

The National Alliance of Women's Food Rights

All India Democratic Women's Association, All India Progressive Women's Association, ANKUR, Bhartiya Mahila Jagriti Parishad, Janvadi Mahila Samiti, Action India - Sabla Sangh, FORCES, JAGORI, Jan Madhiyam, Delhi Commission for Women, National Commission for Women, YWCA of India, All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN), GreenPeace, Indian Social Institute, National Federation of Indian Women, Women's Development Cell, Lady Sri Ram College, Mobile Creches, Toxics Link, National Alliance of Women (NAWO), Samajvadi Abhiyan, Hind Mazdoor Sabha, Joint Women's Programme, Nari Bikash Sangha, Centre for Women's Development Studies, Centre for the Study of Administration of Relief, Mahila Dakshata Samiti, Matrika, Research Foundation for Science, Technology & Ecology, Sakhi Kendra, Unnati, Diverse Women for Diversity, Navdanya and Others.

WOMEN'S CHARTER ON FOOD RIGHTS

The Constitution

Article 47 of the Constitution guarantees that "the State shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties". This duty of the State is in fact a reflection of the fundamental right of citizens to have access to health and nutrition. Under Article 21, the Constitution guarantees "a right to life to all citizens of India".

Food rights are fundamental human rights recognised and protected by the Constitution. They need to continue to be the basis of current and future economic policy. Any policy that undermines food rights should be rejected.

Nutrition

Women eat the least and eat last

in the family, depending on the leftovers for their sustenance. 80% of pregnant women are anaemic, 20% are stunted (i.e. less than 4 ft 10") making them high-risk mothers. Because of poor nutritional intake, one-third of all babies are born as low birth weight (LBW) babies who also suffer directly from the dearth of food. 52% of children under the age of 5 years are malnourished (UNICEF, 1997). Malnourished girl children grow up to be malnourished mothers and the cycle is repeated, but with an incremental increase in morbidity.

Especially hit by rising food costs are the over one-third poor rural families which are female headed (Beijing Country Report, Dept. of Women and Child Development, 1995). The refusal of the Government to even recognise their special needs means that they have to single

handedly bear the burden of rising prices. They ensure family survival at the cost of their own nutritional and health needs. Others carry double and triple burdens of housework, wage work and reproduction i.e. pregnancy, and childbirth.

A gender-just food and agriculture policy must be based on the equal and fundamental right to food for all irrespective of gender, class, and age.

Agriculture

Indian agriculture is heading for a crisis of food production, food security and rising prices. The export driven policies of successive Governments committed to liberalisation, have led to diversion of vast areas of agricultural land for horticulture, aquaculture, orchards and the like. Government policy has deliberately encouraged production

of commercial crops through increases in subsidies and loans.

There has been a significant shift to export oriented cash crops away from food production. Since 1971, production of small millets (grain for the poor) declined from 1,988,000 tonnes to 821,900 tonnes in 1995-96. The area under coarse cereals has declined from 45.95 million hectares in 1970-71, to 31.49 million hectares in 1995-96. Similarly for jowar, the cultivated area has dropped from 17.37 million hectares in 1970-71 to 11.44 million hectares in 1995-96.

Public Distribution

Government policies have ensured the virtual collapse of the already highly inadequate public distribution system (PDS) throwing vast sections of the poor to the mercy of the open market. Although lakhs of tonnes of foodgrains are rotting in Government godowns, the Government committed as it is to conditions set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) to disband the PDS, has refused to distribute these foodgrains to the poor at affordable prices. The large majority of the poor have been deprived of any of the so-called benefits of BPL (below poverty line) schemes and indeed do not even have BPL cards. For example; in Dharavi, a huge slum in Mumbai, there are only 375 BPL cardholders. By administered price hikes of goods in the PDS, poor quality of the foodgrains supplied and the irregularity of the supplies, the Government has deliberately ensured that the off-take is low, and then used the low off-take for further cuts.

Since trade liberalisation policies

and structural adjustment programs in India were introduced in 1991, the off-take of food grain from the Central Public Distribution system (CPDS) has gone down from Rs. 207.36 lakh tonnes to 191.19 lakh tonnes. During 1997-98, off-take fell by 25.6 percent, and it fell further by 28 percent during April - May 1998.

Food Prices

Government policies have led to a huge hike in food prices of basic staples such as wheat and rice. Prices of basic staples have become higher in India than comparative prices on the international market. For example, in 1992-93, the wholesale price of wheat per quintal in India was Rs. 304.00 compared to Rs. 190.00 in USA. Similarly for rice, the wholesale price in India was Rs. 481.00 compared to Rs. 348.00 in USA. From July 1997 to July 1998, the retail price of wheat and rice has risen 12.5 percent and 22 percent respectively. World Bank policies to cut subsidies on food will ensure food prices rise even further. Rising food prices are leading to a declining consumption of food amongst the poor.

Food Exports

The declining consumption of food is leading to a pseudo "problem of plenty", which is then being used to justify exports, at the cost of people's food rights. As a result of trade liberalisation policies, cereal exports have increased from 12 percent of total agricultural exports in 1991-92 to 27 percent in 1995-96. Meanwhile, per capita coarse cereal consumption has declined from 17 kg per month in the 1950s, to 13.5 kg per month in

the 1990s (Ministry of Agriculture).

Globalisation

The government is explaining the food price rises to the public as being linked to the weather and other extraneous factors. In fact, it is linked to deliberate policies to increase food prices in India initiated by the WB, IMF and World Trading Organisation (WTO) to push Indian food prices to international levels. The WB is now arguing to reduce procurement prices even further and force everyone to buy at the free market level. Under the title 'Getting Agriculture Going', the WB report states "Allow agricultural as well as farmgate prices to increase by linking them more closely with world prices by eliminating controls on international trade including canalisation (import restrictions will be phased out by 2003), and phasing out controls on domestic trade, such as movement and storage controls, and pan-territorial and pan-seasonal pricing for rice and wheat distributed through the TPDS" (World Bank Report No. 18089-IN of "India 1998 Macro Economic Update: Reforming for Growth and Poverty Reduction"). As if the crisis that is crushing the majority of Indians wasn't enough, the WB wants to push the economic policies even further in the direction that undermines food rights.

Globalisation is leading to the poor eating even less. As mentioned earlier, the per capita consumption of foodgrains and proteins has gone down since the advent of liberalisation policies. With unequal family relations as they exist today, it is women of these families who bear the heavier burden.

Globalisation is leading to women eating even less, thereby resulting in a declining off-take of grains, cereals and pulses for the public distribution system. Trade is being given primacy at not only the cost of our women and children's food security, but their health and economic security also. Any threat to our food security is a threat to our national security.

Genetic Engineering in Food Crops

Health professionals are concerned that mass consumption of genetically engineered (g.e.) foods could make treating infections more difficult because most g.e. foods contain antibiotic resistance genes. It is feared by many scientists that genes from viruses and bacteria inserted into food crops could interact with bacteria and viruses in our bodies and create super bacteria and super viruses. With many European countries banning g.e. crops outrightly, a groundswell of public opinion worldwide has arisen opposing genetically engineered foods, demanding that unbiased and comprehensive safety tests be carried out extensively before such foods are pushed onto the market.

Despite the fact that genetic engineering in agriculture is being sold to the South as a way to feed their hungry masses, the use of g.e. food crops is actually posing a threat to food security in these countries. Since the substantial investment required to bring about g.e. foods has mostly been made by MNCs in the North, these companies are assuring they will receive adequate return on their investment. To guarantee this, they are even going

as far as to incorporate g.e. technologies that kill the second generation of seeds ('terminator technology'), thus preventing seed saving by farmers. Such practices further place food production of the South in the hands of powerful Northern based MNCs who are solely interested in maximizing their own profits.

Women and children suffer most when food rights are threatened therefore women's and children's food rights must be at the centre of our country's concerns:

1. We women from diverse groups and organisations demand that our Food Rights as enacted in the Constitution be protected under any economic regime, and by all governments.
2. We demand that the government immediately act through policy intervention to arrest rising food prices and inflation which are clearly linked to structural adjustment policies.
3. We call for the reintroduction of the Essential Commodities Act since unregulated markets create freedom for hoarders and black marketeers and make the ordinary public victims of harsh scarcities of essential commodities like food.
4. We call upon the Government to strengthen the public distribution system (PDS). We demand an expanded system which will include many more essential commodities. We demand that ration cards be given without hindrance to all those who require them. Foodgrains at half the price of ration supplies must be supplied to those below the poverty line. In particular, tribal areas must be given priority in

the distribution of cheap foodgrains and other essential commodities. Women should be given a special role in the running of these PDS networks and the community should be encouraged to play a bigger role. This is essential to make a system more accountable and to prevent pilferage and black marketing. A multi-tiered system needs to be established consisting of; national grain banks in which the Government must play a stronger role, all the way to the micro level where community run and women run grain banks become the basis for household food security and a community level public distribution system.

5. We demand proper land use policy guidelines to prevent diversion of agricultural land for commercial purposes including aquaculture and horticulture. Common land and panchayati land is being handed over to commercial interests depriving the village poor of their use. We demand this practice be stopped and that the land be used for production of fodder, fuel etc. We demand a full and genuine implementation of land reforms, and an immediate halt to the removal of land ceiling laws and a stop to foreign direct investment (FDI) in agriculture. The removal of land ceilings and the opening of FDI in agriculture is increasing the numbers of landless and increasing the burden on the landless.
6. Declining public investment and encouragement of the corporate sector in agriculture leaves the

farmers vulnerable to rural capitalists and multi-national corporations (MNCs). We call upon the Government to encourage public investment and restrict MNC investment in agriculture.

7. We women call on the WB to stop the deliberate creation of hunger and malnutrition in India through structural adjustment policies especially those forced on agriculture.
8. We demand safe and healthy food for all. We demand the Government ensures that our food is free from chemical and non-chemical adulteration. Effective food safety provisions need to be in place to prevent adulteration, thereby enabling the public access to safe and healthy foods of our choice.
9. We reject genetically engineered foods. Genetically engineered foods are proving to cause retarded growth and immune deficiencies (The Hindu, 13/8/98). Since women and children are the worst victims of malnutrition, health hazards due to the consumption of genetically engineered foods will be most severely felt by poor women and children.
10. We call upon the Government to immediately stop the license free importation of 1 million tonnes of soyabean (for our edible oil industry) which is not necessary - from a point of view of people's food rights and will pose threats to livelihoods of farmers, a large section of whom are women. It will also pose a

threat to women and children's health since the Government has failed to take action to ban the importation of genetically engineered soya or demand the separation and labeling of all genetically engineered foods.

11. We demand a halt to the use of imported food and unsafe food for welfare schemes such as the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) Mid day Meal programme, in which such foods as pre-processed corn soya blend is being used extensively. Not only is such imported food hazardous to our health due to the use of genetically engineered soya, but our local, nutrient-high cereal and grain economy is being marginalised to support resource intensive production systems of the developed countries.
12. The government price support system must be reoriented to ensure the meeting of basic food needs for women and children. We call upon the Government to increase procurement prices of staple foods, especially those of millets and legumes, in order to encourage farmers to return to growing essential food crops. Non-food crops (for example, cotton, tobacco and jute) cultivated as raw materials for industries should have no government procurement prices since industries can directly pay remunerative prices to farmers.
13. Women have always played an important role in the production and processing of food. Cottage and small industries in

the food processing sector which gave some employment and income are being taken over by MNCs and big business companies encouraged by the Government. Apart from destroying women's livelihoods, this also leads to the flooding of the market with expensive, unhealthy junk food. Food resources are being diverted on a large scale to this elite consumer market, creating scarcity for households and rising price rises. We demand that food processing should be reserved for the small scale sector. Such a reservation of the food processing industry for the small scale sector would be consistent with WTO requirements of national treatment, since we would be treating domestic industries in the same way as MNCs by excluding both from entry into the food processing industry.

14. We call upon the Government to restrict and ban all exports of essential food till all are fed. We demand that the food needs of women and children of this country are met first, and only the surpluses from meeting this need should be used for trade exports. Instead of women eating last and least - relying on the leftovers for their sustenance, we demand that global trade be left with the leftovers - only after the food rights of all within the country are met. The Government needs to maintain vigilant monitoring of production, consumption and the food needs of all.

