

Women as Catalysts for Advancing Nutrition-Focused Sustainable Development Through Eco-Friendly Dietary Practices

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Abstract

Women occupy a transformative role in advancing nutrition-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Their contributions as caregivers, decision-makers, and entrepreneurs in food systems position them as key drivers of sustainable food practices. However, structural barriers such as limited education, inadequate financial resources, and entrenched socio-cultural norms often constrain their potential impact.

This review synthesizes existing literature to explore the connections between women's nutrition, eco-friendly dietary practices, and broader sustainable development goals within the framework of inclusive green economies. It examines women's roles in promoting sustainable food systems and highlights the intersection of gender, nutrition, and environmental sustainability. The paper discusses the influence of women-led initiatives, including community gardening, organic farming, and eco-friendly food enterprises, on food security and environmental preservation. Case studies are presented to showcase successful women-driven projects that have improved dietary diversity, reduced malnutrition, and enhanced sustainability.

Findings emphasize that empowering women with education, resources, and leadership opportunities significantly amplifies their contributions to sustainable development. Active participation by women in sustainable food practices not only improves household nutrition but also fosters community-wide benefits in food security and environmental outcomes. Despite these positive impacts, challenges such as unequal access to education, financial constraints, and limited policy support remain pervasive and require targeted solutions.

This paper advocates for a multi-faceted approach to maximize women's potential in achieving nutrition-related SDGs. Key strategies include implementing policies to enhance women's access to financial resources, delivering capacity-building

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programs, and fostering leadership development. Integrating green technologies and encouraging community-based initiatives are identified as critical components for ensuring long-term sustainability.

In conclusion, this review underscores the vital role of women as agents of change in bridging the gaps between gender, nutrition, and environmental sustainability. Supporting women through comprehensive policies and targeted interventions can accelerate progress toward inclusive green economies while addressing global challenges in nutrition and sustainability. By investing in women’s empowerment, we can create healthier, more equitable, and sustainable societies.

Keywords:

Women empowerment, Nutrition-related SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Inclusive green economies, Gender equality

Introduction

Women are central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). As caregivers, decision-makers, and entrepreneurs, women play a pivotal role in shaping food systems and advancing global sustainability. Their contributions to nutrition are undeniable, as they often serve as the primary decision-makers in household nutrition, meal preparation, and the overall health and well-being of their families. However, women are not only caregivers but also crucial drivers of sustainable food practices through their roles as farmers, food producers, and entrepreneurs.

Despite these significant contributions, women face systemic barriers that limit their potential. Unequal access to resources, such as land, credit, and training, as well as entrenched socio-cultural norms, hinder their ability to fully participate in and benefit from sustainable food systems. This paper examines the intersection of women’s nutrition, sustainable food practices, and inclusive green economies, exploring how empowering women in these areas can lead to more sustainable and equitable development.

Table 1: Barriers to Women’s Participation in Sustainable Food Practices and Strategies for Empowerment

| Barrier | Impact on Women’s Role in Sustainable Food Practices | Strategies to Overcome Barriers | Examples of Successful Initiatives |
|---|---|---|---|
| Limited Access to Resources | Restricts women’s ability to invest in sustainable farming and food enterprises | Enhance access to land, credit, and agricultural inputs | Microfinance initiatives like Grameen Bank, women-led cooperatives |
| Lack of Education and Training | Women cannot adopt sustainable farming techniques, limiting knowledge dissemination | Invest in educational programs focusing on nutrition, sustainable agriculture, and eco-friendly food production | Self-help groups and community-based training programs in India, Bangladesh |
| Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Inequality | Limits women’s mobility, decision-making power, and control over resources | Implement gender-sensitive policies, ensure land ownership rights, and empower women’s leadership roles | Women-led organic farming in rural Kenya, gender-equal land policies in Rwanda |
| Financial Constraints | Women’s food enterprises often lack sufficient funds to scale or innovate | Provide women with financial literacy training and access to microfinance | Startups promoting eco-friendly food practices, women’s cooperative farming |
| Inadequate Market Access | Women’s sustainable food enterprises may not reach wider markets, limiting their growth | Improve market access, support networking platforms, and reduce trade barriers | Women-led food enterprises offering plant-based meals and eco-friendly packaging in India |

The Role of Women in Sustainable Food Systems

Women as Caregivers and Nutrition Gatekeepers

Women are primarily responsible for ensuring the nutrition of their families, which positions them as key players in achieving SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). They are directly involved in meal planning, food purchasing, preparation, and ensuring the overall health and nutritional well-being of their children and other family members. Studies have shown that households led by educated women are more likely to exhibit better dietary diversity and improved nutritional outcomes (Smith & Haddad, 2015). Educated women tend to have better knowledge about the importance of diverse and balanced diets, leading to healthier food choices and improved nutrition for their families.

However, many women themselves face nutritional deficiencies, which is a significant challenge. The lack of access to sufficient, diverse, and nutritious food often impacts women's ability to meet their own nutritional needs, which, in turn, affects their ability to care for their families. The situation is particularly dire in rural areas, where women's nutritional needs are often overlooked. Thus, addressing women's nutritional health and empowering them to make better dietary choices is critical not only for their well-being but also for improving the health of entire communities.

Women as Food Producers and Entrepreneurs

Women represent a substantial portion of the global agricultural workforce. According to the FAO (2021), women account for nearly 43 percent of the world's agricultural labour force. They engage in diverse activities ranging from subsistence farming to small-scale food production, and many are also involved in food enterprises that promote sustainable food systems. Women-led initiatives such as organic farming, community gardens, and small food cooperatives are critical in ensuring food security and environmental sustainability.

In many parts of the world, women are turning to sustainable agricultural practices like organic farming and agroecology to enhance food security, improve nutritional outcomes, and reduce environmental harm. For instance, women's cooperatives in rural Kenya have successfully employed sustainable farming methods to reduce malnutrition while increasing household incomes (Njuki et al., 2016). These women-led initiatives contribute to food sovereignty and environmental preservation by promoting local, sustainable food systems that rely less on chemical inputs and more on traditional, eco-friendly methods.

Women entrepreneurs in the food sector are also pioneering innovations in eco-friendly food production. Women are involved in startups focusing on plant-based nutrition, waste reduction, and sustainable food packaging. These businesses contribute not only to economic empowerment but also to environmental sustainability, providing solutions that help reduce the ecological footprint of food production and consumption.

Barriers to Women's Participation

Despite their vital contributions, women face significant barriers in fully participating in sustainable food systems. These barriers are multi-faceted and include:

- 1. Limited Access to Resources:** In many regions, women lack access to land, credit, and agricultural inputs. This limits their ability to invest in sustainable farming practices or expand their food enterprises. Women often face difficulties in obtaining loans or financing for their businesses, which hinders their entrepreneurial potential.
- 2. Education and Training Gaps:** Women often have limited access to education and training in sustainable agricultural practices or nutrition. Without proper education, women cannot take advantage of the latest techniques in sustainable farming or eco-friendly food production. Lack of knowledge also limits their ability to promote sustainable food practices in their communities effectively.

- 3. Socio-Cultural Norms:** In many societies, women's roles are confined to the domestic sphere, with little decision-making power in the public or economic arenas. Patriarchal norms often limit women's ability to own land or control resources, thereby restricting their involvement in food systems at larger scales. These norms also restrict women's mobility and access to markets, limiting their ability to run food enterprises or engage in policy advocacy for sustainable practices.

Promoting Women's Empowerment for Sustainable Development

To achieve the SDGs related to nutrition, gender equality, and sustainable agriculture, it is essential to empower women by addressing the barriers they face and providing them with the tools and resources to lead sustainable food initiatives. Several strategies can help maximize women's potential in achieving these goals:

1. Nutrition Education and Capacity Building

Educating women about nutrition, sustainable agricultural practices, and eco-friendly diets is crucial for improving food security and nutrition outcomes. Training women in sustainable farming techniques, such as organic farming and permaculture, can significantly increase the availability of nutritious food in their households. Community-based programs in countries like India and Bangladesh have shown that educating women through self-help groups or cooperatives leads to improved household nutrition and environmental conservation (Kumar et al., 2020). By empowering women with knowledge, they can not only improve their family's nutrition but also spread awareness about sustainable food practices within their communities.

2. Financial Inclusion and Access to Resources

Access to financial resources is a critical barrier to women's participation in sustainable food systems. Microfinance initiatives, such as those pioneered by Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, have shown that providing women with small loans can help them invest in sustainable food enterprises and improve food security in their communities (Yunus, 2007). Financial inclusion initiatives can help women gain access to capital for expanding their businesses or acquiring agricultural inputs necessary for sustainable farming.

3. Women-Led Sustainable Food Enterprises

Encouraging and supporting women-led food enterprises is another effective strategy for fostering sustainable development. Women entrepreneurs in the food sector are driving innovations in plant-based nutrition, waste reduction, and sustainable packaging. By supporting these businesses through grants, networking opportunities, and market access, women can scale their impact and contribute significantly to both economic and environmental sustainability. Many women-led businesses have emerged in urban and rural areas, focusing on producing eco-friendly food products that cater to the growing demand for sustainable and healthy food.

Case Studies

1. Urban Farming in Kenya

In Nairobi, women-led urban farming collectives have transformed vacant city spaces into productive agricultural hubs. These initiatives not only address urban food insecurity but also promote sustainable farming practices such as vertical farming, aquaponics, and organic gardening (Njuki et al., 2016). Women farmers in Kenya have contributed to the local food supply while reducing the environmental footprint of food production. These urban farms provide fresh, nutritious produce to local communities and serve as models of sustainability.

2. Eco-Friendly Meal Services in India

In India, women-led startups are offering eco-friendly meal services that emphasize plant-based diets and sustainable packaging. These businesses are addressing urban nutritional challenges while

reducing environmental impact by using locally sourced ingredients and biodegradable packaging. Women entrepreneurs in the food service industry are also engaging in zero-waste practices, ensuring that their businesses have minimal environmental impact while promoting healthier, sustainable eating habits.

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Enhance Access to Resources:** Governments should prioritize policies that provide women with land ownership rights, credit access, and agricultural inputs. Gender-sensitive policies that ensure equitable access to resources will empower women to lead sustainable food systems and improve food security.
- 2. Invest in Education and Training:** It is crucial to invest in programs that provide women with education and training in nutrition, sustainable agriculture, and entrepreneurship. These programs can equip women with the knowledge and skills necessary to improve household nutrition and engage in sustainable food practices.
- 3. Support Women Entrepreneurs:** Governments and organizations should create platforms that support women entrepreneurs in the food sector. Providing access to markets, technology, and networks will enable women to scale their sustainable food enterprises and contribute to both economic and environmental sustainability.
- 4. Integrate Green Technologies:** Promoting the use of green technologies in agriculture and food production is essential for sustainability. Governments and organizations should incentivize the adoption of technologies that reduce environmental impact, such as renewable energy for food processing or water-efficient irrigation systems.

Conclusion

Empowering women is essential for achieving the SDGs related to nutrition, gender equality, and sustainable development. By addressing the barriers women face and equipping them with the necessary tools and resources, they can lead transformative initiatives that contribute to sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems. Through enhanced education, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurial support, women can play a crucial role in improving nutrition, reducing malnutrition, and promoting sustainable environmental practices. Investing in women's potential accelerates progress towards a healthier, more sustainable future for all. Empowering women is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic investment for a sustainable tomorrow.

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