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**Food Sovereignty, Food Security, and
Gender Justice in Nepal**
Challenges, Policy Gaps, and People's Alternatives

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Acronyms

ADS	Agriculture Development Strategy
AoA	Agreement on Agriculture (WTO)
CARI	Consolidated Approach for Reporting Indicators of Food Security
CCADRMA	Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management in Agriculture
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FY	Fiscal Year
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFSI	Global Food Security Index
GLOF	Glacial Lake Outburst Flood
GMO	Genetically Modified Organism
GoN	Government of Nepal
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
LAPA	Local Adaptation Plan of Action
LDC	Least Developed Country
MoALD	Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development
MoFE	Ministry of Forests and Environment
NAP	National Adaptation Plan
NARC	Nepal Agricultural Research Council
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
ND-GAIN	Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative
NDHS	Nepal Demographic and Health Survey
NPC	National Planning Commission
PFA	Priority Framework for Action
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
VAT	Value Added Tax

1. Introduction

Nepal has made notable progress in improving household food security and nutrition over the past decade. Despite gradual improvement, food insecurity remains a critical development challenge. Agricultural productivity has remained comparatively stagnant, making the country increasingly vulnerable to food insecurity. Nepal is currently classified as having a “moderate” level of hunger, with a Global Hunger Index score of 14.8. As of 2024, approximately 16.5 per cent of the population experience food insecurity, while about 4.81 million people consume inadequate diets (WFP, 2024). Among these, a large segment of female-headed households, smallholder farmers, landless families, and historically marginalised communities are found to be more food-insecure (MoALD, WFP and Australian Aid, 2020).

Multiple interconnected social, economic, environmental, and political factors influence food security in Nepal. Despite the minimal contribution to climate change, recurring climate-induced disasters, including floods, landslides, droughts, and erratic rainfall, disrupt agricultural production, damage crops and livestock, and undermine rural livelihoods (Magar, 2026). Rising food prices, economic instability, debt pressure, high production and transportation costs, and limited access to agricultural inputs are widening inequalities and continue to increase household vulnerability to food insecurity (Dossa et al., 2025 & Palikhe et al., 2024). Entrenched gender inequality, unequal access to productive resources, and limited institutional support systems further undermine community resilience. Together, these factors reinforce cycles of poverty, food insecurity, and economic dependency.

In this context, food sovereignty provides a unifying framework that connects women’s land rights, climate resilience, and food security. The framework emphasises community control over food systems and the use of agroecological methods to mitigate climate risks and strengthen local food systems. It places local communities at the centre of decision-making and highlights the importance of ecological sustainability, local knowledge systems, and democratic control over productive resources. Furthermore, the concept focuses on empowering local communities to preserve biodiversity, sustain household consumption, and transform vulnerability into resilience and dependency into self-determination (Kumar, 2025).

Women constitute more than half of Nepal’s population and play a central role in agriculture and food production. They are actively engaged in crop cultivation, seed preservation, harvesting, processing, packaging, and marketing. They also contribute to soil and water conservation, afforestation, and the preservation of indigenous agricultural knowledge. Through these diverse activities, women significantly support household food availability and dietary diversity, and community resilience. However, their contributions remain systematically undervalued. Women continue to face deep structural inequities in access to land, productive resources, financial services, and decision-making power. As a result, despite being central to food production, women are often among the first to experience food insecurity and malnutrition.

The Constitution of Nepal recognises the right to food as a fundamental right, and Nepal has committed to international frameworks related to food security, nutrition, and sustainable development. However, the realisation of the right to food remains uneven due to weak implementation, structural inequalities, and limited accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, Nepal's graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026 may further intensify pressures on vulnerable households in the absence of adequate transitional support and social protection measures

The paper examines the intersection of women's land rights, food security, food sovereignty, and climate justice in Nepal. It analyses structural inequalities that constrain women's agency and participation in food systems. It also assesses existing policy and legal frameworks and identifies critical gaps in their implementation. Ultimately, the paper aims to support civil society organisations (CSOs) in evidence-based advocacy to strengthen women's land rights, realise the right to food, advance climate justice, and promote food sovereignty in Nepal.

2. Evolution of Food System: Food Sovereignty as an Approach to Move towards Food Security

Food security and food sovereignty are closely related but conceptually distinct frameworks that shape contemporary debates on hunger, agriculture, and sustainable development. While food security focuses on ensuring access to adequate food, food sovereignty emphasises people's rights to control and shape their own food systems. It is important to understand these concepts to better understand the structural, environmental, and political dimensions of food systems.

2.1 Food Security: Evolution and Limitations

The concept of food security has evolved over time, reflecting the growing recognition of the complexities of the technical, social, economic, and policy dimensions of hunger. Early discussions, particularly the 1974 World Food Conference, defined food security in terms of food supply, assuring the availability and price stability of basic foodstuffs at the national and international levels. In 1983, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) expanded its concept to include securing vulnerable people's access to available supplies, recognising that food insecurity was not solely a problem of insufficient production but also of unequal access. This marked a shift toward balancing both the demand and supply sides of the food security equation.

Over time, the focus expanded beyond food production to include people's ability to access and utilise food. The 1996 World Food Summit further broadened the concept, which was redefined in The State of Food Insecurity 2001 as a "situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

Today, food security is commonly understood in terms of four key dimensions: availability, access, utilisation, and stability (NPC & WFP, 2019). Availability refers to the sufficient supply of food

through production, imports, or distribution. Access concerns the ability of all people to obtain and consume food. Utilisation relates to the link between the food consumed and its nutritional impact on people. Stability refers to the consistency of these three dimensions over time, particularly during periods of crisis, disasters, conflict, economic shocks, or climate-related disruptions.

However, the framework has its limitations as it often focuses heavily on availability and market access without adequately addressing structural inequalities, unequal power relations, ecological sustainability, and the political control of food systems. These limitations have sparked debate and the growing relevance of the concept of food sovereignty.

2.2 Food Sovereignty: A Political and Ecological Alternative

Food sovereignty was first articulated by La Via Campesina, an international peasant movement founded in 1993 in Belgium, which unites farmers, landless workers, indigenous peoples, fishers, pastoralists, and rural women across continents. The movement defines food sovereignty as the right of peoples and nations to determine their own agricultural and food policies without external dumping, challenging the dominant narrative of endless economic growth since the Industrial Revolution.

This concept was further elaborated in civil society forums, most notably the Nyeleni Declaration (2007), which frames food sovereignty as the right to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound methods, and emphasises peasant-driven agroecology as the backbone of sustainable food systems. Food sovereignty offers a strategic framework to dismantle the prevailing corporate-dominated trade and food model and recognise the intersectional struggles of small producers, women, and indigenous communities (Popa & Rugarli, 2023).

Food sovereignty also offers an alternative vision for food and agriculture, centring people's right to shape their own systems of production, distribution, and consumption. It challenges industrial models that have fueled hunger, inequality, and ecological harm and promotes agroecology, biodiversity, and cultural food traditions. At its core, food sovereignty affirms food as a human right rather than a commodity, calling for democratic participation in policymaking and the regeneration of localised, sustainable food systems grounded in diversity, equity, and ecological balance (Pimbert & Claeys, 2024). Food sovereignty prioritises farmer-led agroecology and local food systems and challenges the industrial model in favour of a self-sustaining system of agricultural production rather than relying on imports.

In Nepal, Food sovereignty is relevant amid rising import dependency, land fragmentation, and climate stress. The constitution enshrines the right to food while the country continues to face deep agrarian and socio-economic challenges. Male out-migration has reshaped rural labour dynamics, leaving women to manage farms without secure land rights or decision-making authority, while remittance-driven consumption patterns have increased reliance on imported foods, weakening local production. Climate vulnerability further destabilises yields, and farmers remain

disadvantaged by middlemen, limited access to loans and insurance, and a minimum support price policy restricted to only a few crops. Together, these pressures situate food sovereignty in Nepal within a fragile landscape where constitutional commitments struggle against systemic agrifood decline, market dependency, and demographic shifts.

3. Gendered Impact of Food Insecurity and Structural Vulnerability

3.1 The Cost of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity has far-reaching consequences for human well-being and socioeconomic development. It adversely affects physical and mental health and educational attainment, and creates a substantial barrier to socioeconomic progress (Belachew et al., 2011; Cole and Tembo, 2011; FAO, 2018; Gundersen and Ziliak, 2015; UNICEF, 2018; Whitaker et al., 2006). The impacts of food insecurity are multidimensional and disproportionately borne by women, children, and historically marginalised groups (Broussard, 2019).

Food insecurity is deeply gendered. Women face heightened nutritional vulnerability due to both biological and structural factors. Nutritional requirements during menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation increase women's dietary needs. However, discriminatory social norms and unequal intra-household food distribution often limit their access to nutritious food. In many households, women and girls are expected to prioritise the nutritional needs of other family members before their own (eating last and least), increasing their vulnerability to undernutrition and anaemia. Poor maternal nutrition also has intergenerational consequences and contributes to low birth weight, stunting, wasting, and anaemia among children, reinforcing cycles of deprivation that are transmitted across generations.

3.2 Structural Pressures and Changing Agrarian Realities in Nepal's Food System

Although 67 per cent of the population is engaged in agriculture, Nepal continues to depend heavily on imported food commodities to even meet basic food needs (Kafle, 2023). The agricultural sector remains dominated by subsistence farming, where households with limited or no access to land and resources are at high risk of food insecurity. According to the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) 2022, Nepal ranks 74th among 113 countries, with a GFSI score of 56.9, indicating a moderate level of food security.

However, national averages mask persistent gendered and social inequalities in food and nutrition outcomes. Malnutrition remains a critical concern. Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2022 reports that 25 per cent of children under the age of five are stunted (too short for their age), 19 per cent are underweight, and 8 per cent are wasted (too thin for their height). Anaemia also remains a serious public health concern, particularly among women and children. Around 34 per cent of women of reproductive age (15–49 years) and 43.4 per cent of children aged 6–59 months are anaemic. These indicators reflect persistent nutritional deprivation despite policy efforts and sectoral interventions.

These effects are further exacerbated by structural changes in Nepal's agrarian economy. Increasing male outmigration has altered rural production systems, with women increasingly taking responsibility for both agricultural production and unpaid domestic and care work. At the same time, reliance on remittances has reduced investment in agriculture in many households, contributing to declining agricultural engagement and weakening local food systems.

3.3 Regional and Structural Disparities within Nepal

Food insecurity is disproportionately concentrated in rural and geographically isolated regions. Rural households are more vulnerable to food insecurity than urban households due to higher poverty levels, weak infrastructure, and inadequate access to services. Approximately 32.8 per cent of the rural population consumes fewer calories than the minimum requirement, compared with 27 per cent in urban areas.

Food insecurity is particularly severe in hard-to-reach areas of Karnali, Sudurpaschim, and parts of Madhesh Province. According to the World Food Programme's Consolidated Approach for Reporting Indicators of Food Security (CARI) analysis based on the 2024 household survey, Karnali Province faces the most severe food insecurity situation, with 23 per cent of households categorised as moderately or severely food insecure, followed by Madhesh (19 per cent) and Sudurpaschim (16 per cent).

Nutritional outcomes also vary significantly across provinces. Karnali records the highest prevalence of stunting at 36 per cent, while the province with the highest prevalence of wasting has 16.2 per cent, exceeding the WHO emergency threshold of 15 per cent (NDHS, 2022). These disparities are rooted not only in geographic remoteness but also in long-standing structural inequalities, including historical neglect, unequal investment in development, and restricted access to healthcare, education, markets, and livelihood opportunities. Within these contexts, women experience the burden of food insecurity more acutely. They are primarily responsible for household food provisioning, coping with seasonal shortages, and managing nutritional deprivation through coping strategies such as reduced meal intake or dietary diversity, which often remain invisible in formal food security assessments.

3.4 Decolonising the Food System

These persistent inequalities highlight the importance of moving beyond narrow production-oriented approaches to food security toward frameworks of food sovereignty and justice. In Nepal, concern of food insecurity is not limited to insufficient food production, but also to unequal access to land, resources, services, and decision-making power. The growing dependence on imported food, commercial seeds, and industrial agricultural inputs has weakened local food systems, reduced agricultural biodiversity, and undermined traditional farming knowledge and indigenous food practices.

This dynamic is particularly evident in regions such as Karnali, where food scarcity is often narrowly defined as a lack of rice, even though the region historically sustained itself with maize,

millet, buckwheat, and other local crops. The government's rice distribution programs, reinforced by external suppliers, have entrenched dependence on imported grain (Pandey, 2019). As rice became the dominant staple, cultivation of indigenous crops has declined, eroding local resilience and biodiversity.

This shift reflects a shift towards a colonial food system that elevates imported cereals as symbols of “modernity,” associating them with development, marginalising indigenous crops and knowledge systems. This is also contributing to food insecurity, in which communities eventually become reliant on external markets and lose control over what they produce, consume, and value.

As the world moves closer to 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs towards ending hunger, achieving food security, and improving nutrition are under threat. Climate change, economic instability, geopolitical disruptions, and widening inequalities continue to undermine global and national food systems. In Nepal, these challenges are further intensified by gender inequality, discriminatory land relations, uneven development, and the weak implementation of policies related to food security, agriculture, and social protection.

4. Gendered Impacts of Climate Change on Agriculture and Food Systems

4.1 Climate Change as a Driver of Food Insecurity

Climate change is a major driver of global food insecurity, inequality, and poverty, affecting countries to varying degrees through multiple and interconnected pathways (Baez et al., 2010; Dossa et al., 2025). In Nepal, climate stressors such as rising temperatures and erratic rainfall patterns are increasing the frequency and severity of disasters, including floods, landslides, prolonged droughts, and Glacier Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs). These events are causing immediate human and material damage, degrading ecosystems, and reducing agricultural productivity, thereby intensifying food security and poverty (Das et al., 2025; Fanzo et al., 2025).

Despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, Nepal bears a disproportionate burden of climate change. According to the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Index 2022, Nepal ranks 139th out of 182 countries in terms of vulnerability and adaptive capacity to climate change impacts. Climatic variability is projected to intensify, with drier winters, increased monsoon variability, and up to a threefold increase in precipitation during monsoon seasons. Average temperatures are projected to rise by approximately 1°C between 2016 and 2045 (Nepal CCDR, 2022). These climatic shifts adversely affect rural communities, particularly women, Indigenous Peoples, landless households, and historically marginalised populations, exacerbating pre-existing social and economic inequalities and threatening overall food systems across the country.

4.2 Climate Change Impacts on Agriculture and Erosion of Rural Livelihoods

Agriculture in Nepal remains highly climate-sensitive, with nearly half of the country's agricultural production largely dependent on monsoon rainfall due to inadequate irrigation infrastructure

(Prasai, 2026). Increasing climate variability has intensified disasters such as droughts, floods, landslides, and GLOFs, all of which directly reduce crop yields and disrupt food availability (MoFE, 2021; Nepal et al., 2024). The declining productivity of key staples such as rice and maize threatens both household food security and the stability of the national food supply (Adhikari et al., 2023; Joshi et al., 2011; Nepal et al., 2024; Shahi et al., 2026).

These impacts vary across ecological regions. The Terai region, often regarded as the country's "grain basket," is increasingly experiencing recurrent floods and droughts that significantly reduce rice and wheat production. In hill and mountain regions, accelerated snowmelt, changing precipitation patterns, soil erosion, and water scarcity are disrupting traditional farming systems and reducing agricultural productivity. In many mountain communities, declining yields and increasing climate risks have forced households to abandon agricultural land and seek alternative livelihoods. These changes are weakening local food systems and increasing dependence on imported food commodities.

4.3 Climate-Induced Migration and Changing Rural Food Systems

The growing impacts of climate change on agriculture are increasingly undermining rural livelihoods across Nepal. Declining agricultural productivity, recurrent climate-induced disasters, water scarcity, and uncertain farming conditions are reducing the viability of agriculture as a reliable source of income. In response, many households are seeking alternative livelihood opportunities through migration to urban centres and foreign labour markets. This shift has contributed to widespread land abandonment, particularly in hill and mountain regions, while simultaneously accelerating the feminisation of agriculture as women assume greater responsibility for farming and household management.

Migration patterns are closely linked to broader economic transformations in Nepal. Remittances have become a major contributor to the national economy, while the share of agriculture in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has steadily declined. However, remittance inflows are rarely reinvested in productive agriculture. Instead, they are often directed towards household consumption, migration-related expenses, housing, or non-farm investments, weakening long-term agricultural productivity and local food systems (Dhakal & Paudel, 2023).

Although remittance inflows may provide short-term economic relief for some households, these gains are often uneven and unsustainable. Consequently, Nepal's food sovereignty is gradually eroding as the country becomes increasingly dependent on external food markets and imported agricultural commodities. As a result of migration and remittance, only 45% of families meet annual food expenses from farm earnings. Farmers borrowing from agriculture has dropped sharply, from 21.8% in the previous census to 11.7% in the 2021-22 (Prasain, 2023).

The large-scale migration of men has also created significant labour shortages in rural farming systems. As increasing numbers of men migrate abroad or to urban areas for employment, women are taking on agricultural responsibilities traditionally assigned to men, including ploughing,

irrigation management, canal maintenance, livestock care, and marketing agricultural produce. While this transition demonstrates women's adaptability and resilience, it has also substantially increased their labour burden without necessarily improving their access to land ownership, financial resources, agricultural extension services, or decision-making power.

Women in rural areas are therefore experiencing a “triple burden” of labour: managing agricultural production, carrying out unpaid household and care work, and coping with the growing pressures of climate change. Despite becoming the primary managers of rural agriculture, many women remain excluded from formal land rights and institutional recognition, limiting their access to credit, subsidies, insurance schemes, and government support programmes. As a result, the feminisation of agriculture in Nepal has often meant the feminisation of agricultural labour and responsibility, rather than the feminisation of power, ownership, or control over resources.

The combined effects of climate change, male migration, and agrarian transformation are reshaping Nepal's food systems in ways that undermine food sovereignty. This reflects a broader structural transformation in which food systems are shaped by market dependency rather than local control. As a result, communities are losing autonomy over what they produce, consume, and value, signalling a gradual erosion of food sovereignty.

Box1: The Feminisations of Agriculture in Nepal

The “feminisation of agriculture” has emerged as a defining feature of Nepal's rural economy due to large-scale male outmigration for foreign employment. As a result of increasing male outmigration, the proportion of female-headed households rose from 15 per cent in 2001 to 25.7 per cent in 2011 and further to 31.5 per cent in 2021 (Pahari, et.al, 2025).

As men migrate abroad or to urban areas for employment, women increasingly assume responsibility for agricultural production, household management, livestock care, and community responsibilities. This shift has distinct positive and negative socioeconomic consequences.

The first-dimension is feminisation of agricultural labour, the growing involvement of women in direct farm work. It also includes feminisation of farm management, where women assume primary decision-making roles in agricultural activities and gain greater control over farm-related income (Cornhiel, 2008).

Similarly, on the positive side, women may gain greater control over household finances, assets, and mobility. It may also expand their involvement and participation in local decision-making processes. In some cases, women develop new agricultural skills and strengthen their economic agency. However, the phenomenon has intensified women's workloads and responsibilities without necessarily improving their land ownership, access to resources, or decision-making power. Women are often expected to undertake tasks traditionally performed by men, such as ploughing, irrigation management, and market engagement, despite having limited access to training, financial services, and agricultural support systems (FAO, 2019).

Socially, this shift may lead to increased household burden for women, including heightened family stress and children being raised by single mothers or female relatives. Economically labour shortages lead to underutilisation of the agricultural sector, abandoned productive land, food insecurity, and chronic malnutrition among mothers and children (Bhadra, 2007; Tamang et al. 2014; FAO, 2019)

4.4 The Gendered Impacts of Climate Change

The impacts of climate change are not gender neutral. Women and men experience and respond to the impacts differently because their gendered roles, responsibilities, and expectations are shaped by more than their gender (Carr and Thompson 2014:182). Women in Nepal experience these impacts as farmers and primary caretakers of the household. Access to land, water, fertilisers, extension services, financial resources, technology, and knowledge of sustainable agricultural practices significantly influences a household's ability to adapt to climate change.

However, Structural inequities and entrenched social norms further restrict women's access to and control over productive resources and decision-making processes (ICIMOD et al., 2025). Limited land ownership constrains women's access to credit, insurance, agricultural inputs, and government support services and reduces their adaptive capacity and resilience (Deressa and Hassan, 2009; Eastin, 2018; Terry, 2009). These constraints limit their capacity to improve productivity and incomes, reinforcing cycles of poverty and food insecurity (Denton, 2002).

Women are predominantly engaged in small-scale, climate-sensitive agriculture while simultaneously carrying the burden of unpaid household and care work, often with limited or no social protection mechanisms (Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, 2021). In Nepal, women constitute more than 70 per cent of the agricultural workforce (National Statistics Office, 2021). However, the climate-induced water scarcity, declining soil fertility, and land degradation are reducing agricultural productivity and household incomes, increasing their economic vulnerability. Rising temperatures and changing ecological conditions have also contributed to the emergence of new pests and crop diseases, increasing women's workload in activities such as weeding, seed preservation, crop storage, and post-harvest management (ICIMOD et al., 2021).

In rural communities, this burden extends beyond agriculture. Women often shoulder a double burden, simultaneously intensive agricultural labour and managing primary responsibility for household care, including fetching water, collecting fuelwood, cooking, and childcare. Climate-induced resource scarcity increases the time and physical effort required for these tasks, expanding women's paid and unpaid labour burden. In many cases, this reduces their opportunities for income generation, mobility, education, and participation in decision-making processes. Moreover, managing both household and farm work creates heavy drudgery for women, even though their role is essential, but often overlooked.

5. Women's Land Rights and Agency in Food Systems

5.1 Gendered Inequalities in Land Ownership and Control

Secure access to land is fundamental to food sovereignty, livelihood security, and gender justice. Access to and control over land determine who can produce food, access productive resources, participate in agricultural decision-making, and benefit from economic opportunities. In Nepal, however, land ownership and control remain deeply gendered. Although women play a critical role in agriculture and household food production, patriarchal norms and discriminatory inheritance systems continue to privilege male ownership and authority over land and property. These structural inequalities increase women's vulnerability to poverty, food insecurity, and climate-related shocks.

Land serves not only as a productive asset for food production and income generation, but also as a source of social recognition, bargaining power, and access to institutional support. In Nepal, more than 80 per cent of women are engaged in agriculture and contribute substantially to the agricultural economy. However, women's ownership and control over land remain disproportionately low. According to the Agricultural Census 2078 (2021/22), 34.4 per cent of women own agricultural land, while 23.8 per cent of households have land or housing registered in women's names, representing only a modest increase from previous years (New Business Age, 2023; My Republica, 2022). Earlier estimates suggest that women owned or jointly owned only around 10 per cent of arable land in Nepal (FAO, 2019). Furthermore, only 21 per cent of individuals engaged in agriculture possess land registration certificates (*Lal Purja*), highlighting broader inequalities in secure land tenure (Dhungana, 2023).

Secure access to land can serve as a basis for food production, income generation, and improved nutrition and food security. More than 80 per cent of women are engaged in agriculture, contributing over 60 per cent to the agricultural economy, compared with 56.3 per cent of men, who contribute 39.5 per cent (FAO, 2019). Yet only 19.7% of women own 5% of Nepal's total land, and only 10% of arable land is either solely or jointly owned by women (FAO, 2019). Limited access to land constrains their access to financial services, training, and modern technology. The share of female smallholders who can access credit is 5 to 10 percentage points lower than that of male smallholders. This is partly attributable to women often lacking the necessary collateral. These constraints limit their capacity to improve productivity and incomes, reinforcing cycles of poverty and food insecurity.

The gap between formal ownership and effective control over land also remains significant. In many households, even where land is registered in women's names, men often continue to exercise decision-making authority over production, marketing, and income utilisation. Women frequently face restrictions on making independent decisions regarding farming practices, investments, crop diversification, or participation in agricultural markets. Limited land ownership also constrains women's access to credit, agricultural extension services, insurance, modern technologies, and government support programs, as land is commonly required as collateral for loans and

institutional assistance. Studies show that female smallholders are significantly less likely than male farmers to access formal financial services due to lack of land ownership and collateral (Shrestha, 2024). These barriers limit women's capacity to improve productivity, adopt climate-resilient agricultural practices, and strengthen household food security.

Discriminatory inheritance practices and patriarchal cultural norms further reinforce women's exclusion from land ownership. Although legal reforms have strengthened women's property and inheritance rights, implementation remains uneven, and inheritance transfers often continue to favour male family members. Women, particularly widows, divorced women, single women, Dalit women, Indigenous women, and landless rural women, often face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination in accessing land and resources. These inequalities are further intensified by climate change, migration, and agrarian transformation.

Secure access to land, water, financial resources, extension services, and climate-resilient technologies is generally better positioned to adapt to environmental stress and food insecurity. However, women's unequal access to these resources undermines their adaptive capacity and resilience, reinforcing cycles of dependency, poverty, and food insecurity.

5.2 Women as Custodians of Food Sovereignty and Agrarian Resilience

Women are central to Nepal's food system and play a critical role in sustaining household food security, agricultural production, and local food sovereignty. Their contributions extend well beyond agricultural labour, encompassing food production, seed conservation, nutrition management, ecosystem stewardship, and community resilience. Despite their indispensable role in maintaining household nutrition and agrarian resilience, women's contributions remain largely undervalued and insufficiently recognised within formal agricultural systems and policymaking processes.

Women often prioritise crops that support household nutrition, dietary diversity, and long-term food security, while men are more likely to prioritise short-rotation crops with higher commercial value (FAO and UNDP, 2021). Traditionally, Nepal's food system has relied heavily on women's labour in sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, seed preservation, food processing, and household food management, while men were associated with tasks such as ploughing, irrigation, and threshing. Women have also historically acted as custodians of indigenous seed systems through selecting, storing, preserving, and exchanging local seed varieties adapted to diverse ecological conditions. These everyday practices reflect the principles of food sovereignty by strengthening biodiversity, reducing dependence on external seed markets, and sustaining local food systems. These roles place women at the centre of food production and utilisation.

Despite their central role in agrifood systems, women continue to face structural barriers in securing land registration and ownership certificates. Obtaining land registration certificates is often a slow, costly, and bureaucratically complex process, requiring multiple documents and the involvement of paralegal agents (*lekhandas*) who charge additional fees. These challenges are

intensified by limited familiarity with administrative procedures, frequent harassment during land-related transactions, and the perception that land registration is a “male domain” (International Organization for Migration, 2016). Many women lack essential documents such as citizenship certificates or identification photographs, while distance to land offices, inadequate transportation, and household responsibilities further restrict their mobility.

A widespread lack of awareness about legal rights and land transfer procedures, combined with the high rate of illiteracy among women, further undermines their ability to remain informed about legal provisions designed to protect their rights (International Organisation for Migration, 2018). Together, these factors create a system that systematically disadvantages women in their access to and control over land.

Women’s agricultural work remains largely informal, labour-intensive, and underpaid, and they continue to earn significantly lower wages than men despite legal provisions guaranteeing equal pay for equal work. Although women are heavily involved in crop production and post-harvest activities, they continue to earn significantly lower wages than men despite legal provisions guaranteeing equal pay for equal work. Available evidence indicates that women earn approximately 25 per cent less than men for comparable agricultural labour (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United States, 2019). Institutional inequalities further reinforce these challenges. Agricultural extension services, training opportunities, financial services, cooperatives, and access to agricultural inputs are often directed primarily toward male farmers, leaving women with less access to climate-resilient technologies, market information, irrigation facilities, and credit (LIBIRD, 2019; LIBIRD, 2021).

Even where women contribute the majority of agricultural labour, decisions regarding land use, crop production, and income allocation are frequently controlled by male household members or broader patriarchal structures. Women farmers in Nepal often face systemic barriers that restrict their ability to fully participate in and benefit from agriculture. Access to credit is limited because land ownership—often a prerequisite for collateral—is disproportionately held by men. Without secure tenure, women struggle to obtain loans for investment in farming or small enterprises (LIBIRD, 2019).

In this context, women should be recognised as active agents of agrarian transformation and custodians of local food systems, not merely as agricultural labourers. Their everyday practices of seed preservation, biodiversity conservation, subsistence farming, and community-based food exchange play a vital role in sustaining agrobiodiversity, strengthening local resilience, reducing dependence on external markets, and improving household nutrition. However, women remain marginalised within formal agricultural policy, land governance systems, and market structures. Gendered inequalities in access to land, resources, technology, and decision-making power continue to weaken their ability to secure sustainable livelihoods and contribute to food security and food sovereignty in Nepal. Strengthening women’s access to land, resources, training, and

decision-making power is therefore essential for advancing gender justice and building equitable, sustainable, and sovereign food systems in Nepal.

6. Policy Landscape for Food Sovereignty, Gender Equality, and Climate Resilience

6.1 International and Constitutional Frameworks

The Government of Nepal (GoN) has prioritised food and nutrition security as a key national development priority in alignment with SDGs and other global commitments on food security, nutrition, climate action, and sustainable development. National policies and strategies include commitments to ending hunger and malnutrition, increasing agricultural productivity and incomes, promoting climate-resilient agriculture, ensuring sustainable food production systems, and conserving agricultural biodiversity. However, despite these commitments, progress toward equitable, sustainable, and gender-responsive food systems remains limited.

At the global level, concerns over industrialised food systems and market-driven agricultural development have contributed to growing recognition of food sovereignty as an alternative framework. In this context, Nepal has made important constitutional and legal commitments related to food sovereignty and the right to food. Article 36 (Right to Food) under Part 3 (Fundamental Rights and Duties) of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 recognises food sovereignty as a fundamental right, affirming that every citizen has the right to food sovereignty in accordance with the law. The constitutional provision reflects the importance placed on ensuring people's control over food systems, agricultural production, and access to adequate and culturally appropriate food.

Moreover, to operationalise these constitutional commitments, Nepal enacted the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act, 2075 (2018), followed by the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Regulations, 2080 (2023). These legal frameworks recognise the rights of farmers to participate in food-related policymaking processes; to select agricultural enterprises connected to food production and distribution; to determine the use of land, labour, seeds, technologies, and agricultural tools; and to protect themselves from the harmful impacts of globalisation and the commercialisation of agriculture. Collectively, these provisions provide an important legal basis for strengthening local food systems, protecting agricultural livelihoods, and promoting food sovereignty in Nepal.

6.2 Agricultural Policy Architecture and Gaps in Gender Mainstreaming

The GoN recognises agriculture as one of the most vulnerable sectors to climate change and has continued to prioritise agricultural development and food production over the past decades. Similarly, many agricultural and climate-related policies acknowledge the growing threats posed by climate change to food security and agricultural systems. Several agricultural policies recognise

women's role in agriculture and aim to increase women's participation, strengthen their capacities, and improve access to productive resources.

The National Agriculture Policy 2004 acknowledges gender-differentiated roles within agriculture and promotes gender equality and inclusion in agricultural activities. The Gender Mainstreaming Strategy 2006 recognises women's contributions to agriculture and calls for greater gender integration within the sector. The Agribusiness Promotion Policy 2006 encourages marginalised groups, including women, to engage in enterprise development.

The Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS) 2015–2035 acknowledges the impacts of climate change on agriculture and promotes climate resilience through the adoption of stress-tolerant crops, improved technologies, and inclusive agricultural practices. It includes budget allocations for gender and social inclusion and sets ambitious targets to increase women's land ownership from 10 per cent in 2010 to 50 per cent by 2035. Similarly, Nepal's Gender Mainstreaming Strategy further aims to ensure 50 per cent participation of women in agricultural production-related interventions, institutions, and organisations.

The Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management in Agriculture Priority Framework for Action (CCADRMA-PFA) 2011–2020 emphasised mainstreaming gender priorities across agricultural adaptation activities. Other policy frameworks have also attempted to integrate gender and social inclusion concerns. For example, the NARC Vision proposed gender and social inclusion studies related to agricultural outreach, extension services, and technology dissemination.

The National Seed Vision (2013–2025) outlines three overarching goals: achieving self-sufficiency, reducing reliance on imports, and promoting seed exports. To realise these objectives, the policy emphasised on key areas such as the release and registration of new varieties, the development and maintenance of hybrids, and improvements in seed processing and conditioning. It also highlights the importance of establishing buffer stocks to ensure stability during shortages (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Agricultural Development, 2013). However, it failed to identify specific priority areas, implementation strategies, indicators, and monitoring mechanisms for achieving gender-responsive outcomes

Despite these progressive provisions, most policies remain weak in implementation. Many lack clear action plans, dedicated budgets, institutional accountability mechanisms, and monitoring indicators necessary for translating commitments into practice. Policies often recognise women's participation in agriculture without addressing the structural barriers that limit women's effective participation, including unequal land ownership, discriminatory inheritance systems, unpaid care burdens, restricted mobility, and unequal access to decision-making processes.

Furthermore, major agricultural policies, including the Agriculture Policy 2004, the Agribusiness Promotion Policy 2006, the Agriculture Mechanisation Promotion Policy 2014, the National Agrobiodiversity Policy 2014, and the National Seed Vision Strategy (2013–2025), remain largely silent

on women's empowerment, resilience-building, and adaptation to climate change. Agrifood and financing policies also frequently fail to address underlying gendered power relations, labour inequalities, and discriminatory land regimes, despite the heavy reliance of agricultural systems on women's unpaid labour and caregiving responsibilities.

Overall, despite this recognition, most policies remain limited in addressing the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change and fail to provide concrete adaptation measures that specifically respond to the needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities of women farmers.

6.3 Climate Governance and Persistent Gender Inequalities

Nepal's climate policies increasingly recognise the importance of gender equality and social inclusion. Recent frameworks such as the Climate Change Policy (2019), Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) (2020), and the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) (2021–2050) include gender-sensitive provisions and acknowledge the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and vulnerable groups. Similarly, the Gender and Social Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan for Climate Change (2020–2030), the Local Adaptation Plan of Action (LAPA) Framework (2019), and the Climate Change Financing Framework (2017) acknowledge the importance of integrating gender and social inclusion into climate adaptation and budgeting processes.

In recent years, policy documents have demonstrated greater attention toward gender equality and social inclusion in climate governance. This shift reflects increasing global and national advocacy around gender-responsive climate action. These frameworks collectively aim to integrate gender considerations into adaptation planning and financing processes while promoting equitable access to resources and decision-making.

Despite these commitments, significant gaps remain in translating these policies into practice. Women are often framed as vulnerable populations rather than as agents of change, leaders, innovators, and knowledge holders. The Climate Change Policy 2019 lacks detailed provisions related to women-friendly technologies, targeted capacity-building, disaggregated data systems, gender impact assessments, and mountain-specific vulnerabilities. Although some policies mention the need for women's participation in planning, monitoring, and decision-making processes, practical mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation remain limited. References to gender-responsive budgeting are also often minimal and inadequately operationalised.

Earlier frameworks, such as the Climate-Resilient Planning Tool (2011), largely overlooked gender-specific actions, women's participation, access to finance, and monitoring mechanisms. Even recent instruments such as the LAPA framework, provide limited guidance on women's leadership, institutional capacity-building, and targeted adaptation interventions.

Moreover, gender mainstreaming is often treated as a cross-cutting principle rather than an integrated, operational requirement. This has resulted in fragmented implementation across agriculture, climate, and food security sectors, with limited coherence, accountability, and measurable impact. Evidence shows that unequal access to land, irrigation, technology, and

extension services leads to differentiated adaptive capacities between men and women, reinforcing existing inequalities in climate resilience and food security outcomes in Nepal (Begho et. al, 2025).

Overall, policies frequently treat gender as a cross-cutting issue without establishing coherent integration across agriculture, climate change, food security, and gender equality frameworks. Consequently, gender mainstreaming often remains symbolic rather than transformative. Their knowledge systems, leadership roles, and adaptive capacities remain under-recognised in policy implementation. As a result, women's experiences, indigenous knowledge, and adaptation priorities are often insufficiently reflected in climate and agricultural policies. The inclusion of gender language within policy documents alone is insufficient to address deeply rooted inequalities or reduce gender gaps in climate adaptation and food systems (Rai Paudyal et al., 2019). Therefore, achieving equitable and sustainable food systems requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward transformative policies that recognise women not merely as vulnerable groups, but as rights holders, farmers, leaders, innovators, and central actors in building climate-resilient and sovereign food systems.

Box 2: Institutional and Legal Barriers

- Weak policy implementation structures as policies lack clear action plans, dedicated budgets, institutional accountability, and monitoring frameworks.
- Limited operationalisation of gender-responsive policies with gender mainstreaming often remaining symbolic rather than transformative.
- Inadequate financing and budget alignment between policy commitments and investments targeting women farmers, agroecology, and local food systems.
- Continued prioritisation of input-intensive agricultural models that increase dependency on imported fertilisers, seeds, and technologies.
- Limited women's representation in policy formulation, budget planning, and monitoring at national, provincial, and local levels.
- Fragmented policy coordination across agriculture, climate, gender, and food security policies are developed in silos with limited cross-sectoral integration.
- Limited awareness of food sovereignty rights, land ownership entitlements, seed policies, and climate adaptation provision among women farmers, local governments, and service providers.
- Lack of disaggregated data on gender, food security, and climate adaptation outcomes remain limited, undermining evidence-based policymaking.

6.5 From Policy Commitments to Public Investment: Financing Challenges for Food Sovereignty

Despite Nepal's progressive constitutional and policy commitments to food sovereignty, gender equality, and climate resilience, public financing has not consistently translated these commitments into transformative outcomes. A persistent gap remains between policy aspirations and budget implementation. In FY 2082/83, Nepal allocated over 40% of its total expenditure to gender-

responsive initiatives, leading the region on the gender-responsive budgeting (Bhattarai, 2025). Although gender-responsive budgeting has been institutionalised for more than a decade, budget allocations continue to face challenges related to weak technical capacity, fragmented planning processes, inadequate monitoring systems, and limited accountability mechanisms (Sandal 2021).

These implementation gaps are particularly evident within the agriculture sector. Nepal's agriculture sector accounts for 24.03 per cent of the national GDP and is projected to expand by only 1.58 per cent this fiscal year, compared to a growth rate of 3.05 per cent in the previous year due to unseasonal rainfall. In the Fiscal Year 2082/83, the GoN allocated NPR 57.48 billion to the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development. The fund is expected to support programs, such as fertiliser subsidies, promotion of organic farming, pilot projects to control wild animals that are harmful to agriculture, indigenous seed conservation, local crop promotion, minimum support prices, and agricultural extension services.

However, questions remain whether these investments adequately address the structural challenges facing smallholder farmers, women producers, and local food systems, as Nepal needs to balance the farmer-led agroecology, localised food system and reduced dependency on chemical fertiliser. (The Himalayan Times, 2025). From a food sovereignty perspective, public investment should not only focus on increasing agricultural production but also strengthen farmer autonomy, agroecological practices, local seed systems, and community control over food production.

Although recent budget allocations include support for indigenous seed conservation and local crops, government spending continues to prioritise input-intensive agricultural models that rely heavily on imported chemical fertilisers and external technologies. Such approaches may improve short-term productivity but can also deepen dependency on external markets and undermine the long-term resilience of local food systems (Gartaula, et.al. 2017). Achieving food sovereignty requires a more balanced investment strategy that strengthens farmer-led agroecology, promotes biodiversity, supports local seed systems, and reduces dependence on imported agricultural inputs.

Climate financing presents a similar challenge. A 2025 review by the Prakriti Resource Centre found that nearly half of Nepal's federal budget was classified as climate-related, continuing a trend of increasing climate finance commitments. In the previous fiscal year, approximately NPR 871.6 billion was identified as climate-relevant expenditure, with 36% reaching local governments and 47% retained federally. However, weak expenditure tracking, limited transparency, and inadequate evaluation mechanisms continue to constrain the effectiveness of climate spending (Bhattarai, 2025). Consequently, substantial gaps remain between policy commitments and tangible outcomes for vulnerable farming communities, particularly women, Indigenous Peoples, and smallholder producers.

These financing gaps extend beyond agricultural productivity. Increasing dependence on imported food commodities is weakening local food systems, eroding agricultural biodiversity, and reducing community control over food production and consumption. Food security is becoming increasingly tied to market purchasing power rather than local production capacity, exposing households to

price volatility, supply disruptions, and external shocks. For a landlocked country such as Nepal, growing import dependency raises important concerns regarding long-term food sovereignty, resilience, and the sustainability of rural livelihoods (Gartaula et al., 2017). Strengthening food sovereignty therefore requires not only progressive policies but also coherent public financing that prioritises local food systems, gender-responsive agricultural investments, climate resilience, and farmer-centred development.

The most recent budget for FY 2083/84 further illustrates these challenges. The agriculture sector budget has been reduced to NPR 46.92 billion, a decline of NPR 10.5 billion from the previous year's allocation of NPR 57.48 billion. The budget introduces incentives for private investment, including a provision encouraging farmers or companies investing at least NPR 20 million in agricultural and livestock production to receive up to 40 per cent of their investment back over four years through annual 10 per cent subsidies. Agro-processing industries are also granted income tax exemptions for ten years, along with VAT exemptions on machinery, storage, and packaging equipment.

However, these measures appear to disproportionately benefit large-scale farmers and agribusinesses, as smallholder farmers generally lack the capital required to access such incentives. In addition, 55 per cent of the agricultural budget is allocated to infrastructure rather than production support, raising concerns about its direct impact on farming livelihoods. The government has also allocated over NPR 2 billion for agricultural insurance schemes; however, these are poorly aligned with Nepal's predominantly mixed-cropping systems, limiting their accessibility and effectiveness for many smallholder farmers (Chimariya, 2026).

6.6 Eroding Food Sovereignty: From Self-Sufficiency to Import Dependency

Farmers are leaving agriculture because production costs exceed income, and inputs such as quality seeds and fertilisers are not available on time. Nepal's food supply has effectively become the domain of profit-seeking traders with little state regulation.

Nepal's transition from a net food exporter to a chronic importer exemplifies systemic failure of food sovereignty at the national level. The responsible interrelated drivers are: politics of modernisation and economic growth prioritising urbanisation over agriculture, drain of rural farming populations due to labour migration, small and fragmented landholdings resulting in reduced productive capacity, and cheap imported food undermining the profitability and viability of local farmers (Adhikari et.al. 2021).

Nepal's agriculture import bill continues to rise as domestic production declines and structural problems persist in the agriculture sector. Poor irrigation, lack of fertilisers and seeds, rising production costs, migration of youth and market uncertainty are among the reasons analysts cite for the increase in imports. The country imported Rs 46.70 billion worth of food grains in the first ten months of the fiscal year 2025/26 (Republica, 2026). In the fiscal year 2024/25, the country imported 753,305 metric tonnes of paddy and rice, 299,989 tonnes of maize, 8,443 tonnes of millet

and 698 tonnes of buckwheat, spending Rs 59.92 billion. The import bill was Rs 2.63 billion higher than the government's agriculture budget of Rs 57.29 billion for the same period, indicating growing dependence on foreign supplies. Nepal requires an annual input of about seven million metric tonnes of paddy to feed a population of some 30 million. Current production is lagging by around 1.3 million tonnes. Paddy, maize and wheat registered annual production growth of 1.034, 3.98 and 0.8 per cent over the past decade, and millet and buckwheat declined by 22.1 and 17.6 per cent respectively. At the same time, the area of arable land has been considerably reduced. According to the National Statistics Office, arable land dropped from 2.53 million hectares in 2011/12 to 2.22 million hectares in 2021/22, a reduction of almost 300,000 hectares.

Nepal's changing position on GMOs, from a 2014 Supreme Court ban to a 2021 policy reversal, illustrates how regulatory capture and external trade pressure can erode national food sovereignty (Pokharel, 2024). Nepal's connection to global markets lacks protective policies. This has given exporters mainly from India and big international companies control over the food system. The GMO case and reliance on imports show that market forces, not the Nepali communities, are deciding what is grown, sold and consumed.

- 2014: Nepal's Supreme Court bans genetically modified crops altogether until a comprehensive national policy on GMO import, cultivation and management is in place.
- Pre-2021: Lack of adequate monitoring infrastructure meant GMO food products could enter Nepal's markets unnoticed.
- August 2021: Agriculture Ministry issues circular demanding non-GMO certificates for import permits, in response to complaints about GMO soybean flooding markets.
- September 2021: Under heavy pressure from lobby groups, Nepali traders and allegedly US soybean exporters, the Agriculture Ministry reverses course and issues permits for GMO canola, soy and maize.
- 2021 (FDI): Government's attempts to amend the Foreign Investment and Technology Transfer Act (2019) – which banned foreign investment in primary production – by executive ordinance. Amendment stayed by order of the court interim.

Box 3: Food sovereignty vs. Global Trade

Food sovereignty and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are linked through a fundamental tension between local democratic control over food systems and global trade liberalisation. The WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) prioritises market liberalisation, export orientation, and the reduction of trade barriers, which often benefits large agribusiness but undermines small farmers and local food security. Practices such as dumping subsidised imports below local production cost destabilise local markets and erode farmer's autonomy. In contrast, food sovereignty-articulated in the Nyéléni Declaration (2007) and championed by movements like La Via Campesina, emphasises the right of peoples to define their own food systems, prioritising

agroecology, biodiversity, and food as a human right rather than a commodity. The clash is evident; WTO rules treat food as a tradable good, while food sovereignty frames it as a matter of rights and justice. This antagonism is particularly visible in countries like Nepal, where WTO-driven policies encourage monoculture and industrial farming while food sovereignty advocates resist the monopolisation of seeds, land, and markets by global corporations (de Leeuw & Villalobos, 2025).

Case Study: Reviving Indigenous Crops through Women's Collective Action and the Growing Appeal of Finger Millet in Rolpa

In Tuni Bot, Runtigadhi Rural Municipality-9 in Rolpa district, a group of women is demonstrating how community action can contribute to revive indigenous food systems and strengthen local food sovereignty. The **Sunaulo Bihani Women's Group**, comprising 25 women, was established through the POSHAN SUDHAR Project, implemented by Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN) to improve the nutritional status of pregnant and postpartum women and children under 5 with financial support from WHH and BMZ.

Regular group meetings and discussions created an opportunity for members to reflect on the importance of the foods they produce and consume. As their understanding of nutrition and the value of locally available foods increased, the women developed renewed interest in indigenous crops, particularly finger millet (*kodo*) and buckwheat (*phapar*). The group requested seeds from RRN, which subsequently provided them with finger millet and buckwheat seed as part of efforts to conserve indigenous crops and promote nutritionally important local foods.

The initiative helped revive crops that had largely disappeared from local farms. According to group members, finger millet and buckwheat had not been cultivated in the area for approximately 10–15 years. Following the provision of seed and encouragement through the group, members began cultivating these crops again. Gani Kumari Gharti, a member of the Sunaulo Bihani Women's Group, harvested approximately 40 kg from just 0.5 kg of finger millet seed.

For the women, the value of finger millet extends beyond its yield. Although they recognise that its production may be somewhat lower than that of some other staple crops, they value it for its nutritional qualities and its role in traditional diets. Gharti describes eating millet flour with leafy greens and millet roti with ghee as both nutritious and enjoyable. Millet straw is also valued as livestock feed. This demonstrates how indigenous crops can contribute to multiple components of a local farming system.

Farmers have also adapted their cultivation practices. Whereas millet was traditionally broadcast directly onto the field, members now report that raising seedlings in nurseries and transplanting them can improve production. At the same time, the crop has gained economic value in the local market, with women reporting that millet can command prices approximately twice those of some other food crops. The crop is therefore becoming relevant not only for household consumption and nutrition but also as a potential source of income.

The revival of millet has also begun to influence household food practices and younger generations. Local resident Jhupa Oli reported that children have started taking millet products with them when they leave the village for their studies, suggesting that renewed interest in indigenous foods is extending beyond the farm and into changing food preferences among younger people.

The experience of the Sunaulo Bihani Women's Group illustrates that food sovereignty can be strengthened through relatively small-scale, locally driven interventions. Rather than relying exclusively on externally sourced or commercially dominant food crops, the initiative supports communities to rediscover, produce, and consume foods that are adapted to their local environment and embedded in traditional knowledge.

In such way promoting indigenous crops can advance nutrition, biodiversity, livelihood opportunities and cultural food practices. The revival of finger millet and buckwheat after more than a decade of declining cultivation shows that preserving local food systems can be revitalised when communities have access to appropriate knowledge, seeds and institutional support. It places emphasis on locally adapted crops, nutritional value, farmer agency, traditional knowledge, women's participation and community control over food production. In this sense, the Sunaulo Bihani Women's Group offers a practical example of how strengthening local capacities and indigenous food systems can contribute to a more resilient and people-centred food system in Nepal.

8. Recommendations

7.1 Defending the Commons for Smallholders: Trade must safeguard land, water, and biodiversity as the basis of smallholder livelihoods. Agrarian reform and collective agroecological management should protect farmers' rights, free from corporate capture or superficial greenwashing, thereby affirming autonomy and strengthening food sovereignty.

7.2 Formulate and implement National Food Plan: Nepal should implement a National Food Plan that secures food and nutrition for all by enhancing production, storage, distribution and access, regulating trade, embedding gender and social inclusion, and supporting local programs for vulnerable groups to strengthen resilience and realise the right to food.

7.3 Strengthen Women's Land Rights and Resource Access: Guaranteeing women farmers' land rights must be paired with a dedicated gender-responsive budget that strengthens their capacity through training, financial literacy, and access to agricultural subsidies, loans, and technical assistance.

7.4 Advance Gender-Responsive Climate Justice: Recognise women as rights holders, knowledge holders, and agents of change in climate adaptation and resilience-building efforts. Climate policies, programmes, and financing mechanisms should address gender-specific vulnerabilities, strengthen women’s adaptive capacities, and ensure their meaningful participation and leadership in climate decision-making processes.

7.5 Guarantee gender-responsive climate Finance that reduces women’s workload added by climate change, strengthens resilience through training and access to climate-resilient technologies, and directly addresses food insecurity for vulnerable households.

7.6 Engage and sustain youth in agriculture: National, provincial, and local governments must integrate dedicated programs that provide practical skills, training, and entrepreneurship opportunities, backed by access to finance, technology, and climate-smart initiatives, ensuring farming is seen as a viable, dignified, and sustainable livelihood.

7.7 Empower Women Across Food Systems: Move beyond participation targets by ensuring women have a meaningful voice, agency, and leadership in agricultural institutions, cooperatives, producer groups, and food system governance at all levels.

7.8 Mainstream Gender Across Agricultural and Climate Policies: Review and strengthen agricultural, biodiversity, mechanisation, agroforestry, and climate policies to incorporate gender-differentiated climate impacts, dedicated budget allocations, and measurable accountability mechanisms.

7.9 Improve Budget Tracking and Accountability: Integrate gender and climate budget codes systems, strengthen monitoring frameworks, and establish transparent tracking mechanisms to ensure policy commitments translate into tangible outcomes for women farmers and vulnerable communities.

7.10 Strengthen Policy Coordination and Implementation: Enhance coordination among food security, agriculture, climate change, and gender equality institutions to ensure coherent implementation, adequate financing, and effective monitoring of commitments related to food sovereignty and gender justice.

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