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Planting seeds of liberation: Reflections on Allyship in food systems

by Shalini Pathi, South India

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Stories
of
Change

Connecting traditional knowledge and
innovations for fair and sustainable
food systems

United Nations
Decade of
**FAMILY
FARMING**
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Stories of change: Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

Cover photo by Shalini Pathi

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If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

- Lila Watson

It was the harvest festival in January called Sankranti on the land of the Deccan Plateau in the State of Telangana in South India. We were in the office of the Deccan Development Society in Zaheerabad Block in Medak district. And since I am from the capital city of Hyderabad, it was close to two hours from my residence to reach that place.



Photo by Shalini Pathi

It was a special and a festive season. Women from all over the villages, dressed in traditional sarees and tribal women in lambada dresses, were all excited for the “Seed Festival”. I could smell the grains everywhere and I could hear the

sound of the bangles of women settling down under the tree with their produce of millet.

Just a few months before that, I remember participating in the “Gattu” festival ritual in the same place. On that day, the seeds that were about to be planted were worshipped in front of the local deity. And now after a few months, we are here with the women to celebrate the “Suggi Panduga” or simply called the harvest festival. It is a festival celebrating farmers’ produce and marking the end of harvesting season and a subsequent time for harvesting.

The role of urban consumers in food systems

I am a member of the urban consumer group called “Beyond Organic Hyderabad”. Members like us have gathered there to witness the festival, invited by the women organic farmers of the society belonging to all the villages of the district the society works with.



Photo by Shalini Pathi

We all traveled in a bus along with the group from the city and we reached the place in the next two hours. I was feeling the excitement of the other people on the bus. Most of them came with their families especially with children to give them an experience of the farming and ecology of the place.

When we arrived, I noticed that the women and the organizers were really happy to receive us and were making all the arrangements to make sure that the place was comfortable for all of us.

Our group of urban consumers took turns to meet the women farmers. They sat down and received the grains from the hands of the very farmers who produced it. And then we ended the ritual by celebrating and showcasing different varieties of traditional indigenous millets and food grains grown by them.

It was the first time that I was there, and I felt proud to be part of the group and also in awe of the way the idea was conceptualized. As urban consumers, we got an opportunity to honor the women farming community of our State by investing our money as an input for the farmers. Women farmers use this investment to start farming and later urban consumers receive the harvest from them. It felt like a great moment of symbiosis that I read in the textbooks but only experienced now.

Building resilience and capacity during the pandemic

It was a proud moment that during the pandemic and lockdown, when the entire nation was grappling with food insecurity, women from this society were able to remain food secure. Women farmers also were able to harvest the millets and other indigenous varieties and supply these to all of us. By doing so, they not only developed the capacity to mitigate their vulnerability but also helped us remain nutritionally secure.

We were able to be part of the model which that helped us to understand the farming process and the greater ecology. We were able to form that connection with the land and the farmers instead of being distant consumers. We felt accountable and an important stakeholder

in the process. Women organic farmers were receiving support from us to have a functional food system and to create a consistent and streamlined process to take care of their farming needs. And in the same process they were supporting us with healthy and affordable food.

Events like these, helped bridge the gap between the women farmers who are the producers and urban citizens who are the consumers. These were moments of joy, gratitude and shared accountability, not just something to think or talk about but to feel the joy of being a part of the process and to commit to doing something together.

I also noticed that after becoming members of the urban consumer group, people from the city started valuing food and farmers more. We were more connected to the food. And the members wanted their children to learn more about food systems like this and to be champions to advocate for it.

And as everyone was speaking about their experience, I noticed that the women farmers were grateful. But I felt that it was the urban citizens who had to be grateful that we got this opportunity. As an urban citizen, my health and nutritional security is all in the hands of the farmers. And yet, there were less than a hundred of us who were a part of the group.

I started questioning myself about the lack of respect that we as a society still give our farmer who feeds us every day. We are all in symbiosis. It is vital to create markets like this to us for mutual support, so that they are secure in their producing and making a fair living and we are secure in having a healthy supply of food.

I started questioning the mainstream idea and representation of a male farmer. More than half of the labour force in agriculture in India is

female, yet women neither own the land nor are they considered farmers in their own right.

The role of allies in creating sustainable food systems

The most important question we face is our role as allies. Allies cannot be content with the status quo and benefit from the oppression. The women farmers belong to the oppressed caste in the hierarchy of the Indian caste system, from Backward Caste (BC) and Dalit (Scheduled caste-SC) and Tribals (ST's) communities. Traditionally most of the oppressed caste communities don't own any land. They also lack social or economic capital to move up the ladder and achieve mobility and thus prosperity. As allies, it is important for us to recognise this and support each other in dismantling the caste and gender hierarchies. And while doing so, it is important that we don't see ourselves as superior. Because *none of us is free until all of us are free!*



Photo by Shalini Pathi

I feel that much more needs to be done. I am glad that I am able to be a member of the urban consumer group to support the farmers

to continue to grow food and achieve food and nutritional security for themselves and for us. But I also believe my role cannot end there. Because food systems are inextricably tied to greater social structures. And especially the structures that perpetuate oppression.

So, my role starts as a responsible consumer but must not end there. I believe I must still be angry and use this anger as a creative force to continue the work and to ask the right and difficult questions. To the group, to the community, to the urban community and to the society at large and surely to the state:

- How do the existing inequalities get reproduced and reflected in the food systems that we are a part of?
- Why do women farmers still not have a greater share of land, representation and access to capital to farm?
- How can urban communities become true allies in this process to create sustainable food systems in the state, country and the world?
- How do we create food systems that contribute to greater diversity, sustainability and bring back nutritional security that is fair to all the masses?

These and many questions are something that I am grappling with.

So, while I am grateful, I am also angry. And I think we must appreciate and acknowledge these both so that we truly become allies in achieving gender equality and annihilate caste while achieving ecological justice.

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