

Review of the 2019 Right to Food and Nutrition Watch. *Women's Power in Food Struggles*

By Hanna Goldberg

This issue of the *Watch* seeks to center the experiences and particular oppressions faced by women globally, particularly challenges to women's struggles for the right to food and nutrition. In their introductory essay, Andrews, Smith and Morena frame the articles collected in the report "through the nexus of women-violence-nature" (2019, 8). Their analysis highlights the violence of patriarchal capitalism, both physical and symbolic, which, through "various discriminatory international and national policies...act to constrain and curtail women's autonomy through restricting and undermining their right to food and nutrition and other human rights" (ibid). They also use this lens to emphasize a connection between women and nature – particularly the fact that women remain the majority of food growers and producers around the world – and the means by which this connection has been mobilized to articulate a resistance to oppressive states and "the hegemonic neoliberal capitalist food and agricultural system" (ibid). The authors view "both women and nature as exploited, 'othered', and made invisible," and it is this perspective that frames the entirety of the report that follows (ibid). The various articles collected in this issue of the *Watch* seek to make visible the invisible, to center the marginalized, and to give voice to those who have been silenced.

As many of the featured authors make clear, the silencing and rendering invisible of women in the food system has much to do with the devaluing of social reproduction. While – as Andrews, Smith and Morena point out – women are disproportionately represented worldwide in food *production*, they are also vastly disproportionately represented as laborers of social

reproduction, the unremunerated labor required for the reproduction of the workforce and, ultimately, the maintenance of capitalism itself. This devaluing of social reproduction is a theme throughout the articles collected in this issue.

Woods (2019) highlights the ways in which neoliberal governmental policies in the UK, the move toward austerity, and the diminishing of social services disproportionately disadvantage women, people of color, immigrants, children, and the elderly. Woods draws on intersectionality to emphasize the failure of prevailing modes of analysis and data to capture the scope of “institutionalized patriarchy, violence and racism” that “marginalizes and oppresses Black women” (29). Gioia (2019) highlights infringements to the rights of LGBTTIQ people in an effort to demonstrate that these rights holders must be explicitly addressed in the struggle for the right to food and nutrition and human rights more generally, or the rights-based food sovereignty movement, too, will be guilty of reproducing oppressive social patterns.

Seibert et al. (2019) describe the necessity of a feminist approach to agroecology, emphasizing that it is vital to recognize women as knowledge holders with real expertise when it comes to sustainable food growing. This knowledge is directly linked to women’s global status as both agricultural laborers *and* those who perform the bulk of socially reproductive labor. Making this invisible labor visible will be an incredible boon to the agroecology movement—sustainable food production need not be invented, whole cloth. While the above authors highlight fascinating case studies, draw on the theory of intersectionality, and put forth a critique of what they often term “patriarchal capitalism,” I would argue that they might be strengthened by an engagement with contemporary Marxist feminist thinkers, many of whom are grouped under the rubric of Social Reproduction Theory (SRT). Social reproduction theorists argue that capitalism is in fact predicated on this “silencing” and devaluing of social reproduction. While

intersectionality provides a compelling framework for conceptualizing the connections between identities and oppression, SRT is “primarily concerned with understanding how categories of oppression (such as gender, race, and ableism) are coproduced in simultaneity with the production of surplus value” (Bhattacharya 2017). SRT highlights the way in which class is not an identity, but an objective relation to the means of production, but also “theorizes the *relationship* between market and extra-market relations rather than simply gesturing toward their distinction” [emphasis in original] (ibid).

Violence is a second theme that runs throughout the articles collected within the *Watch* report. Leyesa (2019) describes the oppression faced by rural women living under authoritarian regimes in Northern Syria, Brazil, and the Philippines. Under such regimes, women experience physical violence, but also the symbolic violence of silencing and marginalization, as they are denied rights and exploited for their socially reproductive labor. Leyesa highlights instances of women’s active resistance to violence and domination, demonstrated through collective action. Colindres and Lopez (2019) seek to make visible the increasing feminization of migration from Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico to the United States. The violence causing much of this emigration is the direct result of both gender-based violence against women and the structural violence of neoliberal capitalism. Women demonstrate resistance to these forms of violence both in their choices to migrate and in other cases to stay, asserting a right to feed themselves and their families.

That these authors call attention to violence, and particularly state violence, against women is certainly necessary to the *Watch’s* larger project of making visible the invisible. But while capitalist states violently oppress women, people of color, LGBTQ people, they also conceptualize these marginalized people as passive victims. The authors of the *Watch’s*

introduction articulate a sense of “rage” felt by women across the world, which they think is palpable in the articles collected in this issue. Some more developed exploration of that “rage,” and of women’s active resistance and rebellion, might have provided a compelling counterpoint.

All told, this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* illustrates many powerful and compelling contemporary cases around the world, and provides a crucial addition and even corrective to the right to food and nutrition literature. Only by highlighting the stories of women and other marginalized people, by centering their voices, can the right to food movement avoid reproducing oppressive, violent, patriarchal structures. The articles contained in this issue of the *Watch* all highlight a fundamental difficulty faced by the human rights movement—the difficulty of constituting oneself as a rightsholder when one experiences these multiple axes of subjugation. This difficulty only further underlines the importance of the stories of resistance contained within the *Watch*.

References

- Andrews D, Smith K, and Alejandra Morena M. 2019. Enraged: Women and Nature. In: Global Network for the Right to Food. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch: Women's Power in Food Struggles. Germany: FIAN International, Issue 11.
- Bhattacharya T. 2017. Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory. In: Bhattacharya T and Vogel L, editors. Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression. London: Pluto Press.
- Galeano Colindres AD and Sosa Lopez VA. 2019. Migrating for Survival: a Conversation Between Women from Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. In: Global Network for the Right to Food. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch: Women's Power in Food Struggles. Germany: FIAN International, Issue 11.
- Gioia P. 2019. Coming Out! Gender Diversity in the Food System. In: Global Network for the Right to Food. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch: Women's Power in Food Struggles. Germany: FIAN International, Issue 11.
- Leyesa DL. 2019. Women's Resistance Against Authoritarianism in Brazil, The Philippines, and Rojava (Northern Syria). In: Global Network for the Right to Food. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch: Women's Power in Food Struggles. Germany: FIAN International, Issue 11.
- Seibert IG, Sayeed AT, Georgieva Z, and Guerra A. 2019. Without Feminism, There is No Agroecology. In: Global Network for the Right to Food. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch: Women's Power in Food Struggles. Germany: FIAN International, Issue 11.
- Woods D. 2019. Invisible Women: Hunger, Poverty, Racism and Gender in the UK. In: Global Network for the Right to Food. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch: Women's Power in Food Struggles. Germany: FIAN International, Issue 11.