

Food-Feminism: The Contribution of Women to Creating a Sustainable Food System in the Cireundeu Indigenous Village

Willfridus Demetrius Siga¹, Kristining Seva², Alfonsus Sutarno³

¹Centre for Philosophy, Culture, and Religious Studies, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia

²English Education Department, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia

³Faculty of Philosophy, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia

ABSTRACT: This research investigates the influence of women on the formation and maintenance of the food system in the Cireundeu Indigenous Village of Cimahi City, West Java. Guided by a food-feminism perspective, it draws on in-depth interviews, participatory observation, focus group discussions, and community documentation gathered between January and July 2023. The research looks closely at how daily practices, like cassava cultivation and the making of rasi (cassava rice), reflect deeper values of care, balance, and spiritual connection with the land. Findings show that Cireundeu women are not merely domestic actors but also the key subjects that manage the entire food chain—from cassava cultivation and its processing into rasi (cassava rice), to storage in the goah (a special room accessible only to women). These customs, “mipit kudu amit, ngala kudu bebeja” and “Gusti nu ngasih, Alam nu ngasah, Manusa nu ngasuh”, do more than just guide their daily life. They express deep care for nature and reject the idea that humans stand above it. This fact is seen during the Seren Taun ceremony, where the link between faith, food, and ecology becomes visible. This proof was seen from the observation of watching the Cireundeu’s women who lead the rituals reminds us that sustainability is not a theory; it is life in a certain practice. However, women's access to land, capital, technology, and formal decision-making spaces remains constrained by Indonesian patriarchal norms. This research affirms that food sustainability can only be achieved if women are recognized as agents of change or the leaders of the change itself, not merely the invisible labor. The study contributes to theoretical discussions in food-feminism and ecofeminism while offering a local model that aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 12 (responsible consumption), SDG 13 (climate action), and SDG 15 (life on land).

KEYWORDS: Food-feminism; Indigenous women; Sustainable food system; Cireundeu; Gender justice

I. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of food, gender, and ecological sustainability is one of the most formidable epistemological and political battlegrounds of our time: the contemporary global food crisis. When we consider history, particularly at the household and local community level in most cultures, women have built the cornerstone of the food system through invisible but critical physical and emotional labor: feeding, processing, and distributing food. Yet a structural paradox continues despite women providing the majority of food labor; they have little oversight of productive resources, agricultural decision-making, and global economic planning (DeVault, 1991; Allen & Sachs, 2007). More specifically, women’s sacrifice in some cultures means that their own nutrition needs are often subservient to the hunger-struggling family — it’s a form of sacrifice that’s rarely called labor, let alone a contribution to food security. This imbalance is material, but also has an underpinning in social, cultural, and physical factors shaping relationships between women and the food chain. Materially, women have little access to land, capital, and technology in the material world, and most of the time it is a man’s domain. By the socio-cultural axis, they are the “natural responsibilities” which have no economic value. In the realm of the physical, women’s bodies – their health and reproduction – are often thrown back into the fire for sustainable household food production (Kemmer, 2000). Addressing this injustice, new movements and analytical frameworks have appeared, one of which we refer to as food-feminism: a framework that blends feminist critique of the division of labor according to gender with an eco-feminist approach to ethical relationships between humans and nature.

This aspect of food-feminism denies the anthropocentrism and exploitation of the industrial food system at its origin and stems from indigenous epistemological practices. These communities, characterized by such Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) (Berkes, 2008), have historically constructed sustainable food systems grounded in appreciation for biodiversity, natural cycles, and cosmologies that position humans as co-constructors, not as rulers, of ecosystems (Kuhnlein & Chotiboriboon, 2022; Saras

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Dewi, 2015). Indonesia, which includes indigenous people like Cireundeu in West Java, demonstrates how women are not only culinary tradition bearers but also sustainability agents who incorporate the ethics of care, cooperation, and gender justice in their local food management. Here, what is consumed is not simply the commodity of commodity, but also the relational articulation of humans, nature, and the Divine as exploitation of nature is understood as a form of spiritual trespassing (Sumardjo, 2009).

Although the practices of the Cireundeu community have much potential as alternative models, few studies have either explicitly situated them in theoretical circles of food-feminism or taken the time to examine how their local epistemology might become a basis on which to reconstruct food systems away from mere “local practice” towards justice and sustainability. In the midst of climate catastrophe, food insecurity, and rising gender disparities, we need more food models that treat women not just as faceless workers, but also as knowledge bearers and a collective force. As a result, this article seeks to redress this gap by addressing three research questions: (1) What is the relevance of the food-feminism perspective in constructing a sustainable food system as per gender equality and the female place at the table? (2) What are the food-feminism-oriented best practices in the Cireundeu indigenous community? (3) What are the epistemological possibilities for their food system as a replicable model? This research integrates feminist, ecofeminist, and local knowledge anthropology approaches and thus documents community-based food resilience practices, while also offering theoretical and practical contributions to food justice movements through national and global perspectives.

METHOD

This study took a qualitative approach to study the position of women in a sustainable food system in the Cireundeu Indigenous community in Cimahi City, West Java, with a case study design to explore their roles. A qualitative method was selected as it enables an in-depth analysis of meanings, values, practices, social, and cultural dynamics which cannot be described through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2009). Among other things, we employed the grounded theory model of data collection and analysis, inductive theory categories based on food-feminism perspectives, and the study approach, in terms of data collection and data analysis.

The research site was chosen purposively in the Cireundeu Indigenous Village, Leuwigajah Subdistrict, South Cimahi District, Cimahi City, West Java. The primary reasons were the persistence of local wisdom among the Sundanese Indigenous people in preserving a cassava-based food system as a symbol of food sovereignty and cultural identity, and the pivotal role that women played in the transfer of food knowledge and sustainable ecological practices. It is a space on a community level through which feminist, ecological, and spiritual practices are embedded in everyday life.

Data were collected from January to July 2023 using four main strategies: (1) detailed interviews of key informants; including leaders in the highest levels of traditional activity, women food managers (WWAs), and community members who are significant participants in agriculture and traditional food processing, (2) participatory observation of daily activities related to the production, processing, and distribution of food, especially among women, (3) focus group discussions (FGDs) with specific groups of Indigenous women to examine its collective perceptions toward the notions of gender justice, food responsibility, and challenges of sustainability, and (4) documentation including photographs, video interviews, field notes, and community research archives (community reports, customary documents, and local media).

The sample was drawn based on purposive and snowball sampling, and the inclusion criteria included: (1) official membership of the Cireundeu Indigenous Village; (2) participation in the local food chain (from farming to eating); and (3) readiness to provide voluntarily. There were 25 villagers, including 15 women (housewives, traditional food artisans, women’s group leaders, among others), 5 male leaders of food culture, and 5 youth participants involved in maintaining the food culture. During and subsequent to data collection, data analysis was conducted iteratively using the constant method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An initial form of concepts was drawn from interview transcripts and observation notes (open coding), axial coding (organizing these into key themes), and a second type of these thematic categories were used; here, a) Cireundeu’s local cultural values, b) sustainable food practices, and c) the position and role of women within the food system and were subsequently identified using thematic analysis as a guide to integrate these themes into the framework of food-feminism. Triangulation of sources (interviews, observations, documents) and member checking, i.e., verification of findings by informants to validate interpretative accuracy, was used to ensure data validity.

The studies also cited appropriate ethical frameworks for social research by involving all participants in the research process and confirming that written informed consent was obtained, anonymity was maintained, and the research material was provided back to the community for discussion. In this way, the research not only aimed at scholarly knowledge but also at empowerment through the use of local knowledge, recognizing female roles in securing food and ecological sustainability in their communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Cireundeu Indigenous Community and the Sundanese Worldview

The Cireundeu indigenous community, in Cimahi City, West Java, is a Sundanese traditional community. It adheres to a philosophy called *ngindung ka waktu*, *mibapa ka jaman*, which aims to adapt, keep in sync with the times, but also has a commitment to tradition and heritage. This is a balance of maintaining ancestral heritage and evolving with our new society. It mirrors an adaptation that is not purely social in nature but rather involves a particular value system and worldview with a basis in the *Tri Tangtu di Buana* philosophy of intention (*tekad*), speech (*ucap*), and action (*lampah*) unity (Sumardjo, 2019). This philosophy is consistent with the Sundanese philosophy of living within the same universe as nature, the other beings, and God. In this triadic structure, the cosmological and ethical thinking of the indigenous community became articulated as all human action is rooted in the universal order. In the case of Cireundeu, the same philosophy means multiple layers of ecological zoning, the first: *Leuweung larangan* (protected forest), *Leuweung tutupan* (buffer forest), and *Leuweung baladahan* (productive forest). Such groupings are not only an ecological practice; however, they reflect the triadic Sundanese worldview in a perspective that endeavors to achieve harmony among conservation, utilization, and regeneration of natural resources (Iskandar & Iskandar, 2011). We are not a way of governing nature; we are part and parcel of our collective existence.



Figure 1. Map of Cireundeu Indigenous Village in Cimahi City, West Java, showing ecological zones such as protected, buffer, and productive forests that shape the community's sustainable food system (Resource: team documentation)

Local Wisdom and Social Ethics in the Cireundeu Community

The Cireundeu communities demonstrate local wisdom by providing tangible means of life through cultural practices, language, food systems, and environmental management. *Ngindung ka waktu* represents a staunch commitment to the beliefs and values of the Sundanese populace, and *mibapa ka jaman* is an assertion of a willingness to accommodate greater social and technological advancement (Fadhilah, 2020). The *Seren Taun* ritual and the *Cacarakan* script are two forms the Cireundeu community honors; they appear both universal and flexible in the fast-paced contemporary world, but also include formal education and participation in socialization at a newer level (Saraswati & Gulfa, 2017). These two tenants signify a dialectical equilibrium, with modernity not threatened by past and now, but rather the site for adaptation of values. Traditional values are also reinforced in the local food economy, where cassava is the staple dish. This decision was made after the 1918 famine, where the people swore never again to rely on rice, something that was then dominated by colonial powers (Saleha, 2005). It is a food sovereignty practice, a spiritual representation of the human-earth relationship. They do not oppose advances; instead, they strive for sustainability by performing best in certain ways and by taboos (*pamali*) that limit resource extraction. Cireundeu's local wisdom is the social and ecological ethic that protects the sustainability of life.



Figure 2. The Sundanese proverb is expressing ecological ethics of permission, respect, and balance in resource use (Resource: team documentation)

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Food-Feminism and Ecofeminist Perspectives

Food-Feminism and Ecofeminist Perspectives. Food-feminism is an aspect of ecofeminism in which women are considered active consumers in the life of a society (Glazebrook, 2002). Rather than adhere to anthropocentric models that remove human beings from nature and patriarchal and capitalist methods of women's exploitation and naturalistic resource extraction, this movement represents itself in social life based on the earth. In the Cireundeu, women are shown to relate with nature through rituals such as ngajayat and Seren Taun, which are considered to mean giving respect for fertility and life (Arivia, 2018). Women are the guardians of balance, food processors, and repositories of ecological knowledge. Food-feminism, conceptually speaking, teaches an ethics of care with respect to food and nature. Food is not simply a material entity, but rather a spiritual relationship of humanity with the environment (Fitri & Akbar, 2017). These perspectives match those of the Cireundeu community, working with their own food sources and sustainable practices. The choice to make cassava the cornerstone of consumption exemplifies an ecofeminist idea of rejecting our reliance on exploitative worldwide food systems. Cireundeu food practices by the women provide an actual example of how feminist ideas can coexist with ecological values in a food system grounded in a culture.



Figure 3. Women leading the Seren Taun ritual in Cireundeu Indigenous Village, presenting harvested cassava as a symbol of gratitude, fertility, and harmony with nature (Resource: team documentation)

Sustainable Food Systems and Their Connection to the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals)

Sustainable Food Systems and the Integration with the SDGs (SDGs). Sustainable food systems are directly tied to several SDGs - poverty alleviation, food security, gender equality, and environmental conservation (feminisation, social equity, and environmental conservation) (Pradhan et al.). Systems based on subsistence-style food systems, like those by the Cireundeu Indigenous Community, contribute towards SDG Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), and Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). But the low economic and agricultural productivity challenges make it hard to grow anything from agriculture to the overall quality of life of the communities in the land area. However, local food organizations have the potential to retain ecological equilibrium and avoid environmental pollution. By comparison, the industrial systems across the globe that rely on high-intensity, big-scale systems are not free of ecological harm, biodiversity loss, and economic inequality. Reliance on fossil fuels and natural resource extraction is also responsible for the challenges of SDG Goal 13 (Climate Action), Goal 14 (Life Below Water), and Goal 15 (Life on Land). According to food-feminism, sustainable food systems should place women and local communities at the forefront of the process of balancing man's requirements with the preservation of the environment. This orientation includes ethics, social justice, and ecology in the sustainability.

DISCUSSION

Three major findings were presented about the strategic role of women in the environmental and sustainability-based food systems in the Cireundeu Indigenous Village in Cimahi City, West Java. Not only are these findings in line with these and other local practices, but they also point to the importance of food-feminism values deeply integrated into the lives of indigenous communities in daily practice.

First, women in Cireundeu are embedded along the entire food system, from upstream to downstream, at the most intimate local level. They participate in activities such as land cultivation (often as unpaid labor on their husbands' land), cassava planting, harvesting, and processing into rasi (cassava rice), storage, distribution, and household consumption management. Beyond this, women are the custodians of local knowledge, passing down sustainable farming practices and nutritional principles orally and through everyday action as well. In relation to food, rice consumption is more than a rice substitution, but represents a collective cultural, ecological and spiritual, and ethnic resilience, specifically the refusals of reliance on imported foods and monoculture agriculture. Women are not only "cooks" or "nurturers" in this context, but they are the architects themselves of household food security, who define diet quality, food diversification, and sustainable use of resources. This dependency purports that women are sustainability gatekeepers with zero hunger and sustainable consumption.

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Second, two customary institutions strengthen women's power in food management, and these are described as the *leuit* (communal granary) and the *goah* (home food storage space). Crucially, only women can go into the *goah*, so to speak, as part of a wider recognition that rather than the invisible workers of the culture, women are the ones at the root of household food security. This is a trust-based, not a hierarchical, division of labor. Additionally, traditional regulations that had been handed down for generations, such as “*mipit kudu amit, ngala kudu bebeja*” (taking must be with permission, using must be communicated), function not just as a matter of protocol but as practices of care for the nature where food is a divine grace. This reflects the Sundanese religion linking the preservation of the environment and respect for the divine: to subvert nature is to upset spiritual balance (Sumardjo, 2009).



Figure 4. Interior of the *goah*, a sacred women-only storage room where cassava rice is preserved, reflecting female authority in household food security (Resource: team documentation)

Third, Cireundeu food is a practical expression of food-feminism theories as (1) ‘food sovereignty through self-reliance based on local resources (cassava as staple food), (2) mutualistic consumption, where humans do not dominate nature nor do they live at the whim of it’, and (3) sustainable food innovation, (e.g., organic waste into fertilizer and local plants for medicine and food). Yet inequality persists at the level of structures. However, women’s access to productive resources (including land, agricultural credit, technology, and participation in customary decision-making forums) remains limited by a patriarchy that defines men as heads of household and members of the community. This also underlined that women are, in this case, still the invisible labourers instead of the landowners.

The patriarchal norms are still defined as going for a way above the role of women, right down to a minimum. While the *goah* are managed by women and food is given out daily, strategic decisions (such as sharing land in common or keeping up customary politics) are still made under male control. Other results indicated that women’s involvement in community groups (such as indigenous women’s groups) has a positive impact on women’s capacity: it gives them more access to information, enhances social networks, and improves their bargaining power. Households with more women’s empowerment report better food security indicators: a more varied diet, better nutrition for their children, and greater preparedness for food crises. This demonstrates both that women’s empowerment is not merely a matter of justice, but that the whole system is about the efficiency of the food system. These results support the claim that indigenous women are not only “supporters” of the food system but are epistemic subjects and agents of transformation who embed ecological knowledge, cultural values, and ethics of care within their daily practices. Their participation in Cireundeu is indicative of a site for food-feminism, a way of viewing people and work that challenges the dichotomous opposition of reproduction with productivity and that contests the anthropocentric logic that frames both nature and women as commodities of exploitation (Shiva, 1988; Mies & Shiva, 1993).

The notions of *goah* and *mipit kudu amit* are more than a traditional way to practice; they are a collective way to practice being responsible for food. This accords with Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as outlined by Berkes (2008), knowledge that is accumulative, adaptive, and transmitted culturally to support an environment that is healthy and harmonious with humans. In Cireundeu, this TEK is sustained and activated predominantly by women, who represent the primary custodians of ecological and cultural sustainability. Even so, as DeVault (1991) highlights in *Feeding the Family*, feeding is often not categorized as work because it’s seen as an extension of motherhood.

In Cireundeu, for instance, while women manage all elements of the home food supply, they are seldom counted in formal economic standards and food policies. Even worse, when food crises occur or land degradation happens, women are often unfairly blamed — for example, for “failure to manage consumption,” even though the root issues have structural and ecological roots. This brings out the gender paradox in food systems, where women have the greatest weight but the least power (Doss et al., 2018) under the patriarchal values themselves. Cireundeu’s practices provide a different approach to realizing the SDGs.



Figure 5. Cireundeu women processing cassava into rasi (cassava rice), demonstrating women's leadership in the traditional food chain and ecofeminist values of care and sustainability (Resource: team documentation)

A cassava based food system supports SDG 2 (zero hunger) through local food resilience; women's role in managing goah and knowledge sharing supports the SDG 5 (gender equality); minimal waste and use of local materials supports SDG 12 (responsible consumption); and their biodiversity-friendly farming supports SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 15 (life on land). Additionally, this approach demonstrates that food system transformation does not require entry into macro policies, but rather can originate from cultural and local knowledge, underlined by Kuhnlein & Chotiboriboon (2022). These practices are nonetheless under threat from structural challenges that threaten sustainability. Globalization, urbanization, and developmental pressures undermine indigenous land and values. Lacking legal recognition of indigenous territorial rights that could help them negotiate future land policies, and a lack of policy support for women's participation in decision-making, it is clear that Cireundeu-like practices of indigenous peoples are susceptible. Hence, food-feminism should develop from local to national levels of policy, which can be made feasible through the incorporation of gender in food security programming, the enhancement of women's land rights, and the promotion of community-based agriculture in order to promote these issues. As a result, Cireundeu is not just a place for the protection of culture but, rather, a socio-ecological laboratory providing a vision of the food systems of the future, which are sustainable, just, rooted in local knowledge, and focused on women. In a world that is becoming more threatened by climate and food injustice, models like this are no longer mere alternatives but an urgent need.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that genuine food sustainability is rooted in the community, as evident from the women of the Cireundeu Indigenous Community in West Java. These women are not just the objects or animals at home but as primary forces who control ecological knowledge, carry cultural rituals, and make certain that domestic food security is maintained from cultivation to consumption. It illustrates how practices – processing rasi (cassava rice), handling the goah (a women-only storage space), implementing customary beliefs such as “mipit kudu amit, ngala kudu bebeja” – are the bedrock of food-feminism, and emphasize ethics of care, food sovereignty, and non-anthropocentric engagement with nature. The adage “Gusti nu ngasih, Alam nu ngasah, Manusa nu ngasuh” (“God gives, Nature nurtures, Humans care”) serves to underline the notion that humans are stewards over nature, not the conquerors of it. But with less land, capital, technology, and formal decision-making spaces for women due to patriarchal ideas, the ruler is first and foremost. These findings confirm that sustainable food systems can develop only when gender relations are reformed to make women agents of change. The Cireundeu model is linked to not just SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land), but to empirical evidence that food systems that are sustainable and gender just are not the kind of abstract ideas we tend to think about, but rather live and breathe in indigenous communities, and should underpin inclusive national food policy.

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