

Gender, Nutrition, and the Human Right to Adequate Food

Toward an Inclusive Framework

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Foreword

I am deeply grateful to Anne C. Bellows, Stefanie Lemke, María Daniela Núñez Burbano de Lara, and Flavio Valente for providing me with the opportunity to express my appreciation for their work. With this book, they help us understand how challenging gender-based violence is essential to the eradication of hunger and malnutrition. Women and girls, they recall, are overrepresented among the victims of violations of the right to food: world-wide, about 60 percent of the undernourished are women or girls (ECOSOC 2007, para. 14; WFP 2009, 5). This in itself is unacceptable and calls for combating gender discrimination in access to food to become a global priority. For this reason alone, this book deserves to be widely read and discussed: it provides a gender lens through which to examine the failures of the mainstream food system we have inherited from the previous century.

But there is more, of course. Gender empowerment is the single most important determinant of improved nutritional outcomes: a cross-country study of developing countries covering the period 1970–1995 found that 43 percent of the reduction of hunger was attributable to the progress of women's education, almost as much as increased food availability (26 percent) and improvements to the health environment (19 percent) during that period combined; 12 additional percent of the reduction of hunger were attributable to increased life expectancy of women, so that we owe in total 55 percent of the gains against hunger during those twenty-five years to an improvement of women's situation within societies (Smith and Haddad 2000).

Thus, by combating the abuses women and girls face and by investing more in them, using an approach that is empowering and enlarges their real freedoms, the gains accrue to the entire society. In order to achieve this, this volume shows, the question of *power*—and of its abuse by those holding it in any society—needs to be addressed directly. This explains the focus of the book on the political economy of food systems, as well as the insistence of the authors on using the human right to adequate food and nutrition as a tool to challenge existing hierarchies and the routines that perpetuate male domination. Indeed, there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the expansion of the social and economic opportunities for women, in particular by improving their access to education and resources, and the

improvement of their role in decision-making within the household and within society: greater economic independence will improve the bargaining position of women within the household and increase their voice in public decision-making, while empowerment in turn can accelerate the removal of the obstacles to the expansion of their opportunities as economic agents.

By putting the emphasis on power and the political economy of food systems, this book forces us to pay attention to a number of questions that are generally dismissed as irrelevant, or conveniently ignored: who makes the decisions in food systems reform? Under the influence of which interests? On the basis of which information? Taking as departure point which framing of the problem of hunger and malnutrition? And are women and girls involved in providing the framing and in designing solutions, or are they excluded? The first contribution of this book is in providing us with this new lens through which food systems reform can be analyzed, encouraging us to rethink our routine ways of searching for answers.

The second contribution of the book is to link questions related to gender empowerment to the right to adequate food and nutrition. The right to adequate food and nutrition as a human right goes beyond the requirement of food security alone, for three reasons: first, because it acknowledges that adequate education and health are essential in ensuring that food intakes translate into improved health and nutritional outcomes; second, because it insists on dietary diversity and access to healthy foods as components of adequate nutrition that cannot be reduced to a requirement of access to minimum calorie requirements; and third, because of the dimension of state accountability that an approach focused on the right to adequate food and nutrition entails.

Gender sensitive policies empowering women within households in a human rights framework can make a significant contribution at all three levels. First, the provision of childcare services and the redistribution of power within the household not only should allow women to make the choices that matter for infants but should also ensure that men contribute to giving such care and that this activity is valued as it should. Second, the gender dimension is crucial to ensure that investments in agriculture will translate into improved health or nutritional outcomes. Such investments should ensure access to sufficiently diverse and balanced diets, allowing all individuals to have access to the full range of macro- and micro-nutrients that are necessary to all, at all ages, to lead active and healthy lives, and they should allow for a reduction in rural poverty, taking into account the income effects of various paths of agricultural development. Support to agriculture shall be especially effective in improving nutritional outcomes if such support increases the incomes of the poorest households, and within these households, benefits women in particular. And a greater role of women in making decisions regarding the priorities of agricultural research and development will generally result in a greater attention being paid to the nutritional needs of the family, rather than to profit maximization only.

Third, finally, the right to adequate food and nutrition implies that whatever support is provided to women and girls—including in particular their protection from discrimination—is a matter of human rights. Women and girls are not simply beneficiaries of programs based on charity and the support provided to them is not simply instrumental, a means to improve food and nutrition security: instead, women and girls are rights holders, who have claims against duty bearers, quite apart from the contribution gender empowerment can make to the reduction of overall rates of hunger and malnutrition.

Women's empowerment and the adoption of gender sensitive policies are key also because of the contribution both can make to gender role shifting. Indeed, it is broadly acknowledged that public services should be strengthened in order to alleviate the burdens and time poverty that many women face—in particular by the provision of child care in rural areas, but also by the provision of piped water and access to clean energy sources—in order to reduce the time women and girls spend fetching water or fuelwood. It is also largely accepted that the unpaid work women and girls disproportionately contribute within the household should be recognized. *Reduction* and *recognition* are incomplete, however, unless accompanied by the *redistribution* of roles (Elson 2010; Eyben and Fontana 2011). Consistent with its preamble, which recognizes that “a change in the traditional role of men as well as the role of women in society and in the family is needed to achieve full equality between men and women,” article 5(a) of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW; UN General Assembly 1979) provides in this regard that states parties shall seek to “modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.” Indeed, until the responsibilities in the non-monetary economy are more fairly shared between women and men, such responsibilities will continue to be undervalued and neglected—and those who perform them will not be supported as they should. “Redistribution initiatives are about supporting men's and women's own efforts to change gender norms that prevent men assuming equal roles in care responsibilities, making it easier for men to become more involved in and respected for sharing the family's caring responsibilities as well as for doing paid care work” (Eyben and Fontana 2011, 10).

None of this can be achieved without improving the participation of women at all levels of decision-making that affect the transformation of food systems. When they adopted the outcome document *Keeping the Promise: United to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* at the sixty-fifth session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2010, the heads of state and government committed to “improve the numbers and active participation of women in all political and economic decision-making processes,

including by investing in women's leadership in local decision-making structures and processes, encouraging appropriate legislative action and creating an even playing field for men and women in political and Government institutions" (UN General Assembly 2010, para. 72(f)).

Improved representation of women at the local level is just as important as their improved representation in national parliaments and executives. In fact, it could be even more significant: the decisions made at the local level are of great practical importance to what matters most to women's ability to contribute to the realization of the right to food, as such decisions concern the allocation of land, the choice of which crops to grow, or how the available labor shall be shared between the plots of land. In addition, it is by participation in local decision-making that women can most easily challenge the dominant representations concerning power and voice. This is one reason why enhancing leadership and participation of women in rural institutions is one of the four pillars of the initiative launched in September 2012 jointly by UN Women, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP). The program, *Accelerating Progress toward the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women*, will be implemented during its initial five-year phase in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger, and Rwanda. It is premised on the idea that economic and political empowerment are mutually supportive and should go hand in hand: the expansion of economic opportunities for women and their enhanced role as economic agents improve their status within the community and can create the necessary social consensus for a greater role of women in rural institutions and local governance and, at the same time, women's political empowerment can facilitate the adoption of reforms in public policies that will improve their status in the economy. The important implication is that neither economic nor political empowerment should be seen as a prerequisite of each other: instead, both processes should go hand in hand, leading in time to a virtuous cycle in which women's economic emancipation facilitates their ability to have "voice" in decision-making, which in turn shall help remove the current obstacles they face in expanding their economic opportunities.

For all the reasons outlined above, this book makes a major contribution to our understanding of the root causes of hunger and malnutrition and of the importance of challenging the violence against women and girls as a key determinant of both. But it also is remarkable by the methodological *démarche* that it adopts. This collection of essays is the result of a process of co-construction between two non-governmental organizations, FIAN International and the Geneva Infant Feeding Association (GIFA)—the latter part of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN)—and academic researchers working within the Gender Nutrition Rights (GNR) research group based in Syracuse University, the

University of Hohenheim, and Coventry University. As such, it offers a clear demonstration of the need for social actors and scientists to collaborate both in the framing problems and the identification of solutions, in a mode of research that is truly transdisciplinary.

Such a collaboration between different types of knowledge is an essential condition for policy relevant science to have an impact. The implementation of policy proposals will only succeed if they are perceived as legitimate both by those to whom they are addressed and by the intended beneficiaries. Such legitimacy in turn depends on involvement of those being addressed in shaping these proposals and ensuring that they are informed by their views and concerns. It also depends on such proposals addressing not only the symptoms—for instance, high rates of stunting among children or growing incidence of obesity—but also the causes of the problems identified, including in particular the political economy of food systems. Finally, it depends on the policy proposals including mechanisms for self-correction: feedback loops allowing for policy revision that can be activated by social actors when unintended and undesirable consequences of existing policies are perceived. In short, legitimate policy proposals are proposals that involve social actors, both *ex ante* and *ex post*, that include a requirement of participation at all stages, and that go beyond “fixes” in order to lead food systems to a sustainable trajectory by addressing the causes of failure.

I welcome this book as a major contribution not simply to the rights of women and girls as a central question of food systems reform, but also as a new and promising way to advance science.

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