

# Gender, Nutrition and the Human Right to Adequate Food. Toward an Inclusive Framework Book Review

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## **Book review**

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## **Gender, Nutrition and the Human Right to Adequate Food. Toward an Inclusive Framework**

Edited by: Anne C. Bellows, Flavio L.S. Valente, Stefanie Lemke, and María Daniela Núñez Burbano de Lara (Routledge 2016).

Why are women and girls overrepresented among victims of violations of the right to food and nutrition? And why have decades of gender mainstreaming efforts not succeeded in addressing this injustice? The answer, the authors argue, is to be found in our collective failure to tackle gender-based violence, and to promote and protect women's right to feed themselves and others through locally defined and self-determined strategies and food systems.

In "Gender, Nutrition and the Human Right to Adequate Food. Toward an Inclusive Framework", a small group of leading academics – from Syracuse University, the University of Hohenheim and Coventry University – and human rights practitioners – from the non-governmental organizations FIAN International and the Geneva Infant Feeding Association (GIFA) — reflect on how the human right to adequate food and nutrition (RTFN) has developed over the last decades, and how power relations have influenced its conceptual developments. They denounce and critically analyze a number of structural disconnects, and identify ways to overcome them. Together, they advocate for an inclusive framework grounding the RTFN in a holistic understanding of human rights.

The starting point for the book is that the human rights approach is not immune to social and political pressures. The ways in which human rights have been defined and applied by various sectors have resulted in failures in protection that are particularly serious in the field of food, nutrition and women's rights. The authors of the book, however, are convinced that human rights remain the best and most potent tool for helping diagnose problems, and overcome the root causes of inequities. Their objective, therefore, is to apply a human rights lens to gender, food and nutrition, while pushing the boundaries of the RTFN framework itself, to make it a more powerful tool for social mobilizations and for holding states accountable for human rights violations.

The book is more than an edited volume gathering chapters that vaguely connect with each other. It is the outcome of a collaborative writing project and sustained dialogue between the working group of editors and chapter co-authors, to the extent that the book reads almost like a monograph. The book contains 6 very dense and detailed chapters.

Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of how food, nutrition and discrimination and violence against women are addressed in the UN human rights framework. It offers background information on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and discusses recent developments in human-rights based approaches to food and nutrition, following the global food crisis of 2007-08 and its associated global governance reforms. The chapter makes the case for a dynamic approach to international law, which is described as evolutionary in character.

Chapter 2 discusses two structural disconnects that prevent women from realizing their right to food and nutrition. First, the isolation of women's rights from the human right to food (invisibility of women in the patronizing ICESCR that insists on a patriarchal head of household, and omission of the essential role of food in CEDAW), and second, the isolation of nutrition (addressed through supplements or over-medicalized interventions) from food (seen as a question of mass production to be globally traded). The chapter rejects a development approach that sees women as vulnerable, a term that implies weakness and obliterates social relations of power and structural violence. It also condemns an instrumental emphasis on pregnant and breastfeeding women's nutritional status that focuses on women in the context of reproduction only, and fails to explore their needs throughout their life cycle.

Chapter 3 is a powerful call for looking at violence against women as a central but under-explored factor impeding women from realizing their RTFN and participating in civil society. Violence is discussed in a variety of ways, including the impacts of physical violence and what the authors call "food violences", to characterize periodic or chronic physical, psychological and political harm associated with food availability and food-related work. The chapter offers a critical overview of the shortcomings of the gender mainstreaming approach, and contends that the approach, in practice, underestimates the power of structural violence as a barrier to women's public participation. This may result in retaliatory violence at women venturing into culturally unauthorized public spaces, in effect reasserting gender social norms of power.

Chapter 4 focuses on policy interventions with regard to maternal, infant and young child health and nutrition. It decries the fragmented approach that isolates pregnancy, birthing and child health and nutrition, and calls for recognizing the "intertwined subjectivities" – the independent and yet critically interconnected rights, needs and capacities of women and children. It denounces the negative role played by the corporate sector, which too often interferes with women's own strategies and right to feed others through breastfeeding and the appropriate introduction of culturally adequate and locally grown complementary foods. The chapter rejects short-term, transnational, market-based and corporate solutions – as embodied in the Scaling-Up Nutrition program – and calls on transnational corporations to comply with their human rights responsibilities.

Chapter 5 further explores the divide between food and agriculture on the one hand, and nutrition and health on the other. It advocates for “nutrition-sensitive agriculture” as a way to approach nutrition in a systemic way and fill the gender gap. The chapter convincingly demonstrates that the various shortcomings that plague current development approaches (empowerment, sustainable livelihoods, ...) can only be overcome by re-embedding food and nutrition in local food systems. Through numerous case studies, it presents various ways in which food and nutrition security can and have successfully been integrated in a food systems approach.

Chapter 6 integrates all of the above and introduces the peoples’ and food sovereignty matrix, which strives to adopt a comprehensive understanding of the RTFN as a social process of producing, procuring, cooking and eating food, while at the same time integrating the RTFN within the broader framework of food sovereignty. The matrix is an updated and expanded version of the food security matrix developed by A. Eide, Arne Oshaug and Wenche Barth Eide in 1987 to capture the different levels of state obligations to guarantee the RTFN.

The book is clearly written and is an easy read despite the lengthy chapters. It succeeds in being two books at once: a very comprehensive and detailed reference book that covers both historical and recent developments in the field of human rights, food, gender and nutrition, and a strong and well articulated argument in defense of renaming the human right to adequate food, *the human right to adequate food and nutrition*. The book’s far-reaching ambition is also its (only) weakness. The authors so convincingly argue for the need to develop a holistic framework that overcomes all the identified disconnects – food and nutrition, women’s rights and RTFN, but also rural and urban, human beings and nature, human beings and their own nature, people and their knowledge about food and nutrition and local food systems –, that the task appears a bit daunting.

The book certainly does not pretend to have all the answers. Rather, it calls for a participatory social movement-led reconceptualization of the RTFN, and expresses the hope that the matrix it proposes can be a first step in pursuing a dialogue between human rights practitioners, academics and social movements, with a view to unify and reinforce social struggles and shift power relations. How to initiate such a dialogue with non-organized sectors of society and with groups that have so far not been fully included in the food movement at large (agricultural and food industry workers, migrants, refugees, the homeless, ethnic or racially discriminated groups) is certainly a central challenge for the years to come.

As a firm believer in the importance of the proposed dialogue between human rights practitioners, social movements and the food deprived, I regret the emphasis placed by the authors on concrete recommendations at the end of each chapter, mostly directed at the UN Human rights system. Would a list of guiding questions for future discussions not have been more useful? While the approach is totally understandable considering the conceptual focus of the book, it reminded me of Susan Marks’ argument that, too often, the human rights community identifies root causes of

human rights violations only to put them aside later. In her article “Human Rights and Root Causes”, Marks welcomes recent efforts by the human rights movement to go beyond the mere documentation of abuses to try to explain them, as this book precisely does. She argues, however, that root causes are often discussed in ways that do not suggest the possibility of actually doing something about them. This tendency is particularly obvious in the recommendations that ritually close human rights reports issued by non-governmental organizations or special procedures of the UN Human Rights system, and that tend to leave questions of power relations unaddressed (Marks 2011). To some extent, this trend is palpable in the book which insists on the importance of holding the agrifood sector accountable and of better articulating the respect, protect and fulfill dimensions of states obligations, but could have offered more in terms of concrete ways forward in these two key issues.

Finally, I regret the lack of critical engagement with the individual and collective right to self-determination as a concept, which I believe would have given a firmer foundation to the new proposed holistic framework for the RTFN. The book is, from beginning to end, grounded in a radical and multi-faceted understanding (and vision) of self-determination that appears to rest, all at once, in women’s right to dispose of their own bodies, in their individual and collective strategies to feed themselves and others, and in people’s knowledge and choices about food, nutrition and local food systems. Self-determination, however, is not defined in the book, and its conceptual trajectory in international law is not discussed, despite the central place that it occupies in the human rights regime. Similarly, the concept of food sovereignty is barely discussed and those not familiar with La Via Campesina and the contribution of contemporary agrarian movements to the creation of an alternative, more multicultural and more cosmopolitan conception of human rights, the topic of my latest book (Claeys 2015), will likely be left wondering what the food sovereignty framework really entails, why it is relevant and why it should be used as a reference framework in which to ground the holistic RTFN. Exploring the foundations and grassroots understandings and practices around food sovereignty and self-determination, and how the two connect and overlap, would I believe have added to the coherence of this excellent and inspiring book.

## References

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