Title
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Women and the Human Right to Food:
Examining Rights-based Approaches to the Gendered Cost of Food in the U.S.

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Bio: Megan Carney is a PhD student in Sociocultural Anthropology and holds the position of Sustainable Food Coordinator at UC Santa Barbara. Her dissertation research explores the role of Latinas in community food security and implications for Latina citizenship in food sovereignty movements. She earned her B.A. in Anthropology from UCLA in 2006 and her M.A. in Anthropology from UCSB in 2009.

Abstract: In this paper, I discuss how food insecurity has been politicized most recently in the United States and abroad through a framework of human rights and argue that the development of a global-industrial food system has systematically marginalized those who have been most instrumental in ensuring food security. I further explore how a discourse of gender equality has paralleled discourse on the human right to food. Finally, I draw on findings from a study of gendered repercussions of a global-industrial food system and relate these findings to the food sovereignty movement.

Introduction

The state of food insecurity in the U.S., as with the rest of the world, has continued to worsen despite governmental efforts to alleviate the problem. In 2008, 14.6 percent (or 17 million) of U.S. households were food insecure (Nord, Andrews et al. 2009), i.e., had difficulty providing enough food for all members due to a lack of resources. The prevalence of food insecurity had increased from 11.1 percent (13 million households) in 2007 and was highest since nationally representative food security surveys were initiated in 1995 (Nord, Andrews et al. 2009). Women have been disproportionately affected by food insecurity, enduring multiple reproductive and productive burdens (Ellis 1983; DeVault 1991; McIntosh and Zey 1998; Siefert, Heflin et al. 2001; Townsend, Peerson et al. 2001; Adams, Grummer-Strawn et al. 2003; Casey, Goolsby et al. 2004; Avakian and Haber 2006; Julier 2006; Allen and Sachs 2007; Spieldoch 2007; Gundersen, Lohman et al. 2008; Huddleston-Casas, Charnigo et al. 2009; Phillips 2009) that are rarely calculated in the cost of food. Thus, a gendered cost of food framework...
should account for compromises to women’s physical and psychological health resulting from food insecurity.

Industry-government partnerships limit the potential of communities to assert autonomy in food governance by imposing needs-based solutions from the top-down (Anderson 2008). In many instances, governments have yielded to transnational corporations whose activities obfuscate liberal understandings of “sovereignty,” “rights,” and citizenship (Ong 2006), including “food citizenship.” Recent attempts to alleviate food insecurity through a human rights framework have yielded many questions regarding implications of the human right to adequate food, particularly does a rights-based approach to food systems address the gendered cost of food insecurity?

**Food Security and Needs-based Approaches**

Chilton and Rose (2009) cite that the U.S. has made no advancements in reducing national food insecurity mainly due to reliance on a needs-based approach. In fact, the most recent Household Food Security Survey Module, the instrument used for measuring national levels of food insecurity, observed the prevalence of household food insecurity at its highest since the establishment of the survey (Nord, Andrews et al. 2009). Federal food assistance programs functioning on a needs basis, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamps) and the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), have been criticized for at best mitigating the experience of food insecurity but failing to undermine the root causes of hunger which continue to disproportionately affect certain households more than others (Chilton and Rose 2009). For instance, rates of food insecurity are substantially higher than the national average for households with incomes below the official poverty line.
Food insecurity currently affects about 50 million people, or close to 17 percent of the U.S. civilian population (Nord et al. 2009). This national epidemic is estimated to cost about $90 billion per year in increased medical care costs, lost educational attainment and worker productivity, and investment burden into the emergency food system (Brown, Shepard et al. 2007).

The Human Right to Food

Food has appeared in the official language of human rights since the first signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948; Article 25 of the UDHR states that everyone has “a right to a standard of living,” including the right to food and the right to be free from hunger (Chilton and Rose 2009). The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) expanded on this notion to include “freedom from hunger” as a fundamental human right and the obligation of states to improve food production and distribution systems for equitable access to food. All countries except the United States and Australia agreed to recognize food as a basic human right at the Rome Declaration for World Food Security in 1996 (Chilton and Rose 2009). These terms were again ratified in 1999 to explicate the right to food and to oblige states in respecting, protecting, and fulfilling this right. Despite the commitment of states, food insecurity rates have augmented to record highs (FAO 2008; Nord, Andrews et al. 2009) providing further rationale for beliefs that hunger is the “most flagrantly violated human right,” (Van Esterik 1999).
Right to food discourse, or rights-based food system approaches, remain controversial. While the U.S. government officially embraces the UDHR, the Department of State insists that the constitution does not protect or recognize economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to food (Messer and Cohen 2007) and repeatedly votes against the annual Right to Food Resolution in the U.N. General Assembly, “usually as the sole dissenter,” (Messer and Cohen 2007). Other reasons for voting against the Right to Food Resolution stem from concerns that the right to food is “associated with un-American socialist political systems,” that fulfilling such legislation would be too expensive, and that the rights-based approach does not culturally resonate with the American model of self-reliance (Messer and Cohen 2007).

Since all human rights are mutually reinforcing, universal, and indivisible (Van Esterik 1999), continued opposition by the U.S. toward rights-based food system approaches has been argued to undermine all other U.S. commitment to the UDHR, upsetting the “basis for world civil and political order,” reinforcing cultural relativist interpretations of human rights, and allowing for continued support of neoliberal economic policies as the path to global food security (Messer and Cohen 2007). Within the current U.S. model of a needs-based approach, citizens become passive beneficiaries of nutritional handouts rather than as “claims-holders who mobilize around human right to food demands and hold governments accountable,” (Messer and Cohen 2007).

Although an emphasis on women had been lacking from human rights discourse and the gender component of food security was reserved only for periphery discussion during World Food Summits in the past (Van Esterik 1999), more recent multilateral efforts, such as the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science, and
Technology, and coordination through the food sovereignty movement, have promoted new agricultural paradigms that place women at the center (Pimbert 2008; IAASTD 2009).

**Marginalization of Women in the Global-Industrial Food System**

Numerous studies demonstrate the disproportionate vulnerability of women to fluctuations in food prices (Tripp 1997), to negative impacts on health resulting from food and nutritional insecurity (Gladwin, Thomson et al. 2001; Townsend, Peerson et al. 2001; Hawkes 2007; Spieldoch 2007; Rae 2008), and to job insecurity within the food sector (Barndt 1999). The ability to feed families and ensure household food security may provide a source of power for women (Van Esterik 1999; Rae 2008) that the global-industrial food system undermines, as simultaneously women are subordinated through reproductive activities and other domains of food work (Allen and Sachs 2007).

**Gendered Repercussions of Economic Recession and Food Insecurity**

The household, as “a place to feed and be fed,” perhaps best illustrates the intersection of food rights, cultural rights, and the rights of women (Van Esterik 1999). Household food insecurity rates within California rank among the highest in the nation (CHIS 2007; Nord, Andrews et al. 2009) and the rate in Santa Barbara County (herein SBC) – 36 percent of low-income households according to conservative estimates – is among the highest in the state (Harrison, Sharp et al. 2007). Low-income Latino populations, and particularly Latinas are the most at risk (CFPA 2002; CFPA 2003; CHIS 2007; Harrison, Sharp et al. 2007); 48.4 percent of Latinas residing in SBC were reported as food-insecure in 2006 (CHIS 2007). Although national and statewide surveys produce data on households, within household nuances are unaccounted for (Cohen 2002),
requiring further investigation of the differential experience of food insecurity among household members.

Through surveys with 150 household heads from low-income communities of SBC (Eastside Downtown, Goleta, Carpinteria), I investigated the gender-specific repercussions of compounding crises of household food insecurity and the recent economic recession.

Procurement, Preparation and the Gendered Cost of Food

For the majority of low-income households, I observed women as gatekeepers of food procurement and preparation. This was evidenced by the incompleteness of knowledge in regards to food-related activities (i.e., shopping trips per week, preparation time per meal, and sources of food) among male respondents and by explanations that women administered these activities. Furthermore, there were also marked differences between the sexes in reporting perceived levels of food security. Overall lower levels of perceived food insecurity as reported by men were interpreted as indicative of lower stress related to a lack of involvement in household food procurement, and higher levels of perceived food insecurity as reported by women as indicative of higher stress associated with procurement, preparation, and allocation duties (see Table 1).

Women’s management of household food provisions was not unhindered but rather compromised by a lack of sufficient resources. Adequate transportation was a limiting resource for women as many lacked access to personal vehicles and relied on walking or shared rides to the store. Many women were also constrained by irregular work schedules or by the demands of multiple part-time jobs. Labor-saving techniques and comida rápida had seemed to become preferred alternatives to food preparation for
women. In balancing time commitments (employment, child care, cleaning, cooking) with financial commitments (gas, food, rent), women reported high levels of *estres* often to the detriment of their physiological and psychological well-being. Many lamented the inflation of food and fuel prices in recent months and discussed coping strategies for balancing expenses. One woman explained that she was frequenting the grocery store fewer times per week or opting to walk instead of driving, “Para no gastar tanta gas, en camino [al mercado]. Para allá no ir otra vez y gastar gas,” (*I walk in order to save gas. I don’t go [to the store] again so that I can save gas*). Another woman alluded to how increased fuel expenses infringed on the household food budget, “Ahorita la gasolina! En los dos meses pasados o un mes, dos gallones me cobran unos diez dólares. Más caro que la leche,” (*The gas right now! In the past month or two, two gallons costs me ten dollars. Gas is more expensive than milk*). Others reported reduced food intake as juggling between different domestic and employment duties seemed to afford few opportunities for obtaining meals, “Pues a veces estoy trabajando y no tengo tiempo para comer,” (*Well sometimes I’m working and I don’t have time to eat*), or as another woman cynically remarked, the struggle to balance her workload and expenses served as a regimen for weight-loss, “Between rent and gas and working full time, literally [I] have no problem losing weight.” Repression of the (female) body seemed to represent yet another externality resulting from the gendered cost of food.

In provisioning food for others, women admitted to compromising their own nutrition and even reported instances of self-induced food deprivation:

“I buy blueberries for my son, but I don’t eat them because they’re too costly,”; “I worry for [my children’s] health. I give them more food than I give myself,”; “Pero mi hijo sí come bien. Yo sometimes no,” (*My son eats well. Sometimes I don’t*).
Similar sentiments were expressed elsewhere by women, suggesting a gendered obligation in ensuring the health of children and an inverse relationship of children’s nutritional status to that of women. This inverse relationship is perhaps one consequence of a food system that relies on the structural oppression of women. Future research, particularly policy-oriented, should address the questionable sustainability of a system that does not provide adequate monetary or caloric compensation to women for their role in food provisioning.

Table 1. Perceptions of food insecurity (FI) among males and females (expressed as %)
Women, N=93 (22% of total perceived no food insecurity)
Men, N=57 (49.5% of total perceived no food insecurity)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eastside</th>
<th>Goleta</th>
<th>Carpinteria</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild FI</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate FI</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe FI</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
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Food Sovereignty and Implications for Citizenship

Endorsement of food sovereignty as an alternative framework represents an attempt to integrate the goals of the human right to adequate food with women’s rights. Loosely defined as the right to food and the right to control food production and distribution channels (Via Campesina 2009), food sovereignty has been argued more than “food security” to prod into the culpable forces of food insecurity, in that “it proposes not just guaranteed access to food, but democratic control over the food system – from production and processing, to distribution, marketing, and consumption,” (Holt-Gimenez
and accomplishing such ends through eliciting increased participation by women, an attribute usually unseen in food security programs (Rae 2008). Community-based strategies which “de-link” people from the global-industrial food system (Wekerle 2004), witnessed through robust regional food systems, food policy councils, urban agriculture, and farmers markets, serve as the seeds of the food sovereignty movement. As “instruments of deep democracy” (Appadurai 2001) these strategies challenge, “liberal understandings in which citizenship is viewed as a set of rights and responsibilities granted by the state. Instead, citizenship in the context of locally-determined food systems is claimed, and rights are realized, through the agency and actions of people themselves,” (Pimbert 2008: 48).

In theory, food sovereignty seems to yield many favorable conditions. However, whether or not a food sovereignty framework successfully addresses the gendered cost of food through integration of goals for the human right to food with women’s rights remains debatable. Patel (2009) reminds us that, “At the end of the day, the power of rights-talk is that rights imply a particular burden on a specified entity – the state…To talk of a right to anything, after all, summons up a number of preconditions which food sovereignty, because of its radical character, undermines,” (668). In other words, rights as discussed in the liberal sense are recognized by and actualized within the context of states. Dismantling the authority of the state, a prospect favored by many food sovereignty advocates, is also to dismantle a framework of rights. Those concerned with the human right to food and women’s rights need to consider the extent to which a liberal understanding of rights-based approaches actually renders gender equality, particularly in
the context of food governance, or if emergent interpretations of rights and citizenship are more useful.

**Works Cited**


