

# **Gender justice and the right to food**

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## **Appetizer**

In the beginning there was hunger. Hunger because of poverty associated with social inequalities. The table then is unequal and with an environment of food insecurity. The hunger is not due to lack or availability of food, but, mostly to its inadequate access and distribution. Therefore, to guarantee the right to food for all, more ingredients are needed on the table: the justice in the relationships among women and men – gender equality; the access and distribution of land, knowledge and power – the economical justice. The hunger is still there, and it is not only for food, but for equality and justice in a round and diverse table with bread for all!

## **Menu of the day: gender justice and right to food**

Gender is a crosscutting theme and an analytical tool in addressing various disparities and injustices affecting society in general. Gender analysis is a process of reflecting how the cultural constructions and expectations on masculinity and femininity shape the identities of women and men. In a critical analysis, gender mainstreaming is a tool for assessing how these cultural constructions are interfering of any planned action.<sup>1</sup>

Gender can not be used as an isolated category; the interaction with class, ethnicity and generational categories will give a wider spectrum of cultural and social patterns as well as the dynamics of power in each context. Identifying these forces and the powerlessness will give the possibility to work out a way for changing the reality of inequalities. Gender analysis is a tool, an instrument – like glasses – through which the reality is read in a critical, deconstructive way. It is understood that the experiences are culturally and socially constructed, that they are historical and permeated with relationships of power. Gender mainstreaming is a critical approach of denaturalizing the differences, transformed in inequalities, which associates women to the domestic spheres traditionally destituted of power and men connected with the public spheres, where power is associated with virility and force. Using the critical “glasses”/tools, not only women and femininity is deconstructed, but also men and masculinity must be re-defined taken into account the diversity of experiences.<sup>2</sup>

In the theological perspective, **gender justice** expresses the process of distribution of resources and access of benefits taking into consideration the differing needs of different groups, ensuring that inequality is not perpetuated, but transformed. Women and men are created in the image of God. This equality in creation enables the human being – men and women – to be responsible at the same level for the care of the whole creation. It is reflected in the New Testament, in the baptismal form, in Galatians 1.28: “In Christ, there is no male or female ...” This is an affirmation of grace and love, of unconditional acceptance of the human being in God’s creation. God’s wisdom shaped the human being to be equal, embodying God’s image, and from this place of being the same, women and men are called to establish equality and justice in their relations. To practice equality is a matter of how faith is interwoven with life and relations; how faith is spelled out in concrete actions in the believer’s life.

Interconnected with the theological reflections on gender inevitably the operations and mechanisms of power relations need to be addressed. In the effort to put into practical terms the theological concept of an inclusive communion, the access (or not), the use (or misuse) of power manifested in the practice through the hierarchical and androcentric structures of the church must be problematized.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mainstreaming the gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system, ECOSOC, July 1997.* <http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/docs/1997/e1997-66.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Some very interesting discussions on men and masculinities: Andreas Borter: <http://vaeternetz.ch/> ; Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth and Philip Vinod Peacock (eds.). *Created in God’s image. From hegemony to partnership. A church manual on men as partners: promoting positive masculinities.* World Communion of Reformed Churches & World Council of Churches, Geneva, 2010.

This form of organizing the church constitutes one of the most difficult barriers for women to access and fully participate with their gifts and creativity in decision making bodies.<sup>3</sup>

### **From Land and Tables – re-designing the geography of power**

The rigidity of the social and cultural models and of the gender roles assigned to women limits their access to power and places them in an underprivileged social status and division of labor. This social and cultural construction causes discrimination in the access to decision making bodies or to economic fields like access and use of land and resources.<sup>4</sup>

The objective of a systematic gender analysis is not only to show data and draw conclusions on where women and men stand in terms of social status, but, more interestingly, to problematize the social status and explicitly identify and formulate the power dynamics (access to and distribution of power); and to transform this reality!

Shaping this reflection in theological terms a comparison with the seating at a dinner table can be done. Suspicious questions should be asked: Who is sitting at the table? Where are the women at the table? Are they sitting at the same level as other actors, or are they at the edge of the table, or even behind the scene, in the kitchen, cooking and serving the food?

There is a connection between the need of sharing bread and the implications of sharing power. Sharing or accumulating food defines social relations. The word “companion” carries in its (latin) root (*con-pan*) the notion of “with and bread”. Or in other words, with whom I eat the bread, who is my partner at the table - she or he is my partner in life, in the social relationship. Seating together at the table, sharing bread/food makes one allies with the other. But, the question is still there: Who is able to seat at the table? Who is officially invited to seat at some tables of decision making? In a critical gender analysis, if women are not seating with integrity, whole and comfortable at the table, the table is not round, inclusive democratic or just. Then, the table is perpetuating exclusion and hierarchical conceptions of power.<sup>5</sup> “As long as women are asked to bring a self-denying mentality to the communal table, it will never be round, men and women seated together; it will remain the same traditional hierarchical dais, with a folding table for women at the foot.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Looking to the store room – knowledge on food storage and distribution politics**

Here an exercise of comparing two biblical texts is proposed: one is the story of Joseph and the reality of famine and food sovereignty in Genesis 41 and 47<sup>7</sup> and the other is a prophetic story narrated in two different texts, by two different prophets, but with many similarities in both texts: 1 Kings 17, the widow of Sarepta and the encounter with the prophet Elijah, and in 2 Kings 4, the story of the prophet Elisha and the widow’s oil. In this comparison exercise elements of a critical feminist of liberation hermeneutic are used. These elements are mostly questioning the dynamics of power and gender relations as they are described in the biblical text in dialogue with aspects of the quotidian of women’s lives from biblical and current times.

*During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure. (Genesis 41:47-49)*

This biblical story can be used to justify the supposed self-proclaimed right of the market and corporations to control the production, access to and distribution of food. Knowledge in how to store food is one element of power in the discussion on food sovereignty; storing is an important step in food preservation. Having the right technologies, management and infrastructures for storing food are

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<sup>3</sup> See more on gender in a theological perspective see the LWF -WICAS Gender and Power document: “*It will not be so among you! A faith reflection on Gender and Power*” at: [http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/DMD-Gender\\_Power-EN-low.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/DMD-Gender_Power-EN-low.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fao.org/gender/gender-home/gender-why/why-gender/en/>

<sup>5</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro (ed.). *In search of a round table. Gender, theology & church leadership*. Published for the Lutheran World Federation by WCC Publications, Geneva, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> WOLFF, Naomi. Hunger. FALLON, Patricia, KATZMAN, Melanie, WOOLEY, Susan C. *Feminist perspectives on Eating disorders*. New York: Guildford Press, 1994, p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> See: Bloomquist, Karen & Neuenfeldt, Elaine. *A Struggle for Food Security and Sovereignty –*

The Joseph Stories In: [http://www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/OCS/LWI/EN/LWI-200905-EN-low.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/OCS/LWI/EN/LWI-200905-EN-low.pdf)

another key factor of a just distribution of food. Joseph used what can be called an imperialistic food security policy; the empire taking care and using food as a commodity, a way of enslaving the hungry and the poor. It is an agri-hydro-business explorative worldwide market imprinting its character to the production and consumption dynamic.

*The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you." When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world. (Gn 41. 53-57)*

And the result of this kind of policy can not be different!

*There was no food ... and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other. Gen 47:13-21.*

"The Joseph story shows how imperial powers can use those colonized to serve imperial interests. Joseph comes from a poor country; he was exploited and victimized. However, his wisdom on how to secure food for the people was used, not for the liberation of his brothers and other hungry people, but to make them increasingly captive."<sup>8</sup> He used his economic and political power (also the religious...*and God was with him...*) to sell food. The text is clear in saying that he changes food for money, goods (cattle), body (slavery), taxes/tribute and land. (Gen 47.13-27).

In the prophetic story about famine and storing food - the widow of Sarepta and the unnamed widow who is in debt and about to lose her sons to slavery (1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4). These two women have another way of dealing with food; there is knowledge of food administration which is threatened by policies and practices of accumulation and greed.

<sup>1</sup> *The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the LORD. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves."*

<sup>2</sup> *Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? **Tell me, what do you have in your house?**"*

*"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little oil."*

<sup>3</sup> *Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. <sup>4</sup> Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."*

<sup>5</sup> *She left him and afterward shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. <sup>6</sup> When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one." But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing.*

<sup>7</sup> *She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left."*

### ***Tell me, what do you have in your house? Sharing food and knowledge***

It is clearly recognized that there is a big difference between a whole country in need and in a hunger situation, and that of a poor widow in need; but, here is possible to see that there are two approaches to the need/right of food. One is an imperialistic approach in dealing with the need and hunger of people, taking advantage of the vulnerability of the people and using it as power to control and exploit. This is very in line in how food security policy is planed by big companies and imperialistic policies using food as commodity.

The other approach draws on the capacities, knowledge and wisdom from the people involved. It enables people to read their realities, to analyze their contexts and then to promote changes, together. The unnamed widow is asking her neighbors for help, and, in a collective action, hunger is satisfied. This collective and associative attitude is what makes the difference in promoting food sovereignty, affirming the right for all people to have enough, sufficient and nutritional good food in a system which guaranties agrarian policies of food justice. *What do you have in your jars?* Or in other words: What do you have as knowledge to placate hunger? What can be done with what you have in your

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<sup>8</sup> Bloomquist, Karen & Neuenfeldt, Elaine. *A Struggle for Food Security and Sovereignty*.

immediate context? Is asking first, and listening for the wisdom which will flow from the experience of the people who are involved in the problem; and from this experience finding out solutions. Even if there is only a little bit of oil. This attitude looks at the person as a subject, promoting both autonomy and citizenship. It is using the power dynamics to promote justice and dignified life.

### **Empty tables: when there is no food or in times of food crises**

Gender inequalities are one of the main factors which deny women of their right to food and lead them to desperation. Moving again to a biblical story, re-telling Ruth's story in the context of gender inequality, desperation and search for food would raise question like:

“Ruth marries an exotic husband-for love and pleasure? How many girls/women marry men who seem to offer possibilities of a better life? How many men/women think that they can solve residency problems through marriage? As a widow, she has less chances of re-marriage: better chances away from the familiar so she decides to stick to her mother-in-law and go to a foreign land. Two desperate widows dispossessed but in solidarity with each other, what is vital yet not enough: there is a need for a man.”<sup>9</sup>

In a society where women are not seen as autonomous subject of their lives, there is always a need of way in the patriarchal structure which will take decisions in the name of protecting women, but in fact, controlling and encapsulating their capacity of independence. Women are more affected by food crises, because of cultural gender roles which dictate that they are responsible to feed the family. Ruth is a woman/widow and her gender role is to care for her mother-in-law – another old widow. If reading the story de-constructing gender roles expected by the culture from the biblical times, but perpetuated until our times, she is doing what she should do, nothing else. But, what are really her options? What are the options for women, today? In that sense, prostitution and vulnerability to human-trafficking is right in front of many women's door, in all parts of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The right to food is not understood as a self-standing right, and women are not seen as right-holders of food and dignity of life. A study evaluating the CEDAW reports in relation to the right to food clearly stated this: “Most reports focused on the situation of mothers and children with evident confusion between the role of women as mothers, and their independent existence as women *per se*. When reporting on health and on food (often seen as part of ealth) for instance, all the attention was placed on maternal issues, reproductive health and pregnancy.”<sup>11</sup>



<http://www.mmcbrazil.com.br/>

An example of struggle and resistance against the a model of society where patriarchal power work hand by hand with agro-hydro business is done by the Movimento das Mulheres Camponesas – Peasant Women's Movement from Brazil. The need of an agrarian reform and re-distribution of land and resources in Brazil are part of the main agenda of this movement. In the same line, this movement is organizing street campaigns (especially on March 8<sup>th</sup>) raising awareness regarding the close connection of poverty, social inequalities and injustices in food production, commercialization and consumption. The aim of the movement is to articulate a wider understanding of food sovereignty in building a peasant agriculture project integrating respect to the environment and women's wisdom.

<sup>9</sup> Mban-Moyo, Fulata. *Presentation at the LWF Women's pre- assembly*, 27-31, October 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Mban-Moyo, Fulata. *Widowhood: Retelling Ruth's Story in the Context of Human Trafficking*. In: [http://www.lwf-assembly.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Theme\\_PDFs/LWI-200912-EN-low.pdf](http://www.lwf-assembly.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Theme_PDFs/LWI-200912-EN-low.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Isabella Rae. *Women and the right to food*. International law and state practice. FAO, 2008.

These women are resisting against the criminalization of social movement, questioning the complicity of a patriarchal and economical power. These power structures are based on injustice and exclude and impoverish people.

Crosscutting gender analysis with the right to food for all will necessarily be aware on assumptions based on gender stereotypes: on the one side, women are seen as vulnerable subjects, as mothers, pregnant, widows, or on the other side, they are overwhelmed with the tasks to feed their family and in the end care for the whole planet. It is about deconstructing the current model of family - nuclear and patriarchal, which is sometimes place of violence and suffering also among small peasantry. These are the postulations which need to be discussed, problematized and de-constructed using gender justice as a tool and perspective of the work. These barriers impede women to access land and to be autonomous, subjects of equality in production, distribution, commercialization and consumption of food.

### **The feast of life! The right to food in a round, diverse and just table**



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Denise Peter Pokoyeski – working with CAPA – Centro de Apoio ao Pequeno Agricultor – Small Farmer Support Center <http://www.capa.org.br/site/content/home/index.php>

“The production of food is done with happiness! We are not working only to earn money, we have quality of life!” This is the way of expressing the relation with land and food of this young woman, who defines herself as ecological farmer, working with a church based organization in Brazil – CAPA – which supports small farmers in agro ecological production of food. The food is commercialized in small markets in the cities and with the Brazilian governmental program to defeat hungry: fome zero – zero hungry.

The main result in taken part of a social movement which organized small farmer women in ecological production of food is not only the improvement of their own personal life. Denise continues her reflection: “Before we were not organized, but now we are able to take leadership in our religious communities and in the communitarian groups.”<sup>12</sup> Empowering women results in changes in the whole community. The main ingredient of this approach is integral citizenship, not only for women, but for the whole society.

There is a relation between the notions of sharing bread and sharing power, bread being understood here as food in terms of the material aspect of being nourished, but also in a symbolic way of all that is nourishing our lives and bodies: knowledge, recognition, love, relationships. Using gender as a matter of justice in church and society is part of the initiative of building sustainable communities. This is inserted in a struggle for food justice, leading to autonomy, citizenship in society and in the church. A diverse and colorful table open to all, round and democratic is the image which is given the foundation to the ethical notion of food justice.<sup>13</sup> This diversity as a sign of inclusion is a paradigm for all spheres of life and a resistance of an absolute unanimity of thinking, or a monoculture of knowledge which leads to exclusion.

And there was hungry ... for food and life with justice; and there was biodiversity... and enough food for all.

<sup>12</sup> <http://lwf2010women.wordpress.com/2009/11/18/el-pan-diario-y-un-mundo-mejor-son-conquistas-cotidianas/#more-328>

<sup>13</sup> Ivone Gebara. *Teologia Ecofeminista*. São Paulo, Olho d'água, 1997. p.108.