



03 FROM A MARKET
APPROACH TO
THE CENTRALITY
OF LIFE:
AN URGENT CHANGE
FOR WOMEN

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“The prevailing model has no interest in recognizing the reproductive role that subsistence agriculture—traditionally carried out by women—plays in feeding those people that global statistics categorize as poor. If women’s historical labor were to be valued, capitalism and its calculating nature would be shattered.”

The following words could come straight out of a document published by an official UN body, or even out of a marketing campaign of some private sector corporation: “the importance of women”, “especially for women and the most marginalized”, “primarily for women of reproductive age and girls”, “women must have access to productive resources”... Nobody dares to deny the importance of women for achieving a world without hunger. And yet, something must be wrong, because year on year, decade after decade, women continue to be marginalized and left by the wayside.

Women are the pillars of the food system, both in their role as peasants and guardians of seed and knowledge,¹ and in their role as carers, stemming from the patriarchal vision of the sexual division of labor. Historically, in agriculture, the sexual division of labor takes its shape in the fields of production, processing, food conservation and preparation, all of which have traditionally fallen on women. Indeed, women feed the world, not only in their role as peasant producers of food, but also because they are the ones who hold the knowledge for conserving, processing and preparing food. Nevertheless, there is a paradox here—whilst they are the producers, women and girls are often the ones who suffer the most from hunger. This is, in itself, a clear violation of their rights as women and as human beings. Hunger wears the face of a peasant, but also of a woman.

How can we rigorously explain this phenomenon? There are many elements in play, both politically and culturally. But what remains clear is that women’s work has been rendered invisible and is devalued by the capitalist economy, which dismissively labels it as ‘subsistence agriculture’, and this is key. The hetero-patriarchal system, which only values large-scale productive activities that are carried out in the public sphere, scorns and dismisses all other ventures, yet these are the ones that really sustain people, and indeed the system as a whole. The prevailing model has no interest in recognizing the reproductive role that subsistence agriculture—traditionally carried out by women—plays in feeding those people that global statistics categorize as poor. If women’s historical labor were to be valued, capitalism and its calculating nature would be shattered.

Most proposals by international organizations aim for development policies that encourage women to abandon so-called subsistence agriculture, which has been denigrated by capitalism because it remains in the family domain and thus not at a scale considered appropriate within the productive sphere. Women are expected to produce for the only recognized market and integrate into a global, capitalist agriculture, which in theory is the one that will bring them out from hunger and poverty. Meanwhile, as experience shows, women, not only are not breaking free from this sexual division of labor, but also carry a double burden: to produce for the market and to feed their families. This demonstrates that working with women is slowly (very slowly) but surely being included at the policy-making level and as such,

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Photo

Women demanding access to land during West African Caravan for Land, Water and Seeds (Dakar, Sénégal, 2016). Photo by Geoff Arbourne.

¹ For more information on the role of women as guardians of seed in Africa, please see: Pschorn-Strauss, Elfrieda. “African Food Sovereignty: Valuing Women and the Seed They Keep”. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2016): 49–51. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/african-food-sovereignty.

- 2 Many states have reacted to the penultimate draft of the declaration and all references to gender discrimination have been deleted. Additionally, article 4 on the rights of peasant women and other women working in rural areas has suffered cuts, especially in terms of recognizing multiple forms of violence, the intersectionality of discrimination, the right to make decisions over their body and reproductive rights.
- 3 Committee on World Food Security. Making a Difference in Food Security and Nutrition. CFS Forty-third Session Report. Rome: FAO, 2016. Available at: www.fao.org/3/a-ms025e.pdf.
- 4 For more information on the relationship between nutrition and women's rights, please see: Córdova Montes, Denisse and Flavio L. S. Valente. "Interdependent and Indivisible: The Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition and Women's Sexual and Reproductive Rights." Right to Food and Nutrition Watch (2014): 32–33. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/ten-years-right-food-guidelines-gains-concerns-and-struggles.
- 5 "We women have less land, of worst quality, and the land tenure is often insecure". Interview with Sandra Moreno Cadena (La Via Campesina). In the same sense, according to the FAO, in Bangladesh women only own 10% of land, and in Nigeria only 4% of women can take decisions on the sale of land, compared to 87% of men. FAO. Gender and Land Statistics. Recent developments in FAO's Gender and Land Rights Database. FAO: Rome, 2015.
- 6 If women had the same access to land as men, the number of hungry people in the world would be reduced by 150 million. FAO. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2010-2011*. FAO: Rome, 2011.
- 7 For example, in Guinea (West Africa), women are responsible for almost 80% of the country's food production, but only a small percentage owns land and they do not have the right to inherit land. For more information, please see insight box 3.1 "Stories of Resistance: Women's Struggles for Food Sovereignty in Africa" below.
- 8 Rocés, Irene García, Marta Soler Montiel and Assumpta Sabuco i Cantó. "El trabajo de las mujeres Campesinas en proyectos agroecológicos en el asentamiento Moreno Maia en la Amazonia Brasileña." *Género, agroecología y Soberanía Alimentaria*. Spain: Icaria, 2014. pp. 165–194.
- 9 Soler, Carles and Fernando Fernández. "Estructura de la propiedad de tierras en España. Concentración y acaparamiento." *Fundación Mundubat y Revista Soberanía Alimentaria, Biodiversidad y Culturas*. Bilbao: December 2015. pp. 102–120. Available at: www.mundubat.org/informe-mundubat-acaparamiento-de-tierras-en-espana-2016/.

it is beginning to play a significant part of the fight against hunger and malnutrition. Nevertheless, those of us who view the situation from a feminist perspective believe that, so far, we are a very long way away from having reached the type of approach, measures and advancements that we would like.

Day after day, social movements—struggling for food sovereignty in different national and international organizations—still have to constantly fight for the full recognition of women's rights. Those of us who are debating at different forums within the UN system come up against a brick wall when we make such claims. One example is the ongoing negotiations for the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants in Geneva;² another example is the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Some states do not consider women's issues to be a priority; in some cases, women are not even viewed as subjects with their own rights. At the CFS, for instance, it was not until 2016 that CFS recommendations included a paragraph specifically on women's rights.³ In this regard, some states argued that it is not the mandate of the CFS to include it, as its remit is solely food security. This goes directly against one of the human rights pillars; their indivisibility. We cannot separate women's rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, from the human right to adequate food and nutrition,⁴ all the more since these rights play such a crucial role, as mentioned above.

Indeed, we can say that women became a priority for agribusiness, as soon as they were identified as a significant consumer niche market. From supplements for breast milk, to nutritional programs for girls or women at childbearing age, multinationals continue to unroll their wide range of offers of products that add to the causes of malnutrition and objectification of women as mere incubators or walking uteruses. Real and transformational alternatives cannot be built if women are not considered as subjects with full rights, and if we do not work towards their autonomy and real equity. Just as ecological or environmental economy is introduced as a new alternative, a feminist economy is key for the construction of another fairer world.

This is why we need a feminist outlook that will contribute to a shift in focus: the reproduction of life is what counts, not the market. The work carried out by women needs to be recognized as holding center stage, because it sustains life and guarantees continuity. It is not 'subsistence agriculture'; it is agriculture for life. This agriculture is based on ancestral knowledge, on traditional varieties, on agroecology, on diversity—this type of agriculture guarantees healthy, nutritional and diverse food for all people and is adapted to the cultural contexts. That is, this agriculture for life guarantees the right to food and nutrition, and food sovereignty.

It is not perfect, at least not in all territories, especially in a context of climate change. However, agriculture for life suffices for guaranteeing the right to food and nutrition. In these contexts, an agroecological perspective is required so as to seek solutions that are adapted to the circumstances and that allow for this agriculture to feed families, or to find alternatives that complement diets, whilst also respecting the autonomy of peoples and caring for the earth. What is more, in many contexts, agriculture for life is not able to sustain food because women, for the mere fact of being women, have less access to the necessary productive resources, i.e. less access to land;⁵ less access to water; their use of seeds is penalized; and they often cannot gain financial resources to develop their (re)productive activity.⁶ All over the world we come across examples of these inequalities, from Africa⁷ to the Brazilian Amazon,⁸ and European countries,⁹ equality remains a pending matter. Despite all of

- 10 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation No. 34 on the rights of rural women is the first international instrument to recognize that the human right to adequate food and nutrition of rural women is to be developed within the framework of food sovereignty. Available at: tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CEDAW_GEC_7933_E.pdf. For more information on this recommendation, please see: FIAN International. "The Recently Adopted CEDAW General Recommendation on The Rights of Rural Women: How Can Civil Society Make Use of it for The Realization of the Right to Food and Nutrition?" *Analytical Note*. Heidelberg: FIAN International, 2016. Available at: www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications_2016/CEDAW_GR_Rural_Women_Analysis_FINAL.pdf.
- 11 Global Network on the Right to Food and Nutrition. Viotá Declaration. June 2017. Available at: www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications_2017/GNRff/Viota_Declaration_-_EN_final_CLEAN.pdf.
- 12 Connie Nawaigo-Zhuwarara is the Strategic Program Manager at Urgent Action Fund-Africa, a pan-African and feminist fund, established in 2001 in Nairobi, Kenya. Using a rapid response grant-making (RRG) model, the fund supports unanticipated, time-sensitive, innovative, and bold initiatives. Special thanks to Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss (Biowatch South Africa), Priscilla Claeys (Coventry University and FIAN Belgium), Emily Mattheisen (FIAN International) and Carsta Neuenroth (Bread for the World) for their support in reviewing this insight box.
- 13 For more information on the condition of rural women and their rights, please see: FIAN International. *The recently adopted CEDAW General Recommendation on the rights of rural women: How can civil society make use of it for the realization of the right to food and nutrition?* Heidelberg: FIAN International, 2016. Available at: www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications_2016/CEDAW_GR_Rural_Women_Analysis_FINAL.pdf.
- 14 For more information on women's roles in food security, please see the documentary "A Glimpse of Her Stories: Rural Women's Resilience and Food Security", produced by People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS). 2012. Available at: www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/playlist/12305/A-Glimpse-of-Her-Stories--Rural-Women-s-Resilience-and-Food-Security.
- 15 For more information on the role of women in the struggles for food sovereignty in Africa, please see: Pschorn-Strauss, Elfrieda. "African Food Sovereignty: Valuing Women and the Seed They Keep." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2016): 49–51. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/african-food-sovereignty.
- 16 For more information on Green Fuel, a joint government and privatized business venture that has sole use of 3,000 hectares, please see: www.herald.co.zw/green-fuel-invests-300m-into-chisumbanje-ethanol-project/. Green Fuel was contacted with a request for a reaction on the information included in this article on July 14, 2017.

these difficulties, women are the ones who feed the world across the planet and are indispensable in the path towards food sovereignty. For this reason, in the struggle for food sovereignty, championed by La Via Campesina, the role of women is essential and they must be in the front row.¹⁰ Even though they are responsible for food, they remain invisible, they are deprived of their rights and they are continuously victims of physical and structural sexist violence.

This scenario that we are depicting is the everyday reality of many women in the world. Despite all of this, today we still have to reiterate—even within social movements themselves—the importance of working with an outlook that goes beyond streamlining a gender perspective. In some spaces, such as the Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition, feminisms are already being incorporated as a perspective from which to address inequality.¹¹ For decades now women have been 'streamlined', but not much has changed. We will not tire from repeating that changes happen when women reach autonomy and through the organization and incorporation of a feminist perspective. It is simply not enough to paint their lives and spaces a rosy pink to appear more feminine, we want to paint them a tone of purple and make them more feminist. The fight for food sovereignty is anti-capitalist, but it must also be anti-patriarchal, otherwise it will never be just.

INSIGHT 3.1 Stories of Resistance: Women's Struggles for Food Sovereignty in Africa

Connie Nawaigo-Zhuwarara¹²

"We used to grow tomatoes and butternut but now we don't have money for transport or the resources to go and buy these things. There are no wild fruits or herbs. There are no wild fruits for babies. Some children are now suffering from malnutrition. The slag from the factory has poisoned the river and fish are dying."
Community member from Chisumbanje, Zimbabwe

Women in Africa are the social and economic pillars of rural community life,¹³ and as custodians of biodiversity, they are at the center of the struggle for food sovereignty and security.¹⁴ Rural women are also the most affected by global geo-political forces, trade agreements and investment deals. Many African governments yield financial gains from investment payoffs and deals, yet at the policy level, they rarely pay heed to issues relating to women, communities or the environment. Due to gender discrimination and lack of political will, women increasingly find the source of their livelihoods cut off or diminished as foreign investors take over the land, water and forests that they depend on.

African women are resisting and self-organizing to articulate the issues affecting them, and reclaim their food sovereignty.¹⁵ They have used various methods to define their own food and agricultural systems, and have come up with various coping strategies. The three powerful stories of women's resistance below illustrate the vulnerability of women's access to land and livelihoods and highlight their mobilization and activism.

RESISTANCE IN RURAL CHISUMBANJE, ZIMBABWE

In 2009, a sugar cane farm for the refining and production of ethanol in Chisumbanje, Zimbabwe was established by Green Fuel,¹⁶ damaging the ecosystem and putting at

risk women's rural financial livelihoods.¹⁷ Following the large-scale land acquisition, women's customary tenure rights were undermined and their livelihoods and food security compromised by failure of the State to protect people's rights and of the company to adequately compensate the people affected by evictions.¹⁸ As one widow from the community explains: "My husband passed away, I have no other way to make a living apart from when I was farming. I have no education but I really know how to farm."

In rural community life, women are responsible for the planting, caring and harvesting of crops. Historically, women grew a variety of crops such as groundnuts, maize and sorghum, and were active in sharecropping. However, due to the large-scale monoculture cropping of sugar cane in Chisumbanje, women are suffering from the loss of arable land and biodiversity.

Through mobilization, the women challenged the company, petitioned Parliament and highlighted their struggle. Members of Parliament visited the area and presented a report to the Full House of Parliament. However, legislation to protect the women never materialized and instead, the government pushed for the legalization of fuel blending, which provides the ethanol plant with the much-needed market for their agrofuel supply. Nevertheless, women will not give up their struggle.

MAASAI WOMEN'S FIGHT FOR FOOD AND LAND SOVEREIGNTY IN TANZANIA

In 2006, the Tanzanian government approved large-scale land acquisition by foreign investors for high-end tourism, which led to the eviction of the Maasai community and the shrinking of their grazing lands.¹⁹ The Maasai are pastoralists who depend almost exclusively on livestock for their livelihoods and seasonal migration with their animals, which underpins their resource management strategy. In the Ngorongoro region, in Arusha, Maasai women and girls have been harassed and intimidated by the government for defending their land, and even the activists' lawyer was arrested, leading to a protest march in July 2016.²⁰

Women have actively challenged this dispossession through mobilization, advocacy and public interest litigation.²¹ Women have been at the heart of resisting, organizing and petitioning government to protect their food sovereignty.²²

SETTING LEGAL PRECEDENTS IN GUINEA

In Guinea, women are often victims of discrimination and violation of their fundamental rights. The state has failed to protect women even though it is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Women are responsible for nearly 80% of the country's food production, but only a small percentage own land. They do not have the right to inherit land. Instead, women obtain user rights to agricultural land through their husbands and sons, and they usually depend on them to maintain access to land. This discrimination has been worsened by uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources.

Earlier this year, three widows who were evicted from their land after the death of their husbands, decided to challenge these discriminatory local practices. The women have been able to organize and resist by taking urgent legal action in court to defend their interests and raise awareness of the rural population on

- 17 For detailed information on this case, please see: Farai, Mutondoro *et al.*, *The Intersection of Women, Land and Corruption in Zimbabwe: Case study of women in Chisumbanje and Chinyamukwakwa villages in Zimbabwe*. Transparency International Zimbabwe, 2016. Available at: https://searcul.ac.zw/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&id=193&Itemid=96.
- 18 For more information, please see: Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, Zimbabwe Human Rights Association and Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association. "Zimbabwe civil society condemns threat by Green Fuel to muzzle voices of marginalized farmers." *Transparency International Zimbabwe*, July 21, 2016. Available at: tizim.org/?p=375.
- 19 For more information, please see: Renton, Alex. "Tourism is a curse to us." *The Guardian*, September 6, 2009. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/06/masai-tribesman-tanzania-tourism.
- 20 For more information, please see: Ubwani, Zephania. "Police break up lawyers' protest march in Arusha." *The Citizen*, July 27, 2016. Available at: www.thecitizen.co.tz/News/Police-break-up-lawyers--protest-march-in-Arusha-/1840340-3317864-3tkow1z/index.html.
- 21 On February 26, 2014, the Soitsambu, Sukenya and Mondorosi villages filed an action in a US federal court against Thomson Safaris, an affiliate of Tanzania Conservation (TC), and its owners. For more information, please see: business-humanrights.org/en/thomson-safaris-lawsuit-re-maasai-in-tanzania.
- 22 For more information, please see: "Maasai women take leadership in Ngorongoro." *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs*, February 15, 2017. Available at: www.iwgia.org/news/search-news?news_id=1440.

women's right to inheritance and land as recognized by Guinean land law. This court case could set an important precedent in challenging local customs that violate women's basic rights.

WOMEN RISING: WHERE NEXT?

These stories of resistance illustrate that women play a pivotal role in food sovereignty, but this is being increasingly undermined by the surge in large-scale land grabbing. Women's roles are often overlooked by mostly male-led elites due to gender discrimination embedded through religion, customary practices, policies and laws that do not take into account the contributions women make to community life and ecosystems. Religious fundamentalism and underdevelopment, both growing factors in Africa, continue to amplify these problems. Despite this, women are standing up, organizing, resisting and challenging both state and non-state actors, but in doing so, it makes them vulnerable to government-sponsored violations and abuses of their human rights.

African women are rarely part of decision or policy-making processes and as a result they are continually discriminated against. In the process they often lose the very basis of their livelihood and this is exacerbated by the new wave of industrialization and investment across the continent. Land is a major factor in the advancement of the human right to adequate food and nutrition. As active proponents of food sovereignty, it is vital for women to be political participants and to have their voices heard by organizing themselves around the issues of access to and ownership of land and compensation, to fully enable them to effectively assert their human rights.

The international community has recognized the need to protect rural women as they continue to experience poverty and exclusion whilst simultaneously battling with systemic discrimination in the access to land and natural resources.²³ States must meet both their national and international human rights obligations.²⁴ African states must therefore take measures to achieve substantive equality, especially in regard to customs that govern the governance of land tenure, and put in place laws that protect access to and control over land, participation and strengthen customary and statutory institutions to defend and protect women's rights and food sovereignty.

23 In March 2016, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) adopted its General Recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women. For more information, please see: http://internet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CEDAW_GEC_7953_E.pdf.

24 The rights of women are beginning to be acknowledged by international forums (including the African Union) and additional countries are slowly developing policies to reflect this trend. For more information, please see: www.achpr.org/files/instruments/women-protocol/achpr_instr_proto_women_eng.pdf.