



WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE AND FOOD SECURITY

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Abstract

Women play a vital role in the production of food. Most importantly, they are critical in the storage, processing as well as the provision of food at the household level. It is also a fact that as in the case of all policies, those on food are supposed to be informed by existing evidence and realities whose dynamics keep on changing. As key stakeholders in food handling, women have a wealth of knowledge on issues of food and nutrition status. This paper argues on the importance of this knowledge in informing policy issues and programming issues related to food security and nutritional status. The study draws from the findings of a study done in Kenya by the African Women's Studies Centre (AWSC) of the University of Nairobi and the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics in 2014. The study aimed at documenting women's knowledge in relation to food security and generating proposals ensuring the full implementation of Article 43(1)(c) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010); as well as suggesting policy recommendations at the national and county levels. The study used Moser's Gender Analysis tool

Key words: *Women, knowledge, food, security.*

6.1 Introduction

This article relies on the findings of the study on food security in Kenya by African Women's Studies Centre (AWSC) and the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS).¹ The study sought to provide evidence-based information on the status of food security as a contribution to the current national discourse on the implementation of the Constitution of Kenya 2010, Article 43 (1)(c), which states that “every person has a right to be free from hunger, and to have adequate

(1986) and adopted a descriptive survey approach. Selected women in each of the ten counties across Kenya provided information through focus-group discussions, oral testimonies and key informants questionnaires. Additional data was generated from debriefing sessions which were done with selected respondents of the study at the conclusion of the field work in each county. The findings revealed that by virtue of their gendered roles and responsibilities in the family and community, women have a wealth of experience and knowledge on food and nutrition. The knowledge can usefully inform policies on issues related to food and nutrition status, especially in terms of its availability, access, utilization and sustainability. The study thus recommends the need for policy makers, scholars and researchers to focus on gender responsive studies so as to capture not only women's needs but also their experiences and knowledge. The policy makers have an obligation to ensure the same in policy formulation and programming.

food and of acceptable quality (Republic of Kenya, 2010)².”

The concept of food security has become complex but since the 1970s it has slowly gained momentum globally. In 1974 for example, the World Food Summit defined food security as “*the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic food stuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption to offset fluctuations in production and prices*”. Later in 1996, a similar summit redefined food security as a situation in which “*all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life*”. Clearly, this definition pegged the

¹ AWSC and KNBS (2014)

² Republic of Kenya (2010)

situation of food security to three elements namely; *availability, utilization and security*. In 2001, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Report, refined the concept of food security to include both physical and economic access to food that meets people's dietary needs as well as their food preferences.³ The same report estimated that around one billion people are undernourished, and that each year more than three million children die from under nutrition before their 5th birthday.

It is acknowledged that men and women play different and important roles in ensuring food security at the household level. While men as well as women may participate in agricultural activities, women put in more time not only in the production but also in harvesting, transporting, storing and preparing most of the food. This, therefore, means that women interact with food more than men. Hence, this article is based on the premise that women's knowledge is a key factor in addressing issues of food security in Africa and Kenya in particular. As such, any food policy formulated and implemented in ignorance of the contribution of women would be lacking in focus and target.

On the whole, women in Africa are active participants in growing, collecting and managing food at the households but with limited control of the means of its production. On the other hand, food security at the individual and household level is achieved '*when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preference for a healthy and active life*'⁴. However, the pertinent issue that underpins this article is how this can be achieved in the absence of the knowledge that women have in their responsibility in executing and maintaining household food consumption and nutritional status in all instances, including times of abject poverty. Consequently, an understanding of issues related to food security at the household level requires a serious consideration of women's knowledge within their gender roles and relations with their male counterparts. The argument is that in performing their

daily gender roles (including managing resources while feeding the families), women acquire valuable experiences and knowledge on how to deal with situations of food scarcity and security.

Studies reveal that women play a key role in the development process at the core of which is the household maintenances⁵ and that their knowledge can enrich the process of policy making and programming in related areas. Unfortunately, due to the subordinate role of the women within the gendered relations, their perspectives and knowledge are often ignored in informing research and policy formulation which results in poor targeting and misuse of resources.

Food security is a basic human right. In Kenya, this right is articulated in Article 43 (1)(c) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010), which states that "*every Kenyan has a right to enough food and of good quality*". The "*National Food and Nutrition Policy (2011)*." demonstrates the commitment of the Government of Kenya to fulfil its constitutional obligation by ensuring food security for all its citizens. The policy takes cognisance of the need for multi-public and private sector involvement, and that provision of food security is a shared responsibility of all Kenyans.⁶

The invisibility of women has been a concern among scholars who in time have appreciated the critical role of women's wide knowledge in transforming as well as ensuring sustainability in addressing issues of service delivery. Among these scholars is Moser⁷ whose emphasis is on the need to incorporate women's perspectives, including knowledge into policy formulation and implementation. Moser⁸ stressed the crucial role women play in the translation of the products from agriculture into food and nutritional security for their households, both as subsistence farmers and commercial food producers alongside the men. FAO recognizes that women possess a wealth of knowledge on varieties of food, nutritional status and methods of preservation and food preparation for

⁵ Kimani and Kombo (2010)

⁶ Republic of Kenya (2011)

⁷ Caroline O. N. Moser (1993)

⁸ Quisumbing (1995), Akhter U. Ahmed et. al (2009)

³ FAO (2001)

⁴ FAO Report (2001)

all categories of the members of the household, including the most vulnerable, namely the sick, elderly, children, expectant and lactating mothers.⁹ This article posits that this knowledge needs to be tapped to inform food security policies and interventions at all levels.

The argument affirms the need for gender mainstreaming in all issues of food security, which basically calls for ensuring that the interests, perspectives and knowledge of both men and women are taken on board during the formulation and implementation of food policies and programmes. The importance of involving both women and men in all social transformation interventions has been at the centre stage since September 1995 when the concept of gender mainstreaming was officially adopted in the Beijing Platform of Action. Since then, there has been no doubt that women's perspectives and experiences can enrich any process of policy making and programming. However, the extent to which women's knowledge has informed food security policies and programming is the bone of contention for this article, given that the invisibility of their perspectives in policy development has for a long time been a major concern within the women movement.

6.1.1 Statement of the Problem

It is the policy of the government of Kenya that *"all Kenyans throughout their life-cycle enjoy all times safe food in sufficient quantity and quality to satisfy their nutritional needs for optimal health"*.¹⁰ This article argues that this goal can hardly be achieved if key players in the production, provision and management of food at the households are not gainfully engaged in informing the policy formulation and implementation processes. Critical in this category of players are women who are known to have a wealth of knowledge in the production and management of food at the households. Given the low participation of women in

the development process, especially in decision making, their knowledge hardly counts in food policy formulation and programming. It is this concern that underpins the problem of this study.

6.1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were firstly: to identify areas of concern for tapping women's knowledge in relation to food security and secondly to establish possible areas for the inclusion of women's knowledge in the formulation and implementation of food security policies in Kenya.

6.2 Theoretical Framework

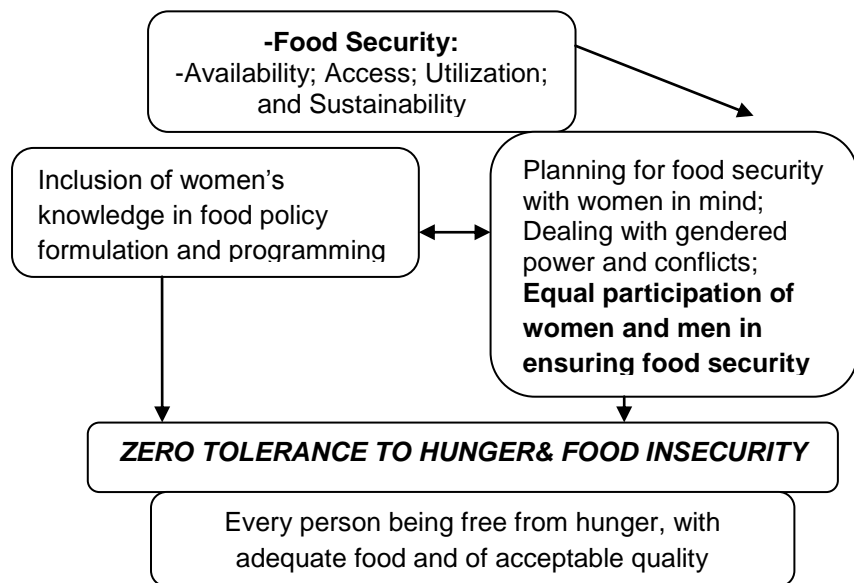
This study was guided by Moser's (1986) tool for gender analysis. The tool was developed in 1986 with the aim to free women from subordination in order to allow them to achieve equality, equity, and empowerment. The framework is based on Moser's concepts of gender roles, gender needs, and her views on the ways policies should approach gender and development planning. The tool which was eventually expanded into a methodology for gender policy and planning is appropriate to guide this study in that it focuses on the need to collect and collate quantitative as well as qualitative empirical facts to inform planning and policy formulation. More importantly, the tool guides how to investigate the reasons for women's subordinate positions of power that lead to less access and control of the means of production. In the context of food security, the Moser tool acknowledges the importance of planning with women in mind, a process which must deal with gendered power and conflicts. The idea is to come up with policy issues that would liberate women from hunger by appreciating the value that their knowledge can add to food security policies, programmes and strategies. The inclusion of women's knowledge to inform policy makers about issues on food security is explored on the basis of its availability, access and utilization, as conceptualized in Figure 1.

⁹FAO (2010)

¹⁰National Food and Nutritional Security Policy Report (2011:3)

6.3 Conceptual framework

Fig 1: Incorporating women’s knowledge in food security policies and programming



Source: Author

6.4 Study Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey and triangulation approach. Data was generated and analysed mainly on the basis of food availability, access, utilization and sustainability, which then dictated the format of the study instruments. The study aimed at capturing the women’s experiences, perceptions and attitudes on food security in 10 counties of Kenya. In each of the selected counties, data was generated from women in focus-group discussions, oral testimonies and in-depth interviews, spread over all the constituencies. Additional data was generated from debriefing sessions which were done with selected study respondents at the end of field work in each of the counties selected for the study.

This article is mainly based on the findings made in six constituencies of Kiambu County. The constituencies involved in the study were: Gatundu North, Limuru, Kiambu, Githunguri, Kiambaa and Thika. Women’s knowledge in food security was mainly generated from the oral testimonies given by selected women and focus-group discussions, with purposively selected participants from different social-economic circumstances (age, education, occupation) and representing both rural and urban parts of the county. In addition, the views of opinion leaders in the selected constituencies were sought using key informant

questionnaires. The leaders comprised male and female political and youth leaders, two elderly male and female residents, as well as one male and one female person with disability. Institutional questionnaires were also administered in order to generate the opinions of government officials on food security in each of the counties visited. These were mainly government officers in the Department of Gender and Social Services, as well as agriculture and livestock. At the end of the field work, more data was generated through a debriefing session in Kiambu town where representatives of all the categories of respondents met for the purpose of sharing preliminary findings, some of the lessons learnt and best practices observed during the data collection.

The generated data was cleaned, coded, entered in CPro and analysed with the use of SPSS. However, data generated from the FGDs was first transcribed. On the other hand, information generated from the institutional questionnaire was used to corroborate information gathered by the use of the other tools.

6.5 Results and Discussion

The findings on the women’s knowledge and food security are presented on the basis of the key performance indicators of food security namely, availability, access, utilization and sustainability.

6.5.1 Availability of Food

Food availability refers to the physical existence of food, either from own production or through purchase from markets. USAID defines food availability as having sufficient quantities of appropriate and necessary types of food. According to the report, food availability in any one country results from domestic food production, available stocks, imported foods, as well as available food aid. As such, availability of food entails a guaranteed increase in quantity and quality of food at all times and for all categories of people¹¹. In this respect, the study established that women's knowledge on the availability of food is critical as they demonstrated their vast experience in production as the major providers of labour on food production, custodians of storage, preparation and handling.

The major concern in food availability at the household was found to be lack of control of the factors of production, especially the land to the extent that women continue to be producers on pieces of land that are owned by the male partners as husbands and fathers in cases of unmarried elderly women. The knowledge of women is, therefore, never utilized because the land is utilised as the male directs, a situation that renders women as "blind workers", unable to apply their knowledge for increased production. In connection with this concern, one woman respondent had this to say during an FGD, "I always know what to plant and where at any one given season. However, my husband dictates what to plant where although he works far from home and only comes home over the weekends"¹².

The study, therefore, noted that the non-application of women's knowledge is among the factors that contribute to low food production and security. On the other hand, the findings revealed that availability of food is largely affected by women's lack of access and control to means of food production. Critical in the categories of the means of food production are land,

farm inputs and improved methods of farming. In cases of unavailability of these important factors of production, the farm yields are low, hence chronic hunger in the family. This was evident in areas where the available farm land was over cultivated with evidence of over cropping and poor methods of farming, as demonstrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4.



Figure 2: Subsistence farming: a woman's monopoly but decisions made by men



Figure 3: Evidence of anticipated low yield as a result of poor farming methods



Figure 4: Low yields as a result of inter-cropping in the scarcity of land

¹¹USAID (April 13, 1992)

¹² Susan Mugo (Nyambari Sub-Location, Rari Constituency, Kiambu County) #The real name here and subsequent respondents have been concealed to hide identity.

The study noted several areas where women's knowledge can add value in ensuring food security, especially in the search for the most appropriate agricultural knowledge, economic policies such as

pricing, best practices in food storage and preservation, cost effective transportation systems and practical methods of coping with emergencies.

6.5.2 Access to Food

Food access is ensured when all households and individuals within those households have sufficient resources to obtain appropriate food for nutritious diet. The access is dependent on the level of household means of production, especially land, finances, labour and food production and management related knowledge. Access to food means that individuals are able to obtain appropriate food needed to maintain consumption of an adequate diet and nutrition for all members of the household, regardless of their gender and age. Whatever food is available at the household, women respondents in the study demonstrated having had the highest access to at the household. As such they had no doubt in their mind that they have unreserved knowledge on how best the food can be increased, stored and preserved at the household level.

As custodians of food at the household level, women respondents reported that they have various coping mechanisms to ensure survival for their family members during times of food scarcity. While some served only one meal per day, mainly dinner, others informed the study that they ate small meals as compared to other members of the household, with men being served first and with the biggest share. Other coping mechanisms included joining women self-help groups to ensure social support, part of which included provision of food. Still others registered for provision of Food Aid from local organisations and the government, although the major frustration was their inadequacy and irregularity.

Access to food throughout the Kiambu County was found to have been improved through the use of women's knowledge and their ability to preserve and store food, wherever they had plenty. The study, however, established various methods of storage and preservation, for example drying, hanging of the grains, especially maize as well as use of stores, traditionally referred to as granaries. Figure 5 is an

example of such a store, which was found in the homestead of one woman respondent. However, the challenge that they experienced with the use of such storage facilities was theft of the stored food. To this effect, a woman respondent informed the study that she preferred storing the harvested food in her bedroom to avoid theft.¹³



Figure 5: This woman as wide knowledge on food storage and preservation

6.5.3 Utilization of Food

Food utilization is defined by USAID as: *proper food use; proper food processing and storage techniques; existence and application of adequate knowledge of nutrition and child care techniques and adequate health and sanitation services.*¹⁴ In the process of food utilization women have adequate knowledge gained in the choice and packaging of the daily diet at the household level, specifically in the course of their gendered roles as household's "best cooks".

The study was informed that the concept of food security from the consumers' perspective is best understood with the members of the household in mind. Women respondents indicated that they know best on the factors that impact on the utilization of available food at the household. In the words of one woman in a focus group discussion, "It is not about the preparation of food for the family but about the quantity, quality and who needs special diet and its availability".¹⁵ To this end, women respondents

¹³ Margaret Kamau (Kairi Sub-Location, Gatundu South Constituency in Kiambu County)

¹⁴ USAID (April 13, 1992: pge 3)

¹⁵ Wanjira Ngunjiri (Kiandutu Informal Settlement, Thika Municipality in Kiambu County)

informed the study on various factors that influenced the utilization of food at the household, namely the capital, culture, family size and the circumstances of the family members.

6.5.4 Capital

Capital includes the means of production for the family, mainly the land, farm inputs and labour. Women cited lack of land, lack of farm inputs, especially seeds and chemicals as well as poor farming methods as the major causes of food insecurity.

6.5.5 Culture

Family eating habits are sometimes dictated by various factors, mostly the culture as well as locality (rural or urban). However, the study noted that there have been changes of the cultural feeding habits, dictated by scarcity of food varieties. Women are aware of this situation and are, therefore, best placed to advise on the coping strategies and how people can be persuaded to change their traditional eating habits for enhanced food and nutritional security. In this respect the study established that although fish is nutritious, it is less consumed in many parts of Kenya where the eating habit is of different orientation.

6.5.6 Family Size

Women demonstrated awareness of the fact that although freedom from hunger is a basic human right, the larger the family size, the more likely it is that they will be food insecure, especially if the means of production within the family are limited. One woman respondent insisted that increasing food production is a way of ensuring food security but population control is equally important, where women also play a crucial role. In her own words, *“women need to inform health workers on the most effective and acceptable family control method.....Women are the custodians of family control”*¹⁶.

6.5.7 Circumstances of Family Members

Women respondents also demonstrated they have useful knowledge that can inform policy makers when

¹⁶ Julia Muthoni (Nyaga Sub-Location, Githunguri Constituency, Kiambu County)

it comes to the provision of food for family members with special dietary needs such as children, (especially under five years), the elderly, the sick, as well as pregnant and lactating mothers. Women, as the custodians of food preparation, have a lot of influence on the provision of the family nutrition. As the government seeks to improve maternal and child health (MCH), women’s knowledge should be tapped in the search for the most realistic strategies.

6.5.8 Sustainability of Food

Food sustainability is pegged on the extent to which food is accessible at all times, in the anticipated quality and quantity, well stored and preserved. In the words of a woman respondent in Gatundu South Constituency in Kiambu County, food sustainability is experienced *“when my all members of my household can eat what they prefer, when they want and at all times”*¹⁷. In their struggle to feed their families in times of plenty and scarcity, women’s knowledge can be tapped to advice on the best and workable strategies to ensure food sustainability.

Further, as key providers of labour in food production on small scale and subsistence farming, women’s knowledge can inform policy makers about the best methods for food storage and preservation in all circumstances, including diversity in the environment and culture. The study, however, established a constant struggle as women aspire to put food on the table on regular basis. They demonstrated having diverse coping strategies. For example, a woman respondent in an FGD in Thika Municipality informed the study that *“whenever there is little food, she feeds all the other members of the family and sleeps hungry”*¹⁸. On the other hand, where they can make decision on the farm production, and in the light of less land they plant as many varieties of food crops as possible in the hope that there would be no lack of food from the fruits and vegetables to starches and animal feed as demonstrated in Figure 6.

¹⁷ Susan Wamuhu (Gatundu South Constituency, Kiambu County)

¹⁸ Nancy Njeri (Gatuanyaga Location, Thika Municipality, Kiambu County)



Figure 6: Quest for food within a limited portion of land (Maximum utilisation of

6.6 Conclusion

The study findings brought to the fore the importance of women's knowledge in informing policies in food security in terms of availability, access, sustainability and utilization. As scholars argue that poverty has a feminine face, this study confirms the same applies for food insecurity¹⁹. Lack of food hits women more since they are the solely responsible to ensure that there is food to be put on the table. In pursuit of the fulfilment of their gender roles in the society, women acquire vast experiences and knowledge in issues of food, both in terms of production, processing and preparation, which can best inform food policies. However, since women are the most excluded in all areas of policy formulation and implementation, the study concludes with an emphasis on the need to make deliberate efforts to ensure that their knowledge is captured not only in research but also in the formulation of food and nutrition security strategies and policies.

6.7 Recommendations

In the light of the findings and conclusions, the study recommends that issues of food *availability, access, sustainability and utilization* should be considered as critical food policy areas in which women's knowledge should be taken into account. The recommendations are generated from the practical and realistic strategies that women respondents gave in terms of what the Kiambu County government and the national government of Kenya need to put in place in the implementation of Article 43 (1)(c) on the provision of food security to all citizens. Top among the

recommendations was the need for a family support program through which the governments can provide food support to some families selected on the basis of vulnerability to food security. The support can be in the form of farm inputs and training on better farming methods to increase food production. Food production can also be enhanced through the provision of agricultural field officers to advise the farmers on the best farming methods, investing on storage and strategic food reserves at the county level and rain-water harvesting. The study further recommends that scholars and researchers need to appreciate the fact that since every undertaking and experience impacts differently on women and men, there is never a gender neutral ground in the knowledge gaps that studies seek to fill. Women and men should, therefore, be deliberately targeted through gender responsive research problems and methodologies. The study thus urges research institutions to continuously explore and advance studies that capture women's perspectives and knowledge on all issues of engagement, including food security, in the spirit of advancing the concept of gender mainstreaming that has remained rhetoric in most of the research undertakings.

¹⁹AWSC (2014), Kimani and Kombo (2010)

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