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STRUGGLING FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: THE CASE OF PEASANT AND FISHERFOLK COMMUNITIES IN PAKISTAN AND UGANDA

*An Interview with Social Movements*¹

All human beings have the right to adequate food and nutrition (RtAFN). However, in practice, peasants and fisherfolk worldwide face similar situations of hunger and malnutrition and challenges regarding food sovereignty, access to natural resources and gender disparities. This interview explores the daily realities and hardships for peasant and fisherfolk communities in the Sindh province, Pakistan and Katosi, Uganda.

The *Watch* Team interviewed Gulab Shah, Mustafa Mirani and Roshan Bhatti from Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF),² and Rehema Bavumu from World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF) and the Katosi Women Development Trust (KWDT) to present the perspective of social movements on food and nutrition, the hurdles they face in advocating for the implementation of their RtAFN and the work they do to overcome and eradicate social injustice.³

THE MEANING OF FOOD: INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FOOD, TERRITORY, CULTURE AND RELIGION

Question: What comes to your mind when thinking about food and nutrition? What are the relationships between food, the territory that you live in and cultural and religious practices in your community?

Answer—Roshan Bhatti: Basically, food is the only reason we survive in our lives. Nutrition is fundamental to what we call food, which is composed of different nutrients, such as vitamins and proteins, and the carbohydrates that we need.

Different crops are grown in different areas of Pakistan. For example, wheat, rice, cotton and chilies are cultivated and harvested in the lower part of the Sindh province. Sugarcane, bananas and other fruits are found in the upper part of this province. Communities feel very emotionally connected to the types of crops they produce and to the territory they belong to.

In our villages in Pakistan we celebrate various traditional fairs, festivals and events, such as marriage ceremonies. The head of the family is able to marry their children using the proceeds of sale from their harvested crops. However, there are not as many festivals as we would like due to abject poverty. As regards religion, yes, there is indeed a link between our religion and our food. As a Muslim community, one of the basic requirements is that we have what we call *halal* food, meaning permitted or lawful food. Food is *halal* if it complies with the religious ritual and observance of Islamic Sharia law, as defined in the Quran. We consume meat that has been prepared in a *halal* manner, except for pork, and different kinds of vegetarian food, which is mainly linked with our belief system.

¹ This article is based on interviews conducted in English in April and June 2015.

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² PFF is a member of the Watch Consortium. For more information on the PFF, please visit: www.pff.org.pk.

³ For more information on the WFF, please visit: worldfisherforum.org. For more information on the KWDT, please visit: www.katosi.org.

A—Rehema Bavumu: I think food is anything that can be eaten within my cultural setting, while nutrition refers to the particular importance of specific foods to the body. In Uganda the proverb *oluganda kulya, olugenda enjala teludda* means that community is about eating and whoever leaves your home hungry will never come back! Food is a symbol of brother and sisterhood in our communities. Traditionally, when food was still available in abundance, people used to believe that you should never prepare just enough food. You should always prepare food in excess, lest a visitor comes and there is no food to give them! Such sayings are now difficult to live with when food is so scarce and families are struggling to feed their own children.

THE PRACTICE AND CHALLENGES OF FOOD PRODUCTION

Q: What is the importance of producing food yourself and how does the practice of producing and/or buying food work in your communities?

A—Rehema Bavumu: Food produced by the people themselves is much cheaper and usually fresh. It is also more nutritious because it is naturally cultivated without artificial fertilizers. Women and children usually look for and prepare food, while men are engaged with food in commercial terms; many of them go fishing and then sell their catch. However, families in fishing communities, where fish has been the traditional food over the years, are struggling because stocks are declining and access to Lake Victoria is becoming problematic. Fish is no longer available for local consumption and it is much more expensive for local people. The decision on what to produce largely depends on the available options. You cannot produce food if it requires land that you do not have. One alternative has been to introduce other staple foods from neighboring communities into our diets, as well as to graze livestock and grow crops.

A—Roshan Bhatti: We are peasant communities, who are connected to agricultural work and produce regular crops, trying to grow much of our staple diet. We cultivate the land and then harvest the crops. However, we do not process commodities. We sell raw commodities, such as wheat, sugarcane and rice, to mills, which then produce the final good. The products then go to commercial areas to be sold to consumers, where we buy the final processed product.

A—Mustafa Mirani: In the case of fisherfolk communities in Pakistan, we sell fish on the market and, if we do not sell everything by the second day, we consume them.

Q: What difficulties do you face in storing and selling the food that you produce?

A—Roshan Bhatti: Unfortunately, due to unequal power relations, fishing and peasant communities face injustice daily. We do not have enough capacity or financial resources to stock the food that we have produced. The ideal situation would be to have our own big factories and mills, so that we could directly produce, and then stock, food for our own consumption. However, the areas where we live are still marked by feudalism and some 'feudal lords' repress farmers. They influence every aspect of local life, for example, our educational system, the quality of our food, and access to land and to the markets. We are marginalized communities when it comes to food security and to access to nutritious food. This is why the PFF has been advocating and fighting for food and climate justice since 1998.

A—Gulab Shah: There are cases of people living in poverty in isolated villages in Pakistan with limited access to markets. Villagers are compelled to sell their harvest to a so-called middleperson, who buys their crops for cheap and sells them on at very high prices at the markets. We have food available but the distribution and allocation of that food is not just. Our major problem is the fisherfolk and peasant communities' lack of purchasing power, which prevents us from having proper access to the food available.

CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING NATURAL AND PRODUCTIVE RESOURCES

Q: As you mentioned, you also face problems regarding access to land. What are the main challenges and what actions are you taking to overcome them?

A—Roshan Bhatti: Sadly, in the majority of our communities we do not own the lands that we cultivate. As I mentioned before, we are just farmers working under feudal landowners. In the 1970s Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto attempted to introduce a series of land reforms. However, they were not effective. We think that the only solution to succeed in ending poverty and hunger for our fisherfolk and peasant communities is land reform—this is what we advocate and struggle for. We are mobilizing people to demand this and claim their rights, including through strikes and demonstrations, to put pressure on the government.

A—Rehema Bavumu: One of the main reasons for hunger and malnutrition is the fact that women have no ownership of, and limited access to, land and water. Land is owned by men, who normally concentrate on producing food for market. The best crops and animal produce are exported or sent to markets in urban areas, which is more economically profitable for men than giving it to their families. Women feed themselves and their children with what is left over after sale. The KWDT works to empower women and engage them in income-generating activities. For example, some women are involved in fish farming, which is improving the situation of women and children, and increasing their access to food.

Q: Do you also face problems of accessing seeds or other natural resources?

A—Gulab Shah: Local, original seeds are unavailable in peasant communities; now hybrid seeds are replacing our local seeds. The problem with hybrid seeds is that they can only be used once and they are very expensive for peasants like us. Regarding other natural resources, fishing communities, normally located in isolated areas, are frequently neglected by the government, who are solely responsible for providing fish seed (fertilized fish eggs). People do not have enough resources to buy fish seed and so cannot guarantee their families' livelihoods. A shortage of freshwater in rivers is also a problem, which is affecting the reproduction of fish. The Indus delta, which used to be very prosperous in the past, is now not receiving the freshwater it requires to survive for the future, which is diminishing its biodiversity. The Indus delta is also facing sea intrusion and, according to some reports from agencies like the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and recently the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Standing Committee of the Senate, coastal districts like Karachi, Badin, and Thatta could disappear by 2060. The government has not taken any measures to solve agricultural and fishery problems in the region.

HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION AMONG CHILDREN

Q: Are there cases of hunger and malnutrition among children in the community? If so, how are your communities addressing this issue?

A—Roshan Bhatti: Our communities throughout the Sindh province face many cases of hunger and malnutrition. Due to poverty, three meals a day are not available to our communities, and that is why, on average, we only have two meals a day. In Tharparkar district, where communities also face extreme droughts, children are dying of hunger. This is mainly due to acute poverty and the lack of education. Communities are compelled to drink unsafe water and consume simple, low-nutrient foods, from which one does not get the necessary nutrients. The community does not have large-scale awareness of these issues and our government is failing to adopt and implement appropriate public policies. As a result, we feel helpless.

A—Rehema Bavumu: It is common in Uganda for many children, especially from families living in poverty under the care of old and frail grandparents, to go hungry or search for remains of food in the rubbish. In urban areas, these are often street children. In rural areas, these are children that live in very vulnerable and poverty-stricken households. There is no community action to address this as almost everyone is struggling to feed their own family.

FOOD, NUTRITION AND GENDER: THE IMPORTANCE OF BREASTFEEDING

Q: Is there any division of tasks between women and men?

A—Roshan Bhatti: Women contribute in different ways to all different kinds of activities related to fishing, apart from going far out to sea. For example, they arrange nets and separate the fish catch. The situation in agriculture is similar, but in this field they work mainly shoulder-to-shoulder with male farmers. In rural areas, the majority of women are involved in cultivating the land, contributing to the labor force.

A—Mustafa Mirani: Men and women from different parts of the community collectively produce the crops. It is the same with the fisherfolk communities; both fishermen and fisherwomen are responsible for producing the fish.

Q: What is the importance of food, meals and nutrition for the well-being of pregnant and breastfeeding women?

A—Rehema Bavumu: When a woman is hungry, she can hardly breastfeed! When you eat, then your baby eats. In most cases, breastfeeding mothers are also doing domestic work and chores, looking after older children, taking care of the home, as well as drying, and sometimes selling, fish. If they eat well, they are able to take good care of the children. It is only when there is sufficient food to start with that a woman can begin to think about improving her home and the education of her children—then other things follow. She can hardly think about schooling before what they have to eat!

Q: How do pregnant and breastfeeding women understand hunger in your community?

A—Rehema Bavumu: Pregnant and breastfeeding women experience hunger in a different way to the rest of the community. These women are supposed to eat often and well. But, on the contrary, women will normally give priority to the rest of the family members when eating; first to the husband and then to the children, visitors if any, and in-laws. Women think of themselves last. This affects them a lot when they are breastfeeding and that is why many of them will stop breastfeeding as soon as the child is able to eat solid food.

Q: How long do women exclusively breastfeed for and how is breastfeeding looked upon by communities?

A—Rehema Bavumu: It is normally recommended by health workers that women should breastfeed children for two years. Some do that in Uganda, but many are unable to do so. Some will breastfeed for around up to one year. One of the reasons for breastfeeding for a shorter period of time is that many women have to work outside their homes, and they are thus unable to take their children everywhere. But the most important reason is related to their own consumption. Many women will no longer have breast milk by the end of one year of breastfeeding. They do not eat any good food but give it to the children as the first priority! This compromises their ability to breastfeed.

A—Mustafa Mirani: In our communities in Pakistan we also share the common sense that a mother breastfeeds children for up to two years.

A—Roshan Bhatti: On average, children from marginalized communities in Pakistan are breastfed for between six months and a year. In rural areas, there is a very high birthrate. This is due to a lack of education and/or access to family planning. When women give birth to many children in a short period of time, the duration of breastfeeding per child is shorter than we would like. We do not have proper awareness in our community about breastfeeding and nutrition. Education also plays a role in this regard: more than 50% of the community is illiterate.