

# Strengthening local food systems through kitchen gardening in Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary

An exploratory study on women's knowledge and knowledge sharing practices

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In the villages nested in and around the surrounding areas of Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary (BWS), located 130 km from the city of Pune, Adivasi\* women play a vital role in subsistence farming and forest food gathering practices, and are crucial both in seed conservation and the consumption of forest products. In this context, Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group\*\* has supported the promotion of wild vegetable festivals and the informal dissemination of information about the nutritional and medicinal benefits of wild vegetables and local agriculture seed varieties. Furthermore, 10 years of work with Women Self-Help Groups have proved successful in ensuring women have a safe space within their communities to gather, share and mobilize on different issues. Yet, local food varieties use and consumption remains a challenge, along with household food self-sufficiency.



In BWS, gender has been widely used to understand the differences in agricultural households, from male and female unequal access to rural livelihoods to disparities over the management, allocation, and ownership of forest resources. Nevertheless, the boundary between the so-called productive and subsistence tasks are permeable for smallholder farming communities. In this context, little attention has been put to gendered knowledge, that is, to the specific experience and practice Adivasi women hold to ensure household production of culturally and environmentally appropriate food. Although ongoing programs are gender sensitive, the ways in which research and strategies learn about Adivasi women's knowledge and notions on subsistence farming and conservation is not always approached through a gendered lens.

\*Adivasi means first settlers, and is the term used to describe India's indigenous groups. They are classified as Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution of India. The Government of India does not consider any specific groups as 'indigenous' since it claims all citizens to be indigenous.

\*\*Kalpavriksh is an Indian non-profit organization working on environmental and social issues. Founded in 1979 with a campaign led by students to save Delhi's Ridge Forest, this organization's philosophy is rooted in the belief that a country can develop meaningfully only when ecological sustainability and social equity are guaranteed, and a sense of respect for, and oneness with nature, and fellow humans is achieved.

In other words, the way we learn about what women know and how they share their practices often neglect the position they hold within their household and their community. In an effort to contrast theory and practice, and provide an analytical foundation to the importance of recognizing gendered knowledge in BWS Adivasi communities', the following considerations were taken in this exploratory study.

### On gendered knowledge

Dominant notions of smallholder farming as a predominantly male-based activity (Deere, 1995) contribute to women being displaced from controlling and having access to natural resources and agricultural opportunities. Resources in smallholder farming systems are typically allocated based on power and status within the household, which is commonly male (Beuchelt, 2016), and power imbalances within households shape the way a farmer is defined, as well as how women's contributions to agricultural production schemes are regarded.

Access to knowledge creation and sharing opportunities is inextricably linked to status and power within smallholder farmer communities. Little attention has gone to women's uneven ability to access the same agricultural resources and opportunities as men or for agriculture education strategies to cater to women's distinct needs.

A production-oriented definition of a farmer excludes subsistence agriculture or production intended for household consumption –here referred to as kitchen gardening–, which women are commonly responsible for (Barbercheck, 2020).

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Therefore, a gendered understanding of knowledge and a careful analysis of women's ability to access, create and disseminate their agricultural values and expertise are needed for equitable farming practices.

The gendered division of knowledge must be considered to be able to go beyond incorporating women but placing them at the forefront of farming practices and opportunities. The overarching objective of this approach is to understand and analyze the role of women as holders of kitchen gardening knowledge and practice, and therefore as crucial for the social and physical reproduction of Adivasi communities.





## On knowledge and sharing as catalyzers for food sovereignty

Knowledge is a key signifier of power, and it shapes women's agricultural experience and practice. However, can we think of knowledge as a necessary means for the construction of food sovereignty? While the 'knowledge is power' analogy offers inspiration, it does not reflect Adivasi women's efforts to have access to knowledge, or their ability to absorb and retain it without it being replaced or co-opted by other knowledge systems.

The possibility of egalitarian farming systems is directly related to women's access to knowledge creation and sharing opportunities. Therefore, understanding the relationship between local agricultural knowledge, sharing practices and knowledge generation is necessary for community engagement in the use and participation of locally and environmentally relevant subsistence farming practices.



***....can we think of knowledge as a necessary means for the construction of food sovereignty?***

Horizontal knowledge-sharing methods provide an opportunity to leverage women's agricultural experience, best practices, and values. Drawing from cultural frameworks that are shared among women within the same community, this strategy is founded on a praxis-based model. Based on the notion that most household food-related issues have common and local solutions, this approach is inherently linked to the creation of sustainable food systems, where knowledge is generated, shared, and transferred simultaneously. In other words, women use their own empirical experience and combine it with sharing practices. The transformative potential of this approach lies in its ability to meet the needs of specific contexts, farming systems, and farming conditions (Holt-Gimenez, 2006). Leveraging women's knowledge and expertise in agriculture is necessary to provide women and men with equally accessible and safe environments to learn and share.



## Methodology

Women's narratives are oftentimes not recorded nor accounted for and traditional survey-based research methods and structured interviews are not able to capture gender-based differences nor involve women in the co-creation of qualitative data. The methodology used for this knowledge mapping exercise sought to ensure that while women were collectively sharing their current knowledge and knowledge-sharing practices, they were simultaneously able to reevaluate them.

This knowledge mapping exercise is part of a collective envisioning of food alternatives that seriously recognize women's specific knowledge of subsistence farming and food production activities. Women's knowledge revindication and revaluation –on natural farming techniques, kitchen gardening, and the value of forest and native fruits and vegetables– is key for maintaining culturally and environmentally sound local food systems. The intersectional approach to knowledge –practical, experiential, cultural, and gendered– aims to ensure a comprehensive understanding of women's knowledge and skills related to subsistence farming, and leverage its revaluation for the creation of independent knowledge-sharing networks. This study remains a work in progress and in the long term, it seeks to leverage women's organizing capacity and cater to gender-specific ways of disseminating local knowledge and experience.

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## Main Insights

The kitchen garden appears as the main go-to place for women to have readily available fruits and vegetables. When the yield is good from the kitchen garden, women do not need to travel long distances to the local market and spend money on production. Seed availability determines what is grown in the kitchen garden and informal seed exchanges are practices between women, relatives, and neighbors. While decisions on what is grown in the agricultural field are most commonly taken by men, decisions on what is grown in the kitchen garden are taken solely by women. However, and although men are rarely involved in any kitchen garden activities, women heavily support agricultural field work. This is particularly important to emphasize given kitchen gardening and rice transplanting activities overlap during the monsoon season. Additionally, and worth highlighting, is that women are responsible for activities such as fetching water, cooking, cleaning, and other household labor that often goes unacknowledged.



The kitchen garden appears as a space for women to make their own decisions and put into practice their knowledge of vegetables and fruits for household consumption. Knowledge-sharing practices also seem to be strictly female-led, as women mention learning about kitchen gardens from their mothers, grandmothers, and mothers-in-law or other women from their village. Knowledge and best kitchen gardening practices appear to be commonly exchanged in informal ways, either by visits or by word of mouth. It is worth highlighting that women appear to highly value seeing and experimenting with their own hands as a method for learning. For instance, the chula –traditional wood fire stove– and bhanus –traditional kitchen spaces where spices and salt are kept– came up as areas where knowledge is transferred, alongside mentions of cooking and recipes as ways of learning about wild vegetables.

Without romanticizing women's socio-ecological practices, it is important to recognize that nutritional, culinary, and food-related knowledge in BWS is articulated through gender. In small plots of land within families' household boundaries, on slopes, and even on the fringes of their terrain, the Adivasi women have found resilient ways to grow their food. Their knowledge of kitchen gardening has been transferred from generation to generation of women, and the parallels of what and how they grew in their childhood and what they grow in their adulthood lead to think of their kitchen gardening practices as an intrinsically female tradition.

This 'tradition' is also the pillar for a household's food self-sufficiency, –even if to varying degrees– and the reason why Adivasi communities can grow and consume the local fruit and vegetable varieties they know and like the most.



As they said: *"Amhala pahije tenva amhi parasbaget jato ani laget te gheun yeto."*, which in Marathi translates to "We go to the kitchen garden to collect whatever and whenever we want".

However, the tension between what is seen as productive agricultural practices and knowledge and 'old' or local knowledge primarily affects women. When women's kitchen gardening experience and know-how are seen as merely an extension of their domestic chores, their agricultural practices are downgraded, which simultaneously leads to them lacking access to the resources and possibilities for sharing them. This exploratory study worked under the assumption that participatory and visual research methods can be used as tools for local knowledge revaluation.



The methodology rejects the distinction between formal and informal knowledge and emphasizes the value of observation, flexibility, and adaptability in knowledge sharing and revaluation, and seeks to allow women to gain confidence and recognition of their expertise. Focus groups, beyond disclosing any particular information about kitchen gardening practices, were used as a tool for women to be aware of the value of food security and food sovereignty.

Women's social position influences the way knowledge is developed and determines whether their experiences can be readily transmitted and adapted by others. In the face of climate uncertainty and food availability, horizontal and locally-led exchange methods are necessary to enhance trust and build social networks. Moreover, practical and participatory knowledge-sharing practices are necessary to strengthen women-led spaces, and for communities to revalue and recognize the work women are already doing in the construction of food sovereignty.

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