



Right to food; right to feed; right to be fed. The intersection of women's rights and the right to food

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Abstract. This paper explores conceptual and practical linkages between women and food, and argues that food security cannot be realized until women are centrally included in policy discussions about food. Women's special relationship with food is culturally constructed and not a natural division of labor. Women's identity and sense of self is often based on their ability to feed their families and others; food insecurity denies them this right. Thus the interpretation of food as a human right requires that food issues be analyzed from a gender perspective. For example, the paper asks how the rights to food intersect with the rights of women and other human rights; what the policy implications of these intersecting rights are; and how their integration will contribute to the effort to view all human rights as mutually reinforcing, universal, and indivisible. The second half of the paper speculates on the significance of distinctions between the right to be fed, the right to food, and the right to feed for understanding the relation between gender and food.

Key words: Food and human rights, Food security, Gender, Policy, Women

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This paper argues that food security cannot be realized until women are centrally included in the policy discussions about food as a human right and until food issues are analyzed from a gender perspective. As one step in this process, I examine how the rights to food intersect with the rights of women and other human rights, the policy implications of these intersecting rights, and how their integration contributes to the effort to view all human rights as mutually reinforcing, universal, and indivisible. In the second half of the paper, I speculate on the significance of distinctions between the right to be fed, the right to food, and the right to feed for our understanding of gender and food.

Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women is a necessary part of addressing food security, rights to food, and the right to be fed; reducing discrimination against women also requires meeting women's need for food. However, the realization of the individual's right to food takes place within the context of households, often out of sight of those concerned with food policy and household food

security. It also occurs within a culturally defined sexual division of labor and set of gender assumptions. Food shapes and reflects human values, yet it is most often studied by disciplines such as nutrition, economics, and agronomy, which are guided by rules of science, not rules of ethics. Similarly, discussion of human rights is largely a Western, individualistic legal discourse. It is thus critically important that food security be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective that includes consideration of culture and gender, and not simply from the perspective of neo-classical economics.

Women have a special relationship to food and appetite. They are the transmitters of cultural codes about food and eating through the everyday routines of family meals. Women are food to fetus and infant; that is, their nutrients feed their fetuses before birth and continue to nurture through their breastmilk after birth. Most food work is women's work – from food production and acquisition through processing, preparation, and serving in homes and factories. Planning meals and cleanup takes more time, energy,

and investment in social relations than food sharing and commensality, but is seldom calculated at all in women's food work. In the household division of labor in industrial societies, men help women with routine cooking, provide take-away meals, and barbecue (Charles and Kerr, 1988: 48). De Vault (1991) examines women's roles in feeding families in an American city, confirming that women carry out the tasks to ensure that families are fed culturally acceptable meals. She views meals as an organizer and central ritual of family life, documents how much of this work is structurally invisible, and explores the influence of class on food work. Through food work women enact their place in the world, influence others, and define themselves. However, the fact that women and girls often eat last and least has not been analyzed in the food security discourse.

Legislating food security

In 1974, at the end of the World Food Conference in Rome, the governments of the world proclaimed "... that within a decade no child will go to bed hungry, that no family will fear for its next day's bread, and that no human being's future and capacities will be stunted by malnutrition" (Alston and Tomasevski, 1984: 7). Notwithstanding the millions of people who do not think first of bread when they think of food, women are missed by this proclamation, for their rights to food within their own households are not protected by any state, as the many studies of intrahousehold food distribution show (cf. Van Esterik, 1985; Rogers and Schlossman, 1990).

Several instruments in international law pertain to the right to food (cf. Alston and Tomasevski, eds., 1984; Tomasevski, 1987). The right to food was affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), but that document was not binding on governments. The right to food was specified under article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). By 1976, it had been ratified or acceded to by 118 states. But it is up to national governments to enforce and implement it.

Four rights were considered fundamental in the ICESCR, the right to housing, primary health care, basic education, and food. Hunger might well be the most flagrantly violated human right, in spite of the almost unanimous endorsements of governments concerning the right to food. But the international legislation dealing with food and hunger has not been widely implemented for a variety of reasons. Generally the right to food is considered too vague, too "cultural" and too costly to implement and enforce compared to civil and political rights (Eide et al., 1991: 425).

These conventions touching on food security assume the existence of a state obligated and able to protect or procure these rights for individuals under their protection. For example, UNHCR conventions specify conditions for the provision of food for refugees, just as other international instruments specify rights to food for prisoners, and for victims of war and natural disasters. But the right of an individual to adequate food is distinct from the right to be free from hunger. The latter requires consideration of the minimum daily food intake necessary to keep a person alive, a quantifiable amount that is both arbitrary and hard to measure. The right to adequate food is a broader right that acknowledges the importance of the cultural appropriateness of food (Alston and Tomasevski, 1984: 33).

State responsibility for human rights can be examined at three levels.

1. The obligation to respect: states do nothing to violate the individual's right to satisfy basic needs including the need for food. This includes respecting the resource base of people so that they can produce their own food, insuring they have access to land and water, or that they have income to purchase food.
2. The obligation to protect: the state prevents others from violating the individual's right to food, including protecting the resource base, and refraining from acts that would result in the deprivation of food for large numbers of people.
3. The obligation to fulfill: the state takes measures to ensure for each person the right to food. This may include land reform, redistribution of resources, and when necessary, the direct provision of food. The state would be responsible to provide for the needs of people unable to do so for reasons beyond their control.

In brief, states have a duty to avoid depriving, to protect from depriving, and to aid the deprived (Alston and Tomasevski, 1984: 37). However, states themselves often do the depriving intentionally or unintentionally.

In 1983, the Commission on Human Rights prepared a study on access to adequate food as a human right. This study represents a shift in thinking about food as a basic need, to a consideration of the moral right to food. But states have no moral obligations to guarantee food nor effective mechanisms to supervise the implementation of the right to food. Consideration of people's moral right to food does not require any action against the wrongdoer in the face of neglect of duty. It is difficult to enforce the right to food at the community, national level, and even the international level, as confirmed by the political use of food as

a weapon against countries such as Iraq, Cuba, Haiti, and Afghanistan (cf. Messer, 1991; Latham, 1994). In fact, Alston argues that "...policy makers are never going to be swayed by moral or nutritional considerations per se and will only take such factors into account when it is politically or economically opportune to do so" (Alston and Tomasevski, 1984: 13). Food security is a matter of political will, not economic cost-benefit.

Food security is defined as the condition in which all people at all times can acquire safe, nutritionally adequate, and culturally acceptable foods in a manner that maintains human dignity. A household can be considered food secure when it has access to the food needed for a healthy life for all its members (adequate in terms of quality, quantity, safety, and cultural acceptability), and when it is not at undue risk of losing access. People are entitled to food as a commodity through trade-based entitlements, production-based entitlements, own-labor entitlements, and inheritance and transfer entitlements. Sen (1982) refers to conditions where people are unable to survive on commodities to which they are entitled, "entitlement failure." Women in some parts of the world are losing access to direct food entitlements and exchange entitlements. But it is unfortunate and revealing that gender was not included in Sen's analysis of entitlements, considering the obvious linkages between food and gender.

Just as the right to food has changed its emphasis over the years from food as a basic need to food as a human right, so too the international legislation on women's rights has changed with the times from the protection of motherhood, to equal rights for all women and girls. Women are entitled to full human rights because they are human, not because they are mothers. While women's rights are an integral part of "mainstream" human rights, women's rights as workers predate Human Rights protection. In 1919, legal protections for women workers were enacted to protect motherhood including maternity entitlements and lactation breaks. These early protections acknowledged the special needs of pregnant and lactating women.

However, international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and early drafts of the platform of action for the Beijing Conference on Women (September, 1995) made almost no mention of food or nutrition. Other rights such as domestic violence and reproductive rights, took precedence over hunger, breastfeeding, and micronutrient deficiencies during debates on the platform and in the NGO forum in Beijing.

Cultural factors are often assumed to impede the realization of women's rights. The more one seeks to defend traditional group rights, the harder it is to

challenge traditional group rights that neglect women's individual rights. "Equality of rights between men and women meets resistance in Muslim States, but generally is supported both in the Western and the Socialist countries of Europe . . . An initial focus on children will make it least controversial . . ." (Eide et al., 1991: 428). Supporting the rights of the child is considered less disruptive of the status quo and less threatening than supporting the rights of women. Since the rights of women intersect with all other rights, it is critically important that they not be depoliticized. At the World Food Summit meetings in Rome (1996), NGO groups dedicated a day to discussions of women and food to make up for the lack of gender considerations and the attempt to depoliticize food issues, hunger, and famine in the formal Food Summit agenda.

Food and cultural rights

Attempts to address women's rights, children's rights, cultural rights, and rights to food simultaneously face particular difficulties. The interesting intersections of these rights call for more attention than can be given in this paper. Food rights are intimately connected with cultural rights. Although food systems are culturally constructed and carry burdens of signification beyond their material value, food systems are not considered as part of cultural rights as defined by the ICESCR:

- 8.1 The right to take part in cultural life.
- 8.2 Enjoyment of benefits of scientific progress and its application.
- 8.3 Freedom of scientific research and creative activity.
- 8.4 Protection of scientific and artistic production.
- 8.5 Development of international contacts and cooperation. (Tomasevski, 1987: 159)

This list refers more to the right to enjoy Western, individualistic rights than to the rights underlying food security.

Cultural rights are usually not codified, making them even more difficult to monitor and enforce. Indeed, the idea of "enforcing" cultural rights is a contradiction in terms to anthropologists, although they argue that people have the right to pursue their familiar way of life including their means of subsistence. But cultural rights can and have been used to justify depriving women and girls of food.

Right to food; right to be fed; right to feed

To begin to reintegrate gender and culture into discussions of food security, it may be useful to distinguish between the right to be fed, the right to food,

and the right to feed, and to recognize the historical embeddedness of these separate discourses. These are not absolute differences, but differences in emphasis lodged in separate discourses and ways of thinking; the first, passive and patronizing, the second, drawing attention to food and nutrients as products, and the third suggesting active agency. It is perhaps easiest to consider first the right to be fed, as this is reflected most clearly in international human rights legislation.

The right to be fed

Under emergency conditions of threatened starvation, agencies intervene to feed others. Even the cultural acceptability of food and human dignity may be sacrificed for survival. Emergency feeding may preempt people's rights to culturally specific preferred foods (although pork may be an exception). When people, particularly refugees, no longer have basic food entitlements and have lost direct access to food, others take on the responsibility to feed them.

Prisoners of war are protected by the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and the Protocols. In addition to their basic food rations, "Account shall also be taken of the habitual diet of the prisoners" (Alston and Tomasevski, 1984: 25). If prisoners of war have a right to specific foods with cultural meaning for them, surely everyone should have rights to culturally appropriate food. But the freedom to choose culturally appropriate foods has its limits, as Schatan and Gussow point out: "The fact that many North Americans and Europeans can freely exercise their 'right' to buy varying amounts of meat for themselves and their cats and dogs often means that people somewhere else will lack sufficient food" (1984: 111).

At first sight, starvation is gender blind. The sight of an emaciated man evokes the same sympathy as the sight of a starving woman, as if sexuality and gender identity shrink and disappear with the loss of body mass. A closer examination suggests that neither hunger nor response to hunger can be understood except from a gendered perspective. Males and females may have a similar bodily response to food deprivation, but females are more likely to be malnourished. Vulnerability to malnutrition is greater for girls and women who may be discriminated against in access to food and health care, experience rape, or early and closely-spaced pregnancies, and whose nutritional needs are higher during pregnancy and lactation.

Agencies providing nutrition interventions recognize women's special reproductive needs in their programs. An inadequate diet can lead to anemia and stunting, contributing to complications in childbirth and underweight babies. Nutrition textbooks examine

diet-related risk factors for women such as osteoporoses, anemias, obesity, eating disorders, cardiovascular disease, reproductive issues (premenstrual syndrome, contraception, pregnancy, lactation), and women's cancers. In this paradigm, women are at risk, and often in need of nutrition education to alter their knowledge of or relation to food. If children are at risk, women are blamed and instructed on how to improve their diets (cf. Charles and Kerr, 1988: 229).

The World Bank supports cost effective interventions, including adequate nutrition for women, particularly for vulnerable groups and provides an economic rationale for investing in women's health, pointing out the multiple payoffs for family, community, and national economy. But their primary concern was not women, but mothers. Leslie argues that women have been overtargetted by nutrition interventions (1995: 118). "The nutritional status of a woman (current and past) is an important determinant of the ease with which she will conceive and carry an infant to term, the likelihood that she and the infant will survive and emerge from the birth in good health, and her capacity to breastfeed successfully" (Leslie, 1995: 117). Some interventions for pregnant and lactating women operate as if women need to be fed for the sake of their children. Women's nutritional needs should be met not simply because they are meal providers for others and producers of food, but because they are inherently entitled to adequate nutrition in their own right as individuals (ICN, 1993: 6).

Women are usually mentioned in the nutrition literature as a risk group or a target group for needed interventions, rather than as gatekeepers of family health, although the recent International Congress of Nutrition (ICN) guidelines are a noticeable exception. The ICN World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition (1993) is very sensitive to the importance of women as agents and beneficiaries in the food system. This document explicitly recognizes that nutritional well-being is hindered by the continuation of social, economic and gender disparities and discriminatory practices and laws (ICN, 1993: 2). "All forms of discrimination including detrimental traditional practices against women must be eliminated in accordance with the 1979 Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women" (ICN, 1993: 6). But the convention has no tribunal for appeals from individuals based on violation of women's rights.

The right to food

The right to food is part of the discourse that stresses product over process, context and values – the language of food aid, food distribution, and food banks. What is not discussed in legal documents

protecting the right to food is the fact that the final realization of these rights occurs in homes, most often through the efforts of women. Yet endorsement of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is seldom seen as a prerequisite for the realization of the right to food.

Food isolated from its context of production and consumption is more easily quantified and depoliticized. This supports the logic of using food as a political weapon, one that damages women and children in greatest numbers. Media representations of famine highlight the dangers of decontextualizing and depoliticizing hunger, and encourage food charity. Fitchen (1988) and others have documented the links between food surpluses and food distribution at home and internationally. Nevertheless, hunger, unlike abortion, is often considered a safe issue for public discussion and media events, and is much more likely to gain attention than discussions of women's rights *per se*.

Rather than draw attention to problems of food availability, linkages between women and food have generated projects based on women's duty and responsibility to feed their families regardless of the condition of the household food supply. These include projects for malnourished refugee children where the "solution" is to give food aid and nutrition education to the mother. Other nutrition education projects blame women for their children's failure to thrive or for not breastfeeding. Such interventions do not respect women's right to feed their children – to determine how they need to be fed to turn them into proper Lao or Somali or Guatemalan adults.

Many on-site feeding projects demonstrate the priority given to the right to food over the right to feed. Experts complain that food packets that are taken home are not sufficiently "targeted" and sharing food within the household is referred to as "food slippage." This problem of non-compliance is a reminder of the powerful need to share food for a variety of social and political reasons.

Current UN international instruments such as the Innocenti Declaration (1990) stress breastfeeding as a means of empowering women. But some breastfeeding promotion programs promote and present breastfeeding either as a woman's right or as a child's right to breastmilk. This false dichotomy has significant policy implications, as the stress on the child's "right to breastmilk" has (rightfully) alienated many women and women's groups who otherwise might well advocate programs that support breastfeeding.

The right to feed

While international human rights law tries to protect the right to food, and many agencies exist to ensure

people are adequately fed, neither can protect the right to feed. It is women's knowledge of food that prevents starvation at the individual and household level. In many parts of the world, women's sense of self is based on her ability and her right to feed her family. As the basis of her self-identity, this right may become even more important to women under conditions of rapid social change. This source of power is lost when others take over the right to feed and when efficiency is privileged over empowerment. For women who are normally responsible for feeding their families, the experience of being unable to feed their children is tantamount to torture (direct food deprivation is part of the definition of torture). Therefore hunger must be considered as part of the violence women experience and explored as a violation of human rights (cf. Waring, 1996).

This conception of women's right to feed is an analytical abstraction that needs to be grounded in the gender division of labor of different societies. In the real world, some men claim the right to feed. However, this represents a claim that some men make; they are more often assigned the responsibility to feed or to provide food.

The vocabulary of care is not a vocabulary familiar to most nutritionists and human rights lawyers in their professional practice. But recently, care has been drawn into the vocabulary of international nutrition. UNICEF has recognized that food security and primary health care are not adequate to account for child survival. The challenges in working with such a concept are just beginning to be explored (cf. UNICEF, 1995). We know least about care, yet care is most implicated in women's day to day activities, and most directly related to food.

For women to provide the necessary care to others and to exercise their right to feed, priority must be given to enhancing the "legal and social status of women from birth onwards, assuring them of respect and equal access to caring, education, training, land, credit, equity in wages and remuneration and other services, including family planning services, and empower them economically so that they have better control over the family resources" (ICN, 1993: 25).

The right to feed puts attention back on agency, and the context of eating, acknowledging the social and political dimensions of food sharing. Examination of the right to feed requires getting beyond the legal language to see what people are actually doing and eating. This work is most suitable for ethnographic fieldwork. For example, food sharing is an important source of food security for households and communities. But current emphasis on the right to food downplays this aspect of food security: "Patron-client relationships where some are dependent on the often

precarious goodwill of others, run counter to human rights: the rights to food (among other rights) is a right, not an act of grace" (Oslo Initiative, 1992: 3). Knutson argues that the concept of rights will remain empty without the concept of empowerment and the exercise of human obligations at all levels. This empowerment cannot be given but can only happen if people are allowed to use the power they already have (1994: 6). The power women have includes the power to feed.

The power to nurture is unexamined and undervalued power. But it is not without coercive features. The power to nurture others is also power over others, and, like any power relation, can be abusive. Until women have full equality, then whoever depends on women for food will be vulnerable to manipulation through food, and could exert pressure on women through food. Family meals are important localities for such manipulation. Consider also women's involvement in and pleasure derived through participation in food projects such as food banks, soup kitchens, and meals on wheels, a subject requiring further study.

The importance of the right to feed is reflected in the resistance of some women who must rely on local food-based welfare projects to feed their families – food banks in Canada, WIC in the United States, feeding stations in refugee camps. Here you hear the agony and frustration of women who cannot feed their families as they know they should be fed. Latin American women have organized social movements to protest their outrage at their inability to feed their families adequately (Safa, 1990: 355).

Towards a feminist food praxis

International human rights law has little to say about the politics of hunger or the operation of power in the analysis of hunger. A consideration of gender recontextualizes food and repositions it within power relations of households and nation states. Home is a place, an attitude, a locality. An examination of home requires that we put priority on relations between people. Home also evokes a sense of bodily comfort, including a sense of physical security, a feeling that you are not going to be violated or be in danger. Home is also a place to feed and be fed; and here the food rights, cultural rights and the rights of women intersect most clearly.

The need to eat every day gives food a special time dimension absent from many other human rights debates. The very young, the very old, the sick, and pregnant, and lactating women have the strictest time constraints on their need for food. Family feeding is high periodicity work that is non-postponable and high

frequency. Consequently, it usually has low status and is the responsibility of people with little power over their time. Of all human rights abuses, the denial of food as a human right hits closest to home. Perhaps the reason why this right is so difficult to implement is precisely because its realization occurs in homes, most often through the efforts of women. The metaphor of the home encompasses the hearth, the cultural centre of the home, where material products – foods – are transformed into cultural products – meals – to sustain body and soul.

Juxtaposing women's rights with food rights has not simplified and may even have exacerbated existing conceptual dilemmas that feminist theory attempts to address with regard to feeding and nurturance. From the perspective of food, women are both vulnerable and powerful, victimized and empowered through food. At first glance, linking food and women's rights furthers the association of women with nurturance, the domestic sphere, and social reproduction. But for women in many parts of the world, this is the domain that is most threatened by political and economic forces beyond their control. Focusing on food practices reminds us that ethnocentric oppositions, such as production and reproduction, public and private, and other such inappropriate dichotomies are a Western legacy of blinkered binary thinking. Food practices entail both productive and reproductive work, public and private spaces, and are part of both the formal and informal economy (both/and not either/or). The special case of breastfeeding, for example, makes this clearer, and is an excellent example of the need to reintegrate the right to food, the right to feed, and the right to be fed, after having separated these different perspectives for analytical purposes.

Women's bodies are simultaneously means of production and reproduction – producing breastmilk and babies. This is both productive and reproductive work and is both a public and a private act. Breastfeeding has been approached as a child's right to breastmilk – a food; a child's right to be breastfed; a woman's right to breastfeed; and enabling and empowering women to breastfeed. By focusing on empowering women to breastfeed, we still address women's rights, since the improvement of women's social and economic status is necessary for supporting breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is a paradigmatic example of the compatibility of women's and children's rights, and the rights to food.

Other food practices confound the dichotomy between production and reproduction, public and private. The task of preparing meals cannot be reduced to a private act of social reproduction when the food practices may have involved substantial bartering and exchange in the public sector, and the "leftovers" may

be sold as snacks to the neighbors. Is this a public or private act?

Cooking and eating, feeding self and others concern metaphor, pattern, and system and call for an epistemology of relationships between people and between people and their food, not an epistemology or epidemiology of cause and effect. Lineal causality is inappropriate to the world of living organisms, which adapt, relate, and learn rather than react to laws. Mechanistic metaphors do not effectively explain relationships, holism, or synergy. Cooking, feeding, and eating are metaphors for interdependence, nurturance, mutual support, and pleasure in a world full of metaphors for independence, greed, ambition, and pain. Terms like nurturance, reciprocity, and intimacy have no meaning without context, but they require a paradigm shift in thinking. I call this paradigm shift a model of feminist food praxis (Van Esterik, forthcoming).

Women are *most likely* to be responsible for feeding their families on a daily basis, and *least likely* to be involved in shaping the policies that determine the food system they must access. The movement of food at the international, national, and even regional level is almost invariably male controlled; but the mediators of food at the individual, household, and community level are usually women. Hunger is experienced not by states but by individuals. It is thus critical that women's role in alleviating hunger be more fully recognized and integrated into policy planning. Policies must include consideration of such labor intensive practices as breastfeeding infants, feeding toddlers, supervising child feeding, coaxing sick and elderly to eat, as well as producing, processing, preparing, marketing, and trading food.

Western feminists who see food as relevant only to the domestic sphere of social reproduction may place a higher priority on redressing the imbalance of power in the sexual division of labor (so that men take more responsibility for feeding and nurturing), and more fully accounting for women's labor in food production. Latin American women's groups have successfully established collective kitchens, but "some feminists have been critical of these women's self-help organizations because they focus almost exclusively on traditional women's tasks and do not challenge the traditional division of labor" (Safa, 1990: 361). We should be critical of essentializing women as nurturers and relegating them to the world's kitchens, and excluding men from those domains. There is no natural or necessary reason why women are most often associated with household food practices and men with national and international practices. But it is a reasonable expectation that women's food experiences should inform the macro food security systems usually dominated by men. There may be significant

differences between women's practices and men's practices with regard to food. Women's food experiences are easily ignored by national and international food regimes because of the dichotomization of public and private, formal and informal economies, production and reproduction. In order to realize global food security, women's food experiences need to inform both food policy and global food regimes.

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