



Thematic Section: Putting People Centre Stage

Seeds in Women's Hands: A symbol of food security and solidarity

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ABSTRACT Farida Akhter shows that food security is not only an issue of the South but is also an important issue for the North. The solidarity among women around the world is crucial to challenge the mainstream policies for free trade, biotechnology and genetic engineering. Women in the South preserve and maintain seeds and genetic resources. They believe in their strength by keeping seeds in their own hands. This message is very crucial for women all over the world to have control over food production.

KEYWORDS biodiversity; gender; genetic resources; pesticides; World Food Summit

Food security: North and South

Jahanara, a farmer woman in Pabna, stood up on the podium in front of 25,000 farmers to say, 'Sisters, keep seeds in your hands'. It was a biodiversity festival of farmers and weavers held in 1996 (UBINIG, 1996a). She was asked to speak on how she ensures food security in her household. The message she had for everyone was to keep seeds in their own hands. This is very symbolic. In the struggle of ensuring food security, women find this the most important strategy. The role that women play in preserving seeds is crucial for the enhancement of genetic resources and biodiversity. In rural households, the general practices of sharing seeds among sisters, neighbours and relatives is already helping enhance biodiversity and genetic resources, and therefore families have a wide variety of foods which are entirely outside the market.

In Bangladesh, women always preserve and conserve seeds. This is perhaps a general phenomenon for all agrarian communities. Despite all the technological interventions and efforts to accelerate a commercial seed sector in Bangladesh, seed preservation continues to be an important activity of rural women. Women keep seeds of cereals, vegetables, fruits, and many other crops.

Another prevalent notion of food security is to ensure local availability of food and the maintenance and accessibility of food sources in and around the immediate environment. It is very important to maintain and enhance biodiversity and 'uncultivated' food sources rather than depending on food supply through state distribution systems. The farmers argue that it is not the cultivated food alone; rather, it is the availability and accessibility of the 'uncultivated' food which can ensure food security for all, particularly for the poor. The uncultivated foods come from plants, aquatic species, fish, fruits which grow on their own in the common lands, water bodies and as partner crops in the cultivated fields. A majority of the poor survive on the availability of this uncultivated food (UBINIG, 2000).

The policy makers in the North do not understand these notions of food security. To the North, food security comes from the market and the state. Food is also a political weapon. Food security in concrete terms means to continue PL480 programmes of the USA or the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union. Overall, 'food security' is related to the question of war, militarization, profit and control. To the South, food security is an integral part of people's livelihood. It cannot be separated. 'Food security' is associated with 'famine', ensuring 'natural' sources of food in the stressed conditions when agricultural production fails. Only by ensuring biodiversity and ecological richness can food sources from nature be secured.

In the South, we ask, can industrial agriculture, biotechnology and genetic engineering ensure food security? The answer is a clear 'No'. Why? First of all, it is common sense to understand that companies do not provide food for free. Food is a commodity to sell. For the communities, food is a gift and the locus of ethical relationships and community building processes. Communities can ensure food for their members if they control the production, distribution and exchange of food, not the corporations.

Second, food production is also the main livelihood activity for most of the rural communities. Therefore food security is also related to the livelihood security of the food producing communities.

Dislocating this livelihood and making communities dependent on corporations is a disastrous path creating serious consequences. For example, destruction of food sources and dislocation of livelihood forces people to migrate. Women and children often become victims of trafficking for prostitution, organ trade, slave labour and other inhuman sufferings.

Solidarity among women at the World Food Summit (WFS)

'Food Security' is a catchword for UN bodies like the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the national governments and even the big transnational corporations. The World Food Summit (WFS) held in 1996 intended to achieve 'universal food security' by the year 2010, eradicating hunger and malnutrition. The Rome Declaration of the WFS in 1996 proclaimed that it is intolerable that more than 800 million people throughout the world, and particularly in developing countries, do not have enough food to meet their nutritional needs. But plans were made for the needs of only 400 million people to be dealt with by 2015. The Declaration of the WFS was nothing but to silence the critics of the North and South over the proposition of 'free trade' and a biotechnology-based Super Green Revolution. Their concern for the hungry was to maintain that hunger will have to be solved by biotechnology and that genetic engineering is the answer to food security (Mazhar, 1998).

During the 1996 WFS in Rome, women from around the world got together to challenge the propositions of the FAO which were basically serving the interest of the transnational corporations. Based on the slogan of 'Food Security Must Remain in the Hands of Women', the Women's Day on Food was organized on 15 November 1996 at the NGO Forum (Mies, 1996). In this forum, the concerns of women from North and South were similar. Food security was not seen only as a problem of the South but also a problem of the North. The strategy to solve the world food problem by genetic engineering and biotechnology – and generally by the industrialization of food – was criticized.

The Women's Day on Food was at the same time a celebration of the strength and capacity of women as food producers and food providers and their inventiveness with regard to better systems of food production, conservation and marketing. The day started by bringing fruits and bread into the conference hall, which was already a subversive action in such a mainstream meeting. Food, along with solidarity songs by women, made the day a very successful one, offering reassurance to the women of both North and South (UBINIG, 1996b).

Women in the North are the 'consumers' of food produced by the MNCs. They are sufferers of gene-manipulated foods. Food production is no longer in the hands of women; they are only the customers in the supermarket. 'Knowledge' about food is disseminated by companies to the women, through advertisements on television. The industrialized food, including many forms of genetically modified food, is thus in the regular menu, prepared very carefully by housewives. Cooking is nothing but the assembly of different pre-processed food items. On the other hand, women in the rural South are engaged in production, preservation and collection of food from cultivated and non-cultivated sources. Without women, agriculture is not complete. Women possess the knowledge about food and nutritional values of different plants, fruits, fish and animals and thereby decide on family consumption. They know medicinal values of food items which become an integral part of the family diet.

The Women's Day on Food was an extraordinary demonstration of solidarity among women of the North and South on the question of food security. Together they challenged the mainstream notions of food security and showed the realities in which women manage food security for their families as well as for their communities.

Shortcomings of international aid

In 1998 the FAO theme for the World Food Day (celebrating its 53rd anniversary on 16 October) was 'Women Feed the World'. In the brochure made on the occasion of World Food Day, the FAO firmly acknowledged the fundamental contribution of women to household and national food security

and the multiple roles rural women play throughout the entire food chain – from agricultural production to post-harvest processing and marketing as well as nutrition and food safety.

However, the FAO wanted women to have access to credit to expand and improve their farm activities, which included purchase of improved seeds, fertilizers, insecticides and herbicides etc. They maintained that rural women's limited access to financial resources thwarts their efforts to improve or expand their farm activities so as to earn cash income. The improvement in farm production is to be facilitated by improved seeds, pesticides, fertilizers etc. This is very much against the general perception of farm women about their own well-being as well as what is best for their farming activities. Women have been engaged in seed preservation for ages. Improved seeds from the market means taking away control of women over seeds. This is a direct attack on women's sovereignty in their own households.

The other UN agency working on food is the World Food Programme (WFP), which sees women as 'vulnerable' and 'distressed'. WFP Vulnerable Groups Development (VGD) programmes aim to increase the earning power of the most disadvantaged rural women. Under this programme, wheat is provided as a grant 'to give food insecure women a temporary break from the struggle to find food, and allow them to participate in NGO activities and attend courses which focus on market-based income generating activities and functional education (health, nutrition, literacy, numeracy etc.)' (WFP, 1997).

The experiences of the use of wheat by the WFP through the VGD programme have not been good. It has addressed the needs of the so-called 'distressed' women in a disgraceful way. The distressed women are those who are widows, abandoned, divorced etc. The VGD wheat has been used by local elites for political reasons to get votes from the poor during elections. The coercive and target oriented population control programme relies on VGD wheat to get the young widows, divorced and abandoned women to be sterilized to fulfil the targets. The wheat is used for road construction under Food-for-Work programmes. The additional amount of wheat is also used for getting poor

people to work for re-construction projects on roads and culverts damaged by the flood. These roads are used to take the food from the villages to the cities, making the village people more food insecure.

Excessive dependence on food aid discourages production. The ability to pay for food is given more importance than production at the household level. The WFP is suggesting income-generating activities for the poor to be able to purchase food. Poverty, according to the multilateral development agencies, is the lack of purchasing power. Women are seen more as consumers of food rather than producers. In the rural areas, when poor women are given any support it is also for HYV and hybrid varieties of crops, and poultry. In all these cases, women's control over their production is losing out.

Women want to have control over food production

To move away from these distorted notions of 'food security', women want to have control of food production, and that is done through control of seeds in women's hands. The battle of farmers for sustainable production of food is a continuing one. This battle is with companies trying to monopolize food production with unsustainable methods. The global trade in food is taking over the subsistence farmers and threatening their existence. We strongly believe that food security can only be ensured if it is in the hands of farmers.

The question of food security is intimately linked with the issue of biodiversity and enhancement of genetic resources. In agrarian cultures it is the women who conserve, preserve and germinate seeds. It is a highly detailed knowledge transmitted from mother to daughter, from sister to sister, from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, or from a village sister to others.

The peasant women are engaged in keeping and preserving the seeds. Once modern agriculture was introduced, women faced the threat of losing the seeds. Farmers were asked to buy seeds from the market. Women became 'powerless' in this process as they were gradually being thrown out of their work in seed preservation. Women also observed that when the men bought the so-called improved seeds sold in packets, they also bought pesticides. The use of company seeds is associated with the use of chemicals, particularly pesticides. The pesticide companies are selling the seeds. Novartis, ACI, Monsanto are all pesticide and herbicide producing companies. When they sell seeds, it is bound to be poisonous.

Farmers are fighting against this and have come forward with a movement called Nayakrishi Andolon (NK, 1999). NK has primarily focused on seed preservation, conservation, sharing and exchange among the farmers. Hundreds of local varieties of rice, vegetables, fruit and timber crops, etc. have been reintroduced. Farmers are happily sharing and exchanging seeds among themselves and increasing the genetic resource base of their community.

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