

Richmond Review Article – Your Mom is not the only woman who feeds you

By Stephen C. Mullins

Did you know that recently some prominent commentators from North American media outlets have declared that feminism is no longer needed because gender equality has been achieved?

Yeah team! That's great news, a big win for society on many fronts, including the field of food security, because full gender equality is arguably the single most important determining factor in establishing better food security worldwide. So let's put that one in the win column, right?

Well, let's not wave the checkered flag yet. When analysing these commentaries, I noticed that the authors seem to be focused almost exclusively on the state of gender equality in Western countries. That's a huge mistake. Even if we ever succeed in establishing full gender equality in the West, it's not enough, because the issue is nowhere near close to being settled worldwide. That would be like being satisfied that you put out the fire in one room of a burning building while the rest of the building was still ablaze.

The world is going to face difficult challenges in the coming years to ensure there's enough food for everyone. War, climate change, population growth, crop diseases, falling crop yields – all are issues that will stress our food systems. To meet these challenges, we can't neglect any strategy that will further food security. Among the best of these is ensuring full gender equality rights for the millions of women around the world who grow food to feed us. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in their report, *The Face of Female Farming*, women make up almost half of the agricultural labour force in non-Western countries, yet they face deep, systemic obstacles due to their gender.

Women are often barred from owning land, and if they do get land, it is commonly on smaller, poorer plots that lead to reduced crop yields. Women typically get less agricultural training, have difficulty accessing financing, work longer hours, get paid less for their work – the list of barriers is long and daunting.

But what if you removed these barriers, and women received the full range of legal, financial and educational rights that men enjoy? The FAO estimates that these women farmers could achieve crop yields 20-30% greater than current levels. This additional yield translates into an estimated reduction of hunger for 100-150 million people worldwide. It's important to realize that with less and less food being grown locally as fruit and vegetable imports increase, some of the food that these women farmers will be growing will quite likely be feeding us in Canada.

Here at home, it's true that gender equality is much better than in developing countries. In Canada, if women face barriers in their farm work, it's typically the same barriers that other operators of small to medium sized farms face regardless of their gender – high costs for tools, land, fuel, shipping and supplies.

To help address that, RFSS is directly involved in programs that support farmers, no matter what their gender. For example, at an RFSS fundraiser this last March, three local women, Ashala Daniel, Esther Amezcua and Katie Robinson of Three Feet Below Farm, spoke to a crowd that included Mayor Malcolm Brodie about how the local training and support they received was crucial to the success of their business.

They first met and planned their farm while training at the Richmond Farm School, a 10 month program at Kwantlen Polytechnic University that is co-sponsored by RFSS and other partners. From there, they enrolled in the Richmond Incubator Farm Program, which is managed by RFSS in partnership with the

City of Richmond and Kwantlen Polytechnic University. In this program, farmers get access to a half-acre plot to establish their farming practice. They get access to shared tools that would be prohibitively expensive for new farmers, to additional farming training from experienced mentors, and even to training in business practices like record keeping and grant writing.

But in many other countries in the world, they would have been left to their own devices or actively barred from achieving their dreams simply because they were women. Farming is already hard enough without gender inequality making even harder, so we can't stop striving for it yet. One day we might celebrate Worldwide Gender Equality day, or whatever we might call it, but that day isn't here yet. When it comes, I'll be the first one popping the champagne.

Steve Mullins is the communications manager for Richmond Food Security Society. We work to ensure that all people in the community have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods that strengthen our environment and society. To contribute, check out www.richmondfoodsecurity.org and find out how you can get involved.