

# Book Review

**Gender, Nutrition and the Human Right to Adequate Food. Toward an Inclusive Framework.** Edited by Anne C. Bellows, Flavio L.S. Valente, Stefanie Lemke and Maria Daniela Nunez Burbano de Lara. 2016. Routledge, NY. (Research in Gender & Society series). 422 pp. + index

This multi-authored volume, the product of a continuing seminar by the editors and additional authors, exhaustively spans and connects the latest legal, political, economic and sociocultural thinking connecting gender, nutrition and human rights. Chapter 1, building on the work of Olivier DeSchutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Food, provides a thorough and timely update on developments within the human-right-to-food legal and advocacy framework. The central argument, elaborated in Chapter 2, probes ‘Two Structural Disconnects and the Human Rights Processes Necessary to Address Them’: (1) the failure, so far, of human rights proponents to fully integrate intersections of the human right to food with other civil–political and economic–social–cultural rights; and (2) the failure to fully elaborate how women’s (and children’s) human rights in general and to adequate nutrition in particular, creates special obligations for governments—and everyone, to respect and protect women’s equal participation in all aspects of food production, food processing, decision-making over food provisioning, including especially their capacities to feed their children. These disconnects, which allow all kinds of violence and discrimination toward women and exclude women from decision making at all levels, are explored in Chapter 3: ‘Violence and Women’s Participation...’ and 4, ‘Maternal, Infant, and Young Child Feeding: Intertwined Subjectivities and Corporate Accountability.’ Chapter 5, ‘Sustainable Food Systems and Participation: Foregrounding Women in the Context of the Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition’ examines all the ways discrimination against women limits effective nutrition, public health and sustainable food systems. Each chapter summarizes the prior information, identifies gaps in theory, policy and practice, and offers recommendations how to fill them.

Each chapter is up to date, substantiated with the latest legal and institutional developments on the three interconnected concepts. Particular issues are carefully documented with the results of UN and Human Rights NGO conferences, and helpfully illustrated with short, detailed ‘boxed’ case-study examples elaborating the institutions and processes advancing human rights on the ground and in diplomatic settings. Throughout, the authors call for greater participation of grassroots organizations, particularly from affected developing countries,

and more careful scrutiny of the actions of powerful moneyed interests, including corporations who dominate private-sector representation, but also large corporate foundations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which increasingly dominate public–private partnership programs in food, nutrition, and the larger social- and economic-development agenda. Specific chapters pinpoint how these powerful interests, with priority emphasis on technological bullets, consequently short-circuit systemic or structural transformations that are necessary to remove the root causes of hunger, poverty, malnutrition and women’s exclusion. The general point, that technological fixes for agriculture and child nutrition do nothing to change the unjust structures of society that cause nutritional problems, is well articulated across chapters. Their critiques of the World Bank’s ‘Scaling Up Nutrition’ (SUN), with its focus on micronutrient fortification or supplements and commercial lipid-based pastes as nutritional rehabilitative foods, effectively champion grassroots calls for more local and sustainable solutions. Equally compelling are their summaries of the structural causes of food and nutrition crises (2007–2008 and following), and critique of World Bank rationalization of land-holding policies that amplify problems of land-grabs and women’s unequal property rights. None of this information will be new to well-informed readers, but it is advantageous for scholars and activists to find all these interconnected concepts and case studies concentrated in one place.

As is usual in writings building legal background and arguments, there are many redundancies as the authors trace the institutional and documentary background to each topic. This is an advantage, in that individual chapters contain fully developed backgrounds, and individual chapters refer to the others, but also makes the volume quite long. For those less familiar with the human rights approach, the opening chapter, and the appended ‘Chronological Glossary of Human Rights Instruments and other International Frameworks and Documents...’ extending from 1923 through 2014, clearly display where human rights and policy approaches fit into globalization trajectories. Women’s and nutrition rights specialists will appreciate the multiple points of intersection, and benefit from clearly articulated strategies to counter policy gaps, along with abundant information on institutions that could be tasked to fill them. Strategists for children’s nutrition rights will see where corporate officials move back and forth between for-profit and public institutional decision-making, and locate allies to take back grassroots control over their food and health agendas.

The authors recommend that progress in turning the system from its current course should start by inviting social movements, especially food-sovereignty advocates addressing different pieces of the conundrum, to meet and discuss policy failures that lead to false conceptualizations, problem framings and actions. They see fragmentation of the conceptual framework and stove-piping of the agencies who address the different components to be the problem, for which greater holism and unity of the human-rights approach is the solution. The virtues of the analysis are clear; it will be up to readers to find

ways to carry the lessons beyond clear analytical formulations and into effective legislation and implementation of rights-based policies and politics that can improve human outcomes.

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