

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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Discussion Notes

Flavio Valente

**Gender, Nutrition, and the Human Right
to Adequate Food: towards an inclusive
framework**

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Gender, Nutrition, and the Human Right to Adequate Food: towards an inclusive framework

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Agrarian, Food & Environmental Studies (AFES)

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P.O. Box 29776, 2502 LT The Hague, The Netherlands

www.iss.nl/afes

Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy

398 60th Street, Oakland, CA 94618 USA

www.foodfirst.org

Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI)

www.iss.nl/ldpi

Transnational Institute

PO Box 14656, 1001 LD Amsterdam, The Netherlands

www.tni.org

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An academic-NGO collaborative approach

When so many call for the inclusion of women and a gender perspective in food security, why is the status of hunger and malnutrition of women and girls still not improving? In an effort to answer this question and contribute to the current gender analysis of food security, FIAN International and the Department of Gender and Nutrition at the University of Hohenheim (UHOH), in close collaboration with the Geneva Infant Feeding Association, Swiss member of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN-GIFA), have been developing a focused approach on Gender, Nutrition and the Human Right to Adequate Food.

This endeavor reflects upon the reasons why gender is not adequately addressed in food and nutritional security planning nor in the right to adequate food planning and advocacy, and it seeks to propose a more inclusive conceptual framework for the human right to adequate food. The importance of this inquiry is not relevant only for women and girls, but also for boys and adult men, and moreover for the economic and political stability of communities and states. This academic-NGO collaborative project began in 2010 and since then, two public workshops with academics and representatives of non-governmental organizations and international human rights bodies on the topic have been organized – the first one in May 2011 at the University of Hohenheim, Germany and the second one in April 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil at the World Nutrition Conference. Building upon the discussions that took place during these two workshops, a book, entitled *Gender, Nutrition and the Human Right to Adequate Food: towards an inclusive framework*, is currently being finalized and will be published in 2014.¹ This book is composed of five chapters written by different lead authors, which include FIAN IS staff members. Earlier drafts of the different chapters have been reviewed by external experts including the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food, who will also be writing a foreword to the book, members of international development organizations, who emphasize food security programming and highlight efforts of women in agriculture, and international academic experts in food security and human rights.

Conceptual contributions to the current gender analysis of food security

The book begins by examining two structural “disconnects” that frustrate women's right to adequate food and nutrition. The first refers to the structural isolation of women's rights from the human right to adequate food within the legally-binding language of key international human rights treaties. This “disconnect” is primarily reflected in the invisibility of women in the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the omission of women's right to adequate food in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the single attention paid to pregnant and breastfeeding women's nutritional status in the aforementioned Conventions as well as in the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The second “disconnect” is intertwined in the first and exposes the isolation of nutrition, which is over-medicalized, over-processed and not integrated into local food systems and cultural traditions, from the right to adequate food due to an inordinate focus on food stuffs and their production and to the exclusive linking of nutrition to the right to health of women and children. The book argues that these two “disconnects” leverage three existing conditions that further impede women's food security on the ground.

The first condition that is leveraged by these “disconnects” is violence against women and girls, which is discussed as an under-examined barrier to women's right to adequate food and their participation as autonomous and participatory members of efforts to address hunger and malnutrition. Gender-based

¹ Anne C. Bellows, Flavio L.S. Valente, and Stefanie Lemke. (Eds.) *Gender, Nutrition and the Human Right to Adequate Food: towards an inclusive framework*. New York: Taylor & Francis/Routledge. (Expected date of publication: 2014). With contributions from the following lead authors: Roseane do Socorro Gonçalves Viana, M. Daniela Núñez B. de L., Lida Lhotska, Veronika Scherbaum, Anna Jenderedjian, Ana María Suárez-Franco, and R. Denisse Córdova Montes.

violence, of which discrimination is a primary form, impedes women from engaging in their own right to adequate food and from acting on behalf of their families and communities to the full extent of their capabilities. Structural violence engenders violations of women's human rights and at the same time impedes their protection. Furthermore structural violence is a cause of systematic violations of the right to adequate food and nutrition, including malnutrition of infants, children and women. In this context, the book argues that in order to approach the goal of including women and a gender perspective in food security (“gender mainstreaming”), research and policy must pay attention to the challenges women face, most particularly in relation to structural violence as a basis of discrimination and social injustice that impedes access to women’s basic human rights, generally, and participating in civil society, specifically.

A second condition behind women's hunger and malnutrition relates to the current focus on malnutrition during pregnancy and infancy and the accompanying neglect of women's overall nutritional needs throughout their life spans. The authors explore the problems associated with the structural and legal separation of the rights of (a) women and their control over reproductive choice and nutritional needs before, during, and after pregnancy; and (b) foeti, infants, and young children during the most crucial time of human nutrition and health, a period generating short and long term developmental consequences. The book argues that labeling the mother-child dyad as vulnerable instead of rights-deprived facilitates inadequate short-term, transnational and market-based solutions to malnutrition.

The third condition relates to the presumption that the State and international market systems provide better support for food security and nutritional well-being than do local and regional systems and the impact of this presumption on women's food insecurity. Here, the authors locate the need to include gender, nutrition, and inter-scalar governance approaches in rights realization strategies that promote and integrate small farmers and agro-ecology in State-wide systems. Under this third condition, the book focuses on the need to address (a) the constructed and artificial separation in policy, program, trade, and ideology of “food” as something to produce and “nutrition” in the context of macro-and micro nutrient sufficiency and health; and (b) the growth of global trade and aid-based dependencies on non-local food and nutrition “cures” instead of the development of community and nationally-based food systems and autonomy.

Finally, to broaden rights holders’ capacity and hold States accountable, especially for violations against women, the closing chapter introduces an expanded conceptual framework for the right to adequate food and nutrition integrating the dimensions of gender and women's rights, nutrition, and food sovereignty. The book ends by arguing that a rights-based approach, in spite of limitations inherent to all social constructs, is the most potent tool available to human beings to promote a more precise diagnosis of the root causes of inequities observed in society. In this context, a participatory social movement-led re-conceptualization of the right to adequate food is presented as the best way to avoid the artificial fragmentation and dislocation of the conceptual, legal and institutional frameworks and the associated ineffective policies against hunger and malnutrition described in the four previous chapters.

FIAN's continuing gender work

Overcoming food insecurity among women and girls is an integral part of FIAN's mandate. FIAN aims to build upon the conceptual and practical contributions made in the book to continue its struggle against women's hunger and malnutrition. In particular, FIAN aims to mainstream gender through its different working areas, namely its communication and case work, through the development of instruments and local partnerships that will enable FIAN to effectively document, depict and address the challenges women face in relation to realizing their right to adequate food and nutrition. Conceptually, FIAN aims to continue contributing to the current gender analysis of food and nutrition security through its ongoing collaboration with partner academics and NGOs working on gender, nutrition and the human right to adequate food. At the international level, through its work with United Nations bodies and social movements, FIAN will continue to

lobby for the adoption of a more inclusive conceptual framework for the right to adequate food that integrates gender, nutrition and food sovereignty.

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has – as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework – barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” was held at Yale University on September 14-15, 2013. The event brought together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting was to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

The Yale conference was a huge success. It was decided by the organizers, joined by the [Land Deal Politics Initiative \(LDPI\)](#), to hold a European version of the Yale conference on 24 January 2014 at the ISS in The Hague, The Netherlands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Flavio Valente is a physician and holds a MPH from Harvard School of Public Health. Since 2007, he has been the Secretary General of FIAN International. Valente has worked with civil society organizations on the themes of Food Security and Human right to Adequate Food for ca. 15 years. He has published almost 100 scientific papers and articles on human rights, food and nutrition related issues.



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