



UNIVERSITÄT HOHENHEIM  
Center for Gender and Nutrition



# Workshop Report

## Gender, Nutrition, and the Right to Adequate Food

*When so many call for inclusion of women and a gender perspective in food security, why is the status of women and girls in terms of food security still not improving?*

The workshop was organized by

the Department of Gender and Nutrition of the University of Hohenheim (UHOH)  
together with the FoodFirst Information and Action Network (FIAN International)  
and the Geneva Infant Feeding Association, Swiss member of the  
International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN-GIFA)

in the frames of the Congress World Nutrition *Rio2012*

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil – April 28, 2012

This report was prepared by

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## Workshop Agenda

- Moderator: Emma Siliprandi  
Center of Food Studies and Research (NEPA), State University of Campinas (UNICAMP)
- Rapporteur: Anna Jenderedjian  
Department of Gender and Nutrition, University of Hohenheim (UHOH)
- 14.30 – 14.35 Opening Words by the Workshop Moderator
- 14.35 – 14.50 Introduction of the Cooperative Project 'Gender, Nutrition, and the Right to Adequate Food' (GNRtAF)  
Anne C. Bellows  
Department of Gender and Nutrition, University of Hohenheim (UHOH)
- 14.50 – 15.05 Rights based framework for the Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition – Main Challenges (video message)  
Flavio Valente  
FoodFirst Information and Action Network (FIAN International)
- 15.05 – 15.20 The Challenge of Private-Public-Partnerships in the Context of Infant and Young Child Feeding  
Ina Verzivolli  
International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN)  
Geneva Infant Feeding Association (GIFA)
- 15.20 – 15.30 Case Study: Women and Agro-ecology in Brazil – Policies that Work  
Emma Siliprandi  
Center of Food Studies and Research (NEPA), State University of Campinas (UNICAMP)
- 15.30 – 15.40 Case Study: Impact of Ready-to-Use-Foods (RUFs) and Intensive Nutrition Education (INE) on Child Malnutrition in Nias Island, Indonesia  
Veronika Scherbaum  
Department of Gender and Nutrition, University of Hohenheim (UHOH)
- 15.40 – 16.15 Questions to the Panel
- 16.15 – 16.30 BREAK (with further information to the GNRtAF project)
- 16.30 – 16.40 Comment by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (video message)  
Olivier De Schutter  
United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food
- 16.40 – 17.30 Public Debate
- 17.30 – 17.45 Closing Remarks by the Members of the Panel



## I. Introduction

The Congress 'World Nutrition *Rio2012*: Knowledge, Policy and Action' held from April 27-30, 2012 at the Rio de Janeiro State University, Brazil, aimed at discussing and debating current challenges and crises in public health, nutrition, and food systems. Among the invited key speakers were David Sanders (University of Western Cape School of Public Health, South Africa), Urban Jonsson (The OWLS, Kenya), Elisabetta Recine (University of Brasilia, Brazil), Patti Rundall (Baby Milk Action, United Kingdom), Luiz A. Facchini (ABRASCO, Brazil), Renato Maluf (CONSEA-Nacional/Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), and Anne C. Bellows (University of Hohenheim, Germany). The second day of the Congress (April 28, 2012) was opened with a plenary session entitled 'How to assure human rights and equity in health and nutrition', with the participation of Anne C. Bellows and David Sanders as key speakers. As outstanding achievements of the Congress, the signing of four motions concerning UN agencies is worth mentioning, one of them to develop a Code of Conduct and Ethical Framework 'for interacting with the commercial sector in order to protect their integrity and avoid conflicts of interest' in support of the Statement of Concern issued by the Conflict of Interest Coalition.

The workshop 'Gender, Nutrition, and the Right to Adequate Food', also held on April 28, was organized by the Department of Gender and Nutrition of the University of Hohenheim (UHOH) together with the FoodFirst Information and Action Network (FIAN International) and the Geneva Infant Feeding Association, Swiss member of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN-GIFA). The organizers have been developing a focused approach on gender, nutrition, and the human right to adequate food with the twofold objective of reflecting upon the reasons why gender has not been successfully addressed in right to adequate food planning and advocacy, and of inquiring how pro-nutrition strategies can and should bridge food production, research, and policy with the goal of healthy communities. This approach employs legal and institutional aspects of the human rights framework wherein individuals and groups have the right to feed themselves with dignity and self-determination.



*Panelists of the 'Gender, Nutrition and the Right to Adequate Food' Workshop: (from left to right) Ina Verzivolti (IBFAN-GIFA), Anne C. Bellows (UHOH), Veronika Scherbaum (UHOH), and Emma Siliprandi (NEPA-UNICAMP)*



The workshop was moderated by **Emma Siliprandi** from the Center of Food Studies and Research (NEPA) at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP). Around forty five participants attended the workshop, including graduate students and professionals in human rights and nutrition.

## II. Presentations by the Members of the Panel

As first speaker, **Anne C. Bellows** introduced the ‘Gender, Nutrition, and Right to Adequate Food’ (GNRtAF) project as a cooperative effort undertaken by the FoodFirst Information Action Network (FIAN International), the Geneva Infant Feeding Association (IBFAN-GIFA), and the Department of Gender and Nutrition at the University of Hohenheim, which Anne C. Bellows chairs.

The GNRtAF project addresses the question, ‘when so many call for the inclusion of women and a gender perspective in food security, why is the status of women still not improving?’ **Two basic ‘disconnects’** and **five premises** were identified as responsible for women’s higher exposure to food insecurity. **Of the disconnects:** the first relates to the separation of legal obligations, institutional organization, program delivery, and research agendas between the right to adequate food (housed in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)), the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW), and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. The non-integrated foci on agriculture and food production on one hand, and nutrition and public health on the other, represent the second disconnect. As a theoretical and practical tool for bridging these disconnects and bringing together the production and consumption dimensions of nutrition, Ms. Bellows named more localized food systems that emphasize a sustainable livelihoods approach, community food security, and food sovereignty.

**Of the premises:** The first premise states that the structural separation and legal isolation of relevant rights (i.e., first disconnect) has hindered a holistic approach to human health and nutrition, stereotyping thereby women as mothers and wives, putting irregular attention to nutrition as a right of all adult women (not just pregnant and lactating women), as well as all adult men, and has resulted in a fragmented program development and evaluation, as is the case for the Millennium Development Goals. The second premise addresses violence against women as a central, and yet under-acknowledged reason for the failure of most gender mainstreaming policies in improving the situation of women and girls. The third premise introduces the interconnected nature of maternal and child health and nutrition, and highlights maternal mortality as one of the greatest health inequities. In this context, nutrition interventions focusing on malnutrition during pregnancy and infancy (the so-called ‘window of opportunity’ or ‘1000 days’) trigger concern through their neglect of the intertwined physical, emotional and legal subjectivities of the maternal-child dyad during this time period, as well as, the lack of attention to the complete set of girls’ and women’s rights over the entire course of their lives. The violation of the latter contributes to the structural conditions that result in the intergenerational reproduction of poverty and maternal and child malnutrition. The fourth premise relates to food systems, gender, public participation, and democratic food



governance, emphasizing the need for more localized and sustainable food and nutrition systems based on agro-ecological principles that support small-scale and female farmers. The fifth premise explains human rights based approaches as designed to enable and promote the engagement of public-interest civil society actors in regulating the interference of powerful actors with people's sovereign right to adequate food by holding governments accountable according to international law. The harmonization of international laws (e.g., CESC, CEDAW, and CRC) and UN human rights bodies is necessary to achieve an evolution of the systematic interpretation of law, policy, regulation, and evaluation that respects tenets of non-discrimination and universality in the right to adequate food.

**Flavio Valente**, Secretary General at FIAN International, put forward in his video message the need for a holistic, human rights based approach for overcoming food and nutrition insecurity. Human rights establish on the one hand limitations for the power of the State, and define on the other hand, the State's duty to protect people against want and abuse. At the same time, such an approach guides the State in the elaboration of public policies that promote social justice and human dignity by putting human beings at the very center of policies and development activities. A human rights based approach, therefore, represents a practical tool for peoples' struggle against discrimination, oppression, violence, and inequality.

Making reference to Ms. Bellows' presentation, Mr. Valente explained that the mentioned disconnects render invisible basic causes of food and nutritional insecurity, such as the structural violence against women that hinders their capacity to lead healthy and autonomous reproductive lives, and to develop professionally and socially according to their personal and collective interests. Additionally, the two disconnects artificially separate food and nutrition issues, impeding a holistic understanding of the social process of feeding oneself and others. To overcome these disconnects, Mr. Valente argued for the effective application of the right to adequate food to leverage the promotion of women's and men's human rights and equality. This could be achieved by ensuring consistency between the right to adequate food and other economic, social, cultural, political, and civil rights, but also by guaranteeing internal coherence between all the different dimensions of the right to adequate food. The complexity of the latter – i.e. the transformation process of nature into human nature – must be captured if the human right to adequate food is to serve as a transformative tool.

Mr. Valente further suggested the explicit incorporation of the nutritional dimension into the right to adequate food concept and called for its re-conceptualization and broadening to respond to the struggle for food and people's sovereignty, in contrast to the narrow focus on the food and nutrition security framework. This new right to food and nutrition concept, in line with human rights principles, could serve as unifying instrument for different social sectors that carry on their struggles separately. To this aim, he proposed the inclusion of the following dimensions:



- economic, social, environmental, and political sustainability, including a participatory food sovereignty strategy;
- the stable access to adequate food, either through access to productive resources (such as land and seeds), secure jobs and livelihoods, public food security and supply policies, or social security programs;
- the promotion and support of healthy and safe food systems (without agrochemicals and GMOs) and adequate diets, as well as the respect for cultural and religious differences; and
- the acknowledgement of the human being dimension, which includes nutritional well-being, human dignity, participation, and self-determination and autonomy that allow women and men to define their lives, as well as their reproductive and cultural practices.

Next, **Ina Verzivolli** (IBFAN-GIFA) addressed in her presentation the issue of conflicts of interest in the area of infant and young child feeding. As Ms. Verzivolli argued, despite the major contribution of breastfeeding to child survival and the realization of the right of the child to health and adequate food and nutrition, the strong influence of the private sector over public policy-making hampers the increase of breastfeeding rates. This influence has also resulted in the lack of effective implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes thirty-one years after its adoption by the World Health Assembly. A conflict of interest exists when the professional, legal, or political judgment of public officials or health professionals – who are responsible for working towards the realization of women’s and children’s human rights – are unduly influenced by financial or political motivation. In such situations, the realization of the human right to health and to adequate food and nutrition is endangered. In the last decade, companies have entered the policy-making arena (including the United Nations and its agencies) by strongly promoting public-private partnerships (PPPs), multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSI), as well as the corporate social responsibility paradigm. Examples of such PPPs/MSIs are two international nutrition initiatives that target children’s nutritional deficiencies, Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN) and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). These PPP/MSI initiatives generally lack an adequate ethical and policy framework to regulate conflicts of interest or to delineate the appropriate role for business actors. They are not aligned with the human rights framework, they have limited sustainability, and they displace attention from the structural causes of malnutrition.

According to Ms. Verzivolli, the creation of enabling environments free of conflicts of interest, where mothers’ and children’s health and interests are at the center of policy decision-making, is a necessary step for guaranteeing the protection, promotion, and support for breastfeeding, as well as the dignity and enjoyment of human rights by every mother and child.

The presentation by **Emma Siliprandi** (NEPA-UNICAMP) focused on the challenges that rural women face in Brazil. Since 2003, the Brazilian government explicitly recognizes women farmers as right holders and is making efforts to implement policies to encourage women’s autonomy. Although the



Brazilian juridical system recognizes equality between men and women and forbids any discrimination based on sex, patriarchal views still persist in families, communities, and public institutions where men are considered to be the household heads. Thus, women involved in agriculture continue to suffer from social invisibility as laborers and as citizens. They have less access to land and production tools, receive inadequate remuneration for their work, and they are frustrated from participating in public decision-making processes to protect their interests.

To illustrate the need for women farmers' organizations to receive institutional support, to participate in public policies as legitimate interlocutors, and to enjoy the same access as do men to opportunities and benefits generated from relevant policies, Ms. Siliprandi presented two examples of initiatives aimed at empowering rural women and enhancing food security. The first project related to the establishment of women's groups in the frame of the Agrarian Reform in communities engaged in agro-ecological production. In this project, women confronted numerous difficulties in consolidating themselves as independent rural producers, such as skeptical, discouraging, and sometimes violent reactions from husbands and other community members accustomed to conventional agricultural techniques, as well as difficulties in obtaining financing and adequate technical assistance. Nevertheless, these women's groups have succeeded to consolidate, have attracted new members, and have become respected leaders participating in community decision-making. Some groups currently sell their products to institutional markets such as the School Meal Program.

In her second example, Ms. Siliprandi referred to the federal Food Acquisition Program (Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos) established in 2003 with the twofold goal of encouraging family farming production and ensuring vulnerable groups' regular access to high-quality and sufficient food. To this end, food is bought by the government directly from family farmers and then donated to social institutions. The Program currently involves around 100,000 farmers annually. Although it enables the marketing of products traditionally linked to the feminine sphere (i.e., cultivated close to homes or not commonly sold on a larger scale), women's formal participation as suppliers still does not exceed 30% of the contracts, which are often even signed by their husbands. Women's independence is curtailed also in this context by several barriers, such as the difficulty to be recognized as sellers of their own products, by a lack of necessary documentation, as well as by their weak participation in producers' groups.

**Veronika Scherbaum** (University of Hohenheim) spoke in her presentation about different forms of malnutrition as manifestations of the violation of the right of children to adequate food and health, and the current trend of commercialization of malnutrition. In this context, Ms. Scherbaum first presented the positive results of applying fortified peanut/milk paste as ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTFs) for treating children suffering from severe acute malnutrition (SAM) in emergency settings, noting that RUTFs are generally commercially produced in industrialized countries. The problem is that the application of RUTFs is currently being expanded beyond the emergency context



and increasingly recommended also for the treatment of moderately and mildly wasted or underweight children and in some cases even as a preventive measure against undernutrition.

To counter the trend toward commercialization of malnutrition, fortified cereal/nut/legume-based biscuits were developed at the University of Hohenheim and were tested for the treatment of moderately and mildly wasted children on Nias Island, Indonesia. The so-called RUF-Nias biscuits were locally produced from locally/regionally sourced food stuffs and successfully applied in semi-urban and rural areas within daily and weekly supervision and distribution programs, respectively (cf. Purwestri et al. 2012). The majority of moderately and mildly wasted children consumed the locally produced RUF-Nias biscuits as a snack between meals, thereby gaining sufficient weight to reach discharge criteria. In a second case study, Ms. Scherbaum referred to the relevance of intensive nutrition education (INE) in the struggle against undernutrition, leading to weight gaining, as well as to improved knowledge and nutritional practices by mothers/caregivers. The study also revealed the importance of involving further family and community members in INE sessions for ensuring a long-term impact on children's nutritional status (cf. Inayati et al. 2012). In conclusion, Ms. Scherbaum emphasized that moderate and mild forms of wasting can be treated by supporting local food systems and improved child feeding practices.

### III. Comment by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, **Olivier De Schutter**, welcomed in his video message the initiative of the University of Hohenheim, FIAN International, and IBFAN-GIFA to spread the message that re-establishing gender and human rights at the very center of all efforts to reduce food insecurity and malnutrition. Mr. De Schutter argued that the neglect of gender and human rights is grounded in policy makers' lack of understanding of the benefits that can be achieved by using these dimensions.

The Special Rapporteur made reference to the double burden many governments are currently facing; i.e., a high rate of child undernutrition, responsible for one third of the deaths of children under five years of age in developing countries, and the increasing development of obesity and overweight in adult life resulting from unhealthy diets. Mr. De Schutter highlighted this phenomenon as particularly striking for countries like Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and China, where currently more children are obese or overweight than undernourished, but also emphasized the fact of it not being limited to emergent economies and having a significant public health impact worldwide.

Olivier De Schutter named four reasons for gender and human rights being crucial for fighting child malnutrition and unhealthy diets. First, the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of a child's life and the continued breastfeeding until reaching age two is essential for the physical and mental development of the child. In this context, he referred to the recurrent violation



of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. Secondly, Mr. De Schutter argued that social protection interventions such as cash transfer programs are particularly effective when they prioritize women; multiple studies have documented the benefits for household food security in general and children's health, education, and nutrition in particular that arise from women's deciding on budget allocation issues. Thirdly, a human rights perspective stresses the dimension of accountability, as well as the duties of governments to take actions against insufficient or inadequate nutrition. In Mr. De Schutter's view, civil society organizations play a crucial role in holding governments accountable. Monitoring action plans adopted by government can strengthen this dimension. Fourthly, the right to adequate food requires solutions that empower local communities that are victims of violations of the right to adequate food, solutions that are demand-driven rather than supply-driven, and solutions that are sustainable in the long term. The Special Rapporteur underlined the need to support local agro-food systems to develop local capacity to provide local populations with a varied diet, instead of relying on external interventions.

#### IV. Questions and Comments

During the discussion rounds, comments and questions by the public addressed:

- the relationship between the identified disconnects and patriarchal and capitalistic systems and societies that hinder the realization of a true gender equality even when women are politically represented;
- the lack of sufficient progress made in women's rights issues (e.g. regarding women's lower status and lack of access to information);
- existing evidence of women sacrificing their own nutritional well-being for the sake of their children's nutrition, as well as of food insecure women having children with nutritional problems/deficiencies;
- the Brazilian program "Women 1000" that considers women as public policy actors and rights holders and focuses on public policy, education, and social development;
- the cooptation of human rights terminology by the private sector for public relations purposes and without attention to the legally binding aspect of human rights (e.g. *Corporate Social Responsibility*, and *sustainability*); and
- the importance of incorporating a right to adequate food framework that is flexible enough to prioritize and target hunger and malnutrition issues within local contexts and conditions.

In their answers, the key speakers of the workshop emphasized the need to prioritize human dignity and self-determination over markets and policies; indeed, the realization of the right to adequate food requires this salient emphasis on dignity and self-determination.



Additionally, it was stated that public policy frames law that in theory is designed to be non-discriminatory, for example, non-discriminatory against women. However, without proactive protection of discriminated groups, for example, the express promotion of women farmers in all legislation directly or indirectly addressing the agricultural economy and community, the actual effect of public policy will be the perpetuation of socially ingrained patterns of discrimination and exclusion.

Finally, the need for community-based, localized solutions instead of top-down policy approaches was stressed by the panel.



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