

## RESEARCH BRIEF

# GENDER EQUALITY AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN CONTEXTS OF AGRICULTURAL COMMERCIALIZATION

## KEY MESSAGES

- Agricultural commercialization and changes in rural land tenure have an impact on the availability, accessibility and quality of food for people in both urban and rural areas.
- These new forms of production, marketing and consumption of agricultural commodities influence and are influenced by gendered power relations.
- Governments and other actors have obligations under international human rights law to guarantee gender equality in access to land and productive resources as essential elements of the right to food.
- International law on the rights to food and gender equality requires the adoption of measures to ensure:
  - Equal participation and representation of men and women in political, economic and social institutions
  - Non-discriminatory access to justice
  - Policy coherence and integration of a gender perspective in all sectors that have an impact on the right to food
  - Decent employment opportunities for all
  - Comprehensive social protection schemes
  - The establishment of independent data collection and monitoring systems.

JANUARY 2017 | JOANNA BOURKE MARTIGNONI

## INTRODUCTION

Women and girls constitute the majority of the world's food insecure. Recent processes of agricultural commercialization and changes in rural land tenure are having an impact on the availability, accessibility and quality of food supplies for people in both urban and rural areas. The same commercial imperatives that are driving agrarian transformation are also influencing gender relations, the social, economic and political meanings that are ascribed to them, and the injustices they produce. A growing body of evidence from around the world has highlighted the synergies between the promotion of gender equality and the realization of the right to food.

This brief summarizes key issues connected to agricultural commercialization from a human rights perspective with a focus on the right to food and gender equality. Speaking to two of the Sustainable Development Goals formulated in the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, it aims to provide policy makers and advocacy groups with recommendations on the implementation of these rights in contexts of agrarian change.

### UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (2015)

Goal number 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal number 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

## AGRICULTURAL COMMERCIALIZATION, AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF FOOD

Around the world, dynamics of agricultural commercialization and changes in rural land use have accelerated in recent years. New forms of production, marketing and consumption of agricultural commodities – both food and non-food – are being introduced at all scales from the global to the regional, national and local.

International laws and policies on the right to food highlight the need to ensure that processes of agricultural commercialization do not undermine the availability or the physical and economic accessibility of food for all people. Adequate food must be available and accessible either through subsistence production, purchased with income derived from fair and decent work, or provided through social protection programmes. Equality and non-discrimination in access to food are key features of international human rights policies and laws. Governments have obligations to take targeted and concrete steps to identify and remove any barriers to the equal enjoyment of the right to food.

## THE RIGHT TO FOOD

'the right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.' (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment no. 12 (1999), para. 6)

International legal and policy documents require governments to systematically measure the impact of trade, rural development and land use planning on the right to food. All groups in the population should be provided with the capacity and the opportunity to effectively participate in the creation and monitoring of policies and laws on food, agriculture, rural employment, social security, trade and development.

## GENDER RELATIONS IN FOOD PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

Women are crucial to ensuring food security in rural areas. They contribute as farmers and labourers, and they tend to hold primary responsibility for sourcing and preparing food. Changes in agricultural production and land use influence power relations between women and men. Structural forms of discrimination against women in agricultural employment – specifically their concentration in unregulated, low-skilled, poorly remunerated, insecure wage work without access to social security entitlements – are being entrenched in many contexts through the development of agribusinesses. Other aspects of commercialization, such as the growth of contract farming, large-scale acquisitions of land and the privatization of communal resources including forests, grazing lands and water resources have been shown to benefit certain groups of men while generally disadvantaging women.

## WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS

'Rural women are critical to achieving food security, reducing poverty, malnutrition and hunger, and in promoting rural development, yet their contribution is often unpaid, unacknowledged, and poorly supported. Rural women are among those who are the most affected by food insecurity, exposed to food price volatility, malnutrition and hunger, and are amongst the most likely to suffer when food prices escalate.' (UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation no. 34 (2016), para. 63)

At the household level, there is evidence that in some regions, the commercialization of agriculture is contributing to a decline in subsistence food production and to reduced dietary diversity, quality and cultural acceptability of food. In poor rural households where food is scarce, women tend to cut their protein intake and they are more likely to suffer from nutritional deficiencies than men.

The UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and related policy documents on gender equality emphasize the need for governments to take steps to address underlying factors, including gender based stereotypes, that contribute to women's social and economic disadvantage. Policies and laws to tackle gender-based violence, discrimination in employment and education and to redistribute the burden of care work, form part of the comprehensive approach to redressing inequalities recommended by international human rights bodies. These measures should be closely integrated into national policies and legislation related to food, agriculture, employment and social security.

## INEQUALITIES IN ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Processes of land commercialization are exacerbating inequalities in access to resources including land, water, credit, technologies, information and markets. In many countries, women form a large percentage of the agricultural labour force and yet they own and control only a tiny proportion of the world's agricultural land and resources. These gendered inequalities in land and resource allocations also affect women's ability to access essential productive inputs such as credit, technology, labour and agricultural extension services.

In a number of countries, formal and informal legal and social norms restrict the rights of women to own, inherit, transfer, use and control land and other natural resources. Processes of agricultural commercialization can reinforce pre-existing discrimination in access to land and resources by consolidating private ownership of common resources and privileging the development of large-scale, industrialized models of production.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as well as human rights mechanisms at the international level, have drawn attention to the obligations of governments and other actors to ensure gender equality in access to land and productive resources as essential elements of the right to food.

## FAO RIGHT TO FOOD GUIDELINES (2004)

'8.6. States should promote women's full and equal participation in the economy and, for this purpose, introduce, where it does not exist, and implement gender-sensitive legislation providing women with the right to inherit and possess land and other property. States should also provide women with secure and equal access to, control over, and benefits from productive resources, including credit, land, water and appropriate technologies.'

## POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND POWER

Women remain seriously under-represented within political, legal and economic institutions at all levels of government from the international to the regional, national and local. The absence of women from decision-making power tends to be particularly acute in the trade, investment, agriculture, forestry and land use planning sectors. In contexts of agricultural commercialization, this lack of political representation means that the interests of women as small-scale landholders, landless farmers or agricultural wage labourers are frequently overlooked in negotiations, policies and legislation.

International human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, create obligations to ensure that women and men are equally represented in political, economic, legal and social institutions at all levels of government across every sector and that positive measures, including quotas and other interventions, be taken for this purpose. The equal participation of diverse groups of women and men in political, legal and economic decision-making structures has been emphasized as an essential component in guaranteeing the right to food.

## GENDER EQUALITY AND RIGHT TO FOOD GUARANTEES IN INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Arts 2, 25  
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), Arts 2, 3 and 11  
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Arts 2 and 3  
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), Arts 2 and 14

## POLICY CONCLUSIONS

The right to food entails obligations for governments and other actors to ensure that all people have physical and economic access to adequate food at all times. The various means of accessing food—through own production, purchased through fair wages from decent work or via social protection programmes – must be guaranteed to everyone without any discrimination.

International human rights law and related policies on the rights to food and gender equality contain a number of key principles that should be applied at the national and local levels: participation, accountability, non-discrimination and policy coherence. These principles are particularly important in situations of agricultural commercialization and provide guidance to policy-makers and other actors on the ways in which gender equality and the right to food should be realized in practice.

## GENDER EQUALITY AND RIGHT TO FOOD GUARANTEES IN INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW RECOMMENDED POLICY PRIORITIES FOR THE REALIZATION OF THE RIGHT TO FOOD

### PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- Ensure women's equal participation and representation in political, economic and social institutions, including farmers' associations, agricultural cooperatives and at all levels of government.
- Develop independent and participatory review procedures and guarantee non-discriminatory access to justice in relation to the rights to food, land and employment and in connection with development, investment and land use planning.

### NON-DISCRIMINATION AND POLICY COHERENCE

- Systematically integrate policies and laws on gender equality into all sectors relevant to implementing the right to food including; trade, agriculture, rural development, land use planning, environmental protection, employment, social protection, food and nutrition.
- Collect data and monitor the impact of legislation and policies on the equal access of women and men to food, social protection, employment, land, water, credit and other resources.
- Create decent, sustainable and diverse employment and livelihood opportunities in rural areas, particularly for smallholder farmers and landless people.
- Design and implement social protection programmes, including pension schemes, cash transfers, health and disability insurance.

## SELECTED UN DOCUMENTS ON GENDER EQUALITY AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD

[Reports of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food](#)

[UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)

[UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women](#)

[FAO, Right to Food](#)

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### LAND COMMERCIALIZATION, GENDERED AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD (DEMETER)

DEMETER is a six-year project, launched in 2015 and funded by the Research for Development Programme (r4d) of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. It examines the relationship between the right to food and gender equality in ensuring food security in the context of land commercialization in two case-study countries, Cambodia and Ghana.

**The Geneva Academy  
of International Humanitarian Law  
and Human Rights**

Villa Moynier  
Rue de Lausanne 120B  
CP 1063 - 1211 Geneva 1 - Switzerland  
Phone: +41 (22) 908 44 83  
Email: [info@geneva-academy.ch](mailto:info@geneva-academy.ch)  
[www.geneva-academy.ch](http://www.geneva-academy.ch)

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