

Female gender, historical context and food security

Gênero feminino, contexto histórico e segurança alimentar

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Abstract

All societies divide their populations into two social categories according to gender, but beyond the biological question, this division also is due to cultural and historical issues. Inequalities between men and women have been experienced ever since the patriarchal age, and even today, women are discriminated against and face social oppression. Considered as a group vulnerable to food insecurity as a result of biological specificities, women paradoxically play an important role of promoting food security. This study aims to survey the differences between men and women, limited to a historical and cultural context of inequalities, with emphasis on the role of women in promoting food security and nutrition (FSN). Based on the literature review, we could list a few negative points that go against women's role in society, in particular, their function as a subject responsible for ensuring FSN. Therefore, there are still violations of their basic rights, when compared with the opposite sex. Thus, profound changes are needed in society to promote full equality between genders in a broader sense, and a change should start in education.

Keywords: Gender. Feminism. Food Safety. Public Health.

Resumo

Todas as sociedades dividem suas populações em duas categorias sociais conforme o gênero, mas além da questão biológica, essa divisão também se dá devido a questões culturais e históricas. Desigualdades entre homens e mulheres são vivenciadas desde

a era patriarcal, e até hoje, a mulher é alvo de discriminação e opressão social. Considerado um grupo vulnerável à insegurança alimentar, devido a peculiaridades biológicas, paradoxalmente, a mulher é importante promotora de segurança alimentar. Este estudo visa fazer um levantamento acerca das disparidades existentes entre homens e mulheres, limitado a um contexto histórico-cultural de desigualdades, com ênfase no papel da mulher como promotora de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional (SAN). A partir da análise bibliográfica, pôde-se elencar alguns pontos negativos que vão de encontro ao papel feminino na sociedade, notadamente, à sua função enquanto sujeito responsável pela garantia da SAN, pois ainda persistem violações aos seus direitos básicos, inclusive com relação ao sexo oposto. Para tanto, fazem-se necessárias modificações profundas na sociedade, no sentido de promover a igualdade plena entre os gêneros em um sentido mais amplo, a começar por uma mudança de base educacional.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Feminismo. Segurança Alimentar. Saúde Pública.

Introduction

All human societies divide their populations into two social categories, named “male” and “female”. These categories are based on several conjectures derived from the culture wherein they occur, and obviously on their biological nature too, having both, culture and nature, a complex and indissociable interaction.¹

When studying sex identity, it is at least reasonable to say that both biological and environmental aspects have a strong influence on the definition of the gender of any individual. It is known that men and women have different bodies and physiological cycles; women menstruate, get pregnant, give birth and breastfeed; men do not. In addition, there are emotional and behavioral differences between both.¹ Therefore, women have specific needs, which go from different nutritional requirements, as a function of certain biological conditions, to the need for more attention with respect to broader issues, such as health, education and socioeconomics.

In addition to the biological differences between men and women, there are also numerous social inequalities resulting from historical acts of discrimination and violence committed since the patriarchal model age, when man was in the center and controlled women. This model has

changed over the years, but with the rise of capitalism it reinforced the domination relationship and lasts until today.² Still in the nineteenth century, under the perspective of the Western thought, where culture was considered superior and more human than nature, man's superiority was already justified because women were viewed as something to be transformed by men to become more productive.¹

Although more than one century has passed since women began to fight for equal rights in society, specific manifestations of gender inequality still remain, especially in the labor market. This fact has various determinants, among them the domestic duties, for having a great influence on women's inclusion in the labor market as well as the discriminating dynamics and conceptions that are typical of this market.³ In addition, there is the increasing feminization of poverty, since women represent 70% of over one billion people living in extreme poverty in the world.²

Due to the numerous disparities that exist between both sexes, the oppression and discrimination suffered by women, in 1993 the World Health Organization (WHO) defined as an integral part of the universal human rights the human rights of women and girls.

In the Brazilian case, the Federal Constitution of 1988 instituted the constitutional principle of equality between man and woman, as described in Art. 5, which deals with the fundamental rights and guarantees.² In addition to this constitutional legal order, Brazil signed with ONU several conventions to eliminate all forms of violence and discrimination against women.⁴

Just as there are actions to ensure women's fundamental rights, there are also specific actions aimed to revert conditions of vulnerability, to which they are exposed, inclusive regarding food and nutrition. In this regard, the country has adopted protective measures for women by creating social programs such as *Bolsa-Família* (Family Allowance) and *Mulheres Rurais* (Rural Women) to promote food sovereignty within the scope of Food and Nutrition Security (FNS), which Burlandy & Maluf⁵ define as:

[...] The right of peoples to define their own policies and strategies for a sustained production, distribution and consumption of foods that ensure the access to food to the entire population, based on small and medium production, respecting their own cultures and the diverse ways employed by peasants, fishermen, and natives in farming, marketing and management of rural areas, where woman plays a key role [...]. Food sovereignty is the pathway to eradicate hunger and malnutrition and ensure a lasting and sustained food security to all peoples. ⁵(our translation).

Despite the whole global and national historical evolution process, it can be seen that although there are government actions oriented to eliminate food insecurity, as experienced by the Brazilian women, there is still a lot to do, because these actions are insufficient and flawed.

Given the above, the aim of this study was to carry out a literature review to show the major aspects that interfere with the full exercise of women as active participants of society, in their role as the family's provider and in the pursuit of FNS. Thus, the intention here is to conduct a critical discussion on the woman's role in today's society and in human nutrition, considering her as a subject directly involved in issues related to the promotion of FNS, as well as to present possible solutions for the existing problems.

Materials and Methods

A literature review was conducted using as source 18 scientific articles, 16 being published in Portuguese, one in Spanish and one in English. The search was made on the databases of the *Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde (BVS)* (Virtual Health Library) and *Periódicos Capes* (Capes Publications), using the following keywords or combinations of the same: "food and nutritional security", "family farming", "gender equality" and "nutrition, gender and anthropology".

Four books published in Portuguese were also used, which belong to the library of the *Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciências e Tecnologia do Ceará (IFCE)* (Federal Institute for Education, Science and Technology in Ceará), *Campus Limoeiro do Norte-CE*, in the fields of Nutrition in Public Health, Medicine and Anthropology.

Results and Discussion

Woman: aim of historical, social and financial inequalities

Historical analysis

Forms of gender-related oppression constitute an objective reality that affects countless women and can only be understood within the sociocultural and historical context, in a complex and contradictory movement between sociability and individuality and between gender relations and the totality of social life. Historically, there has been more appropriation by men in politics, in the men's choice and decision about their affective and sexual life and more social visibility in the exercise of professional activities. This is a process that results in different oppressive forms, whereby women are subjected to domination, violence and violation of their rights.^{6,7}

When we retrospectively examine women's historical trajectories in the three last decades, their efforts to change the existing norms on gender conceptions and establish the basis for equal rights are remarkable.⁸ Among these efforts are women's actions in world conferences, with emphasis

on the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), where it was decided that the term “discrimination against woman” should be construed as:

[...] any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.⁸

Despite these efforts, women still face numerous inequalities, and if in the last decades they have conquered public spaces, this just contributed to increase their responsibility, by having to reconcile it with the private space. Regarding time, we can see how much time affects women’s lives, when we see it completely used up in the exercise of their activities.⁹ According to Goldani,¹⁰ the “second shift” of work has been much more common among women, and in the 20% corresponding to the poorest households there are women who work 17 hours more than men. This difference decreases to 11 hours when women belong to the 20% richest homes, which shows that, irrespective of social class, there are huge differences between man’s and woman’s workload.

In 2006, the total working hours of men and women were 49 and 56 hours per day, respectively. However, the composition of this total working time was significantly different between the sexes. Men had a working day equivalent to the constitutional time of 44 hours/day and worked five hours in household chores. Women worked 37 hours in a regular job and 19 hours in housekeeping, resulting in 15% more working time than men on average. The longer time in housekeeping is spent by women with a lower education level. However, those with a higher level of education and occupying higher social positions tend to have better jobs and less work at home.¹¹

This occurs because, traditionally, in the patriarchal model of families, women are in charge of the household chores. And although they have gained space in the formal labor market, they are still expected to take care of the household chores, making then difficult their progress in the labor market because of their double shift of work, which is extremely stressful and limiting.

It also contributes to this issue the guilt that women/mothers feel for ignoring the patriarchal prescription and that they may be neglecting their children going out to work. At the time of the Brazil Republic, the sanitation medicine claimed that the female work outside the home was the cause of the family degradation. Nowadays, some media segments support these information, generating guilt in women who do not limit themselves to the domestic role and to the normative patriarchal roles of devoted mother and wife. It is important to emphasize that the “impediment” to women to work outside the home, or when they do they earn less than men, is causing a growing “feminization” of poverty worldwide.²

So, double shift or double burden, at the job and home, which overloads women overwhelmingly, is also an issue that deserves attention due to the damages that it causes to the family. The family routinely counts on a woman always at the verge of exhaustion and unable to sustain a relationship of quality that is fundamental to maintain family as the mainstay of society. This has been common in most of the social classes and may have serious consequences for the future of the country, since education scholars state that when a man is educated, only one individual is being educated, but when a woman is educated, the whole family is.

Important demographic and biological aspects in the life of Brazilian women in the context of FNS

Demographic transition x birth rate

The demographic transition, where high birth and death rates have been reduced, is a global phenomenon with numerous approaches. There are various theories dedicated to explain this phenomenon, one of them being that mortality rates fall because parents change their reproductive behavior to coincide with the increased lifespan of their children.¹³ Such behavior would be adopted primarily in view of economic and psychological advantages, since having fewer children would mean less stress and less spending.

Based on this, a theory is devised based on the concern about the cost of living to raise children, which increased in modern labor markets, especially for women. So, they can reduce fertility intentionally to take advantage of new job opportunities (including those offered by microcredit or other programs designed to increase women's market share), or reproduction is so delayed that fertility is eventually reduced by biological limitations.¹³

In Brazil, according to the 2010 Demographic Census carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)¹⁴, the birth rate dropped from 6.16 children in 1940 to 1.90 children in 2010, i.e., a decrease of 69.2%. In the same survey, it was also found that the region with the lowest birth rate, also lower than the total country's average, was the state of São Paulo, with 1.67 children. It was also found a trend for a late fecundity pattern. The fecundity rate among women aged below 30 was 72.4% of total fecundity in 2000. In 2010, it dropped to 68.6%. Based on these data, it can be inferred that such reduction confirms what was already mentioned: that fertility has been reduced and postponed because of opportunities and rise in the labor market.

Another model/theory would be the cultural transmission, through which reduced fertility would be thought to result in changes in the perception of value of children, the ideal family size, or acceptance of modern methods of family planning. Related to this approach, it is applied

an analysis of social networks in the decline of fecundity, focusing on the transmission of new information and the influence of members of the social network on the others' behavior.¹³

Breastfeeding: a female peculiarity – an everyday challenge

The women' struggle to enter and remain in the labor market is constant. The need to contribute to the household budget, added to the pursuit of personal achievements, contributes to the demand increase. Today, women represent 40% of the country's workforce, and more and more have occupied management positions and jobs usually occupied by men.¹⁵

Despite all challenges imposed to women, there is the desire for maternity, followed by the decision to breastfeed or not her child.

Breastmilk is the first infant's food, and women play a key role in the baby's nutrition. It is an entirely nutritious food, which supplies the child's physiological, metabolic and immunological needs. Breastfeeding is the wisest natural strategy to create bond, affection and provide nutrition to the baby, and is the most sensitive, economic and effective intervention to reduce child morbidity and mortality, besides being considered a protective factor against overweight and obesity in childhood. Therefore, breastmilk is the best food during the infant's first months of life.¹⁶

Despite the well-known importance of breastfeeding for both mother and baby, numerous cases of breastfeeding reduction occur, which is one of the greatest nutritional crises in the contemporary world. Among the factors that can influence such reduction are women's moving from the countryside to the city, lack of information and social, cultural and economic factors, which affect not only the fecundity rate but the way of taking care of children.¹

A study conducted in northern Potosi, Bolivia, with mothers, babies and families, identified erroneous breastfeeding habits, mainly based on family traditions, passed down from generation to generation.¹⁷ Among the behaviors identified in the Bolivian study, it can be mentioned: offering water or urine as the first baby food, not breastfeeding, a fact reported by 70% of the mothers in the study; early weaning and untimely introduction of supplementary foods due to the belief that mothers cannot produce milk at birth and for a sufficient period of time for exclusive breastfeeding. Briefly, these facts result from the lack of maternal and paternal information – a group analyzed offered supplementary food until the sixth month, and only did it because of the importance conveyed by the husband – and family and cultural impositions.¹⁷

In Brazil, although there has been an increased number of breastfed children, duration of breastfeeding is still below the goals and recommendations established. Added to these data, other studies indicate that early weaning is one of the public health problems in the country, showing the need for further actions to promote, protect and support breastfeeding throughout the country.¹⁶

Although breastfeeding plays a key role in the baby's food security and the family's as a whole, the organic and psychological health of the mother that wishes to breastfeed can be seriously affected if she is "prevented" from performing it.

Because of today's female beauty patterns that are imposed by the media, many women will likely develop eating disorders (ED), characterized by impaired weight gain during pregnancy, which may cause serious damages during pregnancy and lactation. The psychological changes and eating problems of women with ED may interfere in the care of their children after birth, besides affecting these children's nutrition, who require more support from the family, employers and specialized care.¹⁸

Family farming – the country woman: supporter and promoter of FNS

In most part of the world, cooking is usually a women's task. In many societies, however, women are also heavily involved in foods production, such as in animal milking, feeding birds and other livestock, planting, growing and harvesting varied crops, which can be seen in family farming. This is based on ecological capital (living nature) and has an indispensable contribution to the production of foods, jobs creation and sustainability and development in general.¹

However, in this kind of farming, although it apparently values women more, still has some hindrances in this regard. Many women in family farming suffer oppression from their families for sometimes criticizing the family organization and the productive model. This is a result of the patriarchal system model, rooted in our culture, according to which man is in the center and women and children perform pre-established and supporting roles.^{2,19}

Women work in all family farming activities such as soil preparation, planting, harvesting, raising animals, among others. However, these tasks are eventually masked by the "praise" for activities such as handcrafting, gardening, housekeeping, which are considered inferior in *status*, but consistent with the women's role of wife and caring mother.¹⁹

The care of the kitchen garden, orchard, livestock and all activities that are considered secondary in relation to large-scale agriculture and viewed as inferior, in fact play a key role in the food security assurance, increasing the household income and preserving the ecosystem.¹⁹ A study conducted by Menasche et al.²⁰ with rural families in Jacarezinho-RS examined the partition of work in these family units, showing that it is the woman, usually with the help of daughters and younger children, the main responsible for the kitchen garden, small food crops and livestock destined for the family consumption, as well as household services.

Also in the same study by Menasche et al.,²⁰ the interviewed women farmers told that they did not use pesticides in the production of foods for family consumption. This fact, along with other factors, contributes to the diversity, quality and availability of foods, ensuring the provision of foods and corroborating Pacheco's thought described in Siliprandi¹⁹:

Women have historically acquired a vast knowledge of agroecological systems. They perform a key role as managers of biomass flows, in the preservation of biodiversity and plants domestication, showing in many regions in the world a significant knowledge on genetic resources and ensuring through their productive activity the basis for food security. [...] This role is so much more important if we consider that the preservation and use of biodiversity are key issues for the defense of the family agriculture and agro-extractivism, as well as, simultaneously, that biodiversity is protected by cultural diversity. (p. 20). (Our translation).

However, because the activities performed by women in farms are not valued, it has led young female populations to move from the countryside to the cities. In their study, Menasche et al.²⁰ suggest that these young women are seeking in the city the recognition that their mothers did not have as farmers and, as a consequence, such systematic depreciation of their work contributes to a situation of food insecurity.

The importance and prevalence of women in farming activities destined for self-consumption only have been demonstrated, but in many rural areas in the Third World women also have a major role in the foods retail market, such as the famous "women market" in West Africa, the Caribbean and parts of Latin America.¹

The liberalization of food trade – which has an effect on the internal prices of foods, increasing access and decreasing prices – have a major impact on the people's life, especially on women. The shift from domestic cultivation of agricultural products to the export agriculture in developing countries (and in several countries in Latin America), as well as the increasing importance of the global food markets, led to growing food insecurity, which is manifested in the volatility of food prices and reduction of food stocks in the world. Such change in the global food market has had an adverse impact especially on the strategy of peasant women, debilitating the food practices of these women and their families.³

Government actions to support women and FNS

The Bolsa-Família program: designed to reduce female social inequality

Based on the premise that poor women suffer more from problems related to the lack of material resources, a condition aggravated by gender hindrances in the access to fundamental rights, women were elected as the beneficiaries of the *Bolsa-Família* (Family Allowance) program, created in 2003 with the aim to reduce poverty, gender inequality and child labor.²¹

The Bolsa-Família Program (BFP) benefits both the urban and rural populations, and has identified, according to data of the National Household Sample Survey in 1994/2009, a situation of food insecurity in about 50% of the population of the rural area. The prevalence of moderate or serious insecurity was higher in households where the reference person was of the female sex – 14.2% of the households, and 10.2% of the households where the reference person was of the male sex. It is worth noting that it was found in the northeast region of the country a higher prevalence of severe food insecurity (11.4%), moderate food insecurity (13.2%) and light food insecurity (24.4%) in households where the reference person was a woman.

Some movements criticize the fact that the BFP card has the name of the mother printed as the beneficiary of the program, arguing that this policy enhances the bias that women are exclusively responsible for taking care of the children and the house. But this is important, considering the symbolic value of receiving this benefit. Women who have never earned a remuneration for the work done, when they have a bank account and a card with their own names, when they receive benefits regularly and directly and can decide how to spend it, have their personal power enhanced. They become providers and managers of the few existing resources in the family production unit with the entry of a regular amount of money, every month. Obviously, the BFP does not necessarily reduce sex inequalities nor represents a change in the traditional distribution of household roles between men and women, but already causes some effect.^{21,22}

Despite the apparent recognition of the female citizenship and its inclusion in government programs and national agendas, this has not shown capable of ensuring all human rights to all women. Thus, this task remains imperative to those who defend the expansion of the female citizenship and gender equality.

Strengthening female family farming

The inclusion of rural workers in the Social Security system was late in relation to other professional categories, particularly rural women workers. This is due to the fact that to be entitled to the Social Security benefits, first of all they should be recognized as rural workers. Such recognition, in turn, was difficult to be proven because most of the work that women performed, as already said, was invisible, in general declared as “support” to the tasks performed by men and often limited to household activities. But this right was assured and currently rural workers are entitled to retirement at the age of 55, provided that they have paid the contributions and their work in rural activities is proven.²²

In addition to the female farmers’ right to retirement, the National Program to Strengthen Family Agriculture (PRONAF) – more specifically the PRONAF Woman created in the 2003/2004 harvest year –, in conjunction with a Group of Work in Gender and Credit (comprised of public agents and representatives of rural women’s movements) seek for more women’s autonomy and space in rural areas. However, six years after the implementation of changes in the Statement of Qualification form, many problems that were identified in 2004/2005 for an equalitarian inclusion of women still remain, such as the lack of information by the agents and the women themselves.²¹

Recent studies assessed the impacts of PRONAF Woman on the empowerment of rural women and showed that, despite the fact that the obstacles mentioned still remain, obtaining credit in their names represents undeniable advances in terms of women’ self-esteem and their recognition as economic agents in the family and communities, besides their importance to food security, since part of this benefit is destined to production.²¹

Another program, although it does not include in their objectives any specificity on gender, but is considered “structuring” in the Zero Hunger strategy, is the Program for Foods Acquisition, which has been pointed in several studies as having a very positive effect in ensuring the production of foods in small properties, enhancing food security not only for those who do not have access to foods but also the producers themselves, with great positive impacts on women.²¹

Conclusions

It was possible to outline some aspects involving women in the food security issue, related to gender inequalities with social and historical interfaces, which still limit the female potential.

Women live in the midst of a paradox in which they are oppressed, victims of social and nutritional problems, and at the same time is the main promoter of food security – a portrait of a globalized society and with capitalist and sexist values.

The right to work outside the home and the duty to continue taking care of their houses, result in a lower rate of fecundity and a reduced period of breastfeeding, as a result of the little time available for their children, as well as the lack of more public policies to support women.

Gender inequalities in labor can be seen in almost all fields of work, including agriculture. However, a greater mobilization of women in this sector has shown their empowerment and importance in promoting food security, because they practice a healthier and sustained production model.

It is known that public policies exist in an attempt to reduce inequalities, also between sexes, in order to improve women's access to the diverse levels of society. However, more actions are necessary, and more than laws, a change in the historical educational base is needed. Female inequality, as seen, is not a merely sociological issue but also a health and nutritional problem, and society as whole has the duty to fight for isonomy between genders in favor of a fairer and equalitarian feminine life.

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