

Center for Women's Global Leadership



The Right to Food, Gender Equality and Economic Policy

Meeting Report

September 16-17, 2011

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
THE RIGHT TO FOOD	4
THE GLOBAL CONTEXT	5
THE GENDERED FOOD SYSTEM	6
GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD	7
FISCAL POLICY, THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND GENDER EQUALITY	9
FOOD PRICES, FINANCIALIZATION AND GENDER EQUALITY	11
APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANTS LIST	13

Introduction

This report is the culmination of a two-day experts meeting, “The Right to Food, Gender Equality and Economic Policy,” which took place on September 16-17, 2011 at the Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL). The meeting was organized as a means to contribute to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food’s work on gender equality, including a final report for the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2013. To this end, CWGL brought together economists, researchers and advocates, working from a feminist perspective on various aspects of the food system, to offer analysis and recommendations.¹

The objectives of the meeting were to: (i) address the connections between the realization of the right to food and economic regulation from a feminist perspective; (ii) make recommendations to the Special Rapporteur on the right to food as a means to fulfill his mandate; and (iii) strengthen feminist analyses and policy advocacy of civil society groups around macroeconomics, human rights and gender equality. The meeting specifically focused on: (i) the ways in which macroeconomic policy can comply with human rights obligations to food from a feminist perspective; and (ii) the connections between the achievement of human rights and the role of regulation, specifically the roles of international trade and local food systems. As the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) notes, “a lack of clarity remains with regard to the understanding of women’s rights and especially women’s right to food.”² Mindful of this reality, the meeting’s outcomes aim to fill specific knowledge gaps.

The Right to Food

The right to food in Article 11 of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) recognizes the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger. It requires countries to improve methods of food production, conservation and distribution. In addition, it requires states to take into account the problems of both food-importing and food-exporting countries to ensure an equitable distribution of the world’s food supplies.³ General Comment 12 further elaborates that States shall respect, protect and fulfill the right to food, including obligations to facilitate food production and provide food, respect existing access to food, and ensure that companies or individuals do not block adequate access to food.⁴ It states that coordinated efforts for the realization of the right to food should enhance coherence and interaction among all actors concerned, including civil society. It also commits governments to guarantee full and equal access to economic resources, particularly for women, including the right to inheritance and ownership of land and other property, and access to credit, natural resources and appropriate technology.

¹ This report is a summary of the contributions made at the meeting. The Center has taken sole responsibility for its production.

² Rae, I. 2008. “Women and the Right to Food: International Law and State Practice”. Right to Food Unit, FAO. http://www.fao.org/righttofood/publi08/01_GENDERpublication.pdf.

³ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. 1966. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>

⁴ E/C.12/1999/5

International human rights law that commits States to link women's rights to the right to food is limited. That said, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) calls on States to take "all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women [...] in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women [...] women the right to enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to [...] the right to food."⁵ Unfortunately, few commitments have been met, and little has been done to link macroeconomic policy to women's rights and the right to food, despite the reality that gender equality and women's rights are central to achieving the right to food.

The Global Context

Efforts to realize the right to food are being undermined by converging problems, including increased demand, price volatility, climate change characterized by land degradation and water scarcity, competition for land, urbanization, and increased poverty and vulnerability. The 2011 *State of Food Insecurity Report* indicates the number of those who are undernourished is well over a billion. It also notes that "[e]ven if the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) were to be achieved by 2015, some 600 million people in developing countries would still be undernourished."⁶

Food prices are expected to increase by as much as 70 to 90 per cent by 2030 before the effects of climate change,⁷ which will place many more millions at risk, increasing the number of those who are already hungry and unable to access food. Price volatility has been caused, in part, by excessive commodity speculation in global markets, coupled with low stocks. The rise in urbanization also affects food availability for the urban poor. It is estimated that close to three billion people live in areas where demand outstrips supply.⁸ This is reinforced by as much as one-third of the food produced for human consumption being either lost or wasted globally.⁹ Climate change, contributing to increasing floods and the desertification of large parts of the world, and more volatile weather conditions also impact crop production. In 2000, approximately half a billion people lived in countries experiencing chronic water shortage. It is currently estimated that as much as 1.8 billion could be living in regions with absolute water scarcity by 2025. By 2050 the number will have risen to more than 4 billion.¹⁰ As a result, countries in sub-Saharan Africa could experience declines in crop yields as high as 20 - 30 per cent by 2080.¹¹

The World Food Programme (WFP) reported that women are shouldering the heaviest burdens in the food crisis.¹² For example, they are the most challenged to feed their families in the face of high food prices and lack of available services for the poor. This has been

⁵ *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. 1979. United Nations.

⁶ *State of Food Insecurity in the World*. 2011. FAO, WFP, IFAD.

<http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2330e/i2330e.pdf>

⁷ *Growing a Better Future Report*. 2011. Oxfam International.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Global Food Losses and Food Waste*. 2011. FAO

http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ags/publications/GFL_web.pdf

¹⁰ *Growing a Better Future Report*. 2011. Oxfam International.

<http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/cr-growing-better-future-170611-en.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Women Shoulder Heaviest Burden in Food Crisis". 2009. WFP. <http://www.wfp.org/stories/women-shoulder-heaviest-burden-global-food-crisis>

reported throughout Southern Africa.¹³ They are the first to sacrifice their food intake to ensure the nutrition of their children and male head of household when food is unavailable, as reported in Cambodia, Indonesia and Timor Leste.¹⁴

The Gendered Food System

The global food economy has been both gender-blind and male-biased in terms of undervaluing women's roles in land use, production, processing, distribution, market access, trade, investment, price volatility, and food availability. Women are involved in all aspects of production, processing and distribution. They work as unpaid, contributing family workers, self-employed producers, on and off-farm employees, entrepreneurs, traders, and providers of services, technology researchers and developers, and caretakers of children and the elderly.¹⁵ On average, 43% of agricultural laborers in developing countries are women who are also the majority of food providers.¹⁶ As producers, women are often the ones who produce secondary crops for subsistence, such as legumes and vegetables, on more marginal lands.

Women are also increasingly involved in non-traditional export production in developing countries, which is a new source of income-generation. However, female workers are often subject to gender-based discrimination, including lower wages. In Malawi for example, "more than 60% of women are in low-wage jobs compared with fewer than 40% men. The gap is even wider in Bangladesh, where 80% of women and 40% of men have low-wage jobs."¹⁷ In some cases, income received can be a source of conflict within couples. For example, in Zambia, women waged workers experienced more domestic violence during harvesting and marketing periods.¹⁸ This indicates that income is a necessary but insufficient indicator of the achievement of women's rights and well-being.

To date, female farmers are mostly left out of modern contract-farming arrangements because they lack land rights and other resources required to guarantee delivery of a reliable flow of produce. They also lack information and bargaining power, which leave them at the bottom of the value chain, preventing them from taking on more prominent roles as buyers and sellers. Cultural norms and gender-based discrimination also contribute to this, e.g., in Bangladesh, restrictions on women's mobility hinder them from working as vendors or purchasers.¹⁹ In some cases, contract farming has increased conflicts over whether land should be used for cash or food crops, with a negative impact on women

¹³ "Women Bear Brunt of African Hunger Crisis." 2009. Associated Press.

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30412356/ns/world_news-africa/t/women-bear-brunt-african-hunger-crisis/

¹⁴ Bernabe, María Dolores and Estrella Penunia. "Gender links in agriculture and climate change." 2009. Isis International: Manila.

¹⁵ Hill, Catherine. Background paper. 2011. Prepared for UN Women Expert Group Meeting on Enabling Rural Women's Economic Empowerment: Institutions, Opportunities and Participation.

¹⁶ *State of Food and Agriculture 2011: Women and agriculture: Closing the gender gap for development*. 2011. FAO. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Farnsworth, Cathy Rozel. "Gender-Aware Value-Chain Development." 2011. Prepared for UN Women Expert Group Meeting on Enabling Rural Women's Economic Empowerment: Institutions, Opportunities and Participation.

¹⁹ Ibid.

producers. In addition, in Kenya under contract farming men appropriated the subsistence production of female farmers' for export vegetable production.²⁰

A key challenge faced by women is their lack of control over land; most titles are in the name of men and where laws exist they are ignored and gendered social norms prevail. Women own less than 20% of agricultural land globally.²¹ In Kenya, men's landholdings are at average three times bigger, and in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Pakistan they are twice the size of women's.²² Women without land rights have little power over whether land is used in support of subsistence food production. Because they lack inheritance rights, they are even more vulnerable when their husbands die. In many cases women not only lack legal rights, they also lack customary rights, which are supported by traditional systems that maintain those customs, norms and values that privilege men.²³

Rural women also have limited access to rural extension services and technology.²⁴ Increasing both the number of women trained in agriculture and the quality of their training would contribute to the right to food in terms of improving agricultural production and economic empowerment. For example, in Honduras, Nepal, the Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa and Zambia involving women in the design and field testing of new technologies, such as crop varieties, small machinery, and farm tools, have led to the adoption of new innovations, increased productivity and income.²⁵ Improving rural services and infrastructure also serve to reduce women's time spent in gathering food, fuel, and water for household food preparation, and transporting their produce to local markets.

Gendered Dimensions of International Trade and the Right to Food

Fundamental policy shifts over the last 30 years, initially promoted through the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), were advanced through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Uruguay Round of trade negotiations, which later led to the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). SAPs and international trade negotiations have focused on expanding trade and reducing government regulations, with the expectation that such changes would generate income and secure the global food supply. In many cases however, rather than establishing more equitable outcomes, these measures have strengthened the position of the most powerful actors, particularly transnational companies, through unfair subsidies, while developing countries withdrew investment in agriculture and rural development, leading to a decline in their long-term productive capacity and transforming them into net food importers.

Lower tariffs, cuts in spending and deregulation served to decreased government revenues to support key agricultural policies, production incentives, infrastructure investments and

²⁰ State of Food and Agriculture 2011, op cit.

²¹ "Women Farmers: Change and Development Agents". 2011. Prepared by World Rural Forum with Alexandra Spielfoch for World Conference on Family Farming.

²² State of Food and Agriculture 2011, op cit.

²³ Ogalleh, Sarah Ayeri. "Land Rights and Justice for African Women: Advancing the Right to Land and Justice for Women in Africa". 2011. WOCAN Conference Report.

²⁴ Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook: "Investing in Women as Drivers of Agricultural Growth." 2009. World Bank, FAO, IFAD. <http://www.ifad.org/gender/pub/sourcebook/flyer.pdf>.

²⁵ Ibid.

price stabilization measures, including establishing marketing boards and introducing subsidies for small-scale producers, restrictions on imports, and export taxes. Lowered tariffs also led to the privatization of essential services, such as water, sanitation, health, and extension services for the rural poor, who are primarily women and children. As a result, policies and programs that could assist female small-scale producers have been eroded, while trade liberalization policies have increased their work burden and undermined their right to food.

Studies show that as a result of global trade and a concentrated food supply chain, cheaper, less nutritious foods are entering local markets, leading to more prevalence of fats, sweeteners, energy-dense and highly processed foods than present in traditional diets.²⁶ In certain contexts, hungry populations are lacking micronutrients from locally produced foods that are replaced by less healthy imported foods.²⁷ There are clear health implications for women and children, who not only represent the majority of the world's poor, but also the majority of those who are chronically hungry.

Governments and the private sector are currently investing in large-scale land deals in various developing countries to outsource food and fuel in an effort to safeguard supply in response to scarce resources and market disruptions. The majority of this foreign direct investment are taking place without the knowledge of, or consent from, local populations. These deals, many of which last as long as 99 years and contain no protections for human rights or the environment, are threatening already tenuous land reforms, putting local populations at risk of displacement, and contributing to job loss and food insecurity.

Although such leases come with agreements between local leaders and investors under the guise of revenue generation and job creation, they often do not result in positive impacts on smallholders. In addition, women who lack property and inheritance rights are hardly consulted, and have little to no voice in the negotiations as they are taking place. Thus, decisions often do not reflect their interests or priorities. While dealmakers claim they are only talking about marginalized land, these so-called marginalized lands are often in use by female smallholder producers and indigenous populations. Women's lack of access to, and control over, land and productive resources compounds the various problems associated with land use and distribution.

While investments in women in agriculture are necessary, those favoring intensive production and dependency on external inputs should be reviewed based on the extent to which they support gender equality and the right to food. The Special Rapporteur on the right to food has identified sustainable production and agro ecology as an alternative model that could support women's empowerment. Agro ecology reduces smallholder vulnerability and dependency, improves climate-friendly practices and crop diversity, and supports job creation in the rural sector.²⁸ For women in developing countries who cultivate less than two hectares of land and lack access to resources, including needed inputs for production,

²⁶ Hawkes, Corinna; Mickey Chopra and Sharon Friel. "Globalization, Trade and the Nutrition Transition" in *Globalization and Health: pathways, evidence and policy*. 2006. Routledge.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Report on agro ecology, submitted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier de Schutter. 2010. Human Rights Council, 16th Session. United Nations.

http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20110308_a-hrc-16-49_agroecology_en.pdf

this model is sensible: it supports diversified production; facilitates resiliency; erodes dependency; and prioritizes women's knowledge and experiences as farmers.

Recognizing that trade and investment should serve broader human rights goals, including those that ensure that women's human rights and the right to food are realized, participants offered the following recommendations for States:

- Trade and investment policies should be aligned with existing human rights law supporting the right to food and linked to women's human rights.
- Trade policy should allow governments the policy space to design and implement appropriate measures at the national level supporting the right to food. These include, but are not limited to, tariffs, special products, special safeguard mechanisms, food stocks, commodity exchange regulations, extraterritorial obligations to regulate transnational corporations, and restrictions on monopolies on various technologies and natural resources that are central to the right to food.
- Mandatory impact assessments are needed to mitigate risks of the erosion of human rights and gender equality associated with trade and investments.
- Governments should work closely with female farmers to define appropriate regulatory measures that support the right to food. They may also need to provide technical assistance to improve women's bargaining power as investment deals are being developed.
- Governments should adopt policies to facilitate investments in distribution channels to support local food systems and women's productive capacity.
- Governments should respect the right to free informed prior consent, as identified in Article 32 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, allowing indigenous communities to consult and develop priorities for the use of their land, and requiring States to obtain free and informed consent from them prior to the approval of development projects.²⁹ Specific provisions should be made to secure substantive consultations with indigenous women.
- Governments should implement the precautionary principle;³⁰ if implemented it will allow States to require scientific proof that any trade and investment activity would not have a negative impact on health and the environment.

Fiscal Policy, the Right to Food and Gender Equality

Fiscal policy refers to government spending, taxation, other sources of government revenue, and debt management. Many agricultural and food policies are implemented using fiscal tools, such as subsidies, tax breaks, income transfers, public investments and social protection programs, which have budgetary implications. Fiscal policy affects the right to food by determining the available resources of States and influencing the overall level of demand in the economy. Tax breaks for, and cuts in public investments in, the agricultural

²⁹ *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. General Assembly Resolution 61/295. 2007. United Nations. <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html>

³⁰ Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. 1992. United Nations. <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/conf151/aconf15126-1annex1.htm>

sector over the last thirty years—mandated by structural adjustment programs and reinforced by trade agreements—have reduced food and agriculture budgets.

Not surprisingly, cuts in spending have increased gender inequalities as key services and social protections became and remain unavailable, ultimately increasing women’s time and work burden. Programs that support agricultural production tend to be gender blind and are often biased in favor of large farms. For example, in most exporting countries, large farmers and agribusiness are receiving the bulk of subsidies, based on the type of crop they produce and their net income. This model has not only led to market concentration, it also contributed to gender inequality. For instance, the gender division of labor in developing countries is not by crops, but by various tasks, resulting in subsidies not benefiting female farmers who do not own land or control their income. In India, lack of land rights, caste and class all reduce rural women’s access to available credit.³¹

Various governments are implementing programs, such as cash transfers, employment guarantees and land titling, that target women. There is no one-size fits all for these programs - they need to be context-specific if they are to be effective. For example, through its Zero Hunger Program, the Brazilian government is helping rural women through land titling. Between 2007 and 2009, nearly 50,000 titles were delivered, with a positive impact on women’s empowerment.³² However, even if women can obtain land titles, restrictions on credit can hinder their abilities to use it.³³ In Madagascar, though inheritance laws are on the books, men choose not to marry women so they can maintain control over land.³⁴

Food entitlement programs providing nutritious food by tapping into family farming hold great potential for fulfilling the right to food and promoting gender equality. These types of programs should be supported through public budgets. Bolivia, Brazil and India have begun programs to subsidize locally produced, nutritious food from family farms. This has increased food security in poor households and incomes among the rural poor, including female farmers. In New Delhi, women overwhelmingly preferred in-kind food entitlement programs vs. cash based transfers.³⁵ In 2009 during the price spikes in Kenya, cash transfers targeted women, assuming men would not spend them wisely. However, the 10% of men who did receive cash in hand spent the money quite responsibly, contradicting stereotypes.³⁶ Gender-responsive taxation and budgeting can also help guide resource allocation in ways that promote the right to food.

³¹ Excerpt from presentation made by Madhura Swaminathan, Indian Statistical Institute, at the Center for Women’s Global Leadership. September 2011.

³² Cunningham Kain, Myrna. “Role of Institutions in Rural Areas Addressing Women’s Needs, With a Focus on Indigenous Women”. 2011. Expert paper prepared for UN Women Expert Group Meeting: Enabling rural women’s economic empowerment: institutions, opportunities and participation.

³³ Onsrud, H.; Sylvane PaiXao and Sue Nichols. Women and Land Reform in Brazil. 2006. University of Brasilia.

³⁴ Excerpt from presentation made by Olivier de Schutter at the Center for Women’s Global Leadership. September 2011.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Doubts over role of cash transfers in women’s empowerment.” The Guardian. May 9, 2011.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2011/may/09/report-questions-if-cash-transfers-help-women/print>

As a means to address existing challenges in fiscal policy, participants offered the following recommendations to States:

- Design and implement fiscal policies and national budgets based on sex disaggregated data and gender analyses of the ways in which various agriculture and food distribution programs will affect women and men.³⁷
- Prioritize gender-responsive taxation and subsidies that support the infrastructure needed for women to engage in sustainable production, transport produce, access warehousing and other storage facilities, and receive a fair price for their goods.
- Ensure that entitlement programs, such as cash transfers and land titling programs, support a gender equality vision to achieve the right to food.
- Facilitate women's ownership and access to agricultural lands as part of a larger vision for agrarian reform.

Food Prices, Financialization and Gender Equality

Borrowing to realize human rights amounts to using financial intermediation, i.e., entering into financial markets, to realize human rights. This raises issues about the ways in which the realization of human rights is increasingly being intermediated by financial concerns. For example, during the food crisis from 2005 to 2007, food prices increased astronomically, contributing to increased hunger and poverty. A key contributor to this increase was the entry of investment banks into the commodities futures market. This phenomenon is referred to as the financialization of commodity production.

Increasingly, core human rights are being intermediated by financial interests in ways that the human rights community has not caught up on. The tendency to drive up food prices and contribute to commodity price volatility depend on the kinds of financial regulation in operation. The central role of finance in economies around the world alters the ways in which progress on economic and social rights can be achieved, as well as the policy space available to governments.

Inappropriate monetary responses to inflationary pressures may have long-run consequences on governments by slowing the pace of employment creation and limiting peoples' ability to buy and distribute food. If one simply focuses on available budgets it is easy to make the assessment that there is no available money for social spending. However and for example, the banking sector in the United States is currently holding 1.6 trillion dollars in foreign exchange reserves, up from 20 billion dollars in 2007.³⁸

Rapidly increasing food prices make it much more difficult for women as food providers to ensure the adequate nutrition of their families. In times of financial crisis and austerity measures to balance the debt to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ratio, women also end up with more responsibility to provide basic services to their families and communities, and

³⁷ Examples include Austria, the EU, India, Mexico, Rwanda and South Africa.

³⁸ Excerpt from presentation made by James Heintz, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts. Center for Women's Global Leadership. September 2011.

larger numbers of women end up working in the informal sector to make ends meet. At the micro-level, banks are providing women with micro credit and small-scale loans because they are responsible borrowers. Evidence now shows that microcredit programs have had an adverse impact on poor women, putting them into more debt, without substantially reducing poverty and food insecurity.

A key issue involves addressing the ways in which monetary policy at the macro and micro-levels can have a more positive impact on the right to food and gender equality. Participants made a strong argument for transparency and accountability in monetary policy decision-making. In this way, efforts at stabilizing prices would be more flexible and context specific, taking into account external influences and gender equality considerations about the ways in which credit and financial resources are directed to address inequality. Since women are leaders in harvesting, warehousing and storage of reserves at the local level, their voices should be central to the macro policy dialogues in this area.

Meeting participants also highlighted the importance of non-market insurance provisions, such as cooperatives, food reserves and public procurement schemes as viable ways to stabilize price volatility while supporting female farmers and consumers. Food reserves as a means to address price volatility are still taboo among the G 20, who continue to support production that responds to signals of crisis.

As a means to address existing challenges in monetary policy, participants offered the following recommendations to governments:

- Identify the gendered dimensions of price volatility in terms of producers' production risks and access to financial resources and food.
- Regulate futures markets so they can play a role in managing risks associated with food production, without leading to excessive speculation.³⁹
- Develop a global coordination strategy on reserves to enable better stabilization of global food prices.
- Invest in food reserves at the local and national levels, including distribution mechanisms, infrastructure and storage, that respond to women's roles as producers and consumers.
- Invest in women's cooperatives and self-help groups as a form of mutual insurance at the local level.

³⁹ Excessive speculation has adverse effects on the right to food as it delinks food prices from real producers and consumers and contributes to heightened food prices volatility.

Appendix 1: Participants List

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