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The Face of Food Insecurity is Female: A Post-Colonial Feminist Argument for Rural Women

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Abstract

The achievement of food security is a global priority, but remains a particular challenge for rural women. International frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to ensure zero hunger, improved nutrition and the promotion of sustainable agriculture. Yet, while the SDGs have significantly broadened the scope of targets focused on achieving gender equity and women's empowerment, as well as recognising that gender equality has a social, economic and political dimension, they remain silent on how substantive gender

justice would be achieved. Using a post-colonial feminist perspective, the paper argues that the political, economic and social dimensions, specifically regarding food security, are interconnected and rooted in power inequality and patriarchy. The paper uses a qualitative content analysis to determine the extent to which policy frameworks developed in support of rural women in South Africa are gendered to reflect the experienced realities of women in rural, culturally traditional communities.

Keywords: *Food Insecurity, Post-Colonial Feminist, Gender, South Africa*

Introduction

Globally, 821 million people suffer from undernourishment, which is equivalent to one in nine people worldwide. There is an increase in the percentage of people facing undernourishment and severe food insecurity (FAO 2018). Achieving food security is an international priority globally. The FAO (2012) estimates that 75% of all hungry people live in rural areas, primarily in Asian and African rural villages, with 50% from smallholder farming communities and a further 20% from landless people depending on agriculture for their livelihoods, with 10% involved in herding, fishing or forestry activities. A further 20% are migrants living in informal settlements seeking employment in order to sustain families living in rural areas. Seventy percent are women disproportionately affected by malnutrition, poverty and food insecurity. Food security is defined by the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security (2013), as a situation where all people at all times, continuously have access to food that is safe, healthy and nutritious as is required for a healthy and active life. The achievement of food security and the eradication of hunger continues to remain a challenge for countries such as South Africa. In order to promote the achievement of SDG 2, which aims to promote food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture, there are various agreements, commitments and plans for action in place. At the G20 Summit in 2018, countries made a commitment to end poverty, with specific emphasis on eradicating extreme poverty by the year 2030. Countries such as Brazil, Germany, China and South Africa made commitments to devote resources to develop sustainable agriculture and support women farmers, herders and fisheries in developing countries. On the African continent, the African Union Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security (Maputo

Declaration) emphasises the achievement of food security and nutrition in Africa and aims to eradicate hunger and undernourishment by 2030 (African Union 2019).

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) is responsible for the coordination of food security initiatives in South Africa. The DAFF is responsible for the implementation of the Integrated Food Security Strategy (2002), the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security, as well as the Fetsa Tlala Production Initiative conceptualised in 2013. The study uses theoretical sampling for the inclusion of DAFF formal documentation produced between 2002 and 2018 related to the above strategy and policy. Through thematic analysis the findings will be presented using a post-colonial feminist lens in deepening the understanding of the extent to which policy frameworks are cognisant of the economic, political and social factors that influence the daily lives of rural women. The scope through which women's empowerment is driven by public policy is contested, as the argument is made that gender policy which does not have an inherent gendered basis will not lead to the sustainable transformation of rural women's lives.

Conceptualising Food Insecurity and Food Sovereignty

While food security was first defined in 1996 by the World Food Summit to reflect the definition provided above, food insecurity can be defined as the absence of physical and economic access to food which can either be chronic or transitory. The international peasant movement, La Via Campesina (a transnational network of 150 local and national organisations in 70 countries from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas), has gone further to identify the obtaining of food sovereignty as an ultimate goal. Food sovereignty is when food security is combined with the idea that people should have control and power over their food systems, inclusive of production and consumption. The whole intention with advocating for food sovereignty is to ensure that people affected by food security policies in their countries have a say in their formulation, implementation and evaluation (Deepak 2014:154). Patel (2009:9) advocates that it is “a precondition for everyone having something to eat, of a genuine and direct democracy, which has been systematically denied to the world's rural poor”. For this reason the La Via Campesina (2011) articulates that food sovereignty implies “new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, people, racial

groups, social classes and generations”. The importance of achieving food security (and by implication food sovereignty) includes the recognition of the gender inequalities faced by women. The existence of gender inequalities is a hindrance to the productivity of women and the contribution that women can make to food security and nutrition (FAO 2019). Women are the main producers of the food consumed on the African continent, they are also responsible for the preparation of food consumed in the household (African Union 2017). The role that women have in ensuring food security goes beyond agricultural production, and extends to selling food in order to generate household income.

Ekeme *et al.* in African Union (2017) highlight the significance of women’s roles in income generation for the household by stating that in rural areas, women are specifically responsible for the selling of agricultural produce in some areas which result in access to income. Food security is underpinned by four pillars: food production, food access, food utilisation and the stability of food supply. This paper argues that in order to be effective, policies, programmes and strategies should incorporate considerations of the gender inequalities faced by women in rural areas. The international treaties and agreements that South Africa has ratified encourage the elimination of discrimination on women based on gender. The following section looks at the international and national policy framework that supports the eradication of hunger with specific emphasis on women.

Post-Colonial Feminism

Gender remains a most contested concept, principally because it is defined by those who study it. While feminism as a movement achieved much in placing emphasis on structural societal inequalities, the movement also resulted in marginalising groups of women who did not fit into the more neo-liberal Western definition of feminism. Chandra Mohanty wrote “Under Western Eyes” in 1984 wherein she contested this structural assumption of a typical third world woman oppressed by her society and culture with a very paternalistic attitude towards women. She confronted Western feminism on two fronts, namely questioning the hegemonic nature of Western feminism and what it leads to (othering of ‘third world women’) and arguing for a feminist theory that is “autonomous, geographically, historically and culturally grounded” (Mohanty 1991:51). This third world woman would necessarily be

defined as religious (not progressive), family-oriented (traditional), a legal minor (not aware of her rights), illiterate (ignorant), and domestic (backward). Post-colonial feminists (Sa'ar 2005; Agathangelou and Turcotte 2010) warn against implying that third world women's geography limited their access to rights and state protection, thereby othering third world women and negating their status as one where their location and history have led to their exclusion and oppression.

The implication is that the West produces feminist theory and praxis while anything non-Western is considered as "other" (Mohanty 1991:52). However, in this definition there is a gross misrepresentation of women and their relationship to power and development. Cheryl McEwan (2001:93) wrote that "development is about power" and where contemporary development is studied, the concept of power needs to be recognised. Mohanty (2003:402) argues that cross-cultural feminism must take consideration of the micropolitics of context, subjectivity and struggle, as well as recognising the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes. Parpart (1995:255) contends strongly that presenting third world women as backward, uniformly poor, powerless and vulnerable marginalises women in the global South further and lessens the possibility for partnership between Western and Third World women needed to realise global targets such as those set by the SDGs. Deepak (2014:156) recognises the oppression of women in the global South in multiple sites, through colonialism, nationalism, fundamentalism, patriarchies and global economic structural constraints, while still affirming their agency. Their agency is, however, limited by their social location, influencing their access to political, social and economic rights. Thus, the need for a multi-layered and contextual analysis is needed when studying the development of women within a specific context, such as rural women in South Africa. The argument supported by this paper is that even rural women should not be seen as a homogenous group, since the particular intersection of gender, culture, context, age and even ethnicity will influence the extent to which global agendas such as the SDG targets are realised through local programmes and policies such as the Integrated Food Security Strategy and the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security.

Research Methodology

A qualitative content analysis is proposed for the study selecting the three most important policy frameworks developed and administered by the DAFF in addressing food security. The DAFF is responsible for the implementation of the Integrated Food Security Strategy (2002), the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security (2013) as well as the Fetsa Tlala Production Initiative (2013).

Through thematic analysis the findings will be presented using a post-colonial feminist lens in deepening the understanding of the extent to which policy frameworks are cognisant of the economic, political and social factors that influence the daily lives of rural women. The scope through which women's empowerment is driven by public policy is contested, as the argument is made that gender policy which does not have an inherent gendered basis will not lead to the sustainable transformation of rural women's lives. Pine and de Souza (2013) write about the inhumanity suffered by food insecure people as study participants in which their own voices are silenced. They argue that the commodification of food contributes to the political disempowerment of those experiencing food insecurity. While the qualitative content analysis does not include active participation by those intended to be served by the policies, the aim is to determine, through qualitative thematic analysis, whether any consideration has been given to providing a voice to the food insecure rural women in South Africa. For this purpose the findings will be discussed using the following themes, including access and representation (political dimension), inequality and poverty (social dimension), and economic self-determination (economic dimension).

Findings and Discussion

The FAO (2015) states that these gender barriers that exist in the rural areas where women continue to face gender constraints hinder their role in food production and economic participation. This section of the paper provides a discussion of the gender barriers that impact on women's food security. Agarwal (2018:26) argues that women's access to land and property, as well as their access to natural resources, have the greatest ability to influence their food insecure status. The following section will discuss the extent to which the South African government policies identified above have made provision for the political, social and

economic dimensions in addressing food security for rural women. Consideration will be given to the extent to which these policies provide for a multi-layered understanding of rural women's lives in the identification of priorities and programmes.

Access and representation

Daniels (2016) reports that rural women in South Africa live mainly on communal land in traditional authority areas. Of the estimated 21.5 million people living on communal land, 58.9% of them are women, which places rural women at the intersection of law and traditional practice, specifically when considering their access to land rights. Although generalising as to the gender identity of rural women is not encouraged, the reality that traditional land limits access to and participation in decision-making cannot be denied. One of the barriers that women face in the households is access to resources. Households where a female is the head are more inclined to and susceptible to hunger when there is an increase in the price of food (Gustafston 2013). According to Gustafston (2013), the rationale for this inclination is due to the fact that women spend more of their income on food for themselves and their households and therefore when there is an increase in food prices, women will benefit the least. In comparison to men, women spend more of their income on food. Women are disadvantaged by the differences that exist in terms of access to credit. There are differences in the opportunities provided to women and men in terms of access to credit, extension services and resources that are necessary for food production. This is especially the case for women in the rural areas who depend on agricultural production for food and income (wa Githinji, Kostontidinis and Barenberg 2014).

According to Olowu (2013), there is an increasing number of households that are female headed. In some instances, due to their gender roles, women are denied security and land tenure. The lack of resources to secure credit is a barrier to women accessing land, producing food for their households and participating in agriculture as a form of income. "If women had the same access to produce resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20-30%. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 25-40%, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12-17%" (FAO 2010:40). This paper argues that in order to be effective,

policies need to take into consideration the gender inequalities that women face in accessing resources that promote their productivity in agriculture. In order for the African continent to achieve sustainable development, it is important to ensure that women are empowered to actively participate in decision-making processes (Ekeme *et al.* in African Union 2017).

In the IFSS (2002), the word representation is used twice in connection with ensuring the development of consultative forums to support the implementation of food security programmes. While civil society is specifically mentioned as being important in those consultative forums, women are not mentioned. The policy further recognises that the lack of representation is a contributing factor that influences effective coordination between all stakeholders in the implementation of the policy. With regard to women and food security, the policy states as a background the depiction of women and children as the most vulnerable groupings affected by food insecurity. No specific mention is made as to how women are to be given a voice in the implementation of the policy. Inequality in terms of gender and race is mentioned, but again as part of sketching the background as input into the policy. The argument can be made that while the IFSS (2002) stresses the importance of ensuring that women have access to resources that would enable them to better their lives, no particular attention is given to either defining women as a heterogeneous group nor as to how women will specifically be included or given agency through the implementation of the policy. The policy distinguishes between rural and urban areas as broad categories, but does not delve into the composition of rural people, although increased profitability and competitiveness of rural enterprises on behalf of those who are food insecure is an expected outcome of the realisation of the IFSS.

With regard to the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security, representation is not mentioned. Women are mentioned twice in connection with health and nutritional education, but gender is not mentioned. The policy confirms that food and nutritional security is complex and multi-faceted, requiring a multi-dimensional approach in addressing its challenges. As stated in the policy (2013:6) “Food and nutrition security requires well-managed inter-sectoral co-ordination, and the genuine integration of existing policies and programmes in health, education and environmental protection, as well as in agrarian reform and agricultural development”. The policy gives rise to initiatives and

programmes, including improved nutritional safety nets, nutrition education, investment in agriculture, improved market participation, and risk management administered through relevant departments including DAFF. The argument is made that at the national policy level no recognition is given to the role of women in realising these initiatives, and no particular voice is given to rural women who may considerably affect specifically agricultural production in ensuring food security.

Ironically, the Fetsa Tlala Food Production Initiative (2013) identifies its intention to eradicate the structural causes of food insecurity, while not mentioning women or gender in its conceptualisation. Annual performance reports have been submitted and report on the extent to which land has been made available for increased food production, which commodities have been planted and how specific provinces have fared with regard to production targets. However, who were involved and how their lives were affected by the increased food production are not discussed. There is no consideration for the voices of women or recognition of the challenges that hamper their participation and empowerment. Thus, while food production may increase, the reality is that the evidence of whether rural women's livelihoods have been positively affected is starkly absent.

The irony presented in the above analyses is supported by Agarwal (2018:27) who states that 47% of all farm workers in Africa are female. Not giving recognition to the particular lives and challenges of almost half the workforce may explain why policies aimed at empowering women do not realise their empowerment. The fact of the matter is that the policies have been designed without the input of those they intend to affect, namely rural women. This is exacerbated by the accepted social role that women play in the household and the extent to which policies aimed at structural change actually reinforce the accepted social norms and practices.

Inequality and empowerment

In addition to the challenges that women face due to their gender in terms of access to resources, there are societal norms that hinder women's active participation in food production. Tebekaw (2011) states that women with low levels of empowerment and decision-making power are 50% more likely to experience undernutrition than other women who have decision-making power in the household. There are

traditional practices that favour men more than women, especially in terms of the distribution of assets (Kassie, Ndiritu and Stage 2014). In the event of a death or a divorce in the family, women might receive less productive livestock or smaller plots of land for agriculture. Female headed households are more vulnerable, especially in rural areas. In rural areas, women have less personal resources at their disposal and limited influence over household decision-making processes (Charles 2011). It is imperative to ensure that the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies for food security consider the gender inequalities that women face. This paper argues that in order to address food insecurity, these barriers should be taken into consideration when making policy decisions.

Nambiru-Mwaura (2014) indicates that there are still gender disparities that exist in terms of access to land around the world. Women are food producers although there are areas where they do not fully own the land. In China, women might not have access to land due to patrilineal practices that persist in inhibiting their participation in agricultural activities as food producers. In Mozambique, men are still regarded as the head of the household and have the rightful authority over land. In rural areas women are most likely to grow their own food and should be treated as important contributors to the food value chain in terms of access to and the availability of food in households. It is therefore vital to ensure that the factors that may inhibit their active participation are reduced (FAO 2011). Adebo and Fallowo (2015:44) found that “male headed, small size, educated households are more food secure than female headed large sized, uneducated households”. Women play an important role in ensuring food security with regard to food production, economic access to food and nutritional security.

According to the IFSS, poverty is mostly found amongst black South Africans due to its colonial and apartheid history. Black South Africans are presented as a homogenous group and poverty within races or gender are not distinguished. Nationally the policy describes South Africa as food secure with the ability to produce and even export specific commodities. Yet, at household level, the statistics indicate that 35% of the population are vulnerable to food insecurity (IFSS 2002:22). The policy breaks these statistics down per province, but does not disaggregate any data further. The IFSS makes mention once of social development and empowerment, and does this in relation to identifying possible policy interventions needed to address food insecurity. The IFSS

does not recognise any role that patriarchy or traditional practices may have on the daily lives of rural women. Equally, no mention is made of the above in the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security or in the Fetsa Tlala Food Production Initiative. Not recognising the social context or dimension within which rural women are placed negates the effect that national policies aim to achieve. Disavowing the voices of half the population in developing policy aimed at addressing their lives leads to a gross misrepresentation of their lived existence and will not fundamentally change their realities. Doss, Menzen-Dick, Quisimbing and Theis (2018) indicate the significance of strengthening women's access to the resources required for productive agriculture. They assert that researchers, policy-makers and practitioners all carry preconceived ideas of gender relations, gender disparities and gender roles. Given this fact, there is a need for the recognition of the differences between groups of women, women's strengths and limitations and the roles of men and women assigned by society. This recognition will be vital to ensure that programmes for the right people are designed with the right context in order to achieve policy and programme goals.

There are patriarchal cultural practices that do not provide equal opportunities for women and men, while disadvantaging women based on their gender roles. This has a negative impact on household food security. As a result of the discrimination that women face, there are difficulties that inhibit women's participation in food production, preparation, processing, distribution and marketing activities (United Nations 2013). Cultural practices indicate that women decrease their own consumption if there is a shortage of food in the house (ODI 2009). "The distribution of food within the household depends on gender and the power relations hierarchy within the family" (FAO 2013). A study conducted by Tibesigwa and Visser (2016) indicates that male headed households were more food secure than female headed households. Female headed households in the rural areas were found to be more prone to food insecurity than urban based households. The role that women have in the households has led to women being mainly in charge of making sure that there is adequate food available in the house. This cannot be achieved if the social context of rural women remains unrecognised at a national policy level.

Economic self-determination

Daniels (2016) reports on the links to be drawn between land ownership and rural women empowerment. These benefits include:

- women who own property or control assets are better positioned to be resilient when coping with crisis;
- women who own land can use this as collateral for credit in ensuring access to financial investments;
- women who own their homes and land experience protection and have a secure place to live; and
- women who own land generate much higher non-farm earnings from self-employment than women without land.

The role that women have in the households has led to women being mainly in charge of making sure that there is adequate food available in the house, and therefore it is women who are affected the most by an increase in food prices. Specifically, in the rural areas, women are excluded from decision-making in the household in relation to the provisioning of food (Levay et al. 2013). Tibesigwa and Visser (2016) assert that in order for policies to be effective, consideration must be given to geographical and gender differentiation wherein they have found that the gender of the household head determines food security.

Women have lower purchasing power than men due to fewer economic opportunities stemming from lower levels of education, lower wages and less income. “Women and girls are disfavoured in the allocation of food in the household. In order to reduce education-related expenses, girls would be removed from school first. It is important for policy-makers to know and understand the inequalities that exist between women and men, which is essential for programme and policy formulation and implementation” (Asian Development Bank 2013).

The gender inequalities that women in the rural areas are faced with create a need for the recognition of the gendered dimensions of food security. If countries are to achieve the objective of zero hunger and eliminate food insecurity, the public policy context must reflect and address these inequalities. The IFSS Policy recognises that nationally economic conditions have not been created to favour the increased participation of poor, food insecure households. All that has been attained is making these poor households more dependent on social

safety nets, such as social grants, which do not foster economic growth or increase participation in the mainstream (formal) economy. No recognition is given in the policy for the work done by women in the informal economy in order to sustain their families, although mention is made of women's lack of access to financial institutions and credit to fund their economic activities. High unemployment rates are blamed for lack of purchasing power amongst the poor, while the policy remains silent on how food security in particular will be achieved, apart from stating it as a priority.

Equally the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security highlights inequalities in food distribution and identifies that approximately 9 million tons of food are wasted annually against the stark reality of a vulnerable and food insecure rural population. Both poverty and inequality are highlighted as challenges through South Africa's development roadmap, the National Development Plan (2030), and here the securing of land tenure especially for women is mentioned. The policy makes provision for targeted spending to increase food security, but fails to identify who should be targeted. Specific measurements are discussed in the policy and child hunger is particularly mentioned, as are women's lack of access to credit and improved technologies that would increase their agricultural production. A general consideration for increased black economic empowerment to improve market participation is described, without recognising the heterogeneity of black South Africans. Reports on the achievements made through the Fetsa Tlala Food Production Initiative have been largely favourable in measuring increased farmer participation in local and international agricultural activities. The numbers of farmers helped through the initiative are mentioned annually, but whether these farmers are men or women is not known. In presentations made before Parliament, mention is made of women-run projects, but not how many and where, and no particular lessons have been learned from these projects. The lived lives of women are not told and whether their lives are actually affected by any of the policies mentioned above have not been documented. While the DAFF reports actively on the seasonal crop production and estimates, data on gender-targeted programmes or policies remains elusive. The argument can only be made that in order to understand the extent to which any national policy affects the lived experience of rural women, one would have to immerse oneself in a rural community and actively

participate in their daily lives to give voice to one of the most vulnerable groups in our society, namely the rural women.

Synthesis

The recognition of political, social and economic diversity amongst rural women supports a post-colonial feminist perspective and provides for a voice to be rendered to those most vulnerable in society. That being said, international and national policies prioritise specific initiatives and call upon governments to initiate programmes that would lead to women's empowerment and address their lack of access to financial and economic opportunities. International and national policies do not, however, demand that these programmes or initiatives be developed in partnership with themselves (rural women), but rather reinforce that government initiatives are something that happens to women and not something for which women request participation, recognition and responsibility. Post-colonial feminism demands that the gender praxis should be developed by those involved in its activities and not by those not having lived rural women's lives. The policies developed by the South African government are completely silent about the participation of women in policy development, and evidence that suggests that policies have positively affected the lived lives of rural women remains elusive. Post-colonial feminism cannot be allowed to be developed in the hallowed halls of academia, but should reflect and be influenced by the lived experiences of women, and in this case rural women in South Africa. The picture of food insecurity will not change unless those contributing to food production and food security within their own homes are heard.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to identify international and national policies developed to affect the livelihoods of rural women and specifically to address their vulnerability to food insecurity. Using a post-colonial feminist perspective, the paper concludes that policies and programmes remain mute as to how the lived lives of rural women should be reflected in the development, implementation and evaluation of these public policies. Positioning rural women within a post-colonial feminist space allows for the reflection of diversity in political, economic and social circumstances, while demanding that the local context of rural women be

recognised as an important contributing factor towards public policy realisation. Power, patriarchy and a lack of participation in decision-making processes and structures remain the most significant obstacles towards to realisation of food security for South African rural women.

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