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The Role of the Mongolian Women's Farmers Association in Addressing Food Security and Health Crises in Post- Socialist Mongolia

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Abstract

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991, one of the most pressing challenges faced by post-socialist states has been widespread malnourishment and food insecurity. In response to these systemic issues affecting the daily lives of rural nomadic communities in Mongolia, the Mongolian Women's Farmers Association (MWFA) has aimed to equip farmers across the country with the agricultural knowledge and materials needed for sustainable self-sufficiency. In this paper, I argue that the Mongolian Women's Farmers Association is a vital response to the ongoing food and health crisis within Mongolia, focusing its efforts on food diversity, traditional farming tactics, economic instruction, and ecofeminism. Using ethnographic research, survey data, secondary scholarship, and historical records, this research paper is designed to combine elements of nomadic lifestyle with aspects of more modern agricultural technology to improve Mongolian food habits. The research finds that often in post-socialist countries, due to weak infrastructure, difficulties transitioning from state-controlled to market economies, and dependency on said markets, systemic food insecurity is much more prevalent. For a country like Mongolia, a large percentage of nomadic communities face dire health consequences due to their diet of mainly meats and dairy, and because of sporadic weather patterns, are losing their ability to mobilize to new regions. Many communities lack the knowledge needed to grow and maintain vegetable gardens, making the prospect of surviving in a climate change-affected world increasingly daunting. In addition, much of the farming responsibilities are culturally given to the women, making the MWFA's goals all the more relevant to the current socio-cultural norms of Mongolian society. This paper contributes to the ongoing debate over how food sovereignty movements can survive in post-socialist spaces and provides evidence of how Mongolia can decrease food insecurity nationwide.

Author's Note

My name is Griffin W. Sanford, I'm a rising junior at Vassar College,

Poughkeepsie, NY, 12604, and I'm currently double majoring in International Studies and Russian Studies. This paper was written as the final project for an anthropology course entitled "*Food and Indigeneity*," taught by food scholar Dr. Mark Chatarpal. The goal of this course was to highlight the work of indigenous scholars across the world (more specifically in the Global South). After much deliberation, I decided on the Mongolian Women Farmers Association. I believe their work is incredibly timely and holds immense potential for advancing sustainable development in Mongolia and other struggling states around the world. Additionally, as someone who grew up with a single mother, I found their focus on teaching single mothers self-sufficiency inspiring. Their approach embodies social empowerment rooted in community and compassion, in addition to agricultural resiliency.

Keywords: Food Sovereignty, Ecofeminism, Mongolia, Post-Socialist

Introduction

As the global community continues to struggle with combating widespread poverty, rampant undernourishment, and environmental degradation, the knowledge and ideas of indigenous communities, along with the need for more sustainable food systems, are becoming increasingly valuable within policy discussions. Mongolia, a country founded on its traditional pastoral legacy, serves as an insightful case study. Due to the country's post-socialist transition to a market economy in the early 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, centralized agricultural structures collapsed, leaving rural herding communities to feel the brunt of the rising poverty epidemic. Adding to this economic pressure, the ongoing health crisis perpetuated by unhealthy diets, parallel with the loss of land and livestock due to climate change, has severely impacted the way of life for many herding communities. The role of women in food production has also emerged as a central concept in the establishment of sustainable food structures, forging a path towards the creation of more tight-knit and resilient rural communities. With this information in mind, drawing on government documents, ethnographies, secondary sources, surveys, and case studies, this paper argues that the Mongolian Women Farmers Association (MWFA) plays a crucial role in confronting the failures of Mongolia's food systems. By combining sustainable farming practices, indigenous knowledge, economic education, and women's empowerment, the organization offers a locally rooted, gender-conscious response to food insecurity, public health crises, and the detrimental effects of climate change.

Theoretical Framing

This paper is heavily influenced by existing food sovereignty literature, which focuses directly on uplifting local communities to control their food systems, as well as the concept of ecofeminism, which exemplifies the role of women within all aspects of food production. Popularized by the international movement known as La Via Campesina, food sovereignty was initially brought into global discussions of food policy during the 1996 World Summit in Rome. After years of debate, the term was finally established within the Declaration of Nyéléni in 2007 as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems” (Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty, 2007). Through this framework, groups like La Via Campesina hoped to amplify the needs of indigenous people within governmental food policy, as well as protect and conserve traditional agricultural and cosmological practices. Adding on to this idea, during the late 2000s, Hannah Wittman's *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting Food, Nature & Community* became one of the more influential texts in the food sovereignty space, translating the movement into a more policy-oriented academic discussion. Wittman presents her idea of food sovereignty as an agrarian citizenship, where individuals are entitled to influence the laws and procedures governing production, food, and land (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010). Using this lens, she critiques neoliberal agricultural reforms such as the privatization of land and resources, removal of trade barriers and subsidies, and the promotion of monocultures that seemingly disadvantage small-scale farmers in the Global South. She also takes a stance against the idea of a “technocratic approach” to agricultural

development, where institutions such as the IMF and World Bank actively sideline indigenous and cultural agricultural knowledge.

Building on Wittman's findings, Food sovereignty has also been analyzed through the corporate commodification of food. Raj Patel outlines how the consolidation of power within agribusiness undermines traditional food practices and erodes cultural foodways (Patel, 2007). Through the privatization of land, water, and even seeds, Patel shows how farmers are losing their autonomy within the industry, and argues that the international system needs to restructure its food systems to invite better democratic and sustainable reforms. While Patel focuses on more large-scale structural power dynamics, scholars Oane Visser & Natalia Mamonova outline a more localized and subtle approach. In post-socialist countries with fewer opportunities to challenge government policies, Visser and Mamonova describe a phenomenon they refer to as "quiet food sovereignty" (Visser, Mamonova, Spoor, & Nikulin, 2017). Using Russia as a case study, they show that while outwardly vocal food sovereignty movements are virtually non-existent, food sovereignty does exist through the substantial utilization of dachas and secondary plots for smallholder production by rural and urban households. Using this frame of reference, the authors explain that although less mobile, quiet food sovereignty is not apolitical, and shows that the social dimension of "everyday resistance" is just as important for the development of food sovereignty across all political systems.

In addition to these arguments, this paper is also focused on the intersection of both food sovereignty and ecofeminism, connecting how food systems interact with the empowerment of women in agricultural spaces. World-renowned scholar Vandana Shiva argues that women, specifically in Indigenous and Global South contexts, play a crucial role in the sustainment of biodiversity and traditional agricultural knowledge (Shiva, 1993). Taking Patel's findings further, Shiva describes how Western industrial structures and capitalism exploit women's labor and knowledge in the agriculture sector, leading to the promotion of monocultures and corporate control over seed production. Expanding upon this, Dianne Rocheleau & Barbara Thomas-Slayter argue that landscapes are gendered, outlining how they are split between men and women based on differing social dynamics and labor responsibilities (Rocheleau & Thomas-Slayter, 1996). They also contend that women's work managing forests, water, and food is often undervalued, creating a stark contrast between how men's and women's labor is perceived societally. Furthermore, Bina Agarwal's findings while studying collectives of group farming in South Asia showed the importance of land ownership for the economic and social empowerment of women's rights (Agarwal, 1994). Through her research, she highlights the essential nature of collective action, as women who work in groups have an easier time mobilizing, gaining a voice, and earning credibility. When utilized together, these frameworks of ecofeminism and food sovereignty offer a critical lens through which this paper analyzes the Mongolian Women Farmers Association, showing how gendered, grassroots agricultural practices can promote sustainable food systems in post-socialist environments, combat neoliberal development, and restore local autonomy.

Mongolia's Post-Socialist Transition and Its Effects on Agriculture

To begin, it is crucial to acknowledge the historical background of Mongolia's food systems, and where many of these issues originated. During the collective period, Mongolia's agricultural systems were split into two frameworks, where state farms focused on agricultural experiments/crossbreeding, and institutions known as *negdels* focused on pastoralism (Visser & Schoenmaker, 2011). The *negdels* were hierarchically organized, and specialized in differing livestock types. Mongolia's central planning apparatus set quotas for each member, as well as gave them a set of tasks to fulfill, however, in practice, most herders had a lot of flexibility and had significant influence in terms of pastoral management decisions. Along with being a hub for agricultural employment and production, the *negdels* were also known as "total institutions", equipped with well-arranged social facilities such as production and supply systems, schools, veterinary centers, marketplaces, and water stations (Visser & Schoenmaker, 2011). At its peak, a *negdel* could have over 1,000 members, half of whom engaged in herding (Visser & Schoenmaker, 2011). Not only were these services critical for the livelihoods of thousands of Mongolian farmers and herders, but they also allowed people to earn stable incomes, gain education, and have access to developed healthcare facilities.

Moving into the 1990s with the fall of the Soviet Union, and the loss of significant funds towards the *negdels*, Mongolia's economy was thrust into immediate economic decline. The country's introduction of "shock therapy" (transition from centralized to market economy) into their economy dissolved the well-funded state-owned farms, led to significant job losses, and forced a majority of the population back into the herding workforce (Sankey et al., 2018). To sustain themselves, this change caused farmers and herders to individually privatize. This privatization of livestock resulted in the exponential growth of the share of individually owned livestock, which increased from 23% in 1990 to 80% in 1993 (Visser & Schoenmaker, 2011, p. 30). This rapid decollectivization led to the disappearance of essential collective services such as mechanized fodder production, transportation materials, and marketing provided by the *negdel*, which forced rural households to survive largely on a subsistence basis. Scholars Visser & Schoenmaker in their comparison study of Mongolia and Russia's agricultural post-socialist transformation contend that one of the main reasons for Mongolia's rapid demise in the farming sector is because of the population's dependence on the *negdels* social systems (Visser & Schoenmaker, 2011). On a more environmental note, as argued by Temuulen Sankey, following the collapse of its socialist regime, Mongolia experienced substantial changes in its cropland extent and distribution methods that drastically affected the rural herding population. In their study, they found that due to privatization, there has been an estimated 38% decline in cropland across the major crop regions of Mongolia between 1990 and 2014, leading to land degradation and causing the country to be more reliant on imports from countries like China and Russia (Sankey et al., 2018). Together, these issues compiled together have caused herders to become incredibly vulnerable to anything from market shifts to dangerous weather patterns, ultimately entrenching financial instability and widening rural inequality.

Traditional Herding Lifestyle and Its Strain in the Modern Era

For rural Mongolians, the tenacious challenges brought forth by the country's post-socialist transition are often exacerbated by their unique nomadic herding lifestyles. In traditional Mongolian nomadic culture, their livelihood is often centered on extensive multispecies animal husbandry, where most families herd both large livestock (horses, camels, and cattle) and small livestock (sheep and goats) (Janzen, 2005). This type of practice has been handed down for many generations and is said to maintain the delicate and highly anthropized steppe ecosystems by distributing grazing stress among species (Peter et al., 2024). The pastoral space itself is separated into concentric circles, with the human body at the center, then the yurt (or rarely other types of more modern shelter), the camp, and finally the pastoral lands that are separated for each species' ecological needs (Marchina, 2021). As described in Indigenous scholar Hotta Ayumi's ethnography *Stories of the Enkhbat Family*, the yurt or *ger* holds deep cosmological significance. When nomads marry, they leave their parents' home and establish a *ger* of their own (Hotta, 2021).

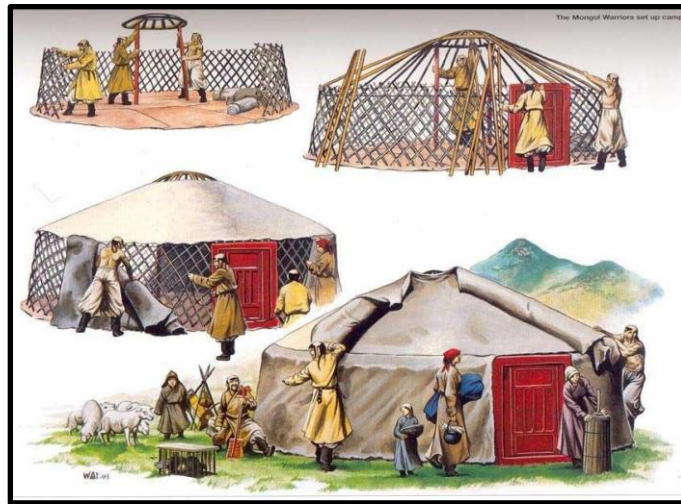


Figure 1. Discover Mongolia Travel, "Ger, Mongolian Traditional Dwelling," accessed May 3, 2025, <https://www.discovermongolia.mn/about-mongolia/culture-art-history/ger-mongolian-traditional-dwelling>.

Additionally, nomads are inherently movement-oriented, and seasonal migrations are perfectly timed to maximize pasture carrying capacity and ensure the livestock survives through rough cold winters and dry springs. One of the most important aspects of Mongolian nomadic culture is centered around the appropriation and management of natural conditions, where communities are often faced with tackling differing climatic levels and irregular weather patterns (Legrand, 2000). In terms of cultural foods, the dietary traditions among herding families are primarily based on meat or dairy-based dishes. Mongolians view meat as the only food that can truly 'nourish' them, with most families maintaining a continuous meat broth simmering over the fire. Mongolians have a strong emphasis on preserving hospitality rituals during all meals, only eating inside the *ger*, facing the soles of their feet towards

the door to rid out negative energy, and ensuring they are always under the protection of the fire spirit (Williot & Bianquis, 2019).

Although Mongolian nomads have been able to sustain their way of life for thousands of years, following the elimination of the *negdels*, herders were incentivized to maximize their herd sizes, causing the livestock population to boom from 22 million in 1940 to over 40 million today (Lkhagvadorj et al., 2013). In an examination of the socio-economic challenges to herder households in Mongolia, Michler & Kaczensky found that there is an average of 653 livestock per household, with many herders describing their desire for more to guarantee a better financial standing (Michler et al., 2024). This rapid increase has caused significant grassland degradation and economic decline, ruining pasture quality and inviting pernicious forest grazing. In a similar vein, the shifts in agricultural policy and elimination of programs that worked to market herders' meat and dairy products have left many economically exposed. High transportation costs make it difficult for herders to sell livestock products in urban markets, leaving them heavily dependent on unstable cashmere sales, which currently make up around 70 percent of their herding income (Michler et al., 2024).

Given these blatant economic disadvantages, there has been a recent societal shift among younger generations, who are increasingly moving away from sedentary lifestyles and toward more urbanized spaces. Although existing literature such as Peter & Niess (Peter et al., 2024) and Gardelle & Zhao (Gardelle & Zhao, 2019) contend that intergenerational traditional nomadic knowledge in Mongolia within younger generations is relatively strong, Katarzyna Golik argues that there has been a significant trend of migration away from rural pastoral spaces among the newer generations (Golik, 2021). Through interviews from 2007 and 2019 respectively, she discovered that a majority of the younger generation believed traditional pastoral life was too difficult, hoping for better living conditions, education, and healthcare within the major cities. She also expressed how Indigenous knowledge is potentially being lost through this urbanization process, giving the example of a 10-year-old girl living in Ulaanbaatar whose parents rejected the need for her to learn their ancestral language, citing it as “useless” (Golik, 2021, p. 55). This potential loss of indigeneity through urban migration signals a societal shift in the way Mongolian nomadic lives operate, posing a serious threat to the sustainable ecosystems and traditional food knowledge that has existed within Mongolian society for generations. With these issues of cultural erosion, economic volatility, and environmental destruction seemingly getting worse every year, the work of grassroots organizations such as the Mongolian Women Farmers Association becomes increasingly crucial for the conservation of pastoral culture legacies.

How MWFA Fills The Gap

As outlined by the theoretical frameworks of both food sovereignty and ecofeminism, smaller-scale community-led efforts focused on women's labor and sustainable food practices are crucial for addressing ongoing ecological and economic crises across the world. In practice, the Mongolian Women Farmers Association exemplifies these concepts, offering a unique solution that empowers rural communities to practice greater self-sufficiency and gain more control over the

domestic agriculture industry. Founded in 1999 by Mrs. Byatshandaa Jargal, this non-profit, non-partisan, non-denominational organization was created to directly support low-income families, and more specifically, single mothers, to grow and sell their own organic and sustainably produced vegetables (Mongolian Women Farmers Association, n.d.). Knowing the ongoing health and food insecurity crises in Mongolia, the organization has focused on teaching the cultivation of various vegetable seeds, explaining the process of constructing greenhouses, breeding and planting different types of native trees, and restoring soil. Participants receive seed packets in the mail and sometimes are provided with a plot of land on a community farm (Nelson, 2009). Adding on to this training, the program also shows families how to use their crop cultivation to gain alternate forms of income. This has enabled many single mothers to afford their children's education while fostering a tight-knit community that upholds deeply rooted cultural values (Mongolian Women Farmers Association, n.d.). In addition to their in-person training, the MFWA has also utilized YouTube through their channel @MNwomenfarmers to reach a wider audience. Their training ranges from 2-10 minutes and have amassed an average of 22,000 views across 10 different videos (MNwomenfarmers, 2010). Since its establishment, the organization has supported over 5,300 households across Mongolia, illustrating how state-level deficiencies in food security and women's empowerment can be addressed at the local level. On top of that, Byatshandaa herself has written many textbooks in Mongolian bridging vegetable farming with traditional animal husbandry, promoting eco-friendly solutions that work within the bounds of nomadic and pastoral lifestyles (Nelson, 2009).

The MWFA can be described as a perfect example of quiet food sovereignty, as while the program does not make overtly political statements, it does radically reimagine how food is produced and controlled. By focusing on sustainable farming methods and the enhancement of community-driven projects, the organization “quietly” challenges the existing agricultural sector’s policies, especially those considerably influenced by post-socialist reforms. Through this dynamic, the organization can uplift marginalized groups by providing them with the tools to engage in their own food self-sufficiency, strengthening local economies in the long term. In one case, a local woman who was left disabled in a fatal car crash began growing vegetables based on MWFA’s guidance. It has since become her main source of income and food. She is now even able to combine traditional meat soup with the variety of vegetables she grows for her daughter and husband (Strzyżyńska, 2024). Furthermore, the MWFA’s emphasis on providing educational tools to grow your own food and women’s livelihoods represents an interesting intersection of food sovereignty and ecofeminism. As discussed, a woman’s role as the primary caretaker is often downplayed, and the MWFA is fighting directly against this narrative on both societal and economic levels. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Byatshandaa explained why the program was directed toward women stating, “I thought that by training women how to grow vegetable gardens, I could help families by giving the mums something productive to do while also providing the household with a source of food and income” (Strzyżyńska, 2024). Altogether, the organization offers valuable lessons for similar rural and disadvantaged communities around the world, integrating gender-focused empowerment, local knowledge, and many of the core principles outlined within food sovereignty.

Role of Women in Food Production

When considering the broader context of women's contributions to Mongolia's agricultural and pastoral industries, the importance of the MWFA becomes even more clear. Historically, women in Mongolia are well known for their strength and influential wisdom. Being seen as equal leaders to men, Mongol Queens are celebrated for their role in governing over large areas, serving as judges, commanding in battle, and taking part in open athletic events (Ulambayar & Ferández-Giménez, 2013). Within pastoral society, women take on the role of essential caretakers, ensuring their families are well-fed. Inside the *ger*, women play a crucial role in the production and processing portion of their herds, with their duties including: herding small livestock, milking, transforming raw or processed foods into meals, and shearing/cutting the animal's coats (Cooper & Gelezhamtsin, 1999). Overall, with all these jobs combined, women make up around 42% of the agricultural sector (Ulambayar & Ferández-Giménez, 2013).

While this labor is seemingly respected on paper, these attitudes are not always reflected throughout herding society. Through a study that interviewed Mongolian herding women and their relationship to gender dynamics within pastoral landscapes, Cooper & Gelezhamtsin uncovered that due to the domestic nature of their responsibilities, women's labor is often overlooked (Cooper & Gelezhamtsin, 1999). Interestingly, they even discovered that because the daily labor profiles for women are divided between domestic and productive tasks, women often spend more hours working than men, shifting household burdens even more onto women. This devaluation continues into the economic sector, as in the post-socialist era, women are often classified as "unpaid family workers" in official governmental statistics (Benwell, 2006). This not only overlooks the crucial role women play in both family and agricultural life but also creates conditions in which female-led households face significantly greater financial burdens. Within the country, female-led households are usually constituted in poverty-stricken areas and are short of both labor and livestock (Rossabi & Rossabi, 2006). In an analysis of 140 pastoral communities across Mongolia, Mongolian researcher Tungalag Ulambayar noted that female-led households have significantly fewer durable assets compared to male-led households, including items ranging from trucks, cell phones, and other technology. She also noticed that women are marginally less likely to engage in collective action, losing out on the ability to share knowledge with older and wiser female heads (Ulambayar & Ferández-Giménez, 2013). In light of these mounting issues, the Mongolian Women Farmers Association's initiatives are becoming more and more important for guaranteeing food security in rural areas, preserving pastoral culture, and uplifting women's involvement in food production.

Food Insecurity and Health Crises in Rural Mongolia

These systemic challenges facing women in food production are inseparable from Mongolia's more comprehensive struggle with food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly in impoverished rural areas. As a result of the post-socialist agricultural and economic transition including widespread unemployment, weak financial and governmental institutions, and land degradation from overgrazing, Mongolia has faced

persistently high poverty levels. The percentage of impoverished people has been stuck at around an average of 27% for the past decade, with an unemployment percentage of 5.2% in 2022 (Asian Development Bank, 2024). Adding on to this, the poverty level within rural areas specifically is around 35% (Tserennadmid & Sugar, 2016), with another 50% of the entire population not able to afford a healthy diet (UNICEF, 2021). In a study testing Mongolian consumption habits conducted by Mongolian scholars Tserennadmid & Sugar, it was found that there is a large and statistically significant difference in nutrient consumption between poor and non-poor people within the region, with poor households below the benchmark level for all nutrients examined except animal fat. The study also found that undernourishment levels were deeply tied to both poverty and location, finding that 32.49% of poor individuals were undernourished compared to only 7.33% of non-poor individuals (Tserennadmid & Sugar, 2016, p. 66).

In terms of rural dietary intake, while the main crops grown within Mongolia are potatoes, cabbage, and wheat, most herding communities survive mostly on meat and dairy products. Due to a lack of knowledge when it comes to growing vegetables, and the constant cycle of movement because of seasonal differences, many Mongolians lack the essential nutrients needed from vegetables to stay healthy (UNICEF, 2021). In a study by Mongolian scholars Kadirbyek Dagys and Bakyei Agipar focused on how to maximize food value in chains in Mongolia, it was discovered that due to poorly diversified diets, Mongolians are at much higher risks of micronutrient deficiencies and dietary-related non-communicable diseases. These dietary deficiencies have been directly attributed to the country's high rate of obesity (29% of children and 63% of adults), high blood pressure levels (27.5% of adults), high cholesterol levels (61.9% of adults), and exceptionally high levels of anemia among younger children (27%) (Dagys et al., 2023). The study also highlights the extreme impacts climate-related events have had on Mongolian diets, as unpredictable seasonal patterns often increase the likelihood of livestock mortality and deterioration of soil fertility for crop growth. Most notably, the recent increase in frequency and intensity of extreme weather events during the winter months (*dzuds*) has played a significant role in the death of millions of cattle, meaning less to eat in general (Dagys et al., 2023).

Even further, Mongolia ranks first among all countries in the proportion of cardiovascular disease (CVD) deaths linked to dietary imbalances, largely due to the population's extremely high consumption of red meat, refined grains, and whole-fat dairy products (UNICEF, 2021). While there have been efforts to counteract these glaring public health crises in the form of food stamps and the establishment of a National Food Security Program in 2009, due to poor policy cooperation, low efficacy in implementation, and governmental structures still underdeveloped from socialist times, there has been little improvement in the betterment of rural Mongolian's diets and livelihoods (Tserennadmid & Sugar, 2016). As a result, programs such as the Mongolian Women Farmers Association have become crucial in managing these dietary imbalances, allowing impoverished people more access to nutritious and environmentally sound foods.

Conclusion

In the contemporary era, Mongolia's post-socialist transition has created a complex historical legacy of mass nutritional deficiency, rising poverty, ecological degradation, and the disintegration of traditional pastoral culture. As rural communities continue to be bombarded with the mourning pressures of extreme weather events, economic vulnerability, and rapid urbanization, governmental and public services have proven insufficient in addressing the intertwined crises of health, food, and gendered labor. Through this lens, the Mongolian Women Farmers Association rises as an important figure in combating these systemic dilemmas, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, bettering dietary habits, and teaching others how to attain economic independence. Informed through the ideas of food sovereignty and ecofeminism, the MWFA shows how gender-responsive, community-led solutions may successfully combat social inequalities and exploitative production systems. By encouraging rural women to cultivate their own crops, share traditional and educational farming knowledge, and establish stronger community resilience, MWFA offers a model of food sovereignty that is intertwined with ecological and cultural respect. As this paper has discussed, the gaps the MWFA fills within Mongolia's existing food structures serve as a powerful force towards the restoration of land-based food systems, specifically highlighting the importance of women's labor. The work of community-based groups like the MWFA is essential to creating a more equitable and sustainable future as Mongolia continues to negotiate a quickly shifting social and environmental terrain.

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