

Toward a Feminist Agroecology

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Definition

Agroecology is gaining ground as a movement, science, and set of practices designed to advance a food systems transformation which subverts the patterns of farmer exploitation currently entrenched in dominant agricultural models. A feminist agroecology focuses on redressing unequal gender relations as well as other intersecting relations of marginalization such as race, class, caste, and ethnic identity.

1. Introduction

Global food systems have extended dangerously past planetary boundaries and beyond a “safe and just operating space for humanity” ^[1]. The urgent, interrelated, and intensifying crises of global warming, biodiversity loss, and water and soil degradation are gravely imperiling the very agri-food systems that contribute to fueling these phenomena. Furthermore, the negative externalities of conventional, globalized agribusiness have exacerbated social inequalities and are disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable members of our societies ^[2].

Agroecology is gaining recognition as a potential solution to these interconnected global crises. Defined as a transformative agricultural and social movement, a scientific discipline, and a set of practices, agroecology rejects top-down technocratic approaches, and “challenges the power dynamics in the current exploitative and oppressive agri-food regime” ^{[3][4][5]}. The movement centers producers and food sovereignty, rather than productivity or profit, at the heart of the struggle for food security, in tandem with ecological and human health as the twin primary markers of food system success. Food sovereignty, an important concept in agroecology, refers to the right of food producers and consumers to define the way their food systems function, and to have access not only to sufficient food, but to food which is culturally appropriate and produced in an ecologically sustainable, non-exploitative manner. In this light, agroecology represents a new ‘social contract’ based on equity, justice, and solidarity among humans as well as a ‘natural contract’ between ourselves and the rest of the natural world ^[6].

To frame, define, and operationalize agroecology, the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) on food security and nutrition (which advises the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) Committee on World Food Security) has proposed 13 agroecological principles ^[3]. These are organized around the three interrelated organizational principles of sustainable food systems (SFS): (1) improve resource efficiency; (2) strengthen resilience; and (3) secure social equity/responsibility (**Table 1**). The largest number of agroecological principles relate to the third organization principle, and thus to socio-political issues. Yet, issues related to gender and other intersectional inequalities (i.e., those produced at the intersection of different axes of discrimination, such as gender, age, socio-economic status, caste, etc.) have commanded relatively little attention in the agroecological literature. This oversight has implications for how agroecology is understood and operationalized within agricultural development agendas, as the lack of emphasis on its political dimensions—and on gender as a critical social relation that (re)produces inequality—risks diluting the movement and reducing agroecology to a set of technocratic practices.

Table 1. HLPE’s 13 principles of agroecology.

Improve resource efficiency	1. Recycling Preferentially use local renewable resources and close as far as possible resource cycles of nutrients and biomass.
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Strengthen resilience	2. Input reduction Reduce or eliminate dependency on purchased inputs and increase self-sufficiency.
	3. Soil health Secure and enhance soil health and functioning for improved plant growth, particularly by managing organic matter and enhancing soil biological activity.
	4. Animal health Ensure animal health and welfare.
	5. Biodiversity Maintain and enhance diversity of species, functional diversity and genetic resources, and thereby maintain overall agroecosystem biodiversity in time and space at field, farm and landscape scales.
	6. Synergy Enhance positive ecological interaction, synergy, integration and complementarity among the elements of agroecosystems (animals, crops, trees, soil, and water).
	7. Economic diversification Diversify on-farm incomes by ensuring that small-scale farmers have greater financial independence and value addition opportunities while enabling them to respond to demand from consumers.
	8. Co-creation of knowledge Enhance co-creation and horizontal sharing of knowledge including local and scientific innovation, especially through farmer-to-farmer exchange.
Secure social equity/responsibility	9. Social values and diets Build food systems based on the culture, identity, tradition, social and gender equity of local communities. that provide healthy, diversified, seasonally and culturally appropriate diets.
	10. Fairness Support dignified and robust livelihoods for all actors engaged in food systems, especially small-scale food producers, based on fair trade, fair employment, and fair treatment of intellectual property rights.
	11. Connectivity Ensure proximity and confidence between producers and consumers through promotion of fair and short distribution networks and by re-embedding food systems into local economies.
	12. Land and natural resource governance Recognize and support the needs and interests of family farmers, smallholders, and peasant food producers as sustainable managers and guardians of natural and genetic resources.
	13. Participation Encourage social organization and greater participation in decision-making by food producers and consumers to support decentralized governance and local adaptive management of agricultural and food systems.

Source: HLPE ^[3].

2. Toward a Feminist Agroecology

As noted above, agroecology as a movement differs from other, more piecemeal approaches to solving individual problems in the food industry by espousing a holistic, transformative approach to subvert top-down food regimes, centering the small-scale farmer as the driver, actor, and agent of this agricultural revolution. As such, the ‘transformational’ approach of the agroecological movement is paramount, as “agroecology from below seeks to transform the food system, while the institutional or corporate versions seek to ‘conform’ agroecology to the current industrial model and paint it a little green” ^[7] (p. 21). Gender equality is central to transformation. A feminist agroecology which values the equitable contributions of all stakeholders leads to a more creative, versatile, and successfully transformative movement. As Lopes and Jomalinis ^[8] (p. 17) write, women’s disempowerment directly hinders agroecological imperatives, as “male dominance commonly manifests itself as an impediment to the advancement of agroecology transition by hindering women’s free expression, their creative development

and, finally, restricting their contribution to the productive unit”.

As the HLPE principles [3] demonstrate, agroecology is not only about lowering agrichemical inputs and increasing sustainability; it is about self-determination and reclaiming control of one’s own food, land, and body—a right that has been stripped from the majority of producers by a productionist and profit-driven industrial agricultural paradigm. As agroecology inherently encompasses a normative commitment to redressing unequal power dynamics in the food system, agroecological approaches cannot be discussed without addressing the power (im)balances based on gender and other axes of marginalization that embed food systems and their actors and stakeholders [4]. Agroecology that lives up to its name centers food sovereignty as well as the more mainstream goal of food security, taking social relations based on gender, socioeconomic status, Indigenous identities, and their intersections into account.

Many scholars and activists have argued that agroecology’s transformational and justice-oriented imperative make the movement and feminism a ‘natural’ pairing, as both question and challenge unequal power relations and entrenched systems [9]. In the words of Seibert et al. [4], “feminism in food crisis struggles finds its best representation in the agroecology and food sovereignty paradigm, applying the practices of solidarity by collective actions that challenge gender roles as well as paradigms of inequality, oppression and exploitation” [4] (p. 46). Furthermore, Milgroom [10] (no page number) highlights that agroecology, food sovereignty, and feminism are “intertwined emancipatory movements and political projects that fight for autonomy, self-determination, egalitarianism, epistemic reconstitution and social justice.” As such, agroecological transitions and transformations are often recognized for their potential to support the empowerment of marginalized groups and individuals and reduce gender inequities in agricultural communities “if they are designed to address underlying power imbalances women face, such as norms, relationships and institutional structures that perpetuate discrimination and imbalance” [11] (p. 236). However, such transitions will not automatically advance social equality unless this outcome is targeted deliberately and methodically [7][8][12]. Toward this end, “agroecology as a science, practice and social movement needs to develop ways of knowing, knowledge, and practices informed by a feminist agroecology that challenges patriarchy and forms of structural violence against women in particular” [13] (p. 56).

While there are many definitions and many kinds of feminism, for the purposes of this paper feminism refers to a broad movement and lens which seeks to examine and uproot the underlying causes of inequality and disempowerment—not just for women but for all marginalized people—by challenging patriarchal and colonial power structures [4][5]. A feminist agroecology focuses on redressing unequal gender relations as well as other intersecting relations of marginalization such as race, class, caste, and ethnic identity. Rather than flattening women's experience in food systems as one of unilateral victimhood and exploitation, or positioning women as environmental saviors, an intersectional analysis recognizes that their experiences are complex, dynamic, heterogenous, and shifting [14].

Taking a feminist approach to agroecological transformation also means understanding and addressing the myriad ways in which gender intersects with, influences, and is impacted by all aspects of food systems, as power relations underpin food systems in their entirety, not just their patently social dimensions. A review of the 13 agroecological principles [3] through a feminist lens, carried out in the following section, illuminates the centrality of gender relations and feminist-informed transformation throughout all agroecological undertakings. Agroecological pursuits which do not consider the complex and shifting ways that women and marginalized peoples will be uplifted or constrained by systems changes risk perpetuating or accentuating their marginalization. The following is an illustrative, rather than comprehensive, analysis of the relevance of gender in agroecology. This analysis serves as an invitation to formulate a more overtly feminist approach, whereby agroecology can achieve a more just systems transformation.

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