

SEMINARIO: *Food Security in the MENA Region: Participation of Civil Society and Associationism*



Food Security in the MENA Region: *The Role of Women*

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Introduction:

The notion of food security is the sign of a notable development in the consideration of the rights of man and the attention given to the qualitative aspect of his human needs. In this respect, the rights to food and to food security would be an extension of his inalienable right to life, and one of the elemental aspects that mark his absolute dignity. In principle, all worldly goods should be allocated to man, to his well-being and to the absolute plenitude of his being: physical, mental, social and spiritual plenitude, to everything that contributes to the full realization of his humanity, his very mission at the core of creation. Talking about "food security" today means to discuss the quality of human existence and to touch on one of the strengths of the female contribution. It means being able to say "yes, I have the right to life, to an ever-improving life, to a life in keeping with my dignity".

1. Food security and the role of women: the cultural dimension

Talking about "food security" today, after the industrial revolution, after having favoured for so long all things social or economic to the detriment of the individual, after having persisted in opting for production and consumption than man's land rights, could be the sign of a rectification that is beginning to emerge in the world's set of values. It is undoubtedly an inevitable rectification, a matter of necessity, or even of survival, but which in spite of everything means that man is trying to regain his place,

as his ultimate goal, at the core of all community activities. It is from this perspective that, a priori, women's role and the importance of this role in "food security" should be perceived, beyond all the analyses and sociological and economic statistics. This role represents the link between female identity and life, its perennial nature and its ethical dimension, hence the importance of the study published by the FAO, which states that "**women produce between 60 and 80% of the food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world's food production, yet their key role as food producers and providers and their critical contribution to household food security is only recently becoming recognised**".

Consequently, could it be considered, and always from a cultural perspective, that woman, who carries life within her, who nurtures it and protects it through a natural yet at the same time conscious and conceptual dynamic, lies at the heart of this problem, anthropologically speaking? And that this new dynamic of socio-cultural development linked to the notion of "food security" is also a revenge that does justice to the warm and nourishing kitchen of the family home and to the food carefully prepared by generous and loving hands? A rebellion that provides an alternative to the commercialized food and the fast food that is so harmful to the health, well-being and lifestyle of people today?

Can it be stressed in this respect that the model post-modern woman, inspired by fashion from the mid-20th century onwards, the anorexic female object, is a harmful attack on the physical and mental health of the woman of today; a deformation that distracts her attention, that puts her at odds with life and its demands, that diverts her from her edifying human and social role; an attack that also helps to diminish the phenomenon of socialization and of *joie de vivre* linked to culinary and food-related activity?

Perceived from a cultural point of view, the "Women - Food Security" report has an anthropological dimension and allows us to understand the phenomenon without running the risk of reducing it to a strictly economic and sociological sphere. Naturally, far from confining women within the limits of the biological food function, we are talking about life in terms of its global dynamic, its dignity and its existential quality, where woman becomes both guardian and protagonist.

2. Food security and the role of women: the social dimension

The sphere of agriculture and food security shows us that women are strongly present and extremely efficient. Research reports published by the FAO confirm that "women's participation in the agricultural sector in the Near East region is still underestimated due to the fact that their work in subsistence farming is unpaid: in Turkey, women constitute 55.3% of unpaid agricultural workers; in Morocco, 53.2%; in Egypt, 50.7%; in Lebanon, 40.7%; in Sudan, 34.7%; in Iraq, 30.7%; and in Mauritania, 28%". Likewise, women perform the most time-consuming tasks, the most laborious duties involved in agricultural production and animal rearing: sowing,

applying fertilizers, hoeing, harvesting, carrying, threshing, sifting, cleaning, sorting and bagging".

In developing countries, mainly in isolated regions, woman works the land together with her husband and sometimes even substitutes him. She is often accompanied by her children and she involves them in farming tasks, as if for her the land were an extension of their home. This reality, despite being tough and difficult, has a positive side as far as social life is concerned: it reinforces the family bond and benefits, thanks to the daily contact with nature, the mental and physical health of all the family members. It instils in them many values which have disappeared from urban and industrialized societies, such as endurance, hospitality and immunization against the dangers of individualism and consumerism. The pace of life of agricultural society offers its population greater scope for socializing and communicating than that of industrial society, given that it is linked to the working hours offered by nature and the seasons of the year. This social component favoured by the female contribution urges us to realise the need to implement suitable economic and legal policies in order to sustain and safeguard this source of multidimensional wealth and to do justice, by means of adequate laws, to the invaluable work that women perform in this field, facilitating their access to resources, namely: access to land, to credit, to education, training and information, to decision-making... By way of example I would like to point out that, according to a report published by the FAO, rural women in Lebanon have become the dominant force in agricultural production, from planting to selling, which can be explained by the substantial rural exodus of men and by the increase in the number of war widows, and that more than 10% of rural households were headed by women in 1987.

As regards women's role in "food security", they are solely responsible for it, either in terms of the idea in itself or in terms of its application in the various means of livelihood and production. According to the FAO study, thanks to their contributions they play a key role in food security.

- ***"They preserve biodiversity and plant genetic resources now widely recognised as essential to food security"***. Because they are responsible for supplying their families with food and care, women often have special knowledge of the value and diverse use of plants for nutrition and health. Consequently, they are the preservers of traditional knowledge of indigenous plants.
- ***They process and prepare food.*** Food processing contributes to food security through reducing food losses, contributing to diversity of diet and supplying important vitamins and minerals. In addition to the time-consuming tasks of grinding and pounding the staple grains, smoking fish and meats, women process and preserve their own fruit and vegetable produce. Moreover, women are almost universally responsible for preparing food for their households and thus for the health and well-being of their families.

- ***They care for the basic needs of the household:*** Women perform virtually all the tasks required for household food security and ensuring good nutrition and healthy lives. These tasks include gathering fuel and fetching water, cleaning, cooking, child rearing, and caring for the sick.
- ***They are wage earners:*** Women are often responsible for providing food for their families, if not by production then by earning the income to purchase it. Both rural and urban women in waged labour dedicate a substantial portion of their income to the purchase of food for their families. Moreover, it is increasingly recognized that rural men and women often have different responsibilities for providing for the basic needs of their households, with women responsible for supplying food. Development planners have discovered that the increase of household income through the employment of men in cash crop production does not necessarily increase household income available for the purchase of food. On the other hand, when women have direct control over income, they tend to spend it on the well-being of the family, particularly on improving the nutritional security of the more vulnerable members.

Conclusion:

Recognising, supporting, promoting and accompanying with specific measures women's presence and role in food security means allowing the specific female contribution to bear its fruit in the improvement of human lives and of society as a whole. It also means fighting back, through the quality of food prepared in the home for one's nearest and dearest, against the spirit of the market that has managed to invade our homes, our bodies and our health.