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To cite this article: Elisabeth Prügl & Saba Joshi (2021) Productive farmers and vulnerable food securers: contradictions of gender expertise in international food security discourse, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 48:7, 1439-1458, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2021.1964475](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2021.1964475)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2021.1964475>



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Published online: 08 Sep 2021.



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Productive farmers and vulnerable food securers: contradictions of gender expertise in international food security discourse

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ABSTRACT



With gender equality becoming a key feature of the global food security agenda, international organizations have produced a rich body of knowledge on gender. This paper argues that such gender expertise generates political effects through identity constructions, problem definitions and rationalities. We critically analyse 59 documents relating to gender and food security in the South written in international organizations between 2000 and 2018. Our analysis reveals two gendered constructions articulated in these documents – the productive female farmer and the caring woman food securer. We demonstrate that problem definitions, solutions, and rationalities associated with these identity constructions are contradictory. Their juxtaposition reveals that gender expertise in international food security discourse is not only governed by neoliberal orthodoxy but also surfaces ambivalences and alternatives.

KEYWORDS

Gender; food security;
international organizations;
expertise; discourse analysis

Contemporary international development policies not only have discovered the role of agriculture in alleviating poverty and ensuring food security but are also demanding an integration of women into these policies and a focus on the elimination of gender inequality. In the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) formulated by the United Nations in 2015, gender equality is a cross-cutting priority and thus included in the goal of ending hunger and malnutrition. International agencies tasked with implementing food security, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the World Bank have made gender equality a central issue in their strategic plans and operations.

Yet this preoccupation with gender sits uneasily with neoliberal policies promoting agro-industrialization and land commercialization, which have increasingly influenced the international food security agenda since the 2007–2008 food crisis. A wealth of ethnographic and feminist political economy research has shown that such policies have

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aggravated gender inequality and often dispossessed women. Whether the focus of policies is structural adjustment, land titling to establish private property, the promotion of export-oriented agro-industries, or the contemporary acceleration of agricultural development under public-private partnerships, commercialization and liberalization have come with a patriarchal hue – sometimes expelling women from farms and lands and other times integrating them in the rural economy in particularly exploitative terms (see Razavi 2003; Doss, Summerfield, and Tsikata 2014).

What then is one to make of the contemporary discourse of women's empowerment and gender equality in food security? Inserted into international development agendas through feminist lobbying, gender mainstreaming promised to shake up the silent biases that have perpetuated gender inequality. While the strategy faced stiff resistance for many years, feminist thought has now been formatted into gender expertise that makes such thought amenable for policy and resonates with agency missions. Policy papers, guidebooks and other tools combine evidence on the importance of gender equality for food security with operative plans, helping practitioners to mainstream the issue into their work. The FAO's flagship report, *The State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA)* focused on women in its 2010/2011 edition (FAO 2011), as did the World Bank's 2012 *World Development Report* (World Bank 2011). The FAO, World Bank and IFAD jointly produced the expansive *Gender and Agriculture Sourcebook* (2009), which provides a definitive guide on mainstreaming gender in agriculture and food security. Literature of this kind constitutes gender expertise, that is, a specialized and policy-oriented kind of knowledge that is often internally contested (Kunz and Prügl 2019).

Feminist scholars have argued that gender expertise de-politicizes feminist agendas by turning them into technical problems to be solved through government intervention (e.g. Mukhopadhyay 2014). Nancy Fraser (2009) has gone so far to suggest that feminism has become a handmaiden of neoliberal policies, ideologies, and modes of government. Others have argued that gender mainstreaming and 'governance feminism' have enabled the co-optation, depoliticization, NGOization and a commodification of feminism (Rottenberg 2014, 2017; Roberts 2015; Alvarez 2009; McRobbie 2009; Halley et al. 2006). In the specific context of development, studies have focused critically on the way gender expertise has redefined empowerment as enhancing efficiency, productivity, and market participation in alignment with neoliberal values, interpellating women as entrepreneurs and inviting them to self-improve (Collins 2016; Altan-Olcay 2015; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Phillips 2005). Gender equality policies have thus functioned to advance neoliberal state projects of development and finance (Prügl 2015; Griffin 2013, 2009). Another framing involves the focus on women's deficiencies founding a need for their integration into the neoliberal economy and the formal legal system (Phillips 2005; Bourke Martignoni 2019). Finally, scholars have criticized undifferentiated, de-contextualized, and universalizing generalizations about 'women' in gender expertise and in normative instruments guiding land investment specifically (Collins 2018, 2014).

While depoliticized in the sense of being made to appear purely technical, gender expertise is thus highly political. It supports practices of government by providing problem definitions together with implicit policy solutions, establishing the rationales that connect problems to solutions, and developing technical tools for intervention. In doing so, it aligns feminist goals with hegemonic agendas, straddling purposes of emancipation with those of enhancing productivity and security. Although gender expertise is thus not

innocent or 'objective' knowledge, it also is not wholly co-opted. As we will show in this paper, it is multivocal and contested, assuming different framings, relating differently to hegemonic discourses, and producing diverse and sometimes contradictory effects.

We explore the contradictions of gender expertise in the field of food security where we note the salience of two gendered constructions of women – as productive farmers who enhance productivity, and as vulnerable carers who secure food for the family and ensure its proper utilization. Centring our discourse analysis on these two gendered constructions, we tease out not only the complicities and co-optations of gender expertise but also its ambiguities and cracks in its logics. We make gender expertise itself the object of examination, unveil unspoken assumptions and silences, the power relations it perpetuates, but also the alternatives it makes thinkable.

Accordingly, we ask the following questions:

- In the field of food security, what gendered subjects does gender expertise produce, what rationalities does it develop and what solutions does it propose?
- What unspoken assumptions and silences inhabit such expertise?
- What contradictions are implicit in this expertise and where are there potentially subversive fissures?

Our argument proceeds as follows: we first provide a brief background on gender mainstreaming in food security and the associated development of expertise. This historical overview situates gender expertise in the institutional and ideological trajectories that comprise global food security governance, highlighting the political processes that underwrite the contested agendas in gender and food security discourse today. Following this, we outline the methodology used for this study and then elaborate on the salience of two gendered constructions – the productive woman farmer who, with development support, can become an entrepreneur in a neoliberalized global economy, and the female vulnerable food securer, who needs rights in order to be able to care for her family. We conclude with an analytical juxtaposition of these two figures, teasing out contradictions in the discourse and highlighting hidden alternatives.

A brief history of gender in international food security policy

Women and gender made an explicit entry into the global food security agenda in parallel with the women-in-development (WID) movement, which highlighted the non-recognition of women's unpaid and therefore often uncounted labour in households and in subsistence farming, and generated calls for more research and data on women's role in development. The 1974 World Food Conference formulated resolution VIII on *Women and Food*, and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) included an article on rural women, both calling on governments to promote equal rights. But despite this gain in language and the pronounced efforts of the WID movement UN agencies were slow to integrate gender into their missions.

In the area of food security, the ILO was a pioneer and created the Programme on Rural Women in its Rural Employment Policies Research Branch in 1979. It produced research on employment, labour and poverty relating to rural women and launched a series of

projects in Africa, Latin America and Asia on organizing and employment (De Luca et al. 2012). The FAO followed more slowly and only in 1983 renamed its 'Home Economics Service,' which dealt with women's issues, as 'Women in Agricultural Production and Rural Development Services,' implicitly shifting its understanding of women as housewives to recognizing them as farmers (Skard 2009, 172). Amid widespread staff resistance and a dearth of commitment, the organization began to implement a limited number of women-oriented projects. However, out of the approximately 2,500 field projects in the 1980s, only 35 focused directly on women (Skard 2009, 172 footnote 14).

Over the course of the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985), the focus on the exclusion and marginalization of women from development processes shifted to an interest in structures of inequality – with an emphasis on gender relations rather than women. After the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, governments began to recognize the way gender-neutral policies often perpetuated inequality and committed to integrating a gender perspective into all their operations. The *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* called for gender mainstreaming, which meant ensuring that a gender perspective was reflected in all policies and programmes at national, regional and international levels so that gender inequality would not be inadvertently perpetuated and gender equality promoted.¹ Accordingly, the 1996 World Food Summit affirmed that eradicating food insecurity needed to be paired with policies to ensure gender equality and the empowerment of women (Objective 1.3; "Rome Declaration and Plan of Action on World Food Security" 1996). By then, food security meant more than just availability, but now included the notions of accessibility, safety and stability to be realized at individual, household, national and global levels (Shaw 2007, 349–350).

While the FAO emphasized that women were the 'key to food security' (FAO 1996), civil society groups and transnational peasants movements like *La Via Campesina* at the 1996 World Food Summit outlined the demand for 'food sovereignty'. Their agenda placed producers' and consumers' rights at the centre of the discourse on food, favouring autonomy over (market) dependence. This entailed a parallel shift for considering gender. For instance, at the NGO Forum on Food Security held in parallel to the WFS in 1996, activists critiqued 'distorted' notions of food security and asserted that 'women want to have control over food production and that is done through control of seeds in women's hands' (Akhter 2001, 55). Women thus appeared as the antagonists of multi-national seed companies.

By the early 2000s, most UN agencies working on food security explicitly addressed gender and women in their strategic frameworks.² Today, their objectives parallel the goals of the UN agenda for sustainable development, with the FAO, IFAD, and the WFP

¹The effects of such gender mainstreaming in the UN and their relation to feminist agendas have been discussed in a plethora of studies which have examined the dynamics of 'fitting' gender into institutional mandates and alliances between activist outsiders and bureaucratic insiders (Razavi 1997; Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002). This includes analyses of discourses of empowerment in micro-credit projects and in policies of remittances that interpellate women as entrepreneurs and invite them to self-improve (Altan-Olcay 2015; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Kunz 2011; Sharma 2008; Rankin 2001, 2002). It also includes the identification of women as always already vulnerable and victims in discourses of conflict-related sexual violence and as invariably nurturing peacemakers in policies of gender and peacebuilding (Shepherd 2008, 2016; Otto 2006). And it entails recognitions of intersectionality, of the way international economic governance discourses are supported by heteronormative commitments (Bedford 2009; Griffin 2009) and of the way international security discourses thrive on racialized logics (Pratt 2013; Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011).

²The FAO did so with its Socio-Economic and Gender Analysis Programme (SEAGA) (Phillips 2005, 657). Building on its influential 1992 study on poverty among rural women, IFAD articulated the role of 'women as agents of change' in its 2002–2006 framework (IFAD 2010, 16). The WFP expanded its first five-year gender policy 'Commitment to Women' (1996–2001) to a gender policy titled 'Enhanced Commitment to Women' (2002–2007) (WFP 2008, 5).

all having formulated gender strategies and including gender equality as a cross-cutting theme in their policies and programming (FAO 2017; IFAD 2016b; WFP 2017). While coming to the issue later than the UN, the World Bank today also has a robust gender strategy, which plays a key role in its goal of poverty alleviation.

The increasing salience of gender in the international governance of food and agriculture was accompanied by research about the way gender mattered in this issue area. The knowledge thus generated and adopted into policy expertise is the focus of our analysis. Attuned to existing critiques, we explore contemporary gender expertise beyond its constructions of unitary subjects, its encasings in neoliberal and colonial logics, and its seeming univocality.

Methodology

Our effort follows in the footsteps of a range of scholars who have shown the way development expertise is productive, constructing power-laden problem definitions and identities, and enabling colonialist policies and interventions (e.g. Escobar 2011; Ferguson 1990). In feminist post-colonial scholarship Chandra Mohanty (1984) critiqued the way Western feminist scholarship has constructed the 'Third World Woman' as an undifferentiated, monolithic subject and defined her interests and desires as the same as that of women universally, ignoring differences of class, ethnicity and race. This Woman often emerged as downtrodden and oppressed – imagined like Western women of an earlier age – but invariably devoid of political or historical agency. Mohanty is critical of the politics implied in this framing, enabling benevolent intervention but largely precluding a politics of coalitions and solidarity.

Mohanty's focus of critique is the early women in development scholarship, arguably a precursor to contemporary gender expertise in international governance. WID scholarship garnered imitation, reactions and critique and in this way seeded a body of knowledge that came to inform the integration of gender perspectives into policies and programmes. Thus, gender expertise combines knowledge with policy practices; it is a specialized body of knowledge that provides insights on the problem of gender inequality and is applied in policy and programming (Kunz and Prügl 2019). Gender expertise creates gender experts when it interpolates professionals to assume the mantle of this particular expertise. Vice versa, gender experts participate in creating gender expertise, for example, when they conduct research as World Bank development experts or when they create training manuals, elaborate guidelines and checklists. More broadly, gender experts deploy this knowledge in their work, when they practice their craft seeking to advance gender equality through their policy and programming interventions.

In this paper, we draw on Foucaultian theorizing to approach gender expertise as a discourse, a body of knowledge that is productive and generates effects (Prügl 2011). With Foucault, we argue that gender expertise is governmental, that is, it participates in governing populations that in the case of food security are mostly located in the South. It does so by constructing identities, establishing categories, and advancing 'rationalities of government,' which specify causes and effects, and entail problem definitions and associated solutions. As gender expertise is deployed to administer peoples' lives, it comes to shape realities.

We combine these Foucaultian analytics of government with the tools of critical frame analysis. The notion of framing leads us to study the ways in which policy-makers or interest groups reconstruct reality and render it meaningful through the use of symbolic or rhetorical tools. Like discourse analysis, the critical frame analysis method assumes that policy frames are not a depiction of reality, but rather an 'organizing principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful policy problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly enclosed' (Verloo 2005, 20). Both methods involve an analysis of texts, which seeks to reveal rationalities and logics in one instance, and policy frames or constructions that give meaning to reality in the other. Both also interrogate the construction of policy problems ('diagnosis') and associated solutions ('prognosis'), and thus hint at the performative force of gender expertise.

A Foucaultian approach in addition leads us to think of expertise as not seamless and coherent, but full of fissures and cracks. Accordingly, we are interested in identifying disagreements between co-existing logics or frames, but also want to make visible unspoken assumptions and repressed or forgotten themes. The incoherences of gender expertise illustrate its instability and contested character; and making visible silenced topics foreshadows potential points of disruption and change.

In practical terms, the paper brings together insights from different research projects on gender expertise in the international governance of agriculture and food security conducted separately by the authors.³ Together we analysed 59 documents published between 2000 and 2018 on the websites of international organizations that have addressed food security, rural development and agriculture as central features in their programming and policy activities. These include in particular the Rome agencies, that is the FAO, IFAD, and the World Food Programme. But we also looked at World Bank documents pertaining to gender and agricultural development. In addition, the UN's human rights machinery has begun to generate expert knowledge on gender and the right to food with the creation of a Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food; our analysis includes reports of the Special Rapporteur. (For a breakdown of coded documents by institution see Appendix.) Given that there are over 30 UN bodies or inter-governmental organizations with a direct or indirect stake in the global food security agenda (Shaw 2007, 207), this represents no doubt only a portion of the documents published on the topic, but can be considered a reasonable sample. We made sure to include key policy documents as well as flagship reports that reflect a high level of consensus, but also read more marginal documents to elicit ideas that remained under the surface.

We treat this corpus of documents as reflecting international gender expertise on food security, which is our object of analysis. Because we are interested in a global discourse, and because we find that expert discourses travel widely, we do not break down gender expertise by institutions. Indeed, there is a lot of borrowing of ideas beyond institutional boundaries, and although institutions have different priorities, we find elements of the themes identified in this article in all the institutions under investigation.

We engaged in a systematic coding of the documents using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo), combining inductive and deductive techniques. We each started out

³Joshi wrote a Master's dissertation on the topic (Joshi 2012). Prügl examined agriculture and food security discourse in the context of a research project on gender expertise (for a first summary see Prügl 2017).

with a code list based on analytical concepts (drawn from Foucaultian governmentality theory in the case of Prügl and on critical frame analysis in the case of Joshi) and inductively added codes under the broad categories of our respective code lists⁴ as we read through the materials.⁵ As certain themes surfaced as salient we adjusted our subsequent coding, providing more depth on certain topics and sometimes merging previous codes that emerged as related. Final analysis entailed a re-reading of coded sections, giving priority to codes that appeared particularly frequently, interpreting salient themes in light of our theories, and weaving our interpretations into a common narrative. While we analysed our documents separately (with Joshi's research covering the time period from 2000–2012 and Prügl's extending to 2018), we found complementarities and overlaps in our findings, which we report here.

Women farmers and the gender productivity gap

The most salient construction of women in contemporary gender expertise on food security is anchored in development economics and reflects the neoliberal pre-occupations that dominate that field. Approaching women as farmers, it foregrounds the need to increase their economic productivity and, to speak with Bridget O'Laughlin (2007), establishes the 'myth' of the efficiency of gender equality. Research in this vein documents a 'gender productivity gap,' consisting of the widely-cited fact that 'yields on plots managed by women are lower than those managed by men' with gaps clustering around the 20–30% range (FAO 2011, 39–40). This gap is considered a problem firstly, because women are disproportionately represented among smallholder farmers,⁶ and – as signalled in the 2008 World Development Report – smallholder farming is a highly efficient way of alleviating rural poverty, malnutrition, and food insecurity. Thus, in order to achieve a 'productivity revolution in smallholder farming' (World Bank 2007, 1), it is necessary to overcome the gender gap in agricultural productivity.

Closing the gender gap in agriculture, the FAO argues, 'could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 per cent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 percent' (FAO 2011, 5). The World Bank (2005) similarly documents the 'missed potential' of agriculture in sub-Saharan African countries owing to gender inequality. Multiple studies quantify the gains to be had from closing gender gaps:

- Burkina Faso: Shifting labour and fertilizer between men's and women's plots could increase output by 10–20 per cent.
- Kenya: Giving women farmers the same inputs and education as men could increase yields by more than 20 per cent.

⁴For Prügl, the following were the initial starting codes: problem definitions, solutions, goals, technologies, and subjectivities. Joshi's coding using critical frame analysis grouped codes under diagnosis and prognosis categories (see Bacchi 2005) included the following codes under 'diagnosis' – problem definition, location of problem (household, workplace, society), subject of problem, definition of gender and the following under 'prognosis' – proposed action, strategy, actors, mechanisms and vision of equality.

⁵Prügl was helped by a research assistant; she would like to thank Paula Drumond for her excellent work.

⁶According to FAO statistics women comprise 43 per cent of the agricultural workforce in developing countries (FAO 2011, 5), and there are claims that the majority of small-scale farmers are women (Petrics et al. 2015, 5).

- Tanzania: Reducing time burdens of women could increase cash incomes for small-holder coffee and banana growers by 10 per cent.
- Zambia: If women enjoyed the same overall degree of capital investment in agricultural inputs, including land, as their men counterparts, output in Zambia could increase by up to 15 per cent. (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2009, 3)

Inserting gender into a rationality of increasing productivity has led to the construction of a distinctive female identity in food security, that of women as farmers. Unlike the WID discourse, which argued that women needed to be added into development, this recognizes that women are already part of the rural economy. It is in stark contrast to constructions of women as victims that characterized Mohanty's *Third World Woman*, replacing this unitary and downtrodden woman with a unitary woman farmer who, with the necessary resources and opportunities, can propel development. The FAO's 2011 SOFA report summarizes the logic in its first paragraph:

Agriculture is underperforming in many developing countries for a number of reasons. Among these is the fact that women lack the resources and opportunities they need to make the most productive use of their time. Women are farmers, workers and entrepreneurs, but almost everywhere they face more severe constraints than men in accessing productive resources, markets and services. This 'gender gap' hinders their productivity and reduces their contributions to the agriculture sector and to the achievement of broader economic and social development goals. (FAO 2011, 3)

The main concern in this quote is with women's productivity. While the role of women as workers receives a nod, the suggestion that they need access to resources, markets and services tends to envision them as entrepreneurs and farmers rather than dependent employees. The message is that these women want to be productive but cannot. They may be part of the rural economy, but they are not part of the market.

While thus not hopelessly downtrodden and oppressed, we find, like Phillips (2005) and Bourke Martignoni (2019), that women are oddly deficient when measured against the modern, often male farmer. In the documents we analysed there is pervasive reference to women's multiple lacks: a lack of resources, including a lack of credit, capital, and assets; a lack of productive factors, such as land and labour, and a lack of technology and inputs (such as improved seed varieties and fertilizer); finally, a lack of access to markets and services, a lack of knowledge, education and information, and a lack of voice and representation.

International gender expertise thus makes visible the pervasive disadvantage of rural women and provides a solution: invest in them! This entails powerful policy prescriptions supporting women's access to resources and services, no doubt opening opportunities for many. But it builds on a particular construction of the woman farmer as autonomous, rational, and dis-embedded from society – not quite a man, but soon potentially so.

Unattached to a family, the new Third World Woman seems to be almost entirely modelled after the image constructed in development economics of some Sub-Saharan African women farmers who work their own plots of land. These women have been a favoured object of study for development economists because their control over their own plots of land allows for comparisons with the typical farmer who emerges as male in international policy discourse. Thus, in order to make generalizing statements about

women farmers, researchers like to study areas where women farm their own plots of land, or they study female heads of households. It is these studies that lead them to conclude that women really are no different than men; they just need more inputs and opportunities:

Many studies show that yields on plots managed by women are lower than those managed by men. This is not because women are worse farmers than men. Indeed, extensive evidence shows that women are just as efficient as men. They simply do not have access to the same inputs. If they did, their yields would be the same as men's, they would produce more and overall agricultural production would increase. (FAO 2011, 39)

However, if a farmer is someone who has 'decision-making power over an arable plot (or plots) of land and/or the resulting harvest' (O'Sullivan et al. 2014, 17), then globally speaking a woman farmer is quite rare.⁷ Outside Africa, she typically would be a head of household, either *de jure* (usually because she is a widow) or *de facto* (usually because her husband migrated). Most women working in smallholder agriculture globally do so in a joint endeavour of family farming in which they carry out specific tasks within a strict gender division of labour. Many also diversify into wage-work or off-farm self-employment.

Gender expertise on the women farmer suffering from a productivity gap abstracts this figure from locally gendered contexts and constructs her as universal. As an abstract figure she is not embedded in a family or community and unaffected by specific gender norms and gendered institutions. She also is not differentiated along other axes of power, including class. There are probably few that can live up to that figure and successfully overcome the gender productivity gap. For Siphso Moyo, the head of the ONE Campaign,⁸ this woman looks like Elizabeth Nsimadala from Uganda, who told an audience at a ONE Campaign event: 'I am a proud, successful farmer; I am above the salary scale of public sector servants in Uganda. I do agriculture not only because it pays, but because I can do it better' (O'Sullivan et al. 2014, 5). Nsimadala seems free from constraints of gender or class and has overcome lack of access to resources and opportunities. Given the right policies and technical solutions she demonstrates that women farmers can be independent entrepreneurs in a neoliberal economy; they have the intrinsic potential to succeed regardless of the power relations in which they are embedded.

But there is contradictory expert evidence that disrupts the story of the productive woman farmer who can do better:

In many countries, even when women have access to the same amount of a given input as men, equal access does not achieve the same effect in terms of agricultural productivity. This novel insight points to broader norms, market failures or institutional constraints that influence the effectiveness of these resources for women. (O'Sullivan et al. 2014, 7)

While gender seems successfully locked away in the narrative of the productive woman farmer, it escapes its closet in this finding of 'market failure' generated by biased

⁷As the 2011 SOFA specifies: 'Most women engaged in farming do so within a household production unit, and their activities are not usually separable from those of the household as a whole. Most of the data available on female farmers derives from household surveys and pertain to the activities of female-headed households, who comprise a minority of female farmers in most countries' (FAO 2011, 40).

⁸Co-founded by Bono, who still serves on the Campaign's board, which is studied with the elite of the main private development foundations, joined by a line-up of CEOs from multinationals.

norms and institutions. Indeed, a range of documents we examined located the reasons for women's lack of access in biased individuals (extension officers, village chiefs, financial service providers) and in biased institutions – mostly informal norms, traditions and expectations. They were said to constrain the economic activities women can engage in, undermine their self-confidence and their ability to compete in the workplace, provide an obstacle to their participation in cooperatives, and limit their control over savings and assets (SOFA Team 2011, 15; Petrics et al. 2015, 16; IFAD, WFP, and FAO 2012, 4; Fletschner and Kenney 2011, 5).

The focus on customs and institutions provides ambivalent openings in a discourse that is otherwise narrowly focused on the market and productivity. So does the introduction of the associated concept of the gender division of labour. Both are worth discussing in more depth. Feminist economists typically understand the gender division of labour as a structural feature of capitalist patriarchy that functions to separate production from reproduction (Bhattacharya 2017; Razavi 2009). Some of the texts examined recognize the 'burdens' of household chores (FAO, WFP, and IFAD 2012, 1) resulting in women's 'time-poverty' and standing in the way of women's participation in 'more productive' activities (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2009, 289–297). The proposed solutions are technical, entailing a lightening of women's workloads through labour-saving technologies (FAO 2004b; IFAD 2016a), the strengthening of extension systems to respond to women (FAO, WFP, and IFAD 2012), providing technical skills and education (FAO, IFAD, and ILO 2010, 112), increased investment in rural infrastructure (FAO 2011), and micro-finance for women's enterprises (IFAD 2009). In other words, gender experts are offering technical solutions for a structural problem, that is, the gender division of labour. While such solutions ignore relations of exploitation within households, they also begin to address them when they seek to promote 'gender roles change' (FAO 2011, 4). The radical idea of challenging the appropriation of women's labour lurks behind this framing, not only within households but also potentially in the broader economy.

Land rights are a second area in which the focus on institutions has borne results. Feminist research has identified deep-rooted inequalities in land rights and contributed to generating political pressure for joint titling, registration, and recognizing women's use rights to land (Deere and de Leal 2014; Razavi 2011; Whitehead and Tsikata 2003; Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997; Agarwal 1994). This also is reflected in international gender expertise:

Strengthening women's access to and control over land is an important means of raising their status and influence within households and communities. Improving women's access to land and security of tenure has direct impacts on farm productivity, but can have far reaching implications for improving household welfare as well. (SOFA Team 2011, 8)

The focus on land rights thus opens up a point of intervention that combines the logic of productivity with empowering women, not only as entrepreneurs, but also as actors in the community and in households. Giving women titles does not amount to throwing off power relations in agriculture, nor does the individualization and entailed commodification of land ensure food security (O'Laughlin 2007). But in many contexts, it has helped women secure rights and strengthened their status. Moreover, land rights impact far beyond a logic of productivity:

Family and marriage laws, inheritance provisions and housing law are all important legal areas that play a supporting role in ensuring equitable treatment of men and women in control over land. (FAO 2011, 46)

The FAO thus brings into view the broad range of institutions identified in the feminist land rights literature and in so doing opens a crack in the productivist logic of food security discourse that feeds neoliberal orthodoxies. Together with a demand that rural women get equal access to resources, markets and services, and together with a recognition of unequal gender divisions of labour, this allows for the appearance of challenges to gendered power relations. While the gender productivity gap narrative inserts itself smoothly into neoliberal logics of commercialization and increasing efficiency, and while it establishes a new colonial image of the woman farmer as universally productive though slightly deficient, it also opens up discursive space for attacking gendered labour and power relations and for claiming rights.

Women as vulnerable food securers

In the liberal paradigm of undifferentiated individuality, as expressed in the productivist discourse, women's sameness ultimately undoes the problem of gender inequality. The take-home message is that when given adequate access to resources, markets and services, and when institutions are modernized, women have the capacity to overcome 'gender gaps' to become productive farmers. However, when embedded in the context of nutrition rather than production, often discussed in relation to crises and emergencies, a focus on gender difference eclipses the liberal discourse of sameness highlighted in productivist frames. In this context, a security frame comes to the fore that constructs women's biological, social and situated difference as an invaluable resource for a different kind of problem, that is the elimination of hunger. In this register, gender expertise first valorizes women's roles as mothers and food providers at the household level, and then underscores the vulnerabilities associated with these statuses. The productivist image of the woman farmer who approximates a male ideal thus encounters a parallel and contradictory construction that, in the name of security, celebrates precisely the subordinate reproductive work that the image of the enterprising woman farmer shunts aside.

Since the 1970s, women's bodies – their reproductive capacities and their role in child nourishment – have been central to the discourse on food security. At the 1974 Rome Conference, Resolution VIII recognized the role of rural women as food producers, of 'women everywhere' as food procurers and preparers, and the contribution of mothers to 'the healthy development of the future generations through proper lactation' (United Nations 1975, 282). Women's sex-specific nutritional needs, particularly during pregnancy and lactation, continue to pervade discourses on food security, frequently in conjunction with those of their children.

The construction of women as food securers defined by their (reproductive) difference is particularly visible in WFP documents, framed by the organization's humanitarian mandate focused on food aid and assistance in emergencies. The organization asserts that 'experience has shown that in the hands of women, food is most likely to reach the mouths of children in need' (WFP 2011, 1).⁹ Women's bodies and traditional gender roles are thus mobilized for food assistance and women constructed as channels for

ensuring the wellbeing of their families. As the organization elaborates in its *10 Facts on Women and Hunger*, 'research confirms that putting more income in the hands of women yields beneficial results for health, education and child nutrition' (WFP 2018). This 'fact' is further enhanced by the argument that women have been recorded to be more dependable beneficiaries of developmental assistance, given their inclination towards feeding their children and families: 'When a crisis hits, women are generally the first to sacrifice their food consumption, in order to protect the food consumption of their families' (WFP 2018). Like the Spartan mother, that exemplary embodiment of feminine civic virtue (Elshtain 1982), and defying the liberal ideal of the rational, profit-maximizing woman farmer, it is her predisposition to sacrifice her needs for the sake of the community that makes her the 'key to improving household food security and nutritional wellbeing' (WFP 2011, 1).

In the context of long-term food security, with impacts over generations, a slew of empirical evidence is cited in multiple publications to support the contention that women tend to advance the wellbeing of their families over their own. It shows that women are more likely than men to spend additional income on children, and that women's control over income or credit increases the nutritional status of children and family food security more broadly (FAO 2011, 9, 23, 33, 2009, 10; Fletschner and Kenney 2011, 12; Seebens 2011, 5; World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2009, 12, 18; O'Sullivan et al. 2014, 6; Human Rights Council, 22nd Session 2012). As a result, FAO argues that giving women more resources and strengthening their voice in the household is

a proven strategy for enhancing food security, nutrition, education, and health of children. And better fed, healthier children learn better and become more productive citizens. The benefits would span generations and pay large dividends in the future. (FAO 2011, vi)

Again, women's difference – articulated in their role as mothers and carers – emerges as an asset for achieving food secure futures filtered through an ethos of citizenship.

Another instance where traditional gender roles yield the oft-cited 'key to food security' (FAO 1996) is ensuring dietary diversity – a necessity not only in terms of welfare but also in economic terms.¹⁰ Women ensure dietary diversity by knowing how to supplement staple grains with fruits, vegetables, and animal source foods that provide necessary micronutrients (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2009, 18). Removed from productivity discourses, the gender division of labour is no longer branded as burdensome. Instead, women's traditional gender roles as food providers and preparers are venerated:

Women's role in food utilization for food security is perhaps the most critical and outweighs the importance of their role in food production and how they spend the income they earn. (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2009, 18)

A different kind of gender gap becomes visible in these constructions, one that creates men as the foil to women's virtue. Men materialize as incapable of delivering food security by themselves: 'Men who lack knowledge about food preparation may not be able to translate food availability into nutritional security for their household' (World Bank,

⁹Following the introduction of gender mainstreaming, mother-and-child nutrition (MCN) became a formalized commitment in WFP's country programming (WFP 2006, 8).

¹⁰World Bank et al. find that 'in Sierra Leone iron deficiency among women agricultural workers will cost the economy \$100 million in the next five years (Darnton-Hill and others 2005)' (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2009, 18).

FAO, and IFAD 2009, 13; also Human Rights Council, 22nd Session 2012). They appear incomplete without a nurturing woman. More than that, men cannot be trusted with feeding a family; therefore public programs need to target women for example for cash transfer programmes, 'because evidence shows they are more likely than men to prioritize child nutrition' (FAO 2011, 44). Unlike in the story of the female farmer who emerges as an equal that does not need a male counterpart, the female food provider is constructed as a logical and necessary complement to a male farmer. The Third World Woman becomes a Third World 'happy family' (Bedford 2009) with a virtuous woman completing an otherwise deficient man.

While the uniqueness of the female reproductive experience renders women 'a secret weapon to beat hunger' (WFP 2011, 1), a contending construction of feminine vulnerability, particularly in natural disasters and emergencies, disrupts the narrative of nurturing female carers. Supporting this construction is an abundance of data indicating higher mortality rates of women in natural disasters (WFP 2011, 6), higher displacement of women in crisis situations (FAO and WFP 2005, 5) and higher likelihood of enduring violence and abuse in disasters (FAO 2013, 3). Women's vulnerabilities, manifest in physical, socio-economic and psychological terms, thus accentuate the importance of adopting gender-differentiated responses to crises.¹¹ In the context of famine and food emergencies, FAO argues that:

Women are often more **vulnerable** because of lower socio-economic standing to men, in terms of access to necessary **resources** and ability to gainfully provide for their families. They lack influence due to inequality and disempowerment, and have less decision-making power and control over their lives. (FAO 2004a, emphasis as in original)

The notion of women's difference seems to slide easily into a discourse of women's vulnerability, encompassing both the disproportionate impacts of crises on women and their multiple lacks identified earlier. Such constructions engender trappings familiar from the 'feminization of poverty' narrative. Just like this narrative seamlessly integrated gender inequality with poverty, so does the narrative of women's vulnerability collapse distinct forms of disadvantage into one (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1999; Razavi 1997, 1120). In another parallel, gender expertise on food security also commonly utilizes the concept of female-headed households as a proxy for women's vulnerability, highlighting that she is incomplete without a male counterpart.¹²

But the notions of female vulnerability and difference also produce an ambiguous agenda that perhaps allows room for subversion. For example, experts' double-edged narrative on women's disempowerment as a source of vulnerability has justified not only programmes for women's and girl's education (FAO, IFAD, and ILO 2010; FAO, WFP, and IFAD 2012), but also calls for collective action (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2009), decision-making and political representation (FAO 2011) as antidotes to power imbalances that characterize women's structural marginalization and food insecurity.

¹¹Discursive representations of female vulnerability in disasters echo those noted in context of the climate change debate, where women have been deemed as virtuous or vulnerable in relation to the environment (Arora-Jonsson 2011).

¹²Sylvia Chant (2007) points out that the image of the less productive and resourceful female-headed household has been strategic for policy advocacy, leading to some positive results, such as increase of allocation to female-headed households. But nevertheless it also forwards a problematically homogenous notion of female poverty and a universal category that relies on essentialist claims about poverty and gender inequality (Chant 2007, 36).

The WFP's current gender policy (2015-2020) for example outlines equality in participatory planning, design and monitoring as well as education and supporting women and girls in decision-making roles as key objectives in its operations (WFP 2015, 11–12). Similarly, the World Bank and others urge practitioners to note that disruptive effects of natural disasters may yield a platform for reorienting gender roles and imbalances, warning against the reproduction of vulnerability by treating women narrowly as victims.

Post-disaster reconstruction presents the opportunity to challenge existing gender relations and empower women to better respond to this challenge ... However, an excessive focus on relief assistance may obscure or compromise efforts to challenge these roles. Emergency relief used inappropriately may discourage independence and undermine local coping strategies. These strategies result in the reconstruction of vulnerability rather than the promotion of more equitable and sustainable conditions during the post-disaster window of opportunity for social change ... (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2009, 451)

While operative guidelines and knowledge on crisis management capitalize on traditional gender differences, the emergency itself is constructed as a space for challenging existing normative orders. The identities produced through gender expertise may thus be multivocal, simultaneously encoding hegemonic framings of gender complementarity and seeding the potential to destabilize them.

Conclusion

What does gender expertise on food security do? What subjects does it produce? What problems does it construct, and what rationalities and solutions does it propose? What are its unspoken assumptions? And where is it contradictory, showing cracks in neoliberal and patriarchal hegemonies? These are the questions we have sought to answer in this paper.

We have identified two salient constructions of women – as productive farmers who enhance productivity, and as vulnerable carers who ensure family and community nutrition. These constructions are embedded in distinctive logics: The woman farmer is part of a neoliberal economic imaginary, which envisions that she will flourish if she can become more productive. In contrast, the vulnerable food securer is pictured as part of a community in which she plays an assigned motherly role with associated rights and protections. In both we find Mohanty's Third World Woman reconstructed as two equally monolithic figures that function to hide the diversity of social forms characterizing agriculture around the world, introducing universal logics of efficiency on the one hand, and of nutrition security on the other. Different problem definitions and solutions emerge from these logics: making productive by providing resources and adjusting institutional incentives in one case, protection by securing rights and political participation on the other. Deployed through expertise, these logics provide a potent framing for policy and programme interventions to advance food security, with the first particularly salient in national development plans, and the second more visible in humanitarian settings.

Behind these constructions lurk unspoken, and ultimately incompatible assumptions, reflecting the multivocality and contestedness of gender expertise. The woman farmer appears as inherently the same as the male farmer and thus is constructed as autonomous and separate from her family and community. This makes it possible to imagine her as a disembodied rational agent who, with the right inputs, can become productive in an

international market and thus contribute to food security. The market liberates her, and she in turn enhances market efficiency (compare Prügl 2016). In contrast, the female food securer emerges as fundamentally different in that she sacrifices herself to feed her children, knows like nobody else about nutrition, is uniquely dependable, yet is also profoundly vulnerable and always disadvantaged. Indeed, it is this difference that seeds her distinctive contribution to food security. She is first and foremost a mother, logically connected to her family and complemented by a man who needs her difference to keep himself food secure. The two figures re-enact well-rehearsed tensions between liberal and radical feminisms, with the first dismissing the significance of gendered embodiments and the second celebrating women's difference (albeit outside the patriarchal order).

In their juxtaposition, the two logics make visible contradictions when read against each other. Their claims to advancing gender equality get shipwrecked when measured against the other logic of the other. Thus, one logic celebrates women's difference for assuring family and child nutrition and thus advancing food security, while the other considers women's caring labour an obstacle to their productivity. Women's difference and reproductive labour are thus treated as assets in one instance, and as something to be overcome in the other. Moreover, there are internal contradictions in each of the logics identified: The demand for making women farmers productive runs up against insights that they fall short even if they have the same inputs as men. Efforts to help women enter markets falter on the shoals of their difference, generating persistent 'market failures'. Conversely, seeking to empower women as food securers inadvertently reproduces their secondary status as the Other of men – their position in the patriarchal gender division of labour perpetuates their vulnerability.

In these contradictions, gender expertise in food security reveals itself as not only co-opted, but also unstable. It makes visible the cracks in the logics of international food governance and helps surface the outlines of alternatives. Among these is the recognition that patriarchal family law hinders not only women's access to land but anchors their position in the gender division of labour and makes them vulnerable to various forms of violence. Among them is also the recognition that women's difference is an asset only if it gets de-linked from such vulnerabilities. From these recognitions emerge demands for changing institutions and family law, for giving women a voice and enabling their political participation. They contribute to undermining gender divisions of labour and power that continue to obscure the important work of social reproduction and keep in place male privilege. None of this amounts to a revolutionary overthrow of gendered power relations that prop up contemporary food systems. But it should lead us to accept that power is not monolithic; instead it is inhabited by resistance and circulates in contradictory ways. Gender expertise in food security policy is thus much more than co-optation. It is a site of contestation and contradiction that can amplify subversive interventions and create space for a disruptive politics of gender justice beyond enhancing women's productivity or treating them as conduits for feeding families.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Dzodzi Tsikata, Fenneke Reysoo and three anonymous reviewers for their comments which greatly helped improve our article. An earlier version of this paper was presented at

the 9th Annual International Feminist Journal of Politics (IFJP) conference held at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, USA. We thank discussants and panelists for their input.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Research leading to this publication has been supported by a grant from the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development, co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swiss National Science Foundation [grant number 400540].

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Appendix. Number of documents coded.

FAO	30
IFAD	10
WFP	6
World Bank	3
Special Rapporteur	2
Joint	8
Total	59

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