

## **Holistic Approach to the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition<sup>1</sup>**

There is nothing more basic to every human being than the acts of breathing, eating and drinking. These are fundamental activities that guarantee the water, the nutrients and the oxygen in our bodies, which are present in the foods we eat and drink and the air we breathe. Without them, we do not grow, become weak, sick and die. The struggles of people against exploitation, discrimination, hunger and malnutrition encompass the human right to adequate food and nutrition for all, among other rights and in the context of peoples and food sovereignty.

Eating and feeding one's family and others are actions that most deeply reflect the richness and complexity of human life in society. The ways in which we eat are derived from our very nature, but also constitute products of history and the struggles and lives of our ancestors. They are a reflection of the availability of food and water in our local environment, power relations, and economic and physical abilities to access food.

Discussions about food are inseparable from those about nutrition and health in the context of women's rights and food sovereignty. These discussions should touch upon the diversity, quantity, nutritional composition, quality and type of food production; who produces what, how and where and who makes these decisions; access to and control over productive resources and physical and economic access to food and water; preparation methods; information on diversity and the recommended nutritional balance of diets; the definition of healthy eating habits and the risks of consuming various foods, such as ultra-processed foods, saturated fats, and genetically modified foods, among others. Structural violence and discrimination against women are often invisible or ignored, magnifying the violations of women's rights and hindering their

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this article was published in the Number 22, June 2015 edition of the Nyeleni Newsletter on nutrition and food sovereignty, available at [http://www.nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/newsletters/Nyeleni\\_Newsletter\\_Num\\_22\\_EN.pdf](http://www.nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/newsletters/Nyeleni_Newsletter_Num_22_EN.pdf).

capacity to participate actively in the realization of the right to adequate food and nutrition. Network members support women in their struggle for equal rights with men, for their right to self-determination, for their sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to choose their partners and whether or not they want to procreate. Child marriage and adolescent pregnancies violate the right of women (as per CEDAW) and of children (as per the CRC) and typically reflect and perpetuate poverty in general and violations of the right to adequate food and nutrition of both women and children in particular.

Furthermore, the definition of a proper diet cannot be reduced to a nutritionally balanced basic food ration. Food and nutrition incorporate creativity, love, care, socialization, culture, and spirituality. Thus, a proper diet is one that addresses all these dimensions and contributes to building healthy human beings, aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens of their country and the world, their environmental responsibilities and the quality of life of their descendants.

Food for humans is much more than an instinctive act of collecting and hunting that is born exclusively from hunger. It goes far beyond the mere intake of nutrients present in nature that go into our digestion and transform into body and life. Throughout its evolution, humankind has developed intricate relationships with food processes, turning these into rich rituals linking humans and nature itself, permeated with the cultural characteristics of each community and family. When eating typical dishes of our childhood and culture with friends and family, individuals are renewed in their human dignity, reaffirm their identity, and much more at other levels that reach far beyond the strengthening of their physical and mental health.

The development of all human beings depends on the support of his or her parents, family, community and society. This support manifests itself in the form of food, love, warmth, care, stimulation, education and security, among others. It is impossible to separate the individual value of each of these factors. Optimal infant and young child feeding practices, such as exclusive breastfeeding until 6 months of age and continued breastfeeding until 2 years of age or beyond, together with timely introduction of

adequate complementary foods, are vital and involves all of these dimensions. In this sense, it is essential to strengthen the collective responsibility, in the first place at State's level, for ensuring adequate conditions that enable women to optimally breastfeed without imposing additional burdens on them, including amongst others, ensuring maternal and paternity leaves. In such an enabling environment, women's and children rights are protected and fulfilled and breastfeeding can be exercised as the first act of food sovereignty.

Promoting food sovereignty, with the objective of the full realization of the human right to adequate food and nutrition for all, necessarily requires the full realization of women's human rights. The impact of structural violence against women and girls and the systematic violations of women's human rights on the nutrition of women and children have been concealed by the hegemonic vision of food security and nutrition. Cases of malnutrition in women and children can be attributed in large part to pervasive gender discrimination in regards to access to education, information and health care, including sexual and reproductive health services, disproportionate burden of household responsibilities, child marriage, and teenage pregnancies, which is also arising from lack of comprehensive sexuality education. As main caregivers, families and especially mothers are also the main targets of malevolent marketing of unhealthy foods, such as breastmilk substitutes and high-fat/high-sugar foods, and thus receive inadequate, confusing messages about the best way to feed their families. Finally, food security policies and programs traditionally do not effectively tackle these structural issues, and in the name of "gender equality promotion" end up further increasing the burden on women, by placing additional responsibilities on them that in reality should be collectively shared.

This holistic conceptualization of food and nutrition leads us to the understanding that hunger and the different forms of malnutrition are not "natural" processes. They are in fact the result of social and economic exclusion and exploitation, particularly of:

1. The grabbing of land, water and other natural resources, as well as of human knowledge and practices, labor, productive and reproductive capacity and ways of life.
2. The low and unequal wage, poor working conditions and other violations of workers' rights.
3. The indiscriminate expansion (and public promotion) of the agribusiness production model, which reduces the diversity and quality of food and poisons soils, water, workers, farming communities, and promotes global warming.
4. The accumulation of land and wealth in the hands of a few.
5. The structural violence against women and girls, including violations of their right to education, limitations on their autonomy, and control over their lives and bodies.
6. The unregulated marketing practices promoting the consumption of processed food products such as breastmilk substitutes, genetically modified products, nutraceuticals, nutritional supplements and fortified food products, as well as their increasingly broad distribution.

The struggles for the human right to food and nutrition do not solely aim to satisfy hunger and nutritional needs, but rather to nourish ourselves and each other, family, friends and even strangers, to reaffirm ourselves and leverage each other as human beings in our physical, intellectual, psychological and spiritual dimensions. It is not without reason that all family and community festivities and many spiritual rituals involve acts of preparation and communion of food. In doing so, we reaffirm our identity and cultural diversity in the context of the universality of being human and we realize our food sovereignty.