

Women and Food Sovereignty Workshop

NGO Forum at the World Food Summit (five years later)

June 11, 2003

Rome, Italy

Bringing together women from all over the world, the Women and Food Sovereignty Workshop organized by the Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific, and the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development had women from Africa, Pakistan, Thailand, Nepal, the Philippines and other lands recount the tragedy of poverty, acute marginalization, hunger, exploitation and discrimination still facing women. Like the rest of the NGO forum, peasants leaders, especially those from Via Campesina were extremely vocal at the workshop. It was exciting to be a part of an international meeting discussing food sovereignty where the peasants were a speaking majority rather than a small token minority surrounded by NGOs and government officials. The criticisms of the WTO and international agricultural policies from both the speakers and the crowd reflected this.

"Exports and liberalization policies of the WTO, IMF, Asian Development Bank and World Bank are forcing people to leave their land, " stated Asra Talat of Pakistan. Sharing the plight of women in the rural communities of Pakistan she explained that, "increasing prices of agricultural inputs, like pesticides, are forcing small farmers further into debt and suicide. The emphasis on cash crops for exports has severely undermined the peoples rights and ability to feed themselves. There is no more food left for the rural communities, especially women. "

Catarina Estavillo, of the Manila based National Federation of Peasant Women (AMIHAN) pointed out, "The FAO has identified two main obstacles in the implementation of its Plan of Action, namely: lack of political will and lack of sufficient resources, but peasant women in the Philippines believe that the government is not addressing the roots of poverty and hunger. Instead, it is merely following the dictates of the IMF-WB and the WTO. The policies of liberalization and privatization have pushed the Filipino people and the peasantry, in general, and women in particular, deeper into the quagmire of poverty and hunger. These policies are totally unacceptable and must be resisted, " she stressed.

As the only women from the North, Karen Pedersen from Via Campesina stated, "We have increased our exports and embraced industrialized monoculture agriculture exactly the way we have been told, but hunger and poverty in Canada is increasing not decreasing and increasing numbers of farmers have off-farm jobs or are moving off the land to the city because they can't afford to produce food. If we (Canadian farmers) are the success story, the so called 'winners', then I can't imagine what the 'losers' are faced with."

The workshop ended with the signing of a Unity Banner of Women's Demands, and a Statement on Hunger and Food Sovereignty presented to the Plenary of the NGO Forum. This was accompanied by the Women's Tapestry on Food Sovereignty that was sewn together prior to the Workshop by women of Asia and other parts of the world at the NGO Forum.

Women 's Statement on Hunger and Food Sovereignty to the NGO Forum, June 11th, 2002

We women, from various continents, representing countries of the South and the North, demand the right to be free from hunger for every woman, man and child. We ask for the right to govern our livelihoods, and to have access and maintain control over our lands, waters, seeds, and all resources which are basic to our and our communities needs. We constitute more than half of the world's 1 billion hungry. We are the producers of the world's food, the reproducers and nurturers of human life, yet we do not get enough nutritious and safe food. In our households, patriarchal values dictate that we are the last priority in the allocation of food. Our productive and reproductive roles are not acknowledged at all levels.

We are denied access to basic social services including health services, adequate sanitation, and shelter. It is no wonder then that 600,000 women die each year in childbirth, 160 million of their children are undernourished, and 64 out of 1,000 live births die in infancy.

The reality we face today is that our capacity to produce our own food is eroded, our most basic resource for survival -- our lands, our waters, are taken over by multinational corporations. We are losing our livelihoods, our incomes are shrinking, health and education services are now beyond our reach. Less and less food is getting on to our tables. The industrial mode of agriculture that prioritizes cash cropping for export is directly linked to the increasing use of agrochemicals like pesticides. This has resulted in many diseases faced by not only women, but even our future generations. Women are the convenient targets of violence as crisis hits societies due to the exploitative nature of the present capitalist mode of production.

We believe that the massive hunger and starvation suffered by millions today can be largely attributed to the globalized economic policies and programs prescribed by the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank.

We believe that in order to overcome the forces which are taking away our independence and dignity, we need to unite and strengthen the voices of women from all sectors, especially fisherfolk, peasants, and other vulnerable communities.

We demand:

- that women's voices are given priority to develop a sustainable agenda for ourselves and our communities.

- that women must be involved in all decision making processes, giving us the right to control our livelihoods.
- that the trade liberalization agenda of the international financial and trade institutions be removed from the agriculture sector.
- that our governments need to build and implement policies and programs based on the needs of women and communities, and not on the agenda of the industrialized nations, transnational corporations, and the local elites.
- that the control over our natural resources needs to be maintained in the hands of women and communities and not be given over to transnational corporations, states and other agencies.