A feminist perspective on urban food system transformation

In 2015, at the onset of SDGs 2030, 795 million faced chronic hunger worldwide (FAO, 2015). In 2021, the numbers rose to 828 million people (FAO, 2021). Now, with six years remaining to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, the world remains hundreds of million people shy of the zero-hunger target. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by food and nutrition insecurity.

Urbanization trends demand examination of food and nutrition security strategies from the point of view of food access and overcoming the rural and productionist bias of most food and nutrition security strategies. Put simply, we will not achieve zero hunger if we do not rethink and redesign cities to prioritize food and nutrition security concerns.

A feminist perspective on urban food system transformation advocates for addressing the intersecting inequalities present within food systems and cities. It recognizes that women, especially those in marginalized communities, play critical roles in coping with crises, food production, distribution, and preparation. Yet, they often face disproportionate barriers and discrimination when they attempt to influence the very governance processes that affect them.

Ahead of the 68th session of the UN Committee on the Status of Women, TMG conducted a dialogue in Cape Town in February 2024 with experts from Brazil, Kenya, Ghana, Egypt, South Africa, and Sri Lanka to discuss the necessary transformation of food systems that, too often, fail to address the needs of women and girls, leaving them in situations of vulnerability.

At a glance

▶ Women's care work and contributions to the informal sector remain largely invisible to the government. Making their efforts visible through fora and accountability mechanisms encourages recognition of informal social protection measures.

▶ Any analysis of polycrises requires a feminist lens to understand the extent to which women and other marginalised communities experience the multidimensional impacts of food insecurity. For example, food insecurity increases the frequency of gender-based violence and femicide.

▶ Improved crisis-response mechanisms by the government are essential to alleviate community burden and ensure care for the most vulnerable. Without structural changes to create an enabling environment, even successful community initiatives will encounter obstacles in expanding their reach.

1 Visible and invisible crises

"3.1 billion women and girls – more than 905 of the world's female population – live in countries characterized by low or middle women's empowerment and low or middle performance in achieving gender parity."
UNDP, 2023

An intersectional feminist perspective on urban food system transformation illuminates hidden factors impinging upon women's resilience in times of polycrises. Over 90% of women across the globe reside in regions where empowerment levels are low or middle (UN Women & UNDP, 2023). UN Habitat (2020a) reports that the majority of the 1 billion people living in informal urban settlements in 59 developing countries are women. Many women in informal settlements gain a living from work in the informal sector. For example, 60% of African women work informally (UN Habitat, 2020b). With the increasing importance of the informal sector for food security, integrating women's perspectives into urban food system transformation is crucial for two reasons: firstly, it is women who bear the brunt of the fallout of collapsing global systems as they face the unavoidable burden of feeding families during times of hunger and, secondly, women living in these systems endure the pain and shame of gender-based violence and femicide as food insecurity smothers their households.

While the impacts of the intersections of big global crises such as wars, geopolitical tension, economic downturn, and climate change cast shadows over lives, people grapple with local issues which maintain them in poverty and insecurity. Viewing these polycrises through a feminist lens provides glimpses of how factors like gender, race, religion, class, and location impact different groups' food (in)security differently. For example, women and other marginalised groups bear the brunt of the burden and face unique challenges during polycrises. While governments attempt to shift the course of crises, it is women who are left to cope with the here and now of caring for their families and communities as crises mount around them (Oxfam, 2023). Women disproportionately provide caregiving responsibilities (Ferrant et al., 2014), further, women have been increasingly victims of violence being locked up at home (UN Women, 2021), people of colour encounter barriers in accessing higher education and formal employment (Wilson & Darity Jr, 2022; Pager & Shepherd, 2008), and indigenous communities face limited access to healthcare services (Davy et al., 2016; Nolan-Isles et al., 2021).

People living in low income areas and informal settlements are often dispropor-tionately affected by food insecurity and gender-based violence (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023). Our recent research in informal settlements on the outskirts of Cape Town revealed that gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) – often termed a silent pandemic – are aggravated by food insecurity. Women who experience severe food insecurity are more likely to experience any form of gender-based violence than women who are food secure. Our research found that men were frustrated by their inability to fulfil their cultural role as food purchasers during times of hunger and became angry when their female household members were unable to fulfil their roles as food providers. In Cape Town, many kitchens opened to cook for communities to maintain a fragile peace and particularly serve food to men.

2 Making invisible grassroot actions visible to attract systemic support

Across the globe, it is predominantly women who care for households and communities through their provision of childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, and management of household finances. This unseen and unpaid work is paramount to societies' cohesion and economic operation, fulfilling households' immediate needs while enabling family members, particularly men, to participate in paid work or education. While much of this work remains invisible within households, it becomes visible when women collaborate through informal community structures to support their communities beyond their own households. Utilizing social capital, women's informal collaboration through various means (but often including social support, participation, and membership in finance/savings/credit, religious, and feeding/food groups) is well recognized for its enduring positive effects on economic growth and development, particularly through increased investment in children's education, health, and nutrition. In fact, when the World Economic Forum (WEF) noted a global trend of declining social capital in 2023, it ranked declining social capital as the fifth-most severe perceived global risk due to its widespread repercussions on social stability, individual and collective well-being, and economic productivity. While we echo WEF's concern about the erosion of social capital and its impact on communities' resilience, we observe their analysis lacks a call for supportive governance. We contend that preserving and bolstering social capital through women's networks amid multiple concurrent crises is paramount and share the following examples from our own research as to how women's participation in the informal sector and collaborative informal social protection schemes have mitigated the growing layered negative effects of polycrises and GBVF:

▶ In Cape Town, women have spearheaded and staffed many community kitchens which source and serve food, shelter, and support to the urban poor. Operating from private homes and donated spaces, the kitchens build trust, respect, and dignity as they actively replace the misconception that hunger is a shameful result of individual failure with awareness of the system inequities that trap disadvantaged segments of societies in perpetual hunger.
▶ In Nairobi, women's saving schemes empower women to make bulk purchases to mitigate skyrocketing food prices.
▶ In Cairo, urban women farmers build collectives and make land arable to produce traditional crops.
▶ In Sobral (among other cities), women were supported by government programmes to establish community centres (casa da mulher cearense) to support gender advocacy programmes. In these houses women have access to a multidisciplinary support against gender-based violence and also supporting the women with guidance towards programmes for income generation and work opportunities.

There is often a lack of knowledge on the contributions by these grassroots women initiatives. Lack of knowledge translates into a lack of support for these grassroots initiatives. **The question arises: should the invisible work to make themselves seen or should those in power acknowledge the invisible and enable their efforts?**

Grassroots women-led initiatives often come at a huge personal cost, straining women's capacities and resources. In the absence of a strong supportive structure, they overwhelm communities on the frontline. To some extent, social capital and solidarity shield community initiatives from ever-increasing pressure to do more. Communities are often faced with the challenge of striking a balance between advocating for change and coping with the immediate impacts of crises. The cost is even higher for women activists who face numerous challenges in standing up against unequal societies and the unfair burden they must carry due to multiple crises (Folbre, 2006). Thus, production of an enabling environment which makes visible and valorizes the important societal contributions that currently rest upon social capital is crucial.

3 Translating invisible coping strategies to visible transformation through governance

More responsive government crisis-response mechanisms are needed to lessen community burden and provide care for the most vulnerable. In absence of structural changes for an enabling environment, even the most successful community initiatives will face barriers to scaling up and out.

Successful structural changes should address service delivery gaps that exist between governments and their citizens. Governments act in the context of limited budgets, limited capacities, and conflicting policy priorities that underserve informal settlements and low-income urban neighbourhoods. Simultaneously, grassroots initiatives' resource limitations often constrain their scope of operation. Service delivery gaps grow within these inefficiencies. Closing these gaps entails development of grassroots initiatives to enable greater scalability and sustainability alongside governmental policy changes that would systematically support grassroots initiatives. Without this type of structural change, urban food system transformation is not possible.

Brazil's Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) programme stands out as an exemplary model due to its transformative impact on the delivery of social protection. It not only addressed the pressing issue of hunger but also initiated significant structural changes aimed at enhancing women's agency within society. Its exemplary nature lies in the comprehensive approach it adopted, which not only tackled immediate hunger but also

aimed at empowering women economically and socially. Even though the programme has had great impact it still moves towards improvement, as there is still room to make the decision making processes everytime more inclusive and to reinforce existing mechanisms that foster sustainable food production and the full achievement of the right to food in the country. In absence of supportive policy environments and in the presence of widening service delivery gaps, informal structures become more stretched to fill those gaps as citizens strive to achieve a reasonable quality of life. In the case of upholding the right to food, as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, a human rights approach suggests challenging the very systems that perpetuate inequalities. Our experience in Cape Town showed us that, when adequately supported, informal settlement dwellers who lived with chronic hunger could examine, confront, and challenge the social, economic, and government systems that exasperated food insecurity and perpetuated inequalities. By creating awareness of the root causes of their hunger as well as their right to food, local communities learned to hold duty bearers to account. In this way, their invisible efforts to feed their citizens was made visible.

4 Advancing Gender- and Food Sensitive Urban Planning Processes to Combat Invisibilization of Hunger and Poverty

Building communities' resilience to emerging crises requires participation in urban planning by all segments of society regardless of gender, race, socio-economic status, and age. To effect meaningful change in how we redesign cities, advocacy efforts must be grounded in epistemic justice through a strong narrative of fact-based evidence and lived experience from those at the margins. A fundamental shift in how we imagine urban food futures can be made by applying a feminist lens to urban planning. Gender-sensitive urban planning requires a redesign of urban infrastructure with an understanding of how gender roles, norms, and identities impact the experiences and needs of different genders to prioritise safety and shelter, foster spaces that deter violence, and offer sanctuary and support. On a very practical point of view, this could include safe access to public restrooms for all genders, providing them with lights and lockers to prevent restrooms from being spaces of high rates of gender-based violence. And generally, gender-sensitive planning is facilitating access to decision-making processes for communities, we render the invisible visible: we allow those who have been historically overlooked or marginalised to articulate their challenges and address issues such as hunger and violence that sit at the heart of our cities rather than relegating them to the periphery and treating them as unseen. An example of this is found in Cape Town's community food dialogues that follow the strong call, "Nothing about us without us". Through these dialogues, historically marginalised and invisibilised communities have built a meaningful awareness and empowerment programme in their own communities through arts, dialogue, and research. These insights are at the core of their advocacy strategy to obtain a seat at the planning table.

One example that also includes a food-sensitive lens is the infrastructural protection for informal tradersIn Colombo, the relocation of wholesale markets through gentrification have increased the cost of fresh produce to the final consumers. These markets are not well connected to public transport, lack adequate infrastructural facilities needed by vendors such as storage and cooling rooms. Sri Lanka's fuel crisis and increased costs have seen vendors having to pay more to procure produce from these markets. The increased costs across the value chain are passed down to the consumers. For example, even though Colombo boasts a slum-free city, it hasn't achieved a poverty-free status. Although there are no sprawling and unsafe informal settlements, the root causes behind such settlements persist with the consequences of modern infrastructure increasing segregation, gentrification and the ongoing invisibilisation of the urban poor.

Planning to combat hunger or violence is a complex and arduous process and links us back to a question asked earlier: Who's job is it to make the invisible visible?

An intersectional feminist perspective on urban planning exposes hidden truths. Poverty, violence, and hunger are intricately interconnected, yet modern city designs purposefully conceal these realities. Embracing a caring approach demands amplifying the voices of those on the fringes of society and acknowledging the marginalized communities facing escalating hunger, persistent violence, and systemic exclusion. Rather than designing these issues out of sight, they must become the central focus for meaningful change.

About us

Urban Food Futures is a Science-with-Society programme. With hubs in Nairobi and Cape Town, our research is focused on informal settlements and low-income urban neighbourhoods that are largely locked out of formal service provision and governance structures. With informality as the connecting thread, we explore pathways to transform food systems and achieve the right to food for all.

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