

## FOOD IS AN AFRICAN FEMINIST ISSUE...

Elaine Salo

Elaine Salo is a Professor at the University of Delaware (US). A feminist anthropologist who lived and worked in South Africa for several years, she has worked extensively on femininities and masculinities in the Western Cape, social movements in South Africa, African feminisms and sexualities in South Africa.

Email address: [esalo@udel.edu](mailto:esalo@udel.edu)

Women's engagement with food has informed our gendered identities in ambiguous ways. Our primary roles ensuring food and nutritional security to households and communities provides us with a grounded sense of identity and of power anchored in reproductive labor. Terms of respect and endearment emanate from such work so that appellations such as Mama, Nomasizwe, and the like denote deep, shared respect. However such terms of endearment and respect do not extend to significant material power and confine women's power to the limited zone of emotional affection and more cynically sentimentality.

Women in Sub Saharan Africa provide at least 70% of field labor, provide 90% of household water supply and produce between 60% - 80% of food in households (Vivas 2011,) <sup>1</sup>. Yet women do not own the means to food production and are often the ones who feel the impact of food insecurity and hunger.

Many women on this continent have been confined to care work and reproductive work, caring for households and dependents, spending hours laboring in small crop farming, preparing food, firewood and water to provide meals. Such labor in the past, associated with African women's invaluable socio- economic and social statuses that gave *lobola* its legal and economic significance in pre-capitalist economies. Now instead women's reproductive work, to ensure food security place them in the lowest socioeconomic statuses across the continent. Despite the importance of women's labor in ensuring food security in households and communities, and the survival of their dependents, their work is be considered 'free', or naturalized, a part of the invisible economy of affect or of love, often unaccounted for in national economies, and in national accounting systems or, until recently, in the global accounting books of institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. The unaccounted value of women's reproductive labor in agriculture and in ensuring the food security of households have contributed to the invisibility of women's work in this sector.

Food is a feminist issue on the African continent for 3 reasons. First, women contribute to household food but the value of their labor is invisible. National accounting systems do not consider the contribution of women's food production in their calculations of gross domestic product or national income. Most often such economic activities are considered a part of the informal sector or as an aspect of women's domestic labors.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article26779> accessed 2 Nov 2015

Secondly, the majority of African countries have turned to agri business in the farming sector to ensure exports primarily and not to ensure the local populations' food security. In the agri business sector, women are either incorporated as individual entrepreneurs or as flexible waged labor. Recently the World Bank has begun to emphasize incorporating women into the agricultural and food processing sectors as waged workers or as farmers as 'smart economics'. However organizations such as La Via Campesina and eco-feminist activists such as Vandana Shiva (2011) as well as Nancy Fraser (2009) have indicated how such 'smart economics' approaches do not address the structural socio-economic or political processes that still render women as gendered subordinates, in an unequal structural economic and political system.

Women do much of the labor in the agricultural and food processing sector but they are a minority in decision making over seeds, land and water – the natural means of production. Women have little to no control over or ownership of natural resources required for food production such as land and water. Shiva has critiqued the World Trade Organisation and its 1994 Trade Related Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement for allowing for the patenting of life forms such as seeds and indigenous plants. Shiva has called such patenting 'bio piracy'. She has argued that TRIPS has enabled the privatization of seeds and the creation of seed monopolies by food multi nationals and agri businesses. The commodification of nature has informed women farmers' transformation into disempowered laborers and consumers in the food production industry.

Organizations such as La Via Campesina have insisted upon central focus on food sovereignty as an alternative practice to the current focus on agri business model of food production. In the food sovereignty model, in which the eco feminist approach is highlighted, women's labor in and traditional knowledge about food production and their control over seeds are emphasized and valued. In addition, women's conservation methods and sustainability practices in relation to natural resources are also stressed. The eco-feminist approach insists upon the recuperation of the woman farmer as a politicized social group, who have been disempowered in the food production process through the privatization of food production, with the emphasis on profiteering and the concentration of land ownership in a few food multinationals such as Monsanto, Del Monte and others. The eco-feminist approach insists that we examine the processes of privatization throughout the food production processes. This requires us to interrogate the processes of seed acquisition, and the technological interventions in seed production such as genetic modification; the effects of agri business on food production, such as increasing landlessness, commodification of natural resources such as land and water privatization, increasing out migration of men from rural areas and the feminization of labor in this sector. Eco – feminists point to the paradox in which women are turned into waged laborers, but are often paid too little to ensure household food security. In situations where water is privatized, poor women and girls have to work harder, walk further to find water for household use. In this case, women have become consumers of food and water, rather than producers. Eco feminists have called for a focus on the social production of food in local contexts, and the recuperation of women's primary role as knowledgeable producers of sustainable food crops and seeds.

The eco-feminism model is contrasted with the agribusiness sector's focus on a few multinationals' control over food production, seed distribution and land ownership.

Secondly, normative cultural practices that consider women as minors and men's dependents in Sub Saharan Africa have contributed to women's disempowered roles in food security.

Many African countries formally recognize equality on the grounds of sex in their constitutions. However such formal rights remain elusive for many women especially in contexts where their gendered personhood and social worth are anchored within communal settings, and their socio-economic survival depends upon such intersectional connections. Invariably their communal connections are to men as husbands, relatives or chiefs, who exert control over natural resources such as land and water. Women's legal and customary statuses on the African continent render them powerless to decide over such resources.

Women farmers constitute at least 50% of the agricultural labor force in Sub Saharan Africa, and are the keystone to household food security on the continent. Yet, women have little or no power over their access to and ownership of the land, water or the other means to produce food. Many rural women are reliant upon male decision making over natural resources to gain access to land and water for food production. Most often such access is gained through marriage or through other male relatives. However divorced women and widows often find themselves at the mercy of male relatives' charity in order to access land and water for food production. In such cases, men take ownership of the major share of the crops that women produce. Single women are turned into free or cheap laborers within the traditional system of food production.

Finally, the turn to globalization via neoliberal capitalist practices in agri business have increased women's landlessness and lack of control over natural resources. Male chiefs and politicians who hold the decision making power over natural resources are more likely to lease out land and water to foreign companies for the purposes of mining, fracking or farming by agri-businesses, who utilize genetically modified crops, some of which are often expensive to sustain, because they don't provide seeds for successive harvest.

Despite their representation in the state, women ministers in land, forest and water portfolios, lack autonomy, and rely upon male political patronage for their power. Consequently, these women ministers' ability to rule in favor of women's economic power in these sectors remain constrained. In addition, these ministers would be more likely to support decisions to lease the land and the water to private companies, in the interests of globalization through 'deregulation and foreign investment', rather than assist local women to gain access for food production.

## **Conclusion**

Nancy Fraser (2009) has pointed to the coincidence between a feminist focus on recognition through identity politics and representation on the one hand, and neoliberal

capitalism, with its privatizing impetus in the food production sector. African feminism needs to recuperate its radical impetus, through a renewed focus on economic inequality and redistribution, if we are to make any difference in the lives of many women who have to ensure food security for their households. We do need to insist upon equal gendered power in decision making about the natural resources of food production at all levels of food and natural resource governance. And we have to recuperate and celebrate women's roles as knowledgeable food producers, nurturers of the land and of water, and as sustainable farmers, at the heart of food production. This is ultimately what food sovereignty is about - expanding governance of the natural resources, and recuperating feminine knowledge about sustainable, local food production. ,