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Gender in Food and Nutrition Security: Towards Attaining the Right to Food

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
ADB	Asian Development Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organizations
GHGSFP	Global Home Grown School Feeding Programs
IPS	Integrated Production System
CIP	International Potato Center
OFSP	Orange Fleshed Sweet Potato
IWCA	International Women's Coffee Alliance
HHM	Household Methodologies
GALS	Gender Action Learning System
GBT	Gender Balance Tree

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The right to adequate food is a human right that protects the need by all human beings to live in dignity, free from hunger and food insecurity as well as malnutrition (Pinto, 2011). The ability of people to satisfy hunger and acquire nutrients that can sustain their lives largely depends on their ability to access and effectively utilize the food they eat. It is expected of governments to create amicable, enabling and prosperous environments in which people can feed themselves using their own production or bought with their income without necessarily relying on food aid and/or donations. Governments of the world need to facilitate people's ability to consume food that defines and satisfies their food sovereignty (Valente, 2014), a situation where people eat food that is acceptable by their cultures and produced through ecological methods that sustain the natural environment. It is the responsibility of people to find or produce safe food, but governments that have ratified the right to adequate food covenant are obliged to respect the right by avoiding actions that prevent their people from realizing their right to adequate food and good nutrition. Governments are also expected to protect the right, by ensuring that no one deprives anyone else of the right. They finally have to fulfil the right by facilitating actions that strengthen people's access to and use of resources such as land and water and when people are unable to realize the right to adequate food for whatever but genuine reasons governments must provide the means for satisfying their right to adequate food. This paper discusses the right to adequate food in the context that duty bearers such as government have played their part in helping people to achieve and enjoy the right by allowing them to raise incomes and/or actively engage in agricultural production processes as well as utilizing the produce effectively.

In 1996, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) widely agreed at its World Food Summit that food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Studies have shown that there is a strong link between food security, good nutrition and gender. Thus a gender approach to food security can enable shifts in gender power relations and assure that all people, regardless of gender, benefit from, and are empowered by development policies and practices to improve food security and nutrition (SIDA, 2015) towards attaining the universal right to adequate food. When individuals and communities are food secure, they can help people around them realize their right to adequate food. When families are food secure, they make easy for other household members realize or demand their right to adequate food. For example, the sick, the elderly and children can effectively claim their right.

2.0 MAJOR CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

Attainment of food and nutrition security is becoming a nightmare for most rural communities because of challenges that can be grouped into four; climate change, growing use of food crops as a source of fuel, soaring food prices and inefficient food safety systems. Addressing the major challenges requires reaching

development goals at national level that include stimulating agricultural growth, expanding people's livelihood opportunities such as increasing their income sources, and improving nutrition at household level. A key challenge usually neglected is the intra-household gender relations especially between married couples and their household members. It affects the realization of all the pillars of food security highlighted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) namely food availability, food access and food utilization (ADB, 2013) while ensuring stability across each one or all the three pillars. It is a known fact for example that women and girls are less regarded in the intra-household allocation of food yet they champion all the household food processing and management processes (Valente, 2014). The suggested ways for addressing household food and nutrition insecurity become ineffective if the intra-household gender imbalances and tensions remain unattended rendering the right to adequate food a far-fetched dream. The gender related challenges that limit the attainment of the right to adequate food and nutrition good exist in farm labor supply, control and ownership of household assets including land, control of incomes and expenditure.

2.1 Labor supply challenges towards food production – making food available

The World Food Programme (WFP) defines food availability as “the amount of food present in a location through all forms of domestic production, imports, food stocks and food aid” (WFP, 2009). For a long time the contribution of women towards agricultural food production and nutrition security has been increasing (SOFA Team and Doss, 2011) and ranging between 20% and 90% (Fabiya *et al.*, 2007 and Fresco, 1998). It is therefore an established fact that if food production effort was equally shared between men and women especially in the rural economies where much of their production satisfies household food and nutrition security (Doss, 2001) than for micro and macro-economic growth, then the right to adequate food would become an easy task. The investment of effort by men in food crops which are generally known as “women's crops” starts growing only when such crops continue to become high income earners. The women are left to do most of the seemingly light but time consuming and less financially rewarding activities such as lifting, shelling, cleaning and grading of food crops.

2.2. Limited share of benefits for women from agricultural chains

Women operate on lower unprofitable levels of the agricultural value chains. Their numbers, influence, ownership and share of opportunities diminish up the chains (TWIN, 2013). As such in most instances, their motivation to invest more energy, passion, skill and commitment becomes greatly affected leading to reduction in production. If men gave adequate opportunities to women to acquire skills and other opportunities for them to effectively participate in the value chains, more food would be produced and food security hence right to adequate food assured. The women are oftentimes underpaid compared to men for the same work and time; they are also over-represented in informal, unpaid, part-time, and seasonal work (IFC, 2016).

2.3 Gender related challenges on access to food

Food access concerns a household's ability to acquire adequate amounts of food, through one or a combination of own home production and stocks, purchases, barter, gifts, borrowing and food aid (WFP, 2009). Food can be accessed through own production; hunting, fishing and gathering of wild foods; purchase at markets and shops; exchange of items for food as well as gifts from friends/relatives, community, government and aid agencies. Populations experience gender-based challenges that limit their opportunity to access food from any of the sources. Women and the girl child specifically face more serious challenges than men when food access is through buying with currency at the market, hunting and fishing (Kiewisch, 2015). Kiewisch further finds that even in times of food shortage in the household, the women sacrifice their portion of food to adequately serve men and boys thereby affecting the attainment of the women's right to adequate food and good nutrition. Where food is accessed from distant places, women face mobility challenges to go and access the food because men use bicycles, oxcarts, or other means leaving the women who have little of such opportunities.

2.4 Low involvement of men around food utilization

WFP, (2009) defines food utilization as the use by households of the food to which they have access, and individuals' ability to absorb and metabolize the nutrients. It includes ways in which food is stored, processed and prepared, including the water and cooking fuel used, and hygiene conditions; feeding practices, particularly for individuals with special nutrition needs, such as babies, young children, the elderly, sick people, and pregnant or lactating women; how it is shared within the household, and the extent to which this corresponds to individuals' nutrition needs - growth, pregnancy, lactation, etc.

Food utilization also considers the health status of each member of the household.

Most food decisions around diet quality, quantity and diversity, food combination preferences and the actual preparation are the exclusive responsibility of women while taking care of necessary hygiene and food safety requirements. Ironically, they usually have limited choices on what foods to prepare for their households because they have fewer resources and limited economic opportunities. In most communities, men are involved only when they want to slaughter high order livestock to use at home and/or part of it to sell for income. Examples exist where men suffer hunger or force themselves to eat elsewhere if women and girls of their households have commitments elsewhere that prevent them from preparing meals at home. Such situations force parents into child labor practices that also expose the children especially the girl child to work with hazardous fire at a young age.

3.0 SUSTAINABLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADDRESSING GENDER IMBALANCES IN FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

3.1 Existence of “best buy local” campaigns

There is a growing realization worldwide of the benefits of buying and/or consuming locally grown foods. Consumers in most cases are willing to pay more for the locally produced foods as such are sometimes more expensive than imported foods. The fresh flavor and high levels of nutrient content give them the advantage of choice by most consumers. With growing desire to directly support the local producer and the local economy sensitive consumers prefer the local produce than the imported. Local foods are known better for supporting the local ecosystems in which they are produced. Consumers enjoy direct feedback about how the local foods were grown whether organically or with genetic modification or otherwise. They also understand that chances of food contamination increase with increasing length and distance of the value chain. Generally, it is safer, economical and meaningful to eat local while helping define food sovereignty of the producer communities. The right to adequate food promises to be easily attained if the observed trends above continue to grow. The buy local tendency of the international non-governmental organizations (INGO) has sparked growth in production of food crops by local producers, most of them men, as they respond to desire for more income. Most “women’s crops” such as groundnuts and common beans are also fast becoming cash earning crops for both men and women.

3.2 Growing desire to reward the local producer and the local economy

Most local and INGO are buying locally produced food to support communities in need which are identified within or closer to the producers. Doing so satisfies their desire to economically empower local producers while helping achieve food sovereignty for those in need of food. Notable examples include the Global Home Grown School Feeding Programs (GHGSFP) which is supported by the WFP. Other INGOs also buy local food for distribution to disaster stricken areas for similar reasons. While the main interest of the producer is to serve the market, they keep adequate quantities for local consumption consequently helping attain their own right to adequate food and that of people around them.

3.3 The anti-smoking campaigns in the tobacco sector

The anti-smoking campaign in the tobacco industry is helping to grow farmers’ interest in food crops. Many men are investing their resources in food crops which are becoming more of income earners than the recent past when demand for tobacco was growing. The Malawi Government, (2014) reports that most tobacco companies are supporting farmers to grow crops such as maize, groundnuts and soybeans through the integrated production system (IPS) with the aim of directly facilitating farmers’ shift away from tobacco. The shift has seen more arable and fertile land being left to crops which for a long time were grown on marginal land. There has also been more time and effort dedicated to food crops than to tobacco.

3.4 Desire to address nutrient deficiencies with locally produced food crops

Opportunities also arise when governments and INGOs decide to promote a specific food crop in order to address a nutritional need such as nutrient deficiency in women, children or both. The International Potato Center (CIP) for example is facilitating a massive production and consumption of orange fleshed sweet potato (OFSP) in Africa and Asia. The OFSP is promoted to combat Vitamin A deficiency in children targeting 15 million households by 2020. Gender balanced producer groups and individuals participate in the value chain as multipliers, of vines, stakeholders in research and providers of extension on crop management and effective utilization of the potato tubers (CGIAR, 2015). Such targeted interventions are attracting men to grow interest in the value chain which otherwise is considered a women's domain and indirectly they raise people's opportunities for right to adequate food and good nutrition.

3.5 Availability of skill in seed management by women

A huge untapped opportunity exists in the expertise and passion of women in managing seeds and planting materials in agriculture. Since the beginning of agriculture, plant propagation and seed management has always been associated with women (Tsegaye *et al.*, 2012; FAO, 2011; Tapia and Torre, 1998) but largely for subsistence. Women have the natural ability to preserve varieties based on desired consumer preferences. With all the valuable skill, the women however have always been marginalized in commercial seed management and research. It is ironical therefore that agricultural development, the primary stage towards food and nutrition security and the right to adequate food, is failing to nurture and effectively utilize the passion and natural expertise of true seed developers and expect to achieve best results.

3.6 Existing campaigns to reward the true producer

There is growing realization by consumers especially in developed countries to buy produce from women producers in order to expand their economic opportunities. International Women's Coffee Alliance (IWCA) aims at empowering women to participate meaningfully at all nodes of the coffee value chain. Similar interventions including producer cooperatives if done with staples could reward and energize the true food producer to a strong food security and nutritional base.

3.7 More room for men at food utilization - bring men in the kitchen

Gendered farmer-led food days are a visual practice that creates awareness of the foods available in the communities. They help in expanding sharing of knowledge and experiences around food among community members. Men and women farmers come with uncooked samples of all food stuffs produced from their own farms. They practically discuss food groups based on nutrient content. Such knowledge helps them understand possible food combinations and frequencies that effectively bring out all the nutrients that people need. The men and women then prepare dishes of their preference in small groups using utensils

brought from their homes. The food is finally shared and consumed. Well conducted food days help to sensitize men and women about their roles on maintaining good household food and nutrition security. They also help to identify existing gender gaps in food and nutrition security that are perpetuated by cultural beliefs. Food days help men to appreciate the role that women have untiringly and successfully served for decades in sustaining good nutrition. Self-generated solutions to the identified nutritional gender gaps are discussed and shared. Men who lead in addressing such gaps are rewarded with community admiration. Men have always been good cooks and chefs in restaurants; careful mixers of desired food compositions but only willing to work in the kitchen if there is money in exchange. Domestically however, Hill and Vignieril, (2010) found that men only do an average 13% of cooking time. For example, many cooks and chefs in the hospitality industry in developing countries are men (Orido, C. (2017) occupying executive positions.

Figure 1: Farmers at a food day (left: display of food samples; right: display of food groups)



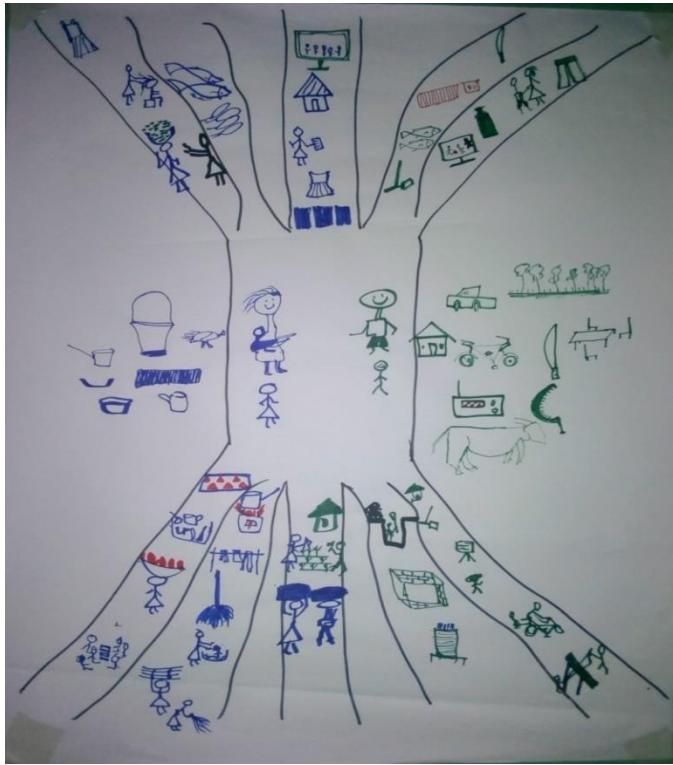
Man and woman serving food at a farmer-led food day

3.8 Build on evidence of intra-household gender relations to advance right to food issues

Household methodologies (HHMs) are good for improving intra-household gender relations, increase engagement with poor households and empower households to realize their development potential by creating stronger, more resilient and sustainable smallholder farming and other rural livelihood systems (IFAD, 2014). Farnworth *et al.*, (2017) found that HHMs bring about “jointness” among participating households explaining further that lack of jointness refers to the observation that women and men run more-or-less separate, individually-managed production, business, and consumption activities. A recent study conducted in Malawi by Stirling *et al.*, (2017) on whether HHM reduce gender inequality and increase climate resilience reveals that HHM resulted in a significant shift towards more sharing between men and women across a range of tasks and benefits. It also found that communities which participated in the HHM had improved food and nutritional security through increased household “jointness”. The study further indicates that households with high jointness consume more diverse diets.

Most tools used in HHM have been modified for application in gender action learning system (GALS) which strictly uses drawings with little or no text. Tools such as the gender balance tree (GBT) are good at bringing self-generated evidence of household gender imbalances and for nurturing people’s desire and passion to address the imbalances. The GALS tools grow and strengthen “jointness” among household members as they work towards a common goal (Farnworth, 2016) and jointly care for each other’s food and nutrition security needs. Many farming communities are aware of gender imbalances that exist around food and nutrition security in their households but their desire to change fails to take effect due to among others cultural and religious forces which are stronger than their individual wishes. Just like what happens with their other wishes, as farmers work on GALS tools, their commitment towards addressing household food and nutrition security needs grows.

Figure 2: GBT for Addressing Imbalances in Food and Nutrition Security



From the Food & Nutrition Security GBT a)

Most household work (root zone) around effective food utilization and nutrition security are solely for women

b) Household food utilization decisions and the assets used (Stem zone) directly for food processing are left only to women

c) Much of the household expenditures for household food and nutrition security are done by women mostly with own incomes except on bigger expenditures for buying meat. Most men will satisfy themselves first before buying for the other HH members

The GBT proves that the right to adequate food works well if HHs work together.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Attainment of the right to adequate food and good nutrition for all people is achievable. While praising approaches that build the capacity of rural people to attain the right to adequate food or to demand such from duty bearers, it is necessary to employ approaches that speak to the hearts of men and women to share responsibilities on activities that bring about food security and right to adequate food.

The right to adequate food can be achieved only if the battle against hunger and food insecurity is not left to women and the girl child alone. The involvement of men in ensuring food and nutrition security will quickly transform households from being demanders of their right to adequate food from duty bearers to providers of the right making others depend on them while they earn a higher income.

Expanding use of HHM has potential to downscale existing gender imbalances in food and nutrition security. People need self-discovered evidence of existing gender imbalances. The self-discovery and the evidence create self-awareness which avoids confrontational measures for addressing the causes and it grows people's empathy while strengthening their desire to address the root causes.

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