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Women, Seeds and the Right to Food for All

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Women as producers and consumers are central to any food economy. Their empowerment leads to improved child development, better health and nutritional outcomes for households and higher productivity for small-scale food producers, including women. Therefore, women should be at the centre of any food security strategy as it is the most cost-effective measure to reduce hunger and malnutrition for all.¹ Failure to recognise women's role as food producers results in misguided policies and programmes with higher levels of poverty and food and nutrition insecurity.

International human rights framework requires States to ensure equality and empowerment of women. However, around the world women have unequal access to food and resources for food. They account for 70 per cent of the world hungry and are disproportionately affected by malnutrition, poverty and food insecurity. Women also lack control over family resources. They are not involved in the decision-making process on resources, including money, even when they earn it.² They

face persistent structural constraints that prevent them from fully enjoying their human rights and hamper their efforts to improve their lives as well as those of others around them.

Women are engaged in all aspects of the economy and yet are not recognised as workers or as economic agents. They play a significant role in all livelihood efforts, but remain invisible as farmers - in spite of their contribution especially to subsistence agriculture, seed production and post-harvest management, animal husbandry, fishery, natural resource management and energy management. They cultivate, plough and harvest more than half of all the food in the world.³ Women are also the primary users of forests and other natural resources including land and water for livelihoods. Livelihood insecurity makes women vulnerable to violence and abuse both within the household as well as outside. Man is seen as the head of the household and as the breadwinner. Most agriculture policies are directed towards men, while women continue to carry out precarious livelihood activities and provide care to their families with

¹U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (2012), *Women's Rights and the Right to Food*, A/HRC/22/50, December 24, p 6.

²U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (2008), *Building Resilience: A Human Rights Framework for World Food and Nutrition Security*, A/HRC/9/23, September 8, p.14.

³In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, women produce up to 80 per cent of basic foodstuffs. In Asia, they account for around 50 per cent of food production. In Latin America, they are mainly engaged in subsistence farming, horticulture, poultry and raising small livestock. Erwin Northoff, *FOOD: Women Farmers are Invisible Actors in Hunger Drama*, World News, Inter Press Service, http://classic-web.archive.org/web/20040214085507/http://www.oneworld.org/ips2/oct98/22_39_068.html.

no recognition or support. Even when women work alongside their husbands, their efforts are often characterised as wifely duties and not as contributions towards their family's food security and livelihoods. Generally the food women produce are not tradable commodities for markets, but are mainly for household consumption. Economic policies under globalisation based on production and profitability agenda displaces local with global, and markets dominate the households. In such systems, women as well as nature's productivity are rendered invisible. In market economy, if you consume what you produce, then you in fact have not produced at all.

Women are subjected to a time burden that is much greater than that of men, as they are expected to take care of nearly all the responsibilities of household upkeep and childcare. They are increasingly made responsible for generating income for themselves and their families in addition to the unpaid work they do. "For many women, unpaid work in and for the household takes up the majority of their working hours, with much less time spent in remunerative employment. Even when they participate in the labour market for paid employment, women still undertake the majority of the housework."⁴ Ironically, this burden becomes even more intense and women's health is often impacted with the advent of development schemes, introduced by government and/or development NGOs, which centre on women's labour. Unequal care work is a major barrier to gender equality and to women's equal enjoyment

of human rights. In many cases, it condemns women to poverty.⁵ In market-based economies, those who work in households are not producers, and therefore they exclude women's work in general - adding to women's economic and societal exclusion and vulnerabilities.

Food production is integrally related to the right to food, and two aspects of it merit brief mention. First, agriculture itself is obviously very important to the right to food. Different types of agricultural production can have varying impacts, depending on crops, yields, labour intensity, whether organic or biodynamic farming methods are used, and other factors. In addition, food producers - including subsistence farmers, smallholders and agricultural labourers - produce most of the world's food; yet comprise the majority of the world's hungry. Thus, food production as an employment or livelihood option has serious implications for the right to food. Of course, it is also important to remember that agriculture is more than just food production: it is a way of life and cultural practice and women are extensively engaged in all aspects of it.⁶

Second, seeds and the intellectual property rights (IPRs) that cover them strongly influence the right to food. In many developing countries, most farmers depend on traditional seed systems, which are typically managed by women. Up to 90 per cent of planting materials used in smallholder agriculture are seeds and germplasm that are produced, selected, saved by women.⁷ Control over seeds and seed banks is important for addressing the

⁴UNICEF (2007), *State of the World's Children*.

⁵U.N. Special Rapporteur (2013), *Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*, A/68/293, August 9, p. 2.

⁶Akhter, Farida, "Development and Development Walahs: It is Time to Say 'Sorry,'" in *Seeds of Movements: On Women's Issues in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Narigrantha Prabantana, 2007).

⁷Report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur, *Seed Policies and the Right to Food: Enhancing Agrobiodiversity and Encouraging Innovation*, pp 15--16; see also Shiva, Vandana and Kunwar, Jalees, *Impact of WTO on Women in Agriculture*, Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology for National Commission for Women (2005).

crisis of agricultural biodiversity,⁸ for ensuring sustainable livelihood solutions for food security,⁹ and for maintaining rural women's empowerment.¹⁰

Many policymakers and development organisations, however, assert that improved (and patented) seed varieties are one of the best ways to improve food security, because such seeds will lead to higher yields and more food. The promotion of such seeds threatens farmers' and women's abilities to maintain control over seeds, one of the most important resources for farmers. In addition, control over seeds often gives women status in their communities and families; loss of control can have a particular impact on women's overall status. Commercial seed systems also threaten to alienate women from their traditional decision-making role about which crop to grow and to sell. Moreover, the promotion of commercial seeds ignores the human rights framework, which "obliges us to ask not only which policies may maximize agricultural outputs, but also, and primarily, who will benefit from any increases achieved by whichever policies are put in place. The right to food requires that we place the needs of the most marginalized groups, particularly women smallholders in developing countries, at the centre of our efforts."¹¹

Agriculture policies, especially around seeds that support innovation in agriculture, also need to ensure the full realisation of the right to food. There are growing tensions between the strengthening of IPRs and the

rights of farmers to save, re-use and exchange seeds and thus contribute to innovation. Agriculture research that provided farmers with knowledge about seeds now focuses on granting temporary monopoly privileges to plant breeders and patent holders. This also results in control of global food systems by a few Northern corporations who are protected by strong IPRs. It shifts knowledge and resources under the control of women and communities in developing countries to generate sustenance and survival to corporations in the North engaged in global trade to generate profits. It jeopardises seed systems that for many small farmers are a source of independence and resilience in the face of threats such as pests, diseases or climate change. This also threatens agrobiodiversity that results from selection processes performed by farmers over generations and which depends on traditional knowledge and the free exchange of genetic materials and seeds. Replacement of high-yielding varieties of traditional crops narrowly looks at food security as a production issue. Lack of resources, accessibility to income for poor small farmers are some of the main reasons for violations of right to food.¹² Adequacy of right to food asserts both quantitative and qualitative adequacy. Sustainability of right to food is linked to the notion of adequacy and also implies that food would be available in the present and for future generations. Sustainability therefore requires that we protect biodiversity by strengthening women and their role in local seed systems.

⁸Navdanya, <http://www.navdanya.org/earth-democracy/seed-sovereignty>, accessed July 19, 2011.

⁹Goswami, Rahul, "Between Seed and Straw: When Will We Get Agriculture Right? *InfoChange*, 2009 June; see also Akhter, Farida, "Seeds in Women's Hands – A Symbol of Food Security and Solidarity", *Development* 44 (2001).

¹⁰Akhter, Farida, "Reflections on Empowerment", in *Seeds of Movements: On Women's Issues in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Narigrantha Prabartana, 2007); see also Akhter, Farida, "Seeds in Women's Hands: The Fundamental Issue of Food Security", *Development* 44 (2007).

¹¹Report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur, *Seed Policies and the Right to Food: Enhancing Agrobiodiversity and Encouraging Innovation*, p 3.

¹²Report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur, *Seed Policies and the Right to Food: Enhancing Agrobiodiversity and Encouraging Innovation*, 28.

State inputs for small farmers are in the form of seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. These inputs are expensive and women lack access to credit. Hence, women farmers are poor and continue to stay in subsistence farming. It is also important to note that commercial seed variety claims higher production and therefore requires other inputs including fertilisers. Farmers are trapped in the vicious circle of debt by acquiring these commercial inputs at subsidised rates in initial periods. Bad harvest and/or monocropping leads to unstable revenues and diminishes resilience in the face of climate change, consequently making it impossible to repay the input loans. Commercial seeds are not necessarily best suited for the specific agri-environment and also results in erosion of biodiversity as many farmers grow the same crop using the same improved variety of seeds.

Under human rights law, the States have an obligation to *respect* existing access to adequate food. States should be mindful that no policy or measure should create obstacles for farmers, especially to women farmers, to maintain their seed systems. This would deprive them of their means of livelihood.¹³ States have an obligation to *protect* the right to food and therefore need to regulate the activities of patent holders or plant breeders to prevent them from violating the rights of small farmers. States also have an obligation to *fulfill* the right to food and therefore should take

steps to strengthen women's access to resources. For the benefit of small and women farmers, States should promote agricultural research and development to ensure basic food production. This requires States to regulate commercial seed systems and further strengthen and enhance informal and traditional seed systems which in many countries are maintained by women. For full realisation of the right to food, it is also important not to separate seed production and improvements from actual farming. Article 15, para1(b) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) recognises that everyone has the right to benefit from scientific progress and its application and hence can be argued to provide farmers their right to access to seeds.

Around the world, women are leading movements to ensure the sustainable production of food.¹⁴ Women are integrally involved in efforts to protect seeds and biodiversity, advocate for rights to land and resources, promote collective and biodynamic farming, and encourage local production and consumption of food.¹⁵ Their leadership is necessary for ensuring the right to food for all. In conclusion, seed policies should recognise women's role in seed systems and should balance the need for innovation for preservation and enhancement of crop diversity. As a result, improving the livelihoods of small-scale farmers will help ensure full realisation of the right to food for all.

¹³International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 11.

¹⁴Shiva, Vandana, *Caliber of Destruction: Globalization, Food Security and Women's Livelihoods* (Manila: Isis International, 1996).

¹⁵Ibid.