SEWA has been organizing women workers from the informal economy for around five decades. Through its work, SEWA has understood that women are the back-bone of an informal worker’s household and are shouldering the responsibility of fulfilling the family’s food and nutritional needs. Women also play a major role in the entire Food Value Chain System – in production, in processing, in trading of food and in making decisions about consumption and purchase of food at household level.

Despite their importance in the food system, due to patriarchal cultural norms and gender discrimination, women have been facing constraints such as lack of land ownership, access to other productive resources and an ecosystem to increase their income. “...Women play multiple roles – as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, in-laws, producers, food-processors, vendors, cooks... And yet, do not have access land ownership, credit, financial services, subsidies etc. All this really puts them at a disadvantage as they juggle all these responsibilities...” quoted Ms. Nsimadala, President of PAFO at the side-event on “Women, Work and Food Systems” during the UNFSS Pre-Summit.

Currently, women are shouldering around 60-65% of agricultural responsibility, especially upstream of the food supply chain. Despite this huge number, it is perversely counter-intuitive that the agricultural support systems and the associated organizations are predominantly male-oriented, male-controlled and male-populated. As a result, women are not only facing the challenge of their voices not being heard, but also they are hardly having any visibility in entire Food Value Chain System. Therefore, institutionalizing gender equality and gender transformative approaches in our homes, our farms, our communities, and in entire Food Value Chain System has become utmost important.

Moving in this direction, SEWA had organized a series of webinars on “Women, Work and Food systems” at Regional, National and also Global level during the Pre-summit Dialogues. The objective was to offer a platform to the informal sector women workers to bring forth their issues, challenges and solutions and eventually integrate them into the workings of the UNFSS work-streams. These women participants were from the countries of Global South and were engaged across the entire food value chain system. These economically suffering women were small and marginal women farmers, agricultural laborers, share croppers, small scale food processors, street vendors and many such from informal sector economy.

These dialogues were successful in providing these women workers an opportunity to enhance their visibility, identity and livelihood in the food system in the presence of a diverse audience constituting appropriate policy makers, private sector organizations, grassroot workers’ organizations, philanthropic foundations, scientists, academicians, Govt. representatives, CSOs, economists and individual consumers.

Some of the key takeaways from these series of webinar are:

- **Organizing is the key:** Organizing women helps in building their collective strength and their bargaining power. It is also a key element in building women’s leadership. Organizing the women is bringing solidarity amongst the women workers in the food systems. It is
enabling the women, even the ones from highly conservative communities and indigenous communities, to make their voices heard, respected and take on roles which are traditionally in the hands of the men.

- **Pro-women Policies:** In the countries of Global South, Agriculture is a family occupation. Therefore, there is a need to look at “Family as a unit”, while organizing the informal workers especially in the food systems and related policy mechanisms. Food System and Agro-policies need to enhance Women’s decision-making in legal frameworks. Policy reforms, especially for agro-policies and schemes, disassociating them from land-ownership will ensure small and marginal women farmers, landless agricultural laborers as well as sharecroppers can benefit from them. This will also help explicitly recognize and promote the rights of women who are structurally disadvantaged.

- **Treat Farm as an Enterprise:** Promoting women-owned and managed food social enterprises and bringing in technology and skills to strengthen the decentralized supply chains, would not only link consumers directly to producers through producer led value chains but also make farmers and other stakeholders in the value-chains as equal partners. There is a dire need of bringing Pro-poor and pro-farmer policies that promote traditional food for supporting and strengthening this approach.

SEWA has organized over 250,000 small and marginal farmers into their own agri-business enterprise connecting farmer to the end-users. It is fully owned and operated by the small scale women farmers. The company has its own procurement channels, processing centers, packaging units and a distribution network.

It brings nutrition and food security to over a million households today. In this process, the farmers get fair returns and the landless laborers get employment.

With an annual turnover of over 100 Mn INR, RUDI has been a great success in transforming the grave agriculture situation of smallholder farmers into favorable and sustainable.

Additionally, SEWA has also trained over 2500 informal sector women workers (both urban and rural) into making nutritious food and also organized them into organic and traditional food-processing initiative - Kamala.

With the objective of promoting smart foods, Kamala processes the coarse grains produced by SEWA’s farmers into traditional hot and dry snacks, Bakery products, condiments etc. and sells it. Thereby, Kamala promotes nutrition security through smart foods.

Similarly, SEWA has also linked hundreds of small and marginal vegetable and fruit growers directly to customers in niche urban market thereby eliminating the exploitative middle-men.

Through the aforesaid initiatives, SEWA has successfully integrated informal sector women workers at all stages in the supply chain – making them owner and managers of the entire food value chain.

Scaling of such women-owned solutions can generate employment opportunities for several more informal women workers and make food systems just and equitable.
• **Integrating Women at all stages in the Food Supply Chain:** Integrating women at all levels in the food supply chain will strengthen the role of women entrepreneurs in the food value chain systems. Upstream, this is done by promoting their traditional agro-skills and practices such as seed production, owning localized seed banks, making farm bunds and plantation on farm bunds etc. This will also help in preserving biodiversity and soil health. Downstream, promoting on-farm and off-farm food processing units and organizing women workers in to their own farm-to-fork food social enterprises. This will also help in building leadership and entrepreneurial mindset. In this manner of putting the entire food value chain together, it will eventually be making the food systems truly equitable and efficient from gender perspective.

• **Affordable access to Productive resources:** Asset creation is one of the surest way of fighting against poverty. When the women are owning productive assets and resources, it is seen that they channelize them in ensuring security of -food, -nutrition, -social being, -finance, -pension and –insurance (both health and life). All this leading to alleviating from poverty and building long term stability of the entire family unit. Therefore, (i) organizing women in to their own food micro-enterprises, (ii) integrating women workers at every stage in the food systems (iii) including women in policy making process for the food system will lead to affordable access to productive resources, further leading to gender equality, bringing women workers visibility, access to market, technology and extension services. Additionally, they also have added socio-cultural benefits.

• **Women’s livelihood Stabilization Fund:** To enable scaling up of such women micro-entrepreneurs, their producer-owned MSMEs and to build their resilience against the increasing time rate of climate and market shocks, there is a dire need of setting up Livelihood Stabilization Fund - a financial product & instrument which will be relevant to these small farmers, build their resilience and will enable them in doubling their incomes and making agriculture sustainable, viable and profitable.