

## GENDER AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: WOMEN AS ACTIVE SUBJECTS IN THE PROVISION OF FOOD AND NUTRITION

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The year 2015 has often been predicted as an extremely significant moment for human rights. In fact, the 1996 World Food Summit (WFS) established the target of reducing the *number* of undernourished people to half the level of 1996 no later than 2015.<sup>2</sup> In 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),<sup>3</sup> less ambitiously, promised to halve the *proportion* of undernourished people by the year 2015 as compared to the levels in 1990 (MDG 1c).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the WFS committed itself to ensuring gender equality and the full exercise of women's rights (Objective 1.3), while MDG 3 aimed to eliminate gender disparity in education specifically by 2015 at the latest.

Nearly 20 years after the WFS, and 15 years after the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, there are no reasons to celebrate achievements by heads of State and governments. Far from achieving the objective set by the WFS,<sup>5</sup> 795 million people will continue to suffer from undernourishment between 2014 and 2016,<sup>6</sup> and the educational gap between men and women still exists at all levels.<sup>7</sup> Public outrage over this failure should be at least as resounding as the applause that followed the adoption of the MDGs. However, heads of State and the private business sector have managed to divert the attention towards the new myth of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are being negotiated at the time of drafting this article.<sup>7</sup>

While the proposed SDGs aim at eliminating hunger, guaranteeing food security, improving nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), as well as gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (SDG 5), they fail, even before their approval, as they do not address the MDGs' serious oversight of not adopting a human rights approach, including accountability mechanisms.<sup>9</sup> As such, policies originating from the SDGs will continue to ignore the structural causes of inequality, poverty and undernourishment, reinforced by the hegemonic agro-export model of production and consumption.<sup>10</sup> These policies will not have communities, people, and especially not women, at their center but rather markets and transnational companies, whose ultimate goals are economic growth and excessive profits. This will damage local food systems, displace peasants, reinforce the sexual division of labor, interfere with access to natural resources and destroy the environment.<sup>11</sup>

### DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AS A VIOLATION OF THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD AND NUTRITION

Despite many international instruments created to promote human development and gender equality,<sup>12</sup> many women still face discrimination in access to natural and productive resources, such as seeds, land, water, education, healthcare, stable employment and adequate wages, and social security, as well as in respect to sexual and reproductive rights, protection against violence, decision-making and social, cultural and political participation.<sup>13</sup> This discrimination constitutes a violation of

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- 2 World Food Summit. *Rome Declaration on World Food Security*. Rome, November 13–17, 1996, 2nd paragraph. Available at: [www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.HTM](http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.HTM).
- 3 United Nations General Assembly. *United Nations Millennium Declaration*. New York, September 8, 2000. Available at: [www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm](http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm).
- 4 Demographic growth can reduce the proportion of undernourished people without a reduction in absolute figures. The reference to 1990 allows for the inclusion of economic growth in China regardless of the MDGs from 1990 to 1996. See: Pogge, Thomas. "The First United Nations Millennium Development Goal: A Cause for Celebration?" *Journal of Human Development: A Multi-Disciplinary Journal for People-Centered Development* 5:3 (2004): 377–397.

women's human rights and hinders the full, autonomous and active exercise of their capacities in the provision of adequate food and nutrition for themselves, their families and their communities.<sup>14</sup>

Thousands of women are subjected to a life of injustice marked by material scarcity. This poverty is significant among rural women,<sup>15</sup> and is inextricably linked to their own undernourishment and that of girls and boys.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, undernourishment, which results from a massive increase in cheap so-called 'junk food',<sup>17</sup> has a higher impact on women and children, who at the same time suffer from poverty and food insecurity.<sup>18</sup>

Discrimination against women is conceived from the structural system of patriarchal domination, with the protection of the institutional and ecclesiastical 'powers that be'. It stems from an ideological capitalist determinism, based on the separation between production, remunerated and typically 'male', and reproduction, non-remunerated and 'female'.<sup>19</sup> In the context of food systems, this model has resulted in the de-contextualization and the business appropriation of food and nutrition. This has created an artificial separation between food (goods, with a production and distribution system boosted through technological innovations and world trade) and nutrition (focused on adding medicalized supplements of micro-nutrients).<sup>20</sup>

## AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL BASED ON THE HUMAN RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD AND NUTRITION: WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Food sovereignty, introduced in 1996 by La Via Campesina at the social movements' parallel forum to the WFS, is a normative alternative for the fight against hunger and undernourishment. Five years later, at the World Forum on Food Sovereignty held in Cuba, 400 delegates from 60 countries from all continents drafted the declaration entitled "For the peoples' right to produce, feed themselves and exercise their food sovereignty":

*Food sovereignty is the means to eradicate hunger and malnutrition and to guarantee lasting and sustainable food security for all of the peoples. We define food sovereignty as the peoples' right to define their own policies and strategies for the sustainable production, distribution and consumption of food that guarantee the right to food for the entire population, on the basis of small and medium-sized production, respecting their own cultures and the diversity of peasant, fishing and indigenous forms of agricultural production, marketing and management of rural areas, in which women play a fundamental role.*<sup>21</sup>

Food sovereignty is built on traditional food systems, whose objectives are providing food to people and the common good. These systems have been accompanied by an exchange of knowledge on seed breeding and conservation for thousands of years, applying comprehensive sustainability without contributing to systematic cultural and natural resource erosion. Hence, food sovereignty entrusts peasants<sup>22</sup> with the decision on what food is produced, who produces it and how, and on the use of that food to achieve the full exercise of the human right to adequate food and nutrition (RtAFN).<sup>23</sup>

The realization of this right and food sovereignty are inseparable from the work of peasants, and are not conceivable without the integration of women. Women must

- 5 While "[t]he latest PoU [prevalence of under-nourishment] estimates suggest that the development regions as a whole have almost reached the MDG 1c", the goal of the WFS "has been missed by a large margin" as it would have required reducing the number of people suffering from hunger to 265 million fewer than the current estimate for 2014–16. See: FAO. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015*. Rome: FAO, 2015, p. 9. Available at: [www.fao.org/3/a-i4646e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4646e.pdf). Moreover, in 2012, the FAO launched a new 'improved' methodology, through which undernourishment decreased to a larger extent than indicated by the previous estimates. See: FAO. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012*. Rome: FAO, 2012. Available at: [www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e.pdf).
- 6 *Ibid.* FAO 2015, pp. 8–18.
- 7 UNESCO. *World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education*. Paris: UNESCO, 2012. Available at: [www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/unesco-world-atlas-gender-education-2012.pdf](http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/unesco-world-atlas-gender-education-2012.pdf).
- 8 The proposed SDGs will be adopted at the UN Summit to Adopt the Post-2015 Development Agenda in September 2015. For more information, please visit: [sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabledevelopmentgoals](http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabledevelopmentgoals).
- 9 Wolpold-Bosien, Martin. "Human Rights Accountability, Inclusive Governance in Food and Nutrition, and the Post-2015 Framework." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2013): 13–15. Available at: [www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications/Watch\\_2013\\_eng\\_WEB\\_final.pdf#page=13](http://www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications/Watch_2013_eng_WEB_final.pdf#page=13).
- 10 Schuftan, Claudio and Radha Holla. "Two Contemporary Challenges: Corporate Control over Food and Nutrition and the Absence of a Focus on the Social Determinants of Nutrition." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2012): 24–30. Available at: [www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications/R\\_t\\_F\\_a\\_N\\_Watch\\_2012\\_eng.pdf](http://www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications/R_t_F_a_N_Watch_2012_eng.pdf).
- 11 Darrow, Mac. "The Millennium Development Goals: Milestones or Millstones? Human Rights Priorities for the Post-2015 Development Agenda." *Yale Human Rights and Development Journal* 15:1 (2014): 55–127. Available at: [digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1111&context=yhrdj](http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1111&context=yhrdj); Quintos, Paul L. "La Agenda Corporativa de Desarrollo Post-2015: Expandiendo el Poder Corporativo en el Nombre del Desarrollo Sostenible." Presentation made at the Biannual Conference of the Asia Pacific Research Network, Hong Kong, China, September 1–2, 2014.
- 12 Among them, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), and the Platform for Action that came out of the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995.
- 13 FAO. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–11: Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development*. Rome: FAO, 2011. Available at: [fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf](http://fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf).
- 14 Anne C. Bellows et al., *Gender, Nutrition, and the Human Right to Adequate Food: Toward an Inclusive Framework*. New York: Routledge, forthcoming November, 2015.
- 15 International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). *Rural Poverty Report 2011*. Rome: IFAD, 2011, p. 61. Available at: [ifad.org/rpr2011/report/e/rpr2011.pdf](http://ifad.org/rpr2011/report/e/rpr2011.pdf).

be valued for the role they play as human rights subjects, taking into account the function they have assumed since the origins of peasant agriculture and their productive role in food and nutrition for all peoples.<sup>24</sup> Social movements, within which women's participation is increasingly active, understand women as life's axis of integration and as promoters of good living (*buen vivir*).<sup>25</sup> Women are seen as bearers of peasant agriculture knowledge, which is based on agro-ecology. Therefore, they are key actors in the mitigation of climate change, given that agro-ecology is the only viable and autonomous alternative to produce diverse, healthy and nutritious food.

For social movements, nutrition cannot be separated from food, health, the environment and agriculture. Food and nutrition are comprised of identity, love, care, and spirituality, as well as physical, mental and emotional health. Both food and nutrition integrate the transmission of knowledge, languages, ceremonies, dances and prayers, as well as stories and songs related to subsistence practices and traditional foods. Social movements perceive and experience daily food and nutrition as an indivisible concept.<sup>26</sup>

Peasant, rural and indigenous women in Latin America, as well as in other parts of the world, are fighting against the patriarchal and neoliberal model: it is not enough to secure food production, distribution and nutritional supplements. Development concepts and programs to fight undernourishment must be reconsidered. It is essential to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, as it violates their rights and hinders their contribution to food sovereignty. The fight against discrimination should start within the social movements themselves, as well as in valuing and sharing reproductive tasks between men and women. Moreover, it is essential to implement human rights-based policies, including accountability mechanisms and safeguards against undue business influence. Only in this way will women be able to fully exercise their capacities in the provision of adequate food and nutrition, which will not be disassociated from each other, or from people and nature.

### INSIGHT 3

#### Violations of Women's Human Rights as Root Causes of Malnutrition: The Case of Communities Affected by Mining and Displacement in Essakane, Burkina Faso<sup>27</sup>

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As a result of the Canadian mining conglomerate IAMGOLD's expanding activities in West Africa, 2,500 households in the north of Burkina Faso were displaced and resettled outside of the mining area in 2009. To support the communities' efforts in demanding the protection of their human rights and holding the State of Burkina Faso accountable for its human rights obligations, FIAN International and FIAN Burkina Faso documented women's perspectives of the impact of mining and displacement on women's rights, as well as on community members' right to adequate food and nutrition, and on children's access to nutrition.

A methodology was developed that recognized how women's holistic access to human rights shapes their capability to ensure family nutrition and children's human rights. Qualitative and quantitative methods assessed women's: (1) sexual and reproductive rights; (2) right to natural and productive resources; (3) right to be free from gender-based violence; and (4) right to recourse and accountability mechanisms. They also assessed children's right to education and right to health.

- 16 van den Bold, Mara, Agnes R. Quisumbing and Stuart Gillespie. "Women's Empowerment and Nutrition: An Evidence Review". *International Food Policy Research Institute Discussion Paper* 1294 (2013): 7–8.
- 17 The excess of sugar, carbohydrates and fat products has produced alarming figures of adults and children that are overweight or obese in industrialized countries and less industrialized countries alike, resulting in a higher risk of non-communicable diseases, such as cancer, chronic cardiovascular and respiratory diseases and diabetes. See: De Schutter, Olivier. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food: The Right to an Adequate Diet: The Agriculture-Food-Health Nexus (A/HRC/19/59)*. Geneva: Human Rights Council, December 26, 2011, pp. 5–9. Available at: [www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/official-reports/20120506\\_nutrition\\_en.pdf](http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/official-reports/20120506_nutrition_en.pdf) WHO. *Set of Recommendations on the Marketing of Food and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children*. Geneva: WHO, 2010. Available at: [whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241500210\\_ena.pdf?ua=1](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241500210_ena.pdf?ua=1). See also: Cedeño, Marcos Arana and Xaviera Cabada. "Nutrition Policies Taken Hostage by Multinational and Conflicts of Interest: The Obesity and Diabetes Epidemic in Mexico" in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.
- 18 The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) presents scientific evidence of the link between hunger, being overweight and obesity. Available at: [frac.org/initiatives/hunger-and-obesity/are-hunger-and-obesity-related](http://frac.org/initiatives/hunger-and-obesity/are-hunger-and-obesity-related).
- 19 Nobre, Miriam. "Women and Food Sovereignty." *Nyeléni Newsletter* 6 (2011). Available at: [www.nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/newsletters/Nyeléni\\_Newsletter\\_Num\\_6\\_EN.pdf](http://www.nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/newsletters/Nyeléni_Newsletter_Num_6_EN.pdf). See also: Anne C. Bellows *et al.*, *supra* note 14.
- 20 For more information on the corporate capture of food and nutrition, please see: Schieck Valente, Flavio Luiz. "The Corporate Capture of Food and Nutrition Governance: A Threat to Human Rights and People's Sovereignty" in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*. See also: Anne C. Bellows *et al.*, *supra* note 14; Schieck Valente, Flavio Luiz. "Nutrition and Food Sovereignty." *Nyeléni Newsletter* 22 (2015). Available at: [www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?page=NWarticle\\_en&id\\_article=509](http://www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?page=NWarticle_en&id_article=509). The 2011 *Nyeléni Newsletter* 6 places the process of industrialization of nature in agriculture on the same level as industrialization of women's bodies.
- 21 World Forum on Food Sovereignty. "Final Declaration of the World Forum on Food Sovereignty." Havana, Cuba, September 7, 2001, 1st paragraph. Available at: [www.ukabc.org/havanadeclaration.pdf](http://www.ukabc.org/havanadeclaration.pdf).
- 22 The term 'peasant' can apply to any person engaged in agriculture, cattle-raising, pastoralism, handicrafts related to agriculture or a similar occupation in a rural area, indigenous peoples working on the land, as well as the landless. See: Human Rights Council Advisory Committee. *Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas*. Geneva: United Nations General Assembly, June 20, 2013, Article 1. Available at: [www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPeasants/A-HRC-WG-15-1-2\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/WGPeasants/A-HRC-WG-15-1-2_en.pdf).
- 23 *Nyeléni Newsletter* 6 (2011), *supra* note 19. See also: Schieck Valente, Flavio Luiz. "The Corporate Capture of Food and Nutrition Governance: A Threat to Human Rights and People's Sovereignty" in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.

During 2014 a total of 60 women participated in focus group discussions, and 19 women were selected to participate in individual surveys. That same year the results were presented for review and validation at community meetings involving an estimated 400–500 women and men in the six communities affected by IAMGOLD mining and resettlement.

Findings demonstrate the overall precarious situation of women's human rights in Essakane and its significant impact on the right to adequate food and nutrition of the communities' children. Women and children's human rights situation is worsened by the long-term, and sometimes permanent, migration of adult males in search of work at other mining sites. The patriarchal nature of society at community and national levels constructs female identity in terms of dependency, instead of self-determination born of human rights and dignity. Women appeared not to have a clear understanding of being rights holders, including having a right to physical and mental integrity that may not be threatened or violated, or having the right to hold their communities and the state accountable for human rights abuses and violations that they and their families face.

In 2015–2016 a series of workshops with affected men and women will take place to foster a greater understanding of human rights and gender equality, and effectively engage community members in the upcoming reporting and review processes of Burkina Faso by the Committees on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2016. These processes are further opportunities for affected communities to bring attention to violations of the right to adequate food and nutrition, and the interdependence of these with women and children's human rights.

- 24 In less industrialized countries women account for an average of 43% of the farming labor force and are understood as the economically active population working in agriculture. This figure varies from 20% in Latin America to nearly 50% in East and Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. See: FAO, *supra* note 13, pp. 7–8 and 10. However, this indicator does not take into account subsistence production, reproductive tasks, which include childcare and household activities, and other activities in the different sectors of the food network, thereby underestimating women's contribution to food and nutritional security. For more information, please see: Deere, Carmen Diana. *The Feminization of Agriculture? Economic Restructuring in Rural Latin America*. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, February 1, 2005; Ferrant, Gaëlle, Luca Maria Pesando and Keiko Nowacka. *Unpaid Care Work: The Missing Link in the Analysis of Gender Gaps in Labor Outcomes*. Paris: Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, December 2014; Pimbert, Michel. "Women and food sovereignty." *LEISA Magazine* 25:3 (2009): 6–9.
- 25 See article "Struggling for Food Sovereignty: The Case of Peasant and Fisherfolk Communities in Pakistan and Uganda" in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.
- 26 *Nyeléni Newsletter* 6 (2011), *supra* note 19.
- 27 This article is based on a report by FIAN International and FIAN Burkina Faso. For more information, see: *Women's Perspectives on the Impact of Mining on the Right to Food. The Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition of Women and Children of Communities Affected by Mining and Displacement in Essakane, Burkina Faso*. Heidelberg and Ouagadougou: FIAN, April 2015. Available at: [www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/media\\_publications2015/FIAN\\_Essakane\\_270315\\_Ansicht.pdf](http://www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/media_publications2015/FIAN_Essakane_270315_Ansicht.pdf). Prior to publication, FIAN shared the report with IAMGOLD, requesting the corporation to provide a response to specific allegations. Responses provided by the corporation were incorporated into the report either in footnotes or directly into the text. Please see full report for IAMGOLD's responses.
- 28 R. Denisse Córdova Montes is the Gender and Women's Rights Coordinator at FIAN International. Kossiawavi A. Ayassou Sawadogo is a nutritionist in Burkina Faso and, during the elaboration and implementation of the study, an employee of FIAN Burkina Faso. Special thanks to Anne C. Bellows (University of Syracuse) and Maria Melinda Ando (Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW)) for their support in reviewing this article. This article was originally written in English.