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AFRICAN FOOD SOVEREIGNTY:
VALUING WOMEN AND THE SEED
THEY KEEP*Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss*¹

The link between women and seed is ancient. Women's link to seed is through food, health, culture, ecology, spirituality and social relationships. In their roles as seed custodians, plant breeders, farmers, herbalists and mothers, African women's daily work involves an intimate involvement and knowledge of plants. Women are the unacknowledged and unseen experts on seed and on both domesticated and wild biodiversity.²

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2 Howard, Patricia. "The Major Importance of 'Minor' Resources: Women and Plant Biodiversity." *Gatekeeper series* 112. London: IIED, 2003. Available at: pubs.iied.org/pdfs/9282IIED.pdf.

3 For more information on the role of women as seed custodians in Latin America, please see article "The Struggle for Peoples' Free Seeds in Latin America: Experiences from Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras and Guatemala" in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.

4 Pionetti, Carine. *Sowing Autonomy, Gender and Seed Politics in Semi-arid India*. London: IIED, 2012. Available at: pubs.iied.org/pdfs/14502IIED.pdf.

5 Sperling, Louise, and Shawn McGuire. "Understanding and strengthening informal seed markets." *Experimental Agriculture* 46:2 (2010): 119–136. Available at: journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FEAG%2FEAG46_02%2FS0014479709991074a.pdf&code=6d05a0855e6b4c2e3d961c531b3262e2.

6 African Biodiversity Network and The Gaia Foundation. *Celebrating African Rural Women: Custodians of Seed, Food & Traditional Knowledge for Climate Change Resilience*. London: Mobius, 2015. Available at: www.gaiafoundation.org/sites/default/files/celebrating_african_rural_women_nov2015.pdf.

In Africa, as in other regions of the world,³ women are responsible for most harvesting and post-harvesting activities and therefore save, select and breed seed. For them, farming and breeding are one and the same activity as the many challenges they face require not only knowledge but also the ability to innovate. This life-giving function is embedded in a sophisticated knowledge system. As seed custodians, women are often responsible for rituals around key moments in the crop cycle and the act of celebrating these life cycles gives meaning and importance. Controlling their own diverse seed supply increases women's ability to provide a balanced diet for their families, ensures that seed is available at the right time, and augments household and community bargaining power.⁴

Women's local seed networks operate to exchange and sell seeds and serve as a safety net and backup when a crop fails to germinate. These networks are autonomous and therefore more resilient to outside shocks and global market forces.⁵

But all is not well with women's seed as it is undermined by patriarchy, gender inequality and waves of genetic erosion that occurred throughout the history of colonialism and neo-colonialism.⁶

GENDER INEQUALITY IS UNDERMINING THE HEALTH OF FAMILIES

The inequality between men and women is a barrier to the implementation of food and seed sovereignty.⁷ The image of a rural African household with a woman winnowing or bent over a cooking pot or hoe and the men sitting talking under a tree, is very close to the truth. Women's contribution to food and seed sovereignty is key, but largely invisible and not recognized or supported.

Most female African farmers combine their roles as seed custodians and small-scale food producers with their role as primary family caretakers. Women undertake 85–90% of household chores and 65% of related journeys, such as fetching water and wood.⁸ They accomplish these critical and life-giving functions within a context of gender inequality and inequity—which is testimony to their resilience.

- 7 Bezner Kerr, Rachel *et al.*, “Participatory, Agroecological and Gender-Sensitive Approaches to Improved Nutrition: A Case Study in Malawi.” Paper presented at the FAO Expert Meeting ‘Nutrition-Sensitive Food and Agriculture Systems’ in preparation for ICN+21, Rome, 2013. Available at: www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/agn/pdf/FAO-expert-meeting-submission-Bezner-Kerr-et-al-ver4-2-FAO_comments_doc.pdf.
- 8 FAO. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–11: Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development*. Rome: FAO, 2011. Available at: www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 For a discussion on the feminization of agriculture, please see the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) report. Available at: www.globalagriculture.org/report-topics/women-in-agriculture.html.
- 11 UNICEF. *Improving Child Nutrition: The achievable imperative for global progress*. New York: UNICEF, 2013. Available at: data.unicef.org/corecode/uploads/document6/uploaded_pdfs/corecode/NutritionReport_April2013_Final_29.pdf.
- 12 GRAIN and AFSA. *Land and Seed Laws under Attack: Who is pushing changes in Africa?* Barcelona: GRAIN, 2015. Available at: www.grain.org/article/entries/5121-land-and-seed-laws-under-attack-who-is-pushing-changes-in-africa. For more information on land grabbing in Africa, please see: Seufert, Philip. “Tree Plantations and Land Grabbing in Niassa, Mozambique.” *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2013): 61–67. Available at: www.rfn-watch.org/fileadmin/media/rfn-watch.org/ENGLISH/pdf/Watch_2013/Watch_2013_PDFs/Watch_2013_eng_WEB_final.pdf#page=61.
- 13 FIAN International and FIAN Germany. *G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa: A Critical Analysis from a Human Rights Perspective*. Heidelberg: FIAN International, 2014. Available at: www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications/2014_G8NewAlliance_screen.pdf.
- 14 These include agricultural input subsidy policies and programs implemented in many African countries; Malawi’s AISP and Zambia’s FISP are well-known examples. Others include the harmonization of seed trade laws and plant variety protection laws in the region.
- 15 Bezner Kerr, Rachel. “Seed struggles and food sovereignty in Northern Malawi.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 40:5 (2013): 867–897.
- 16 For more information on the problems around fortified foods, please see: Rundall, Patti. “The ‘Business of Malnutrition’: The Perfect Public Relations Cover for Big Food.” *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2015): 23–27. Available at: www.rfn-watch.org/fileadmin/media/rfn-watch.org/ENGLISH/pdf/Watch_2015/RtFNWatch_EN_web.pdf#page=23.
- 17 Lemke, Stefanie and Anne C. Bellows. “Bridging Nutrition and Agriculture. Local Food-livelihood Systems and Food Governance Integrating a Gender-Perspective.” *Theorie und Praxis* 20:2 (2011).
- 18 *Ibid.*

Women’s access to land and other important resources are constrained by patriarchy and social attitudes that relegate them to the most marginal land, while their land is taken away if they divorce or their husband dies. They are the majority of farmers in Africa (70%) yet represent less than 15% of all agricultural landholders.⁹ Migration, conflict, and HIV/AIDS have resulted in up to 40% of rural households in Africa being solely female-headed, with women taking even more responsibility for agriculture.¹⁰

Gender inequality generates farm inefficiencies and complicates coping with malnutrition. Women’s multiple, heavy, and unequal work burden allows them neither adequate time and decision-making power to reach full productivity as farmers, nor sufficient hours in the day to prepare nutritious meals. In Africa, 40% of children under five are stunted, triggered partly by a lack of dietary diversity and inadequate maternal health, but also, by gender inequality.¹¹

THE GREEN REVOLUTION: A THREAT TO OUR GENDER REVOLUTION AND OUR HUMAN RIGHTS

In Africa, human rights and access to seed, land, and water are being undermined by a recent flood of foreign investment in mining and large-scale agriculture and plantations. We are witnessing a push in many African countries for land and seed laws to be changed to secure access and control for private investors, undermining domestic farmers’ access and control.¹² African governments are coerced through donor pressure from the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa¹³ to replace farmer seed systems with corporate-owned seeds.

Women stand to lose the most in this transition of agriculture to a high-input, market-orientated system as fixed gender roles mean that they have virtually no say about land transactions or the perilous future of the seeds they have fostered as custodians. The resilience that community and kinship provides in terms of food and seed security, is undermined by policies¹⁴ that reinforce existing inequalities and undermine local knowledge and seed systems.¹⁵

The Green Revolution’s solution to both food and nutrition security is a commercialized cure from outside, i.e. patented seeds, fertilizers, and fortified food.¹⁶ This approach interferes with people’s sovereignty by draining local people’s, particularly women’s, capacity to actively participate in their own food and nutrition security¹⁷ and by promoting economic dependency.

Undermining women’s right to save seed and protect agricultural biodiversity harms their livelihoods and weakens the genetic base and community commons on which the food supply of future generations depends. Such human rights violations reflect a confrontation between, on the one hand, respect for the intrinsic value of seed and the intergenerational responsibilities to protect and enhance it, and, on the other hand, the idea of seed as a commodity from which one can profit as private owner.

The current globalized food and seed system erodes women’s progress toward equality. Dependency on the ‘global supply’ chain makes women complicit in a system that undermines their rights not only as women, but also their rights to sustainable livelihoods.

‘SISTERS, KEEP SEEDS IN YOUR HANDS’

At the intersection between customs, fundamentalist religion and a renewed pressure towards the privatization of land, seed and water, women’s rights, knowledge and stewardship of seeds and nature is under threat. It is therefore more important than ever for women to have a political voice and leadership in decision-making processes concerning the life and well-being of their physical, social, and economic environments. Women need to self-organize to overcome inequality and oppression, and to gain recognition for their innovation and knowledge.

Ensuring continued access to seed and land means that women and men need to pay attention not only to gender equality, but also to the intergenerational impact of patriarchy.¹⁸ An inspiring example is ‘*We are the Solution*’,¹⁹ a campaign for food sovereignty and agroecology and for the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge, led by women from Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana and Guinea.²⁰

Applying a gender lens to the capture and globalization of seed and the food system is essential, but there is no point in women becoming equal partners within a broken system. What needs to be changed is the current value system that prioritizes seed and food for profit as opposed to seed and food for those who produce it and their heirs.²¹ And women are well placed to lead.

19 For more information, please visit:
www.fahamu.org/WAS.

20 Interview with Mariama Sonko, Senegal.
Other Worlds, November 4, 2015. Available at: otherworldsarepossible.org/we-are-solution-african-women-organize-land-and-seed-sovereignty.

21 Tandon, Nidhi. “Changing Value Systems: One Village at a Time.” *GROW blog channel*, November, 2012. Available at: blogs.oxfam.org/en/blogs/changing-value-systems-one-village-time.