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Feminist Food Sovereignty: Crafting a New Vision

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Abstract

Debates around food security and food sovereignty center on questions of social justice. This paper provides a feminist analysis of global and local food security and sovereignty through utilizing feminist theoretical interventions. Feminist theoretical interventions include feminist analysis of neoliberalism, social reproduction and care, intersectionality, feminist political ecology, and “another world feminism.” I discuss and analyze three feminist approaches to food security and food sovereignty: the dominant gender and food security model, feminist food sovereignty, and a reframing of feminist food justice. First, I present an analysis of how gender and food security issues are approached by the UN, as well as other development institutions. Second, I analyze how gender issues are approached in the food sovereignty movement, and finally I suggest a new framework for feminist food justice.

Feminist theoretical interventions

Led by the work of Nancy Fraser (2009), several recent feminist scholars have analyzed the affinity between neo-liberalism and second-wave feminism and called for a transformed and radical feminist approach to global issues. Fraser argues that second wave feminism’s focus on increasing women’s paid employment, “unwittingly provided a key ingredient of the new spirit of neoliberalism.” What began as a critique of the family wage now justifies flexible capitalism with women in both the professional classes and working class viewing work for salaries and wages with more than earning an income but also with ethical meaning and the path towards personal empowerment. Whether trying to break the glass ceiling, working as temporary flexible workers in agriculture or food processing, or obtaining loans for microcredit, women’s empowerment has been tied to capital accumulation. Fraser (2009) also critiques second wave feminism for over focusing on issues of violence against women and reproductive issues to the exclusion of issues of economic justice and elimination of poverty. She argues that as neoliberalism is beginning to crack, feminists should think big and drop the valorization of wage labor in favor of attention to uncommodified work and care work. Another problem with these aligned feminist and neoliberal approaches is that they undermine collective struggles. As Weber (2010) suggests, current forms of feminism and neoliberalism both privilege entrepreneurship and individual agency as the key to solving major social issues. These individual, pull-yourself up by your bootstraps approaches undermine feminist and racial struggles for political solidarity. Weber calls for feminists to align with other progressive efforts to help create a new post-Westphalian political order that addresses injustices along all axis and scales including tackling global injustices. Others suggest that some feminists are already pushing in new transformative directions. Phillips and Cole (2009) distinguish between two types of feminism in Latin America: UN orbit feminism and “another world feminism” which

imagines a transformative future. They argue that feminists working in both types of scenarios struggle to keep gender on the agendas of masculinist institutions and social movements. Feminists working within UN agencies and other development institutions are often constrained by results-based management and expert-driven practices. By contrast, feminists working with “another world” model are developing ties with popular women’s groups, are unconstrained by results-based management, and are utilizing feminist knowledge in different regional contexts to challenge masculinist approaches and propose new alternatives for women’s productive and reproductive work.

Another feminist theoretical intervention that proves useful in moving forward our thinking about food security and food sovereignty is the evolving theoretical and political work on intersectionality. Intersectionality focuses on “ the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities” (Lykke 2011). Intersectionality emerged from the confluence of scholarship on feminist scholarship and critical race studies in the U.S. with a focus on the legal discrimination against African American women. Intersectionality has been taken up by feminist scholars, critical race scholars, and by many other disciplines as a theory, method, and strategy to understand and change overlapping systems of oppression based on race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. At times intersectionality has focused on identities and subjectivities, but recently scholars have called for an emphasis on political and structural inequalities (Cho et al, 2012). Recently scholars have also called for looking at cross-border relations in intersectionality rather than focusing on intersectionality only within a domestic or nation-state (Patil, 2012). Patil argues that “we need to think of the multiple processes, at different scales, that contribute to the emergence of particular local dynamics having to do with gender. From the perspective of intersectionality, merely reframing these dynamics through the lens of domestic intersectionality will only perpetuate the reification of the local... We need to recenter the notion that there are no locals and globals, only locals in relation to various global processes.” As we attempt to address issues of food security and food sovereignty, understanding how interlocking systems of class, race, gender, ethnicity intersect in cross-border dynamics is essential.

Gender and Feminist Models of Food Security and Food Sovereignty

Dominant Gender Approach to Food Security

In 1996, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) established at its World Food Summit the most widely agreed definition of food security: “Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Food security goes substantially beyond adequate global level production to include a deeper understanding of

different aspects of food security. However, as Fairbairn (2012) has pointed out, this concept of food security emphasizes market orientation over state intervention that is consistent with neoliberal ideology. Currently, FAO and a number of other international organizations discuss three or four pillars of food security which include availability, access, utilization, and stability (FAO, 2011). Each of these pillars of food security have important gender dimensions. Feminists working within these organizations have pushed for these gender issues to be recognized and considered in all policies, but implementation lags. Here, I will discuss how each pillar of food security is approached through a gender or feminist lens.

Food availability refers to the availability of sufficient quantities of food to meet the dietary needs of people. Food availability is usually measured by agricultural production and yield data at the macro level-global, national, or regional. In fact, data on food availability is typically measured at the national scale and includes data on domestic production and agricultural imports. The major gendered dimension of food availability centers on issues of gender inequity in access to resources for production. Women farmers produce around 40% of the world's food, but they are discriminated against in terms of access to land, financial services, adequate inputs, technology, and agricultural education. Feminist researchers and policy makers working in development institutions have argued that reducing inequities between men and women has the potential to simultaneously empower women and increase agricultural production. Strategies that empower women to gain access to land and other critical resources show enormous potential for increasing agricultural production in many regions of the world. Increasing women's access to the same level of resources as men could increase their agricultural output from 20 to 30 percent which could lead to reductions in the number of hungry people (FAO, 2011). A large number of studies have compared crop yields between men and women farmers and found that women consistently have lower productivity than their male counterparts. Most of these studies have been conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa where comparison between men's and women's yields is possible because they often farm separate plots. The reasons for lower yields on women's fields are clearly related to lower input levels as shown in several examples including a study of 4700 agricultural plots in Burkino Faso found that women's plots had a 20 percent lower yield for vegetables and 40 percent lower yield for sorghum that could all be explained by their lower use of labor and fertilizer. Yields could have increased by 6% if resources were allocated to women's plots (Udry et al, 1995; Udry, 1996). Another study in Ethiopia found that female-headed households produced 35 percent less per hectare than male-headed households, but the differences were entirely attributable to lower input use and less access to extension by women farmers (Tiruneh et al, 2001). Several other examples reveal that when women have similar access to inputs as male farmers, they can be equally productive. In Ghana, men and women cocoa farmers in Ghana produced the same yields when their input use was similar (Quisumbing and Otsuka, 2001; Hill

and Vigneri, 2009). Maize yields in Malawi were 12-19 percent higher on men's plots, but when women had the same level of fertilizer for use on experimental plots, they had the same yields as men (Gilbert, Sakala, and Benson, 2002).

The argument that food availability would increase if women had the same access to resources as men, suggests a radical transformation of gender relations. It also overlooks key differences between men and women producers in most regions of the world. Compared to men, women typically farm smaller plots, grow more diverse crops, and are more likely to grow food crops for domestic or local consumption. Thus, although their production may be limited, the crops or animals they raise may contribute to dietary diversity and better nutritional outcomes.

Food access focuses more at the household level and refers to the ability of households to have sufficient resources to produce food, buy it, or receive food from government or other programs. Women in many countries contribute the bulk of the labor in food crops and livestock production for home consumption, while men more typically produce commodities for the market. Gender inequities in access to land, water, labor, and knowledge limit women's ability to produce food for their households. Women and men have different uses, knowledge, and practices of biodiversity. For example, women predominate as gardeners, wild food gatherers, and seed savers. Women provide approximately 80% of wild vegetable food collected in 135 subsistence societies (Aguilar, Mata, and Quesada-Aguilar, IUCN). Women also often produce food crops and tend small-scale livestock such as chickens, goats, and sheep for household consumption.

The value of women's activities in meeting food needs in difficult times and providing diverse diets has been under recognized. Women perform the bulk of food processing activities in the household, the informal economy, and the formal economy. Typical gender divisions of labor in households in most regions of the world assign cooking, processing, and meal preparation to women. Despite their overwhelming responsibility for labor in household food provision, women are less likely than men to have equal access to food in their households. A key gender issue at the household level is intra-household inequities in food access. In some situations, some household members may have adequate food while others do not. In such situations, it is usually women and girls who have inadequate nutritional status. Women's own nutritional status is directly related to their children's nutritional status. Overwhelming evidence also suggests that empowering women leads to improved children's nutritional status. A study using data from 36 developing countries, found that women's status has a positive impact on children's nutritional status in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. The study measures women's status as decision making power relative to their male partners and societal gender equality. Women's status had the strongest positive effect on children's nutrition in South Asia, where malnutrition is the worst. The reasons why women's status improves

malnutrition are that they have more education and knowledge, better nutritional status themselves, decision-making authority in the household, and are able to provide better care for their children. Clearly increasing women's status in households will improve nutritional security of household members. A related issue here is the changes in food consumption patterns from local products to highly processed foods resulting in health problems including obesity and diabetes. While some evidence has suggested that this change is due to less time available to women to process, prepare, and cook traditional foods due to their employment and income earning activities, a more transformative approach might focus on redistribution of household duties between men and women.

The third pillar of food security, food utilization refers to the ability of individuals to meet their specific nutritional and dietary needs. Calorie intake alone is not enough to ensure adequate diets and nutrition. This dimension of food security incorporates food quality, safety, nutrition, as well as adequate water and sanitary issues. UNICEF has highlighted the importance of child care and feeding practices such as breast feeding, adequate food storage and preparation, and hygiene practices to ensure positive health and nutrition outcomes for infants and children. FAO has recently emphasized that ending hunger and providing food security must refocus on nutritional security and gender concerns rather than only agricultural interventions (FAO, 2013). This will entail working across sectors such as education, health, water, sanitation, and agriculture. In most societies, women play the primary role in translating available food into nutritional security for children and other family members. Obviously, women breast-feed, which when done exclusively for the first six months and continued for two years with food supplements provides the best health outcomes for infants (UNICEF/WHO). In addition, women also typically assume major responsibility for food preparation, cooking, and provision of water and sanitation within the household. Health care and water and sanitation services must consider gendered needs. Unequal gender relations in the household and in communities can seriously impinge on women's ability to meet the nutritional needs of their families. A number of studies have shown that education and nutritional knowledge of parents, especially mothers, as well as gender equality in household decision making positively impacts nutritional status of young children (Ecker and Breisinger 2012; Behrman and Wolfe 1984; Glewwe 1999; Semba et al. 2008; Behrman and Deolalikar 1990; Kennedy and Peters 1992; Thomas 1994). The physiological needs of pregnant and lactating women make them particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. In addition, maternal health is crucial to child survival and infant and child nutrition. Micronutrient deficiencies disproportionately impact women and children. For example, between 4 and 5 billion people suffer from iron deficiency with estimates of half of pregnant women and children under 5 in developing countries suffering from iron deficiency. Iron deficiency delays normal motor and mental functioning in infants, causes fatigue and impairs ability to do physical work in adults, impairs mental

functioning in teens, and increases the risk of small or preterm babies in pregnant women (Center for Disease Control, 2013). Changing power dynamics within households can enable women to make the choices and decisions necessary for caring for infants and children. As these power dynamics shift, men may assume some responsibility for care but also value and support these activities.

The fourth and final pillar of food security, food stability refers to stability in the food supply from year to year and during different seasons of the year. Food stability is also affected by issues of adequate food storage, issues of price stability, and capacity to access food during agricultural or other emergencies. The drastic increases in the price of food in 2008 in many countries resulted in severe problems of temporary food insecurity. The spike in food prices was unexpected and related less to supply and more to commodity speculation as well as increased use of agricultural commodities for biofuels. Poor people and women were particularly affected by these price increases and were unable to purchase sufficient food. But such recurring fluctuations can continue to be expected in the global corporate food system where people in the global south are dependent on food for which prices are determined elsewhere with limited attention to the impact of commodity and food price increases on poor people. Conflict and civil unrest increase gender-based violence, disempowerment and food and nutrition outcomes. Women and girls tend to be affected differently than men and boys in emergencies due to conflict, natural disasters, or food emergencies. Women often lose their capacity to provide seeds, livestock, and food for their families unless emergency relief operations adopt gender sensitive approaches. In conflict situations, women and girls are more vulnerable to gender-related violence and may not be able to access their fields for growing crops or grazing livestock. Climate change with increased droughts, seasonal shifts, and weather-related disasters has different implications for women and men in relation to food security. Programs that are attentive to gender related concerns during periods of instability and emergencies will be more likely to provide food stability from year to year and throughout the growing season.

Feminist Food Sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty emerged from La Via Campesina in the mid-1990s as a critique of the concept of food security and a critique of the corporate food regime (Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe, 2010 and Fairbairn, 2010). Food sovereignty is not an academic concept but the outcome of a social movement of peasants, farmworkers, and small producers to challenge the global neoliberal food regime. Food sovereignty is the “right of nationals and people to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments” (Wittman et al, 2010:2). Peasant women and women farmers participated in the food sovereignty movement from the outset. The concept of food

sovereignty is more fluid and nuanced than the concept of food security, which has been carefully defined by agricultural institutions. Several of the key components of food sovereignty are: the right to food, valuing farmers and farmworkers, local production and control, and environmental sustainability. Each of these components have important gender dimensions, which have often been raised by women at the grassroots level. The right to food focuses on a basic right to food for all people which supports culturally appropriate and healthy food. The focus on food as a basic right is a strong critique of the neoliberal food regime which treats food only as a global commodity. From a gender perspective, the right to food implies that men, women, boys and girls have access to culturally appropriate and healthy food. The second component of food sovereignty values farmers, peasants, food producers, and farmworkers. Food sovereignty pushes for a food system based on small-scale agriculture rather than large-scale commodity monocultural systems. In this context women's contribution to food production in the global south is recognized. Women in the food sovereignty movement insist that their work in production for the market, for the family, and in social production be recognized and valued. The third component of food sovereignty focuses on local production and local control of the food system. Food should be considered as sustenance for people in their communities rather than as a commodity to be traded. Here, the food sovereignty movement has parallels with the local food movement in the US. The food sovereignty movement emerged as a critique of the impact of free trade policies, particularly NAFTA, on small-scale producers. Another focus local control is an emphasis on seed sovereignty and rejection of privatization of seed and plant genetic resources (Kloppenburg, 2010). Knowledge of peasants and farmers is also valued by food sovereignty advocates in contrast to the privatization of plant breeding by transnational corporations. Gender issues are key here, with women having a long and largely unrecognized history of seed saving and plant selection in many regions of the world. Also, women in rural areas are more likely than their male counterparts to produce a wider diversity of crops for family consumption and for local markets. A complex dilemma here is how to value women's contributions to household and local food provision without reinscribing women's traditional responsibility for food provisioning. Caro (2013) puts forward the possibility of transforming both men's and women's work in this realm through gender empowerment to challenge women's sole responsibility for food at the household level. The fourth component of food sovereignty focuses on protecting the environment and reducing green-house gas emissions with a commitment to end agriculture's contribution to global warming. Studies have shown that women farmers in the U.S. are more likely to use sustainable and organic agricultural practices (Trauger et al, 2009).

Feminist Food Justice

Here, I propose a third model of a feminist approach to food justice that incorporates elements of both the feminist food security and feminist food sovereignty, but looks beyond to a call for reframing food justice. Raj Patel argues that we should use a feminist analysis to “blow open an important set of priorities around food sovereignty” (2010:193). He suggests using food sovereignty to address deep power inequalities based on sexism, racism, patriarchy, and class power. I will outline several possibilities for this feminist food justice model.

1. Rethink and redefine heteronormative household models and inequality related to food. In many regions of the world, women are constrained at the household level in decision-making related to food production, provision, and access. New models of communal kitchens, sharing cooking and food preparation across households, and push for shaking up household divisions of labor that forefront the joys and pleasures as well as the work of food provision.
2. Value social reproduction work with food. A major dilemma here is how to value women’s reproductive work with food from breast-feeding, cooking, to meal preparation without reinscribing the subordinate status associated with traditional gender divisions of labor. One obvious strategy is to involve men and boys more in food preparation and nutritional concerns.
3. Recognize and address the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation related to food inequalities. More collaboration is needed between food sovereignty advocates in the south and food justice advocates in the North.
4. Improve workers rights, incomes and benefits working in the industrial food complex. Women workers often form the core and lowest level of workers on farms and in food processing. Companies in the global south rely on female workers to form a flexible, temporary, seasonal, and informal workforce in high value crops (Sachs and Alston, 2011). Hiring women in these positions has often been justified by citing their responsibility for social reproduction (Raynolds, 2002; Bain, 2010). Advocate for fair wages for both men and women and provision of suitable leaves, working conditions, and real flexibility for workers with families and other responsibilities.
5. Focus on food quality and diversity which enhances the health of people and the larger ecosystem.
6. Employ feminist political ecology (Agarwal, 1992; Seager, 2010) approaches to create more environmentally sustainable agriculture and cope with the increasing pressures of climate change on food production.
7. Feminist transformation of agricultural, food, and development institutions. Years of women and development, gender and development, and gender mainstreaming have

barely penetrated agricultural policies and research agendas. Feminists working in these institutions are banging their heads against the wall. These places need to be shaken up.

8. Last but not least, serious land reform and redistribution. The long violent history of people being dispossessed from their land continues. This is an intersectional dispossession based on long histories of colonialism, racism, and sexism.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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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” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring 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 is 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Carolyn Sachs](#) is Professor of Rural Sociology and Women’s Studies and Department Head of Women’s Studies at Penn State University. Her research focuses on women farmers, gender and food, and gender and climate change. Her books include *Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production Agriculture*; *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture and Environment*; and *Women Working in the Environment*.