Gender Justice and Food Security in Cape Town, South Africa

Hilde Ibsen[1] and Penelope Engel-Hills[2]
[1]Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden
[2]Faculty of Health and Wellness Sciences, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

hilde.ibsen@kau.se
engelhillsp@cput.ac.za

Abstract: The food and nutrition challenges in Cape Town are complex and reflect historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid as well as the impact of contemporary neoliberal policy leading to extremes in socio-economic status. The right to food is enshrined in the South African constitution, yet there is an intersection between food, gender and injustice that prevails in marginalised communities in Cape Town, which is regarded to be one of the most unequal cities in the world and facing great social vulnerability. Rapid urbanisation, climate change, intensity of droughts and flooding, land speculation and shrinking quotas for small-scale fishing put pressure on the city´s food system and reduce citizens access to nutritious food. A survey of 1 060 township households from 2011 showed that 80% of low-income households in Cape Town experience food insecurity. It is now acknowledged that COVID-19 exacerbated food insecurity, and that the city has high levels of poverty induced hunger and a lack of effective response from politicians. In the post-COVID period, and with the ongoing global crisis, food prices have escalated sharply, affecting those that are the most vulnerable. At the tail end of unjust food systems are women and children, and furthermore, women-headed households are in general more food insecure than male-headed. This paper contributes to an important issue in gender research, namely the intersection between gender justice and food security. The case study is carried out in a coastal community on the Cape Peninsula of the Western Cape, South Africa where a majority of the population experience food insecurity and frequent hunger. We explore how women in the community engage in activities that can contribute to improving food security, their motivation for taking action and for advocating for just and inclusive food systems. The study draws on a methodology of co-creation of knowledge, which is embedded in a critical feminist research tradition and that addresses the lived experiences of people in the community.

Keywords: Gender and Justice, Food Insecurity, Community-based Research, Critical Feminist Theory, South Africa

1. Introduction

On the African continent one out of every five people experience hunger with one key reason being the lack of access to affordable food suited to people having a healthy diet. It is estimated that more than 300 million people in Africa will suffer from chronic undernourishment at the end of the decade (FAO 2023). At the tail end of unjust food systems are women, which according to the United Nations (UN) creates a gender gap in food insecurity. Furthermore, in many environments, gender norms are constraining factors that limit women´s access to resources such as land, education and access to adequate nutritional information, consequently leading to malnutrition and serious health problems, particularly in children (WFP 2024). South Africa is ranked the second most food-secure country in Africa and is, when looking at a regional level, the most food secure country in Sub-Saharan Africa (Economist Impact 2022). However, when looking at the household level, food insecurity is a pertinent issue in the country and many people go hungry (Gieske 2021), even though the right to food is enshrined in South Africa's constitution. Challenges related to food security were aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, that brought to the surface how food security was not only about food inflation, an export-oriented food system and the corporate-dominated agri-food sector, but revealed injustices related to continued spatial inequality, uneven power relations and intersectionality. Women-headed households were shown to, in general, be more food insecure than male based units even though women play a pivotal role in all aspects of food security (Paganini et al, 2021a; Battersby 2024). The City of Cape Town, in the recent State of the City Food System Report (2024) acknowledges that there is the need to accelerate the transformation of agri-food systems, to strengthen their resilience and to address inequalities so as to ensure that nutritious and healthy diets are affordable to all (Haysom and Pulker 2024). However, in many historically and currently disadvantaged communities with high levels of unemployment, lack of safety, violent crime, substance abuse, gangsterism and inadequate service delivery, people go hungry and suffer from malnutrition and other health issues. Access to a healthy diet is constrained and people are caught in unsustainable food systems, being dependent on big supermarkets and agri-business meaning that many cannot afford to buy nutritious food.

In present day Cape Town, the neoliberal logic represents a framework of governance that triggers inequality in the agri-food system and "a sea of injustice" (Fishers Festival 2024) in the small-scale fisheries environment where the power is channeled to big corporations (Paganini et al, 2021a). There are political and social barriers to food security that align with the concept of structural violence, meaning neglect from those in power (Ibsen,

Engel-Hills and Jernbro 2023). This concept was coined by sociologist Johan Galtung in 1969 as a tool for understanding the subtle form of violence that he understood not as intentional violence, but as 'something natural as the air around us' (Galtung 1969, p. 173) and that effectively prevents human beings from realising their full potential or the self. One precondition for reaching the full potential of an individual is to have access to healthy food on a regular basis, and it is within this context that African eco-feminist scholar Donna Andrews argues that 'women´s individual and collective struggles for the right to food and nutrition are located' (Andrews et al, 2019, p. 7). In this paper we acknowledge the critical intersection between gender (in)justice and food (in)justice in a context where people are not willing to wait for the government to take action for securing people´s right to food. Previous research argues that women often take the lead as food activists by addressing food security through urban farming and involvement in small-scale fisheries (Paganini et al, 2021a). Thus, our aim is to explore the role of women in building just and resilient local food systems. The question: how do women act to make change happen? is an important first step for gaining knowledges about practices for the reduction of food insecurity and for detecting important factors that facilitate or hamper the development of viable and long-term sustainable food security for all.

2. Research Design: A Case Study Approach

In this paper we choose to follow a single case study approach in a peri-urban community where land and sea area closely interconnected. This coastal community is in the category of chronic crisis (Engel-Hills and Engel 2023) and represents ongoing structural violence; it is illustrative of challenges related to gender justice and food security. A single case study represents a situational approach to places that are often ignored, and this is useful in its own right (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004). Importantly, this approach gives the researchers an opportunity to gain authentic knowledge about the lived experiences of challenges people meet in their particular community, and in our case, experiences related to activism for immediate and long-term food security solutions based on cultivating the soil and harvesting from the sea.

Historically people living in coastal villages in the South Peninsula of the Western Cape, South Africa based their diet on produce from small-scale farming and the sea. The forced removals in the period around 1968, due to the Group Areas Act, changed the traditional way of life. Farming was difficult in new communities as they were built on infertile land, however up till the late 1990s people in general had jobs, could buy food locally and engage in subsistence fishing. Socio-economic decline then started in the area, with industries closing, and moreover, with the tightening of fishing regulations (Gibb 2005) and this directly impacted on the community where we did our research. Regulations that gave way for big business and took away free access to seafood like crayfish and abalone, had a severe economic, cultural and dietary impact (Green 2020). The prolonged drought between 2015 and 2018 had an impact on food production that affected already poor households as prices escalated. There was in this period an 11,9% price increase on the basic and nutritional food basket for one family. A typical nutritious basket includes food that people in low-income households would prefer but could not afford. In 2018, 88% of people in our study area experienced moderate to severe food insecurity in terms of reducing quantities of food, skipping meals and of buying less healthy food, while 71.1% of households experienced hunger (Römmelmann 2018). In the context of neglect from the government, community members have developed tactics of constructive resistance that aim at countering food insecurity (Ibsen, Engel-Hills and Jernbro 2023). Our research reveals a strong activism among women who seek to change the norm of unhealthy diet through reestablishing access to organic vegetables and food from the sea, while also creating environmental awareness, particularly among young people.

3. Methodology and Method

For this paper we draw on a methodology that is inspired by a critical feminist research framework that seeks to explore how community-led action has the potential for driving socio-ecological transformation that is necessary for the development of just food systems (Paganini et al, 2021b). This framework resists top-to-bottom approaches and acknowledges that community members are the ones to identify solutions in collaboration with the researchers (Stengers 2021). Our approach also aligns with place-based gender research focusing on unique stories and knowledge as a basis for social transformation (Shefer, Bozalec and Romano 2023).

The study was based on a purposeful sample of four women that explored the individual experiences of being food activists in terms of being involved in organic farming and small-scale fisheries. Storytelling sessions took place with the women, two at the time, over a period of 8 weeks in October and November 2024, following the microhistory genre that first and foremost pays attention to small units of research, such as individual and

community. Following Joyner, microhistory aims to ask, "large questions in small places" (Joyner 1999 p. 1) which also means the recognition of positionality that understands research within historical and structural contexts (Andrews et al, 2019). For a deeper contextual understanding of the stories told by women in this study, we also participated in two workshops on food security in the study area, Brainstorms on the Bay 12 October and 2 November. Further, we conducted observations at the Fishers Festival of Small-Scale Fishers in Cape Town on 26 October, that gave more detailed insights into present challenges for continued livelihood and culture of fishing villages. Analysis of stories was guided by a reflexive thematic analysis as it acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher which is regarded to be an integral part of the interpretation of individual experiences and knowledge (Braun and Clarke 2020).

4. Narratives of Cultivating the Soil and Harvesting From the Sea

The journey of the women involved in urban farming and the small-scale fishing cooperative started as constructive resistance to structural violence (Ibsen, Engel-Hills and Jernbro, 2023) and reflects their strong belief in community-led solutions. There is a dominant narrative of the will to stand up for themselves and be the change. For change to happen the women who were involved in this study took on the role of food activists; they are driven by multiple motives and experiences, but they are all passionate about the particular ways they seek to bring long-term food security to people in their community. However, being food activists and women, do not go without challenges.

4.1 "We Can´t Wait for the Government": Building Community Through Food

Urban farming in townships and organic-inner city gardens have vital functions for food security in Cape Town and must be understood in a wider context than conflicts over land claims and agrarian reform. People involved in urban farming projects are driven by visions that people take control of and responsibility for what they eat, not leaving it to retailers (Kavonic 2024). This vision is shared by two women in our study area that have taken the lead in building up a small-scale organic farming plot at one of the school yards in the community. They are "plant sisters" who´s motivation goes deep and emerges from far back in their family history with relatives being involved in cultivation of vegetables, plants and of knowing the importance of making compost: "I have it in my blood, my roots" one of them said, and that encouraged her to seek knowledge about how to cultivate, how to plant from seeds, stage plants and make compost with little money. She gradually built her farming skills with the help of her mentor and inspirator, also a woman, who ran workshops that were focused on practical solutions. The other woman who is now the ambassador for food security in the area often says "I was born a farmer", but it was not until some years ago that she got the opportunity to receive training when a non-Profit Organisation (NPO) in the area established an organic farm in the community, which was later taken over by a cooperative that played a vital role in food security during COVID-19. Although this initiative was not viable in the long term, the intentions of cultivating organic, nutritious and affordable produce as a means to change the norms of unhealthy diets and for creating environmental awareness, now guide the new school plot. The women highlight nutrients as an important dimension of food security.

However, both women agree that using the schoolyard for cultivation has multiple functions. Firstly, it is important to transfer knowledge to children and youth so they can learn how to grow and make compost. The children are encouraged to take organic waste from home to the compost station at the school, meaning that they have a potential for educating their parents. Making compost is crucial as the soil is not naturally fertile and it is expensive to buy from private companies. Secondly, involving them in the daily tasks of the farm also aims at keeping them out of trouble. The women care about the soil and the children, and they say: "no food security without social security" and argue that it is important not to separate social and ecological sustainability. In the garden children find solace; it is a safe space where they also gain knowledge about local ecosystems and participate in the eco-club set up by the women. The school yard in our study area plays an important role for containing the diversity of trees, birds and plants that can be used for educational purposes. This is particularly important for one woman who is also a certified pollinator and is dedicated to sharing her knowledge and creating awareness of biological diversity.

The "plant sisters" shared stories about why they are passionate about engaging in food security at the household level and how they imagine the future of their activism. Food security is about more than nutrients and calories, but also about self-worth, ritual and dignity. "The feeling of own food which happens when you grow food by your own hands" matters and makes a connection between soil and soul. In order for people in the community to improve their health, both women suggest it is necessary to teach people how to get rid of

junk food and turn to healthy diets. Ideally, they would like every household to have a garden or a small piece of land to grow organic vegetables to provide nutrition, especially vitamins, and preferably also indigenous plants used for medicinal purposes. To make an easy start they suggest growing different "veggies" in different households and then people can share and barter. For people living in flats one suggestion is that they get access to food boxes and start on a small scale with herbs and edible plants. The box model would create awareness about eating "better" and healthy food as they are rich in nutrients and don´t need much space.

When talking about ways to move forward both women agreed that there are challenges. One particular challenge at the farm is the water supply and maintenance as well as security because pumps have been stolen. The solutions are not straightforward and require a collective approach of the school leadership and the community to support the initiative of these two women for the betterment of the lives of the children directly involved and the community more broadly. Another challenge is that people need training about how to grow their own food, and also money to buy seeds and seedlings. As food activists they are willing to teach people "to produce food without much money", and acknowledge that donations need to play an important part. The woman who is the food ambassador has built good connections over the years, and she is able to acquire some funding and resources, for example she obtains seedling donations, and a sponsored greenhouse is in the process of being built on the school premises. However, to take the project wider and to build a community network of home gardens is a vision that will take resources to implement effectively. For now, this is at the level of building awareness and taking on the challenge one household at a time.

4.2 "They set us up to Fail": Livelihoods of Small-scale Fisherfolk

Fishing rights conflicts are rife along the coastline of the Western Cape with the main issue being the struggle to access marine resources (Paganini et al. 2021a). This is the unfortunate status even if politicians recognise the vital role of small-scale fishing:

"Across the world, small scale fishermen and women play an important role in promoting household food security and providing livelihoods in areas where there are little other means of support" … "The success of these co-operatives depends on, amongst others, having a commercially viable basket of species" (Bizcommunity, 22 Nov 2021 quoting Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment Minister, Barbara Creecy).

The quote is illustrative of the gap between government talk and the lived experience of people in the community who are struggling to secure their rights to sustainable small-scale fishing. The women in our study area tell a story of a long process starting in 2016 when fisherfolk started to complain about not being granted rights to fish while the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) allocated fishing rights to big commercial actors. After a long review of the allocation process, the Western Cape High Court set the process aside in August 2022, which meant that the procedure had to start all over again. However, in November 2023, around 62 fishing cooperatives were allowed to be set up operations (Human 2023). The fishing cooperatives were allocated rights to catch West Coast rock lobster, hake handline, seaweed, line fish, oysters and white mussels, and recently also squid. The story however, reveals that the women are not happy with how the system works in practice. They say that those in power constrain their ambitions and visions for long-term viability of using marine resources, one reason being the Marine Living Resources Amendment Act No. 5 of 2014 that will lift the ban on China fishing in currently restricted international waters. More importantly for our participants is that the threats to small-scale fisheries in South Africa, lay with the DFFE: "they keep us out of commerce". The cooperative operates with limited resources and report this is based on a subsistence model with limited quotas that do not allow for a viable basket of species or adequate catch volume for sustainability. Further, the application process for getting fishing permits is highly bureaucratic; instructions are written in a complicated language that is difficult for most people to read and understand.

Notwithstanding structural challenges, the women keep fighting for small-scale fisheries as they want to see changes in their community when it comes to employment opportunities and hunger relief expressed as: "We have a right to life". One of the women is very specific about her motives for being involved in the cooperative: "I hate what they do to the poor…people are hungry". If the cooperative works properly it will generate money for payments to be made to the members, and also people in the community will be able to buy food at affordable costs. However, the women also point at internal difficulties. They say that "something is wrong" within the management of the organisation referring to internal mistrust, lack of information and corruption: "Directors keep members in the dark, they keep secrets". They also explained that the finances are not adequately recorded. The cooperative needs to pay tax, but the accounting must be done correctly to enable this. One of them even resigned for a long period, but came back as they need to get the paperwork into the

DFFE, otherwise, the cooperative will not get allocated rights for a new period. There are “strong women” in the cooperative, she said, and they will not tolerate mismanagement. She was also specific about the role of women in this male dominated sector as they have put effort into understanding the application process: “We must educate the fishermen” about their rights and license application.

5. Concluding Remarks

The community where this research took place experiences a chronic social crisis, which is understood as being caused by neglect from those in power. In this context of structural violence food insecurity is rife, which is highlighted by previous research in the community before the Covid-19 pandemic (Römmelman 2018) and, further by our recent research for this paper that aimed at exploring how women in particular seek to build just and resilient local food systems as part of their struggle for social transformation. This approach aligns with the critical feminist approach to food security arguing that gender (in)justice and food (in)security are intertwined and that women in South Africa are leading the struggle for the right to healthy and nutritious food (Andrews et al. 2019) by engaging in small-scale urban farming and fisheries (Paganini et al, 2021a).Through our case-study design that was based on place-based gender research and storytelling, we created a framework for exploring how women act to improve food security. We got deep and authentic knowledges about women´s experiences as food activists and the challenges they meet. In different ways they have developed tactics of resistance to injustices that influence food security in their particular community. Development of different tactics must be understood in a context of structural violence as the women experience being neglected by those in power. However, they express this differently: “we can´t wait for government” and “the system set us up to fail”.

The women involved in farming have entered a traditionally male space, which in South Africa is also dominated by issues over rights to land. However, women are more and more entering the sector (Paganini et al 2021a). In our case claiming the right to land is not the focus of the women who use the school yard for urban farming. They are seeking ways of building community through food security and are very specific about not separating social and environmental sustainability. Their narrative reveals tactics of constructive resistance aimed at changing norms and practices. The language used in their storytelling reflects that they are very close to the earth, to the idea of nurturing and caring, all central aspects of an eco-feminist approach to food security (Paganini et al., 2021b). There is a strong connection between soil and soul that is fundamental for understanding their focus on growing organic food and of passing on their knowledge to community members, and to children in particular. They see themselves as educators that can improve food security and safety while at the same time bringing dignity to community members. They are food activists that “can´t wait for government” to take action.

Compared to farming, the fishing sector and the conflicts over small-scale fisheries provide a different context for exploring women´s role in food security. It is still a masculine space with gendered roles; men go to sea, women fleck the fish, pickle and sell, and in our case women also seek to educate and support the men. For women this is a rough space to enter. The narrative of the two women involved in small-scale fisheries reveals that they have a strong desire to claim their rights to the sea, which they say, are undermined by the government. The focus on the right to fish is more distinct in their narrative than food security. In order to be heard, they have developed a confrontational tactic of resistance; they don´t accept mismanagement of the cooperative; they confront cooperative members in meetings, they seek change and believe that change can come about if they fight. They use harsh language: “we must fight them in the face”. In this case “them” refers to actors in government as well as to the directors in the cooperative. However, food security issues are not absent. Confrontational tactics of resistance are driven by anger as people in the community are

Our aim was to explore the role of women in building just and resilient local food systems and we approached the research with the question; how do women act to make change happen? In this first step for gaining knowledges about practices of women in one community for the reduction of food insecurity we have uncovered some key differences between the strong but nurturing women working the land and the tough approach needed by the women tackling the challenges for small scale fisheries. While some focus on food security while others fight for food justice, the case study clearly shows that women are active in the drive for food security for all. This research has provided insights into how women act in two examples of the food chain and highlights some of the challenges these women face as activists and ambassadors. Further interrogation is needed to gain deeper insights into how women in this community can be supported to turn their enthusiasm and hard work into a long-term sustainable solution for food justice and security.

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