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# Gender Equality in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in Berlin Brandenburg

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# 1 Introduction

In recent years, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) have emerged as substantial players in the movement towards sustainable agriculture and food systems. These networks mostly emphasize the local food movement, organic food production, and community-supported farming. They offer a promising avenue for moving toward the sustainable farming part of the agriculture-farming community and present an opportunity for looking at increased equity for women.

Yet, many gender dynamics remain unaddressed within these food alternatives. My research explores these Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and their potential such as social structure, division of labor, and inclusivity practices within these networks.

In this background paper, data were collected from interviews (Darkhani, 2024b) with a range of participants in different AFNs across Berlin Brandenburg as part of the research titled "Investigating the role of women producers in alternative food networks implementing organic farming in Berlin Brandenburg" (Darkhani, 2024a). What emerged from these interviews provides a clear and detailed picture of how these networks function and, more broadly, of the dynamics of gender within the AFNs. To facilitate clarity in the presentation of these results, I refer to each of the seven interviewees as AFN1 through AFN7.

The first analysis suggests that women have a strong presence in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), especially in roles pertaining to administration, education, and community outreach. For example, in AFN 1 (Berlin-Brandenburg), women comprise 70 % of the team, with 75 % of the team leadership being female. This is a striking contrast to the conventional agricultural sector, where men dominate. Nevertheless, in some roles that appear to be sticking to the old format of conventional gender roles, women are largely absent from physically demanding tasks.

Moreover, the study investigates the social framework of AFNs. The variety in financial profiles and the deliberate attempts to involve the younger generation in the educational programs spotlight the networks' inclusive potential. Still, there are considerable obstacles to overcome especially concerning access to land and capital that hit women particularly hard (AFN3).

This paper investigates the role of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in fostering gender equality. It asks three critical questions about who participates in these networks, how labor is divided among participants, and the extent to which AFNs are inclusive. The answers to these questions enable a clearer picture to emerge regarding the actual impacts AFNs have on the lives of women who participate in these networks. It contributes to the important, far-reaching discourse on sustainable agriculture and gender equality.

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## 2 Literature Review

The gender dynamics in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) are complex and intersect with the sustainability of the food system, with social structures, and with provisioning responsibilities (Darkhani, 2024a). AFN, like community-supported agriculture, promise both a radical reorganization of these conditions and an improved suite of food system outcomes (Forssell/Lankoski, 2015). They are seen as prime movers of profound change, especially when it comes to dismantling structures of disempowerment within our urban food systems (Zerbian/López-García, 2024). Likewise, in various areas of Germany, including both urban and peri-urban regions, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), food cooperatives, and self-harvest gardens have emerged as significant models of AFNs. These initiatives create meaningful bonds among producers and consumers through a shared commitment to value environmental and societal goals, facilitating direct engagement and cooperative use of resources and land (Darkhani, 2024b; Zoll et al., 2018). Food coops and CSAs boost local economies by generating employment, facilitating the establishment of small-scale food enterprises, and producing near-comprehensive effects on community health and well-being (Morrow, 2019). Trust is crucial in AFNs, creating direct connections between the producers and the consumers of food (Martindale, 2021). Current studies show that women oftentimes are the ones who take on the primary responsibility for food provisioning, leaving them with the majority of the burden. This gendered pattern also occurs in households that are part of the local food system (Som Castellano, 2016). Involvement in agroecological movements is associated with improved control over income and greater participation in decision-making processes (Valencia et al., 2021).

The division of labor based on gender in the provisioning of food affirms the necessity of studying the dynamics of labor in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in detail. Moreover, the very materiality of food, and particularly the authority that comes with food hubs over food, has much to do with how AFNs function. Understanding consumer motivations and behaviors in AFNs is essential for shaping sustainable food systems (Pascucci et al., 2016). The food economy greatly influences the power distribution within AFNs. As an alternative to the mainstream food system, however, AFNs remain relatively small. They don't reach many people or directly influence society at large. Nevertheless, at the same time, they offer up a way of living differently (Mastronardi et al., 2019).

In addition, the gender dynamics of AFNs are influenced by the entire food system. For instance, the absence of plans for an integrated urban food policy frequently causes AFNs to lack an overall vision; instead, they are shaped by individual initiators with divergent priorities and capacities. This certainly limits the potential of AFNs to drive broader transformations, including in terms of gender equality (Zoll et al., 2021).

To sum up, attaining gender equality within the Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in Germany is closely tied to three aspects: assigning food provisioning duties, establishing trust, which is critical for network functioning; and aiming for sustainability, which is the reason for the existence of these networks in the first place. To understand how to promote gender equality in AFNs and consequently produce a real comprehensive effect on the sustainable food system, understanding these three intertwined conditions is invaluable.

## 2.1 Who works in AFN, what is the social structure?

The interviews reveal that women are central to AFNs. They partake in almost all the farming and administrative work of these networks and often assume leadership positions. The social structure of these networks is fairly diverse; participants come from a variety of ages and economic backgrounds. Table 1 describes the social structure at AFNs.

Women are at the center of these networks. Their presence is felt everywhere, from the administrative offices to the field. Not only do they take on vitally important duties within these realms, but across the various organizations that make up this Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), women are also very often found in leadership positions. Though men are certainly involved in these AFNs, the overall structure of these networks is influenced by women. Their contributions are crucial to the day-to-day functioning and success of these networks, reflecting a significant gender dynamic where women are central to both the organizational and practical aspects of AFNs.

**Table 1:** Social Structure

Social Structure	AFN 1	"Actually, at our farms, we are a 70 % female team. We have more female gardeners and also more female office members at XX.... 75 % of the participants are female. So, it's a lot more women than men."
	AFN 2	"It's also both, like XX was founded by XX. She's yeah, she's a woman obviously. And yeah, some we also work with XX. It's the community supermarket. So, they have also been only in contact with women. But there are also some male actors."
	AFN 3	"Yes. So, we are now around 10 to 15 people. Depends a bit on the season. And we have people working only in the office. Because of course, we do not only grow the vegetables, but we do all the communication, the sales, and everything ourselves... Two of us – and we are mostly working in the office – and then we have two other women in the field."
	AFN 4	"The core of our network is made up of passionate volunteers and part-time workers, most of whom are women. They handle various roles, from administrative tasks to coordinating community events."
	AFN 5	"In our organization, we see a mix of genders, but women are particularly active in leadership roles and decision-making processes. They tend to take on responsibilities that require strong communication and organizational skills."
	AFN 6	"Our group has a diverse composition, but we've noticed that women are more engaged in the day-to-day operations, especially in roles that involve interaction with the community and managing logistics."
	AFN 7	"Women in our network often take on dual roles, balancing both fieldwork and administrative duties. Despite the physical demands, they remain central to the network's functioning."

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In terms of gender distribution, AFN 1 has 70 % female staff. That said, both AFN 2 and AFN 3 possess solid numbers as well, with 50 % and 60 % of their respective teams being women. This indicates, a strong presence of women in these networks. At the same time, it's also important to recognize that, despite these numbers, the physical labor of work within many of the networks is influenced by traditional gender roles. In terms of financial resources, the AFNs are diverse, with members coming from various economic situations and with frequent challenges, particularly around access to land particularly for those without secure incomes. Age diversity is also notable, with efforts to engage younger generations through educational programs and practical training, ensuring the sustainability and inclusivity of these networks.

## 2.2 How is the division of labor organized? Do AFNs offer the opportunity to break down traditional gender roles?

The structure of labor in AFNs is not fixed but varies by situation, yet there is a clear and concerted effort to counter traditional gender roles. Women are present in all sectors of labor, both physical and administrative. The very presence of women in all aspects of food production and distribution acts as an empowerment mechanism. This inclusivity is seen as a way to empower women and provide them with the skills necessary to take on leadership roles. Below, table 2 describes the division of labor and break down of gender roles.

The labor within Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) is divided along gender lines, but the way it is divided is changing. Just as in traditional agriculture, the majority of physical tasks in AFNs are performed by men, with some networks reporting as high as 60 % of the physical labor being performed by men. However, the networks in which physical labor is more evenly shared between men and women are, not surprisingly, those that have a significant number of women in leadership positions. Even so, women comprise the vast majority of the labor in the networks that are more educationally or administratively oriented; obviously, women are performing tasks that are essential to the functioning of the network.

The inclusive attitude of AFN 1 is clear. It has a high percentage of female leadership 75 % and have a collaborative atmosphere in its community of practice. That is why women in AFN 1 have few uncertainties about taking on nontraditional roles in the AFN leadership structure. In this regard, AFN 1's community of practice is good at providing mutual support<sup>1</sup> helping women take on nontraditional roles in the AFNs.

<sup>1</sup> In the interviews, it was mentioned that women must support each other and have each other's backs to remain persistently involved in these circles.

**Table 2:** Division of Labor and Break Down of Gender Roles

Division of Labor	AFN 4	"You have to fight for being a woman – for time or to show that you can do this... It's easier if I bring my man with me or my father; it's easier than to go alone."
	AFN 5	"On the team, it's definitely female dominant. But the community as a whole I think is pretty evenly mixed."
	AFN 6	"The people who apply for the actual jobs where you have to do something and then you have to get paid... seem like a lot of men feel like they could do that, and the women do a lot of volunteer work."
	AFN 3	<p>"Farm work itself is no joke... a lot of the tools are built for Hulk-like strength, which I definitely don't have... We've been trying to change some stuff, like using sliding doors on our poly tunnels instead of those heavy lift-up ones. We need tractors and all that heavy machinery. And let's face it, most guys are more drawn to that stuff. It's partly because of those old stereotypes we grew up with, you know? Guys and machines, while women handle the office."</p> <p>"In our area, there are also women owning the land that we use. So, it's not uncommon, I would say, but I think agriculture in general is more man dominated... It was very common to give the land to the oldest son."</p>
Breaking Down Gender Roles	AFN 4	"There is no difference. Everything is equal... but inside the system is not equality."
	AFN 5	"It's a very women-driven project, and on the board, it's predominantly women, but the advisory board is more balanced with more male representation."
	AFN 6	<p>„I think most spaces are male-dominated still, and I think that there's a lot of work to be done also in organic farming."</p> <p>„If women really want, they do have all the access they need. But I believe that they will always have to work a little bit harder than men."</p>
	AFN 2	„Women are more involved in the sustainable food system, and the CSA model allows them to take on roles that were traditionally dominated by men."



## 2.3 How exclusive/inclusive are AFN? Who do they exclude, who do they include and how does exclusion/inclusion work?

AFNs strive for inclusivity and offer the promise of participatory opportunities for all, regardless of gender (Aare et al., 2023; Volpentesta/Della Gala, 2013). But as AFNs try to establish themselves in the growing cooperative movement, they face significant challenges tied to funding and land access, obstacles that tend to push women and newcomers to the margins.

The food networks are dedicated to bringing together diverse participants in a common endeavor to make the food system more just. Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) attempt to create spaces where all participants can enjoy similar decision-making power, whether or not they are financially privileged. However, there are notable gender divisions, with men often occupying formal, paid positions, while women tend to volunteer, particularly in less formal roles. The difficulties encountered by smaller, often women-led farms underscore the operation disparities between large and small-scale farms. Efforts to involve women in decision-making and promote gender equality are evident, with initiatives encouraging more women to join the sector and participate actively.

**Table 3:** Inclusivity

Inclusivity	AFN4	"We try to create some more balance... so that you don't have more decision-making power just because you have more money... all members have a vote regardless of how many shares they have signed."
	AFN5	"We try to make sure that people can really afford to shop at XX and meet certain environmental standards... we are searching for a change in the system that would make a contribution to inclusivity."
	AFN6	"We have these mini jobbers... they are mostly male and it's usually men who apply for that job. But then we also have a lot of women as volunteers, especially for less formal roles."
	AFN7	"Women are often doing the paperwork in the smaller farms... but on larger farms, the paperwork is the same, making it harder for smaller operations." <sup>2</sup>
	AFN1	"Everybody can join the academy, and we promote that also on our Instagram channel like other women working in agriculture. And I think this motivates more women to join this sector."
	AFN2	"It's a very you know women-driven project... and we try to include as many as possible in decision-making processes."

<sup>2</sup> In interviews, contributors highlighted the unfair amount of administrative work that smaller farms have to do. One noted that while larger farms with 2,000 hectares benefit from more resources and support, smaller farms, which may only have a fraction of the land, still face the same amount of paperwork. There was also a call for government intervention to ease this burden, particularly through financial support or efforts to digitalize bureaucratic processes to support smaller farming operations.

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There is a strong emphasis on community building and supporting women through training and access to resources. However, financial barriers and access to land remain challenges, particularly for women with low income. These barriers can limit the ability of women and newcomers without established connections or secure incomes to fully participate in and benefit from AFNs. Nonetheless, community collaboration within AFNs is a strong suit. This collaborative environment helps mitigate some of the exclusionary factors by fostering mutual support and knowledge sharing among participants. Overall, while AFNs are generally inclusive, there is a need for targeted interventions to address persistent barriers and ensure equal opportunities for all participants.

## 2.4 Key Themes and Recommendations

### Access to Resources

Compared to men, women face greater obstacles in obtaining land and capital. This stems from several causes, including lower average earnings and societal pressures that often assign women to the home. Because of these resource disparities, women are less able to participate in and benefit from these networks. That's why AFNs must focus on creating more equitable access to resources by providing targeted financial support and training programs for women.

### Educational and Support Programs

It is vital to have educational programs and support systems in place to empower the women at these Networks. It is even more crucial that these programs continue to develop and expand, enabling women to gain the knowledge and practical skills that lead to success in both agricultural and leadership roles.

### Community and Collaboration

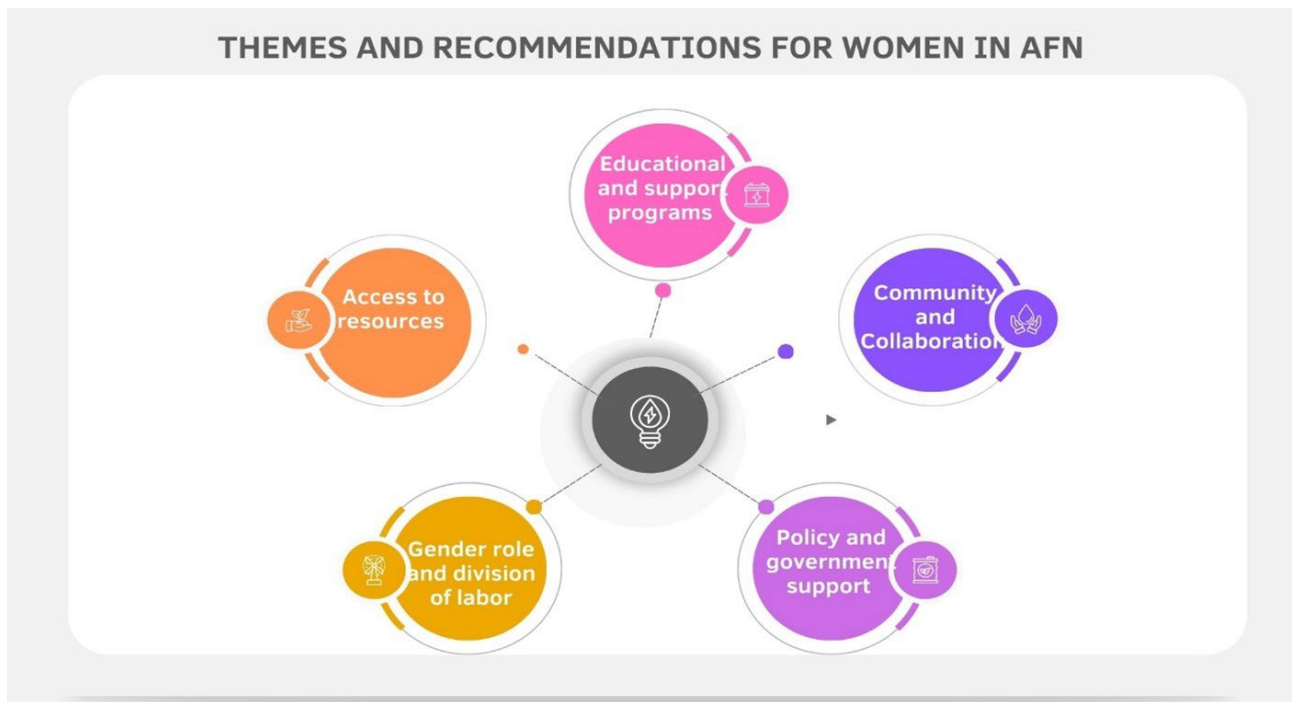
AFNs have vital community building and collaboration components. They should continue to build supportive environments for women, where they can share knowledge and support each other. That kind of sharing and supporting takes AFNs into the next level of achieving their goals. Initiatives that promote collaboration and mutual support should be encouraged and expanded.

### Gender Roles and Division of Labor

It is essential to contest the traditional roles in agriculture and food networks. When we encourage women to participate fully in farming, we go a long way toward helping these networks become truly egalitarian. And there's more: We can achieve even greater gender equality by also encouraging men to take on domestic tasks, including child care, so that everyone is truly free to pursue their aspirations.

### Policy and Government Support

Women working in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) require government support to have a chance to work like large scale farms and scale up their businesses. Young women entrepreneurs rely on informal and low-wage labor to get their work done, and they need more help from the government to come even close to competing with the men who run large-scale farms.



**Figure 1:** Themes and recommendations for women in AFN

### 3 Conclusion

The results from the study of AFNs show that these networks offer a major chance to advance gender equality. Women are present in good numbers, and in some cases, are leading or have led. For the most part, the AFNs are quite inclusive. Consequently, the two networks AFN1 and AFN3 serve as good models for promoter initiatives. Programs and community collaboration play critical roles in challenging traditional gender roles, enabling women to participate in diverse aspects of farming.

Addressing the long-standing problems of traditional gender roles and access obstacles is imperative for the achievement of a truly inclusive environment. Overcoming these access barriers requires not just the elimination of obvious obstacles, like the lack of adequate finances or the shortages of land access that affect women disproportionately. Policy efforts must highlight, in addition, endeavor to transform the traditional mindsets that keep women from attaining financial security and land access.

AFNs can make more headway in breaking down gender roles and building a more sustainable agricultural system by sticking to three strategies: continuing to support and promote educational initiatives; strengthening community collaboration and enriching policy dialogue. Doing so targets the right changes in the right places to advance not just women's empowerment, but also the overall resilience, equity, and sustainability of the food systems AFNs support.

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