

Ecofeminism and Social Learning as a Framework for Addressing Child Undernutrition and Gender Inequality: A Case Study of Women-Led Activism in Northern Ghana

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Abstract: Child undernutrition and gender inequality in Northern Ghana are systemic challenges, shaped by structural, ecological, and social factors. In that context, this paper considers ecofeminism and social learning as complementary frameworks to address these problems. Ecofeminism foregrounds women's ecological knowledge, caregiving activities, and subsistence labor in sustainable food systems and elucidates systematically embedded disparities that perpetuate vulnerability. Social learning theory supports this stance by outlining how such practices and knowledge are transmitted, sustained, and scaled up in communities, and it recognises observation, modelling, and collective engagement as determinants of behaviour change. Applying information and case studies, the paper illustrates how women-led agroecology, farmer field schools, and peer mentoring programs represent both ecofeminist principles and social learning processes, yielding outcomes of improved food security, greater dietary variety, and child health outcomes. There are also references to global ecofeminist and social learning movements, which lend added relevance for these frameworks to help drive food sovereignty, health justice, and gender equity. The academic study fills a gap by theoretically infusing ecofeminism and social learning into a dual lens of analysis for women-led activism and, practically, as one that highlights paths, specifically policy and community interventions. The research also finds that encouraging women to participate in activism and collective learning offers sustainable, equitable, and community-driven solutions to child undernutrition and gender inequality in Ghana that resonate around the world in its discussions of nutrition and health justice.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Social Learning Theory, Child Undernutrition, Gender Inequality, and Ghana.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are many challenges in public health in Ghana, but more so in Northern Ghana, where poverty, food insecurity, and gender inequality converge as a serious public health challenge related to child undernutrition. Current national statistics state that stunting affects nearly one in five children under five, with the highest prevalence in Northern Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2023). Early childhood undernutrition damages health, cognitive development, and sustained economic productivity, thereby

entrenching cycles of poverty and inequality (UNICEF, 2024). Women play an important role in agriculture as well as household food management; yet systemic barriers, including limited land access, lower educational attainment, and limited agency in decision-making, prevent them from being able to ensure adequate nutrition for their families (Fiasorgbor, 2021; FAO, 2022). Gendered inequalities like these harm not only women's livelihoods; they also impact child nutrition directly because women are the primary caregivers for children and food producers. Therefore, the issue of child undernutrition in Northern Ghana requires

tackling structural gender inequalities in conjunction with food system challenges. As one such lens, ecofeminism critiques the interconnected exploitation of women and nature, thus offering us a critical lens through which we can recognize and discuss these challenges (Shiva & Mies, 1993; Gaard, 2017). Ecofeminism links ecological sustainability with social justice, valuing care, interdependence, and community-led approaches to food and health. Social learning theory also adds to this perspective by clarifying how actors or communities learn and enact practices, influencing behavior through observation, participation, and collective action (Bandura, 2001). Ecofeminism and social learning form a holistic lens through which to examine the promise of women-led activism in Northern Ghana to impact child nutrition outcomes and gender equality as a whole (Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024; Lawrence et al., 2024).

➤ *Problem Statement.*

Despite several interventions targeting child undernutrition in Ghana, progress is inconsistent. Malnutrition rates are still disproportionately high in Northern Ghana. The national prevalence of stunting is approximately 19% among children younger than five, according to the Ghana Statistical Service (2023); it is greater than 30% in the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions, making these regions the most nutritionally vulnerable. Wasting affects approximately 6% of the children, and micronutrient deficiencies (e.g., anemia) are prevalent, with nearly 66% of all children under five experiencing micronutrient deficiency (UNICEF, 2024). Structural gender inequalities amplify child undernutrition. Women, working as primary caregivers and food producers, have limited access to land, credit, and agricultural inputs, in addition to constraints on decision-making power in both households and communities (FAO, 2022; Fiasorgbor, 2021). To date, these constraints limit their ability to accommodate diverse diets and nutrient needs. Many nutrition programs ignore the gendered dimensions and do not leverage women's collective knowledge, activism, or social learning processes that could dramatically change food systems. Therefore, critical frameworks are necessary to address child undernutrition and gender inequality at the same scale. Ecofeminism and social learning provide a more holistic approach that acknowledges women's activism as a key strategy to reshaping food systems, nurturing nutrition-sensitive agriculture, and strengthening community resilience in the Northern Ghana region.

➤ *Rationale and Justification.*

Therefore, the need to understand this study lies in an urgent approach to alleviate child undernutrition in Northern Ghana, which has one of the highest national malnutrition rates. Traditional nutrition interventions tend to focus on supplementation but not on the structural gender inequalities contributing to household food security (FAO, 2022; UNICEF, 2024). Ecofeminism provides a framework for the relationship between gender justice and ecological sustainability, whereas social learning emphasizes the importance of collective knowledge-sharing and a change in behavior. Taken together, these views illustrate the transformative capacity of women-driven activism to

promote nutrition-sensitive agriculture and equity in agriculture, resource provision, empowerment, and community resilience. By situating child undernutrition within structural social and ecological contexts, this paper adds to existing scholarship in science and practical policy formulation, providing evidence for a more evidence-based approach to sustainable nutrition interventions in Ghana.

➤ *Objectives*

The study aimed to apply ecofeminism and social learning as integrated frameworks to mitigate child undernutrition and gender inequality through women-centred activism in Northern Ghana. It evaluated the contribution of women-led activism to sustainable agriculture, food security, and child nutrition; explored how social learning within women's networks facilitated nutrition-sensitive practices and strengthened community resilience; assessed the influence of ecofeminist principles on the development of gender-responsive nutrition policies; and proposed measures for integrating ecofeminist and social learning practices into national and regional nutrition strategies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Theoretical Model.*

Ecofeminism and social learning also complement each other in addressing child undernutrition and gender disparities. Ecofeminism critiques the interconnected oppression of women and nature. This emphasizes care, interdependence, and sustainability (Shiva & Mies, 1993; Gaard, 2017). Social learning theory, as Bandura et al. (2001) explained, tells people and communities how they acquire knowledge and modify behaviors by observing each other and participating in collective activity. As a composite theory, these frameworks show the potential for women-centred social action to shape food systems in Northern Ghana and bring about better eating habits that are nutrient-sensitive, strengthening communities' resilience.

➤ *Empirical Review.*

Ecofeminism was formed out of a critique of the dual domination of women and nature. Merchant (1980) laid out how scientific and industrial paradigms replicated patriarchal exploitation, while Shiva and Mies (1993) stressed the crucial role played by women's subsistence work in agriculture in maintaining ecological balance. Simultaneously, the concept of social learning theory, proposed by Bandura (1977, 2001) shed light on how knowledge is acquired and behaviour is changed through observation, imitation, and group practice among people and groups. Taken together, these models point to the longstanding influence of women's ecological knowledge and community learning on both food systems and nutrition outcomes.

Ecofeminism and relational ethics, care, and connectedness position women as agents of ecologically and socially transformative practices (Gaard, 2017). These take cues from social learning, which highlights the importance of modelling, peer influence, and shared knowledge in

shaping behaviour (Bandura, 2001). In the context of child nutrition, ecofeminism emphasizes women's caregiving and agricultural roles, and social learning accounts for the mechanisms to disseminate nutrition-sensitive practices via women's networks, farmer field schools, and community education programs (Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024). Ecofeminism has been criticized for essentializing women's relationship with nature and ignoring intersectional differences (Gaard, 2017). Integrating an intersectional and decolonial approach, recent scholarship has positioned ecofeminism in the context of larger efforts to combat structural inequality (Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024). Likewise, social learning theory has moved away from individual modelling toward a greater emphasis on community-based and participatory methods, particularly in health and nutrition education (Lawrence et al., 2024). Both frameworks now stress the importance of collective agency, activism, and strategies that are context specific to address child undernutrition and gender inequality. Research from Ghana and other countries in Africa shows that empowering women in agriculture improves household food security and child nutrition (FAO, 2022; UNICEF, 2024).

In Northern Ghana, stunting rates are above 30% among children under five years old, and anemia occurs in nearly 66% of children (Ghana Statistical Service, 2023). Women-centred agroecology programmes provide clear evidence of ecofeminist values, as they focus on dietary diversity as well as ecological viability, and the social learning mechanisms, which include peer training and local nutritional knowledge, contribute to the implementation of these practices (Lawrence et al., 2024; Salami, 2024).

Ecofeminism and social learning together show the ability of women-led activism to change food systems, improve child nutrition, and tackle gender-justice inequalities. Merchant's (1980) traditional ecofeminist scholarship, as well as Shiva and Mies (1993) focused more on women's ecological knowledge and subsistence roles, whereas social learning theory (Bandura, 2001) focuses on behavioral modeling and the transfer of knowledge. Recent ecofeminist work (Gaard, 2017; Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024) criticizes previous essentialist assumptions, prioritizing the need for intersectionality and decoloniality.

Recent empirical applications of social learning (Lawrence et al., 2024) highlight participatory strategies in nutrition education and agricultural extension. Nutritional studies (FAO, 2022; UNICEF, 2024), show the role of women's empowerment and agroecology in improving child nutrition, but little of ecofeminist or social learning frameworks.

➤ *Research Gaps.*

Although research supports women to improve food security and child nutrition through women, there is little explicit literature combining ecofeminism and social learning efforts in Ghana. Many studies focus on nutrition interventions as technical solutions, overlooking structural gender inequalities as well as the transformative power of women-led advocacy. There is limited investigation of ecofeminist concepts such as relational ethics and care alongside social learning methods that enable community behavior. This research fills this gap by explaining how ecofeminism and social learning together provide a comprehensive approach to combating both child undernutrition in Northern Ghana and gender inequality in the region.

➤ *Conceptual Framework.*

The study uses an intersectional ecofeminist-social learning framework to explore how women-led activism can combat child undernutrition and gender inequality in Northern Ghana. Ecofeminism provides a transformative lens through which to critique structural inequalities as well as environmental sustainability, highlighting relational ethics, care, and interconnectedness in food systems (Shiva & Mies, 1993; Gaard, 2017). Emerging scholarship advances ecofeminism by integrating intersectional and decolonial perspectives and situating women's activism as part of broader challenges against institutionalized exclusion and environmental degradation (Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024). Social learning builds on this by explaining the dissemination of information, practices, and behavior within communities. Bandura (2001) considered observation and modelling as significant antecedents of behavioural change; more recent uses emphasize participatory and community-driven approaches in relation to nutrition and agriculture (Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024). The framework suggests that enhancing women's activism and collective learning enhances food security, dietary diversity, and child nutrition at the same time that it disrupts gender inequality. Ecofeminism responds to the structural and ecological dimensions of inequality, and social learning describes how women learn, adapt, and contribute to change in the knowledge and practices of individuals. Together, these frameworks highlight the transformative potential of women-led activism in Northern Ghana toward nutrition and gender equity.

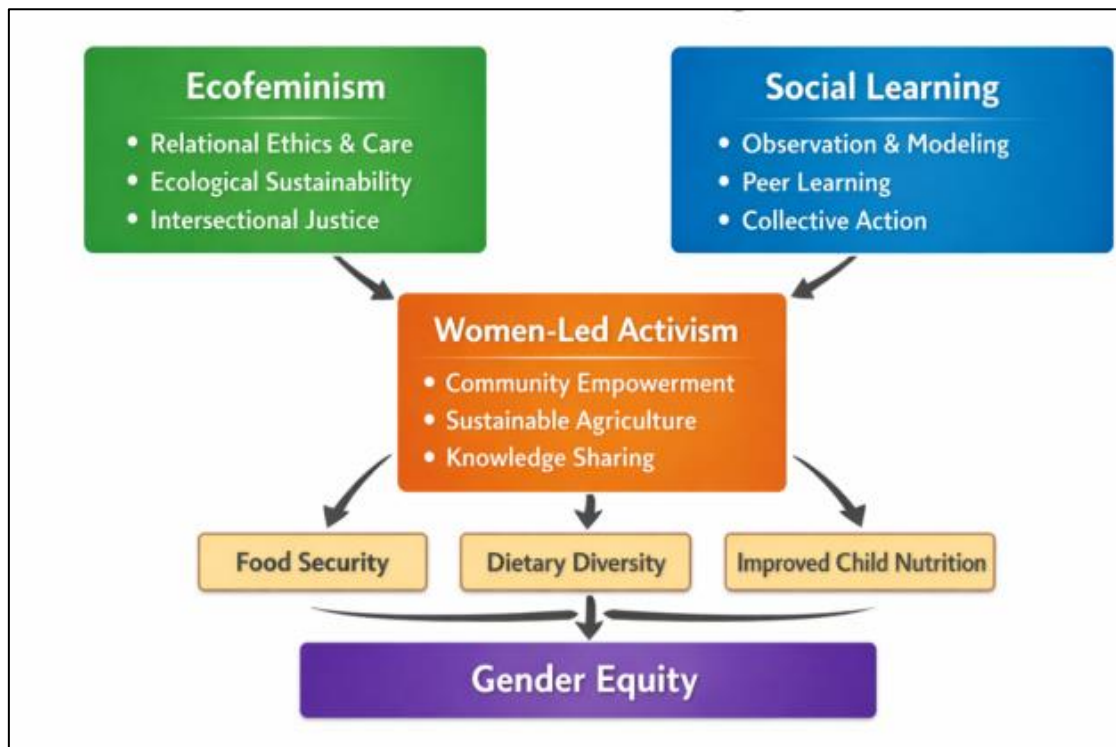


Fig 1 Ecofeminism and Social Learning Pathways to Nutrition and Gender Equity
Authors Construct, 2026

III. METHODOLOGY

Employing a qualitative, literature-based approach, this study synthesized theoretical and empirical insights on ecofeminism and social learning as theoretical frameworks for addressing child undernutrition and gender inequality in Northern Ghana. The approach allows space for interpretation and critical analysis of the body of scholarship, as opposed to primary data collection, emphasizing the integration of concepts.

Data sources include ecofeminist texts that interrogate the links among gender, ecology, and social justice (Merchant, 1980; Shiva & Mies, 1993; Gaard, 2017; Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024), social learning studies regarding behavioral intervention, community engagement, and knowledge transfer (Bandura, 2001; Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024), Ghana-based research on nutrition and food security, and gender inequality (FAO, 2022; Ghana Statistical Service, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

The author used a search strategy to identify these sources through targeted inquiries across various academic databases, organizational reports, and policy documents, which identified source materials for the study based on relevance, credibility, and recency, to achieve a holistic, contextually situated analysis.

Thematic analysis guided the review. The material was read in a systematic fashion and coded to elicit salient ideas and concerns. Codes were then used to construct themes encompassing the theoretical assumptions of ecofeminism and social learning, the contribution of women-centred

activism to food security and nutrition, gender inequalities in social care and ecological sustainability, and the practical implications for policy and practice in Ghana. Themes were synthesized to show where the literature converged and diverged, to facilitate the development of a conceptual model connecting ecofeminism and social learning to improved child nutrition and gender equity.

➤ Ethical Considerations.

While the study relies on secondary sources rather than on primary data, ethical issues are salient. The review privileges accurate articulation of authors' arguments, appropriate citation in APA format, and respect for intellectual property rights. Furthermore, cultural and contextual sensitivity for Ghanaian literature on Ghana is achieved by closely examining literature that reflects local reality and avoiding broad generalizations that might misrepresent communities (Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024).

➤ Limitations

Limited by reliance on published literature, this review is limited in capturing the latest community-level innovations in practice and grassroots practices in Northern Ghana at the grassroots level. This focus on English-language sources may also exclude relevant perspectives published in local languages. Additionally, although thematic analysis provides a structured synthesis, it is interpretative and susceptible to researcher bias. Finally, the convergence of ecofeminism with social learning is relatively theoretical, given that very few empirical studies explicitly integrate these frameworks in line with the Ghanaian experience (Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

IV. FINDINGS

➤ *Ecofeminism and Social Learning Theories' Relevance to Child Undernutrition and Gender Inequality*

Ecofeminism provides a critical lens through which we might examine aspects of structural inequality that underpin undernutrition in children, which is interwoven with gender discrimination. Nurturing women's subsistence roles and ecological knowledge was highlighted by previous research as being central to sustainable food systems (Merchant, 1980; Shiva & Mies, 1993). More current scholarship has included intersectional and decolonial perspectives that emphasize how women's activism is a vehicle for challenging systemic exclusion and environmental degradation (Gaard, 2017; Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024). In Ghana, ecofeminism brings to the forefront the direct effects of women's agricultural work and caregiving on household food security and on child nutrition and exposes the gender-based power structures that perpetuate inequity. Social learning theory supports ecofeminism by describing the ways that knowledge, behavior, and practices are passed on to members of a community. Observation, modelling, and reinforcement were also identified as important factors in behaviour change (Bandura, 2001). Recent applications focus on participatory, in-community approaches in nutrition education and agriculture extension (Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

In Northern Ghana, women's networks and grassroots activism operationalize these same processes. In addition, nutrition-sensitive behaviors can spread through processes such as peer-to-peer education, farmer field schools, and community mobilization. Not only do they promote dietary diversity and child health, they also build collective agency and reinforce ecofeminist values of care and connectivity. Altogether, ecofeminism and social learning together provide a dual lens through which to conceptualize activist dynamics in Northern Ghana driven by women. Ecofeminism reveals the structural and ecological dimensions of inequality, and social learning reveals the circuits of women's ecological knowledge and practices being spread, re-purposed, and/or sustained. The combination of these two frameworks highlights that mobilizing women through activism and collective learning leads to improved food security, dietary diversity, and child nutrition outcomes, while challenging fixed gendered power relations (Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024; Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

➤ *Case Study of Women-Led Activism in Northern Ghana*

Case studies from Northern Ghana show how women-led activism has improved agroecology, food security, maternal health, and community mobilization dramatically. Despite some challenges, women-driven agroecology has diversified the diet, improved maternal knowledge, and reduced child malnutrition (Lawrence et al., 2024). This is indicative of ecofeminist concepts of relational ethics and care, and of social learning and knowledge transfer in communities. For example, farmer field schools and peer to peer training have facilitated the implementation of nutrition-sensitive agriculture practices and reduced stunting

and anemia in children under five (Ghana Statistical Service, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

➤ *Ecofeminism and Social Learning in Women/Community Networks and Grassroots Activism.*

Ecofeminism and social learning offer insight into how women's networks and grassroots activism may help to address child undernutrition and gender inequality. Ecofeminism foregrounds women of ecological knowledge, caregiving, and relational ethics as the basis of sustainable food systems, but also shows how systems of oppression and the resulting structural inequalities deepen a sense of vulnerability (Merchant, 1980; Shiva & Mies, 1993; Gaard, 2017; Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024). Women's agricultural work and community leadership are examples from Ghana that integrate ecological sustainability and maternal and children's well-being. Social learning theory further supports ecofeminism as elucidatory of the manner in which practices and information are learned by communities and, through this means, transmitted. Bandura's (2001) discussion of observation-, modeling-, and group participation were key sources of behavioral change. More recent research highlights the role of participatory practice in nutrition education and agricultural extension (Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024). These processes are enacted within women's networks in Northern Ghana through peer mentoring, farmer field schools, and community mobilization, which enable the spread of nutrition-sensitive strategies to improve food security and child health. Ecofeminism and social learning collaborate to show us that women's activism is structurally transformative and behaviorally adaptive.

Ecofeminism provides a useful approach to understanding inequality as well as ecological sustainability, and social learning outlines the mechanisms by which women's ecological knowledge and activism are disseminated, maintained, and deepened. Ties between these frameworks reflect the importance of grassroots women's movements to increase dietary diversity, decrease child malnutrition, and resist ingrained gendered power imbalances through the intersectionality of practices and social learning (Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024; Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024). The main aim of this study was to examine how ecofeminism and social learning together provide a framework to address structural inequities in child nutrition and gender equity in Northern Ghana. Ecofeminism shows that women are central to sustainable food systems by sharing ecological knowledge and caregiving roles in ecological, the use of subsistence labour, and it also identifies and exposes the systemic exclusions that maintain these inequalities (Merchant, 1980; Shiva & Mies, 1993; Gaard, 2017; Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024). This analysis is enriched by social learning theory to further clarify how practices and knowledge are transmitted, maintained, and escalated in communities through observation, modelling, and community-level participation as the primary drivers of behavioural change (Bandura, 2001; Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

In the Ghanaian context, intersectionality and decolonial perspectives are particularly relevant. Ecofeminist academic investigations demonstrate the ways that these colonial legacies and patriarchal systems intersect to contribute to women's marginalization in agriculture and nutrition. By organizing collective agency and facilitating information sharing, social learning processes show how women's networks challenge these structures (Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024). Such frameworks converge in women-led agroecology initiatives, farmer field schools, and peer mentoring programmes, which challenge, whilst also improving, inequalities and child nutrition outcomes (Lawrence et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024). Comparative findings from other ecofeminist and social learning movements around the world add weight to this two-fold approach. Ecofeminist agroecology movements in Latin America have mobilised women to challenge extractivist economies, as well as to advocate food sovereignty (Gaard, 2017). Similarly, social learning strategies in South Asia have helped women's collectives to scale nutrition sensitive agricultural practices through peer-to-peer learning (UNICEF, 2024). It is these global parallels that remind us that ecofeminism and social learning are not only locally relevant within Ghana but also part of a wider movement for nutrition and health justice.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the continuing challenges of child undernutrition and gender injustice in Northern Ghana and discusses how integrating ecofeminism and social learning provides a basis for tackling these structural problems. Ecofeminism helps unpack inequality: at the intersection of its ecological and gendered dimensions, exploring women's subsistence roles, caregiving responsibilities, and ecological knowledge as essential to the establishment of sustainable food systems (Merchant, 1980; Shiva & Mies, 1993; Gaard, 2017; Salami, 2024; Siegel, 2024). To bolster this analysis, social-learning theory elaborates on the transmission, persistence, and scale-up of practices and knowledge in communities, with observation, modelling, and collective participation serving as major facilitators of behavioural change (Bandura, 2001; Lawrence et al., 2024). This paper builds theoretical bridges between ecofeminism and social learning through a dual lens, allowing for analyses of women-led activism and the practical experience of women's networks through agroecology, farmer field schools, and peer mentoring, working toward food security, dietary diversity, and improved child health outcomes in Northern Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). These findings suggest that empowering women through activism and collective learning not only improves nutrition outcomes but also challenges embedded gendered power relations, with implications for equity and sustainability. The implications for Ghana are substantial: policies and interventions that combine ecological sustainability with participatory knowledge-sharing can respond to both immediate nutritional needs and persistent structural inequalities. Internationally, ecofeminism and social learning resonate with wider global movements focused on food sovereignty,

health justice, and gender equity, exemplified by ecofeminist agroecology in Latin America and social learning programs in South Asia (Gaard, 2017; UNICEF, 2024). Taken as a whole, these frameworks indicate the worldwide significance of community-based, gender-sensitive, and ecologically sustainable responses to child undernutrition and health justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Intervention on child undernutrition and gender inequality in Ghana requires national government ministries, the involvement of non-governmental and grassroots agencies, the building of regional networks, and cooperation with international partners. Reflecting on the two dimensions of ecofeminism and social learning, I offer specific recommendations to enhance women's activism, nutrition-sensitive agriculture, and community-driven health justice projects.

➤ *Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA):*

Provide funds to women-led agroecology projects that promote nutrition-sensitive agroecology systems— so women farmers have access to supplies, training, and markets.

➤ *Ministry of Health:*

Integrate ecofeminist or social learning interventions into child nutrition and maternal health programs that emphasize participatory education, peer mediation, and community mobilization.

➤ *Grassroots Non-profit Organizations (Such as Eco-Conscious Citizens Ghana):*

Scale up community-based nutrition interventions that allow women's networks to disseminate ecological knowledge and foster dietary diversity.

➤ *Regional Networks (AFACJ):*

Foster feminist collaborations on food and health justice: support cross-national education and advocacy for gender-balanced nutrition policy within regional networks.

➤ *International Partners (UNICEF, UNDP, AU):*

Fund/technical support to scale sustainable ecofeminist nutrition interventions, supporting sustainability and the global health justice agenda.

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