A nested approach to the right to food: Food security, gender violence, and human rights

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The six contributed chapters in *Gender, Nutrition, and the Human Right to Adequate Food: An Inclusive Framework* bring public policy, political economy, and gender equity together to create an inclusive framework for food system reform. Uniting human rights, gender discrimination, and food sovereignty, the book offers a comprehensive analysis of the complex intersections between food and nutritional justice, as well as structural poverty and violence. The text is a product of the collaborative effort between the Gender Nutrition Rights (GNR) university-based research group and two international nongovernmental organizations, FIAN International and the Geneva Infant Feeding Association (GIFA), as part of ongoing efforts to “contribute to the capacity and momentum for action and human rights enforceability through the full engagement and self-determination of all women and men in the pursuit of nutritional well-being, with human dignity” (p. xxix). Together, the analyses presented in *Gender, Nutrition, and the Human Right to Adequate Food* add necessary depth to the consideration of patterns in food insecurity and gender violence, barriers to the full realization

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of a human right to food, and structural discon-
nects in the theory and practice of gender security 
and nutritional access.

From the book’s outset, inadequate food 
access and extreme poverty are inextricably linked
to gender discrimination and violence. The food 
crisis of 2008 significantly affected millions of 
people in areas long familiar with hunger, mal-
nutrition, and famine, often in high-risk and 
remote environments where women play key roles 
in household food provisioning and make up about 
60% of the hungry and 70% of the poor (p. 1).
That the most food-insecure populations are also 
those in which women and girls face greater 
disparities in social power illustrates the nested 
nature of food security and gender security. 
Indeed, structural inequalities across demographic 
markers such as status of livelihood, rural-urban 
location, ethnicity, and class are “consistently 
compounded by and manifested within gender 
discrimination” (p. xxxvi).

Bellows, de Lara, and Viana comprehensively 
review the evolution of human rights and food 
security approaches, frameworks, and policies in 
the first chapter, tracing the continuing struggle 
“over the future of the global governance of food 
and nutrition policy” (p. 2). Keeping track of the 
alphabet soup of government agencies, nongovern-
mental organizations, international conventions, 
and various resolutions and accords can be 
cumbersome; this unavoidable characteristic of 
human rights and international development 
ilustrates the complexity, limitations, and need for 
continued advancement in these endeavors. While 
human rights and food security discourse and 
practice since the mid-20th century have called for 
greater inclusion of women and a gender perspec-
tive, it is important to note that the food and 
nutrition status of women and girls has not realized 
significant improvement. Furthermore, even as 
particular human rights instruments have been 
designed to protect the rights of women and girls, 
instances of food and nutrition rights violations 
among women and girls have increased relative to 
men and boys. Pointing to the externalization of 
hunger in a neoliberal global economy, and the 
limited capability of those who suffer from hunger, 
structural violence “manifest[s] discrimination between 
the hungry and the policy makers” (xxviii). The 
shift toward a human rights framework for food 
and nutrition security requires the recognition “of 
the universality and indivisibility of human rights,” 
and that they “cannot be viewed independently 
from, for example, the human right to the highest 
attainable standard of health, or the human rights 
of women and children” (p. 25).

It is against this backdrop that the conditions 
impeding the progress of women’s rights and food 
security are critiqued. In the second chapter, 
Bellows and de Lara introduce the means by which 
women’s rights and nutrition have been isolated 
through the creation of legally binding international 
agreements. Analysis of the Universal Declaration 
of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International 
Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 
(ICESCR) reveals the breakdowns in international 
policymaking that have structurally disconnected 
improvements in gender-based inequality and the 
human right to adequate food and nutrition. These 
authors make a compelling case for reframing the 
status of women and girls in institutional reforms 
from vulnerability to discrimination, noting that 
the former “may in fact contribute to sociocultural 
patterns of patronization and gender discrimina-
tion” (p. 59). Furthermore, the political economy 
of food production, coupled with the increased 
reliance on private-sector engagement in UN 
human rights efforts and public policy, have 
separated nutrition from food security—hence the 
intentional phrasing throughout this volume, the 
right to adequate food and nutrition—propping up 
the commoditization of agricultural products, and the 
medicalization of micronutrient supplementation 
(p. 72). Chapter 2 illustrates the paternalistic and 
neoliberal effects of food security policy and the 
implications thereof for reifying gender 
discrimination.

The remaining chapters unpack specific under-
examined aspects of gender, nutrition, and food 
security. The correlation between women and girls’ 
food-based work and gender violence is taken up 
in Chapter 3, in which Bellows and Jenderedijian 
trace the various forms of structural violence—
including deleterious cultural dietary practices, 
restriction from public participation, and isolation 
from research—and institutional efforts for
reform. Case studies are used to evidence what have often been perceived as abstract concepts, while also underscoring the need for addressing gender violence both at national and international levels, as is discussed in the latter half of the chapter. Lhotska, Scherbaum, and Bellows return to the importance of nutrition in Chapter 4, homing in on the role of childbearing and health across the lifespan. As yet another nested component of the gender security and food security equation, equitable nutrition is largely rendered invisible in policymaking efforts. Indeed, as these authors note, full realization of the right to adequate food and nutrition must account for the unique capacity of women to bear children and breastfeed. What they call the “entwined subjectivities of mother and child,” or the dependency of a child’s health from conception through infancy as influenced by a context of socioeconomic conditions and living environment, has yet to be fully embraced by human rights instruments (p. 164). From the angle of greater promotion of local agriculture and food systems in support of sustainable livelihoods, in Chapter 5 Lemke and Bellows critique the dominant market-based systems that promote international trade as the primary response to food insecurity and malnutrition. Synthesizing threads from the previous chapters—including the patronizing effects of extant food security policies and the problematic practice of medicalized food assistance —connections between the shortcomings of measures aimed to address malnutrition and the paternalistic policies that promote food and nutrition aid dependences are brought into sharp focus. Taken together, these analyses lay bare the nested nature of gender security and food security, and the need for an inclusive approach to the human right to adequate food and nutrition.

Balancing comprehensive and compelling examination of the limits of extant human rights and food-security frameworks, with clear and constructive pathways forward, can be difficult with a thesis as fundamental as that presented by this volume. To be sure, the nested nature of gender discrimination, neoliberal political economy, patronizing public policy and international aid efforts, food access, health across the lifespan, and local livelihoods is necessarily complex; the premise that gender security and food security are inextricably linked requires in-depth analysis. However, the degree to which each chapter painstakingly walks readers though various iterations of international policies, shifts in gendered practices over time, new vocabulary and concepts, and repeated calls to address barriers and provide more adequate and equitable support, often relegates recommendations to the final pages of any given chapter.

In the final chapter, Valente, Franco, and Montes bring the volume full circle in a presentation of a new conceptual framework for the human right to adequate food and nutrition. Summarizing the conditions, disconnects, and fragmentations presented in the preceding chapters, “the role of human rights in improving women’s food and nutrition security and in reducing hunger and malnutrition” (p. 341) is at the center of the volume’s conclusion. Unitizing Amartya Sen’s capability approach, food sovereignty, and principles of participatory governance, the human right to adequate food and nutrition goes beyond “mere access to food stuffs...[and] freedom from hunger,” as is the parlance and practice of extant human rights and food security policy, to “encompass how societies organize to feed themselves adequately and sustainably, in a participatory way” (p. 355). The authors present a three-pronged approach to redefining and actualizing the human right to adequate food and nutrition, codifying specific obligations and provisions in the People’s and Food Sovereignty Matrix (p. 369). The chapter concludes with implications for collaborations with social movements and recommendations for human rights reform and institutional coordination.

This well composed and far-reaching volume adds critical insight to the intersections of human rights, gender discrimination, and food sovereignty. Reflecting the composition and mission of the collaborative team from which this project is borne, this text is relevant across research-, theoretical-, and application-based efforts at food system reform and human rights advocacy and enforcement. Students of international development, political economy, food systems, and gender studies would benefit from the analyses and case studies herein.