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Food Is Life: The Impact of a Changing Food Industry on the Role of Women in the Home

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Food is Life

The Impact of a Changing Food Industry on the Role of Women in the Home

Diana Lay
School for International Training 2011
Spring 2011

Acknowledgements

This project arose from a semester full of adventure and exploration. I was inspired by the meals that made me healthy and the food that kept me full and satisfied. I am grateful for the lush, green trees that surround Cape Coast, and the ocean that flows in repetitious patterns. The seaside at One Africa motivated me in morning and lulled me to sleep each night.

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Abstract

This paper looks at how growing food insecurity in Ghana, and Cape Coast in particular, is changing the role of women in the community. It examines government agricultural policy and its influence on urban communities, including Cape Coast. It seeks to understand the factors that women take into account when they prepare meals for their families and ways in which women are adapting to increasing prices of food and imported ingredients available in the markets. The research incorporated is based on the personal experiences of the author, interviews, and secondary sources. It looks at power dynamics within the community, as well as between Ghana and “the West.”

Introduction

In 2008 countries throughout West Africa were disturbed by large and in some cases, violent, food riots. According to recent statistics, population growth and the demand for food has led to shortages and record high prices of food around the world. Though the food crisis is an emerging issue, people in developing nations are already feeling its effects. Many families in Ghana cannot afford to purchase ingredients at a higher price so they are turning to cheaper and less nutritious food in order to provide for their families. In both rural and urban communities, the number of people suffering from malnourishment continues to rise. However, most studies related to the food crisis focus on rural populations, and few studies are conducted in urban locations. I chose to conduct my research in Cape Coast, a fishing community in southern Ghana, in order to examine the effects of the food crisis on the community.

I lived in Cape Coast for over three months, with a family in Third Ridge, a residential part of the community. Throughout my time in Cape Coast I strove to build relationships with other families and learn from them in ways that extended beyond the experiences of a tourist. My views on the cultural role of women in the home and community is largely based on my observations in those homes, as well as from secondary sources that discuss the historical gender role of women throughout the

country. I strove to always challenge and break down my perception of the roles of women in Cape Coast, in order to uncover a common set of characteristics that women consider to be their own role in the community.

A basic premise of my project was that women in Cape Coast, who are the caretakers of their families, are unable to provide ideal levels of care in Cape Coast because they may not be able to afford nutritional food, or their need to spend more time earning an income takes time away from care-giving.¹ Furthermore, I believed that an influx of imported food items threatens the standard of nutrition in the community because advertisements control access to nutritional information. Therefore, women who are struggling to provide the care that they did in the past are susceptible to the claims made by foreign food companies. As such, they are more likely to purchase imported food, or stray away from local foods and recipes.

My research focused on the ways in which women perceive the value and quality of local or imported food items, especially in regards to their cultural responsibility as caretakers of their families and the community. Therefore, the overall objective of my project was to determine the extent to which individuals are aware of increases in food prices, and if women's traditional gender role, including providing and preparing food for their families, is affected by the signs of the food crisis. A secondary objective was to understand how imported food items, which were introduced in Ghana to reduce food insecurity, are affecting homes in Cape Coast

Methodology

Early in my preliminary research, I noticed the government's emphasis on farmers and communities with the highest levels of malnutrition, and I began questioning how government policies in the form of food importation and

¹ I will include a complete definition of care in the section entitled "Women and the Food Crisis," which is based on a definition by the IFPRI. The definition states that care "is the provision (in the household and the community) of time, attention, and support to meet the physical, mental, and social needs of the growing child and other household members."

distribution of food was affecting the role of women, in terms of their ability to provide adequate care for their families. Therefore, I researched in two areas, the public and the private spheres. I conducted research in the public sphere by interviewing government officials and representatives from humanitarian organizations. I examined public policies designed by officials in the food sector to understand the trends of food importation and how it is immediately addressed in Ghana.

I began by conducting interviews with professors at the University of Cape Coast and the University of Ghana on perceptions of the food crisis. I then interviewed representatives from the UN's World Food Programme, and the Food Research Institute, which are both headquartered in Accra. To supplement those interviews, I looked at studies conducted by other foreign organizations in order to grasp what the major policies are concerning food insecurity in Ghana. I used data collected from the field, as well as my secondary sources, to produce an ethnographic and grounded theory analysis of gender roles in Ghana, and projects designed to help women in agriculture.

I then interviewed individuals in the private sphere, who spoke of the food they purchase and cook for their families. I spoke to women about their homes and families in order to understand whether or not national policies for agriculture or food importation affect the role of women in the community. I also addressed the issue of malnutrition, which is closely related to the food crisis, in order to understand the extent to which malnutrition has affected Cape Coast and the families living there. If it is the case that malnutrition is less of a perceivable issue in Cape Coast, then the immediate signs of the food crisis are less pronounced than they are in the northern regions, where most of the humanitarian projects are concentrated. These interviews required a tape recorder to accurately record the stories told during the conversation.

I also asked women in Cape Coast how they perceive their role as caretakers despite shortages and high prices of food. I looked closely at their perspectives and

organized their interview responses into appropriate categories. I looked at their attitudes on health and nutrition in Cape Coast, their own ability to afford certain food items, their opinions on the quality of the food they serve, and how they provided for their families. Throughout their responses I found common themes that illustrated what it means to be a woman and a mother in the face of food insecurity.

Finally, I asked my respondents in both the public and the private spheres about nutrition education programs in Ghana, as well as Cape Coast. I also recorded my experiences as a participant observer and recorded my notes into my field journal throughout my time in Ghana.

The Food Crisis and the Global Response

Few resources determine a person's wellbeing and sense of security as much as food. As food availability decreases and prices rise, millions of people are being thrown into poverty, where they suffer from malnourishment and limited access to food, water, shelter and health care. Every year more and more people throughout the world are becoming the "new faces of hunger" as prices continue to rise.² In 2008, during a peak in food prices, Vivienne Walt, an editorialist for *Time Magazine* wrote, "Add this to the list of items that could seriously threaten world peace: food."³ Today, the signs of a food crisis are present everywhere, from rising demand in India and China, to the recent and violent food riots throughout the Middle East and North Africa.⁴ Unfortunately, international policy experts project that the food crisis will only worsen.

The World Bank and the United Nations, the leading organizations studying the food crisis, attribute it to several factors. Primarily they relate it to rapid population growth occurring throughout the world. For example, in West Africa the

² Josette Sheeran in Vivienne Walt. "The World's Growing Food Price Crisis." *Time Magazine*. February 27, 2008.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Krista Mahr. "Bread is Life: Food and Protest in Egypt." *Time Magazine*. January 31, 2011.

population “will roughly double between 1995 and 2020,”⁵ and in thirty years the world population is expected to grow from seven to nine billion people.⁶ With more mouths to feed the global supply of staple items is quickly being depleted. In 2008, due to high demand, the global supply of wheat fell, and it was lower than it had been in about fifty years.⁷ “That was a time when hundreds of millions of people fell into poverty, [and] food riots were shaking governments in dozens of developing countries.”⁸ However, today, as global food supplies continue to fall, world food prices are rising above the peak they reached in early 2008. The food industry is in crisis, and food is becoming scarce. “There have been export bans, food riots, panic buying and emergency price controls,”⁹ and still in 2050 food will be even more difficult to acquire.

Few nations are sitting idly by as prices spike. In 2009 the food crisis became a top priority at the G8 meeting and in 2011 President Sarkozy of France requested making food the top priority in the G8’s agenda. In West Africa, in particular, food security is one of the biggest challenges facing the region. Food prices were record high in January 2011 and grains were more expensive than ever before. Throughout the region, food prices have thrown millions back into poverty. Vera Boohene of the World Food Programme (WFP) explained that they had a recovery program in Ghana designed to “help people who were shocked by high food prices.” She recalls that Ghana “had a flood and a drought in one year and then a food crisis took place the next year. There are some people who have had one shock after another.”¹⁰

Ensuring Food Security in Ghana

In Ghana, many of the experts I spoke with believe that by increasing

⁵ Daniel Maxwell, et. al. “Urban Livelihoods and Food and Nutrition Security in Greater Accra, Ghana.” (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2000), 5.

⁶ “The 9-billion people question: A special report on feeding the world.” *The Economist*. February 26, 2011, 3.

⁷ Walt, “The World’s Growing Food Price Crisis.”

⁸ “The 9-billion people question: A special report on feeding the world.”

⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁰ Vera Boohene in discussion with Diana Lay, April 14, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

agriculture productivity, Ghana will be able to ensure food security in the coming decades. Stephen Nketia of the Food Research Institute (FRI) said, in the next fifty years, in order to ensure food security, “Ghana will need to meet the challenge of population growth,” by moving from subsistence to commercial agriculture, and improving the nutritional value of locally produced food items. Farmers “must be trained for commercial farming, to give [Ghana] more food, and to train more entrepreneurs to convert these foods into long shelf life foods for the country.”¹¹

In 1992 the revised Constitution of the Republic of Ghana obligated the government to “enact policies to promote agriculture and industry while protecting the environment and national resources.”¹² Furthermore, policy decisions are based on forging “development in the mist of scarce resources. Scarcity of resources has become almost a mantra for policy-makers in Ghana and several African countries. Since no country, either rich or poor, has an infinite supply of resources, the question is how to organize and prioritize scarce resources for optimum outcomes.”¹³ Nketia argues that commercial agriculture, in particular, will ensure optimum outcomes. “We have not exhausted the ability to produce in large quantities so that we can store and then export the local crops.”¹⁴

Nketia’s perspective exemplifies many of the policies designed by the government, intended to create large-scale change, which they believe will in turn trickle down to specific communities, and improve the lifestyle of residents. “If the policy is designed to bring more foreign exchange to the country then in the long run it will increase the income of those who produce it, which will trickle down to their families... helping the common man. It will help infrastructure, building schools, hospitals... everyone in the long run will benefit.”¹⁵ Yet, this attitude does not address

¹¹ Stephen Nketia in discussion with Diana Lay, April 12, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

¹² Korbla P. Puplampu. “Bureaucratic Politics and the Search for Biotechnology Policy in Ghana.” In *The Public Sphere and the Politics of Survival*. Ed. Korbla P. Puplampu and Wisdom J. Tettey. (Accra: Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2003), 191.

¹³ Ibid, 195.

¹⁴ Nketia.

¹⁵ Matilda Dzomeku in discussion with Diana Lay, April 12, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

the immediate effects of food insecurity on individuals and their households.

In order to help protect people faced with food insecurity, NGO's, and international organizations like the World Food Programme designed humanitarian projects to combat malnourishment and other health effects associated with food insecurity. However, in Ghana, most humanitarian projects are concentrated in the Northern region where malnourishment and poverty levels are the highest in the country. Boohene explained that in 2008 and 2009 the WFP and the ministry of food and agriculture conducted a comprehensive food availability and food security analysis. They found that smallholder crop farmers in the Northern region were the poorest amongst some groups. "That is why [their] focus is so much on them."¹⁶

The Food Crisis in Urban Areas

As I transitioned my research to Cape Coast, I examined how the food crisis was manifested in urban locations.¹⁷ Though many of the government's perceivable solutions lie in the realm of agricultural communities, residents of urban areas are also affected by increasing food prices and decreased access to certain foods. Malnourishment, though it is concentrated in the Northern region, is becoming a major issue in the southern half of the country. A study by the IFPRI found that urban poverty and food insecurity are new priorities in Ghana. Rapid urbanization is threatening food and nutrition security due to overcrowding, environmental degradation and massive unemployment.¹⁸

In the Greater Accra area, rapid urbanization resulted in poverty so severe that it jeopardized food and nutrition security. It subsequently "resulted in growing joblessness among the middle-class Ghanaian residents, many of whom have been pushed out of the middle class" by rising prices. In 2000 the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) conducted a study called "Urban Livelihoods and Food and

¹⁶ Boohene.

¹⁷ I consider Cape Coast an urban location in large part because of its access to resources like the Internet and foreign products, which are less available in many rural villages.

¹⁸ Maxwell, 1.

Nutrition Security in Greater Accra, Ghana.” The study was based on Haddad, Ruel and Garrett’s 1999 finding that “urban poverty is not only growing rapidly but has tended to be underestimated in the past.”¹⁹ As infrastructure deteriorates and overcrowding and environmental degradation continue to increase, rapid urban growth will continue to exacerbate food insecurity. The IFPRI research found that:

*“Specific policy attention to issues of urban poverty such as food security and nutrition has lagged behind [research in rural areas], despite the demonstrated need. Earlier research showed that 60-80 percent of the total household budget of the urban poor is spent on food. This finding makes it likely that urban poverty will be manifested at least in part as a food insecurity problem. Within the West African region, urban food security—and the dearth of research on the topic—has been recognized as a growing problem.”*²⁰

Similarly, in urban settings there are many different factors that affect the health and nutrition of residents. “Food access, dietary intake, the capacity of households to provide adequate care for all members and environmental conditions (such as crowding) influence health and the incidences of illness,” all impact the food security.²¹ Furthermore, women are especially vulnerable to the urban food crisis because their role as caretakers and providers of food is central to a family’s ability to survive during food shortages.

Women and the Food Crisis

When faced with food insecurity, maintaining cultural practices is critical for ensuring a sense of normality and guaranteeing food security for everyone in the community. The family unit is the primary cultural institution that determines the wellbeing of community members. Its most basic function is procreation. However, it is also “the milieu within which the individual’s sense of stability is developed, and

¹⁹ Haddad, Ruel, and Garnett 1999 in IFPRI, 1

²⁰ Maxwell, 1

²¹ Maxwell, 2

the society's culture and cultural roles are transmitted."²² At the center of the family unit is the mother, who makes sure that the family's basic needs are met. This is achieved through her presence in the home and helping children develop to become members of the community, by teaching gender roles and giving the child a sense of stability in the home. Therefore, women are central to the continuity, health and livelihood of each community, through her ability to provide care.

*"Care in this context is the provision (in the household and the community) of time, attention, and support to meet the physical, mental, and social needs of the growing child and other household members. Even when there is poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to health care, enhanced caregiving within the household can optimize existing resources to produce good health and nutrition in young children. Recent research has suggested that care may be a particularly important determinant of good nutrition under urban conditions."*²³

Based on the IFPRI's definition of care, the key players affected by food insecurity are women, whose cultural role as caretakers includes preparing meals for their families. Historically, Ghanaian women have made the basic decisions about the "constitution of the family diet,"²⁴ and their domain lies in the area of providing nutritious and healthy meals for their families. The homes I visited in Cape Coast maintained these gender roles. In my house and many others, the kitchen was a gendered space, reserved for women and their daughters. Professor Awedoba remarked that, "women are the people who cook the food, so they are the ones who sell in the markets and prepare food to sell."²⁵ His gendered analysis of the role of women exemplifies their cultural identity and its relationship to the food industry.

The changing food industry, however, challenges how women learned to prepare and provide meals for their families. Families may not be able to afford the

²² Henrietta J.A.M. Mensa-Bonsu. "Family Law Policy and Research Agenda." In *The Changing Family in Ghana*. Ed. Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1996), 221.

²³ Maxwell, 2

²⁴ Filomina Chioma Steady, "Women of Africa and the Diaspora." In *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*. Ed. Joseph E. Harris. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1993), 171

²⁵ Albert Awedoba in conversation with Diana Lay. April 11, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

food items mothers learned to prepare as a child, or the influx of imported foods may challenge what they once considered nutritious. Therefore, food insecurity inherently threatens the role that women play in Cape Coast. In order to learn how women adapt to the changing food industry, I asked them about the food they serve and their impressions of the quality of food they prepare, as well as their perceptions of food insecurity in Cape Coast.

I found several basic factors that women take into account when they prepare food for their families. Some women have a strong attachment to either locally grown or imported food. Many women trust the cultural wisdom that locally grown food is nutritious and plentiful, while others believe that imported food must be more nutritious. Many women also consider their economic means. They may find a way to earn extra money, or they will change the ingredients they buy in the markets if they cannot afford certain items. As I listened to the women talk about their attitudes on certain food items I tried to find connections between their role as women and mothers in their families and the community, and the ways in which food insecurity is changing how they enact their role.

Perceptions of Local Foods

I have observed that for the Ghanaian woman, her perception of which foods are nutritious and which foods are not is a major factor in determining the meals she prepares for her family. In Ghana, the locally grown foods are very nutritious, and many women prefer to remain as close to the local diet as they can. Auntie Naana highlighted the existence of a local preference when she said, “there are certain homes in Cape Coast where the items that enter are only local foods.”²⁶ In some cases, those homes may shy away from foreign food items because they believe that the local items are more nutritious.

The crops indigenous to Ghana include the key components of a complete

²⁶ Naana J.S. Opoku-Agyemang in discussion with Diana Lay, April 23, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

diet. There is an array of nuts and legumes that can be used for soy products and tofu. There are whole grains and nutritious carbohydrates, as well as a large variety of vegetables, including the protein rich moringa plant. I spoke with Nketia at the FRI about the nutritional value of local crops, and he explained that because they are highly nutritious, the FRI uses them to prepare foods for young children. “We have been able to develop combinations of our local crops so that when they are mixed and used for foods for kids, they are able to have good nutritious food and grow very well.”²⁷

Several of the women I spoke with stated that they use local foods specifically for its nutritional value. Auntie Hattie said that after her career in nutrition education, she learned how to use combinations of indigenous food to prepare complete meals for her family. “We have a lot of nutritious food around. I have done nutrition before, so I know that the nuts and legumes that we have are very nutritious... I know that if I add those ingredients to the meal it will be nutritious. I can still make a nutritious meal for myself and my family without going to buy meat and fish.” Similarly, she pointed out that in many instances she is not able to find meat in the local markets because it might not be available.²⁸ Under those circumstances, Auntie Naana insisted that, “imported beef and chicken are not healthy... they are not wholesome foods.”²⁹

In other cases, the women I spoke with said that they prepare local foods because of their nationalistic pride for Ghana’s indigenous ingredients. My host mother, Maggie frequently told me she was going to prepare me a “real Ghanaian dish!” as though an integral part of my experience in Cape Coast depended upon the local meals I was eating. The Ghanaians I met were proud of their cultural relationship to food. In Washington, D.C. there are a host of Ghanaian restaurants that all serve dishes with, in a sense, local ingredients. My host father, John, proudly mentioned that one of those restaurants was considered the best restaurant in D.C. in 2009. I

²⁷ Nketia.

²⁸ Henrietta Kuofi in discussion with Diana Lay, April 24, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

²⁹ Opoku-Agyemang.

can attest to his claim, and recall that this is true. Similarly, a Cape Coast father I spoke with, named Mohammod, said that he only ever purchased local rice because it was prepared in the North. He was fiercely proud of his connection to the rice. “Northerners eat local rice and they are strong! If you go to there you will see how strong they are because of their diet.”³⁰

Local foods are an integral part of the food culture in Cape Coast. “Traditional crops are there all the time... it is what the people know how to cook.”³¹ However, as food insecurity becomes a more visible issue, the ingredients that women learned to use as a child may no longer be affordable, or her access to those ingredients might be limited. For example, Auntie Hattie learned to cook with local rice, but now she cannot find local rice in the market. Though she prefers its taste, she now uses imported rice, which is more available in Cape Coast.³² Along the road, bags of foreign rice are piled high in shops and along the market street. Throughout Ghana, imported food is impossible to ignore. In every market from Wa to Cape Coast there are packaged food items from Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Japan, the United States, etc., which all include the ingredients historically indigenous to Ghana. Auntie Hattie illustrated the change by saying, “when I was a child, I did not use packaged or imported meat, but as the world is changing we are now buying imported chicken.”³³

The experts I spoke with were concerned about the influx of imported food items. When I asked Professor Awedoba about the impact of food importation on Ghana’s local food and agriculture industry he exclaimed, “It appears as though our agriculture has not been efficient enough to move us away from food importation. Why is our government allowing foreign rice when we have so much local rice? When I was younger everyone believed we should protect our local industries.”³⁴ Awedoba’s comment expresses his belief that a shift has occurred, in which Ghanaians no longer feel an attachment to their local industries. Nketia also related

³⁰ Anonymous Interview, April 21, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

³¹ Opoku-Agyemang.

³² Kuofi.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Awedoba.

food importation to a changing mentality in the way Ghanaians perceive the presence of imported food. “A lot of people feel they would rather import and sell. Too many people are looking at that area rather than looking at what we can produce here in Ghana.”³⁵

Professor Kingsley Taah and Nketia both argued that transportation issues also impair the local industry, hindering farmers’ abilities to move their cash crops to the market. Nketia explained that although “the various crops grown in various regions are in fact quite nutritious...[taking] it around to everybody is quite expensive... Transportation costs, and what not. But if we are able to spread crops to all parts of Ghana that would be very good because crops we have here are very nutritious.”³⁶ Some families, loyal to local ingredients, respond to the industry’s limitations by emphasizing their decision to purchase local crops. Mary Obodai explained that her family buys “local produce because [they] want to encourage [Ghana’s] local entrepreneurs!”³⁷ Similarly, Doe travels to the northern region to purchase local rice in bulk directly from the farmers.³⁸

Perceptions of Imported Food

I have observed that women’s perceptions of foreign food items are influenced by several factors, including taste, cost, and preparation time. Nketia commented, “when people get used to the taste of foreign products, it is difficult to get them to eat the local foods and stop them from taking foreign foods.”³⁹ For example, one of the mothers I spoke with, Regina Barnes, told me she only cooks with *Uncle Sam* rice because “it’s better and tastier than the local rice.”⁴⁰ Regina started cooking when she was fourteen and said that she started to prefer foreign rice at that time, partly because it is easier to cook. Interestingly, Regina was

³⁵ Nketia.

³⁶ Nketia.

³⁷ Mary Obodai in discussion with Diana Lay, April 12, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

³⁸ Doe Thompson in discussion with Diana Lay, April 10, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

³⁹ Nketia.

⁴⁰ Regina Barnes in discussion with Diana Lay, April 22, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

ambivalent about the nutritional quality of the rice and seemed unaware of a difference in quality between local and foreign rice.

Advertisements are another primary reason imported food is so prevalent in Cape Coast. Foreign food companies invest in advertisements to convince consumers that their item is nutritionally superior, or better tasting than other products available. On every local television station there are advertisements for *Blue Band* butter and its nutritional enhancements. In many cases the advertisements illustrate a mother preparing a piece of toast for her son with *Blue Band* spread on top. The advertisement states that the butter will make her son strong and healthy. By connecting *Blue Band* margarine to images of middle-class family values, the advertisement suggests that very specific ingredients determine the quality of a mother's care. I also noticed billboards lining the road from Accra to Cape Coast, advertising *Ideal Milk*. The ads include its nutritional statistics and also address mothers, informing them that *Ideal* will help their child develop and grow strong.

Auntie Naana related these advertisements to a larger issue that grows as food importation increases. Businesses from “the West” operating in Ghana create advertising mechanisms designed to put higher value on foreign food. She points out that in many cases, “people don't have another voice telling them that the imported food is not good.”⁴¹ Foreign companies influence the sale of their items by making them appear special, or highly valued. For example, when I spoke with Mary Obodai she stated that she regularly purchases local produce, but “every once in a while you give yourself a treat” and buy imported foods, such as canned meat or sweets.⁴² By placing value on imported food, she ignores the nutritional value, or economical advantage of buying local products.

Economic Capability

As the food industry changes, and the options in the market change, women

⁴¹ Opoku-Agyemang.

⁴² Obodai.

are likely to also reconsider the economic value of each of her ingredients. The local foods that she used to prepare may no longer be worth the cost. Professor Awedoba confessed that, “foreign products are much cheaper. It is difficult for me to hear that I need to ignore the cheaper product and buy the more expensive item simply because it’s local.”⁴³ Additionally, the cost of maintaining the same lifestyle that she grew up with is becoming increasingly more difficult as the job market becomes more competitive and food becomes more expensive. Therefore, many women are reacting to food insecurity by finding ways to earn extra money for their families, while still trying to maintain the same level of care in their households.

The economic correlation women have to household management is critical for understanding their relationship to the food crisis. Especially in urban locations, “both men and women are working away from home, from 9a.m to 5p.m. in order to feed the family members and afford the necessities of a modern life.” Additionally, a study by the IFPRI found that “women’s ability to provide care is increasingly affected by the need to provide additional cash income” in order to afford increasing food prices.⁴⁴ As more women join the work force, their traditional role in the home changes, as well as their ability to provide the same level of care.

In response, many women strive to find a balance between maintaining a functional home and earning an income to help pay for groceries. My host mother, Maggie, started making jewelry because her family needed an additional source of income. She travels regularly to Accra to purchase her supplies and then she works every morning from 5a.m. until 6p.m. She only takes breaks when she prepares food for her sons or her husband. Maggie cannot find a job in Cape Coast or outside of her home because she manages her household and needs to be home throughout the day. C.K. Brown explains that, “women use short-time intervals in between all their

⁴³ Awedoba.

⁴⁴ Maxwell, 3

other... domestic tasks to produce something that can bring money to the house.”⁴⁵ Therefore, she earns money by preparing jewelry in her home and selling it to petty traders in the market, while at the same time maintaining her household role.

The Opare, another family in Third Ridge, distributes chores to all of the women in the household so that someone will always have time to earn an income in the market during the week. Augustina Opare, the mother of two children, sells various items, including Maggie’s jewelry, in Kotokoraba every weekday. She sells with her sister, Vera who owns the shop. Augustina spends so much time in the market that when she comes home she does not have the time or the energy to complete the chores necessary to run the household. Her sister, Grace, lives with the Opare while she attends school in Cape Coast, and prepares the meals for the family. Since she was sixteen Grace has been managing the household. In many ways, Grace is taking on her role as a mother and a caretaker because Augustina does not have the economic capacity to earn an income and run the household.

The jobs available for women in Cape Coast exemplify their relationship with food and their role as caretakers. For example, many of the places women work are gendered spaces. Maternity clinics, the market, the clothing industry, the food industry, etc., all apply skills women learn in the household. Even professor Awedoba made the distinction that “women are the people who cook... I don’t see that men will enter in the market as people who sell and transact produce in the market.”⁴⁶ The market is a gendered space, in large part because it is integral to a woman’s access to food, and thus her ability to prepare food for her family.

Organizations like the WFP, which aim to help Ghanaian women earn an income, also recognize the cultural relationship between women and food preparation. The WFP trains groups of women to operate rice mills so that they can increase production of local rice and process cereals to sell in the community.

⁴⁵ C.K. Brown. “Gender Roles and Household Allocation of Resources and Decision-Making in Ghana.” In *The Changing Family in Ghana*. Ed. Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1996), 27.

⁴⁶ Awedoba.

Boohene explained that they want to empower women. “Maybe they do shea butter, or process ground nuts, but the area in which they are working is seasonal, so indefinitely the income is not around... we train women so that they can work on that project when they are not otherwise working.” The women’s groups were also trained on how to handle their finances, and they were given food packages for their household work. “The idea is to empower them so that when the program phases out of their community, or if there comes a period when food for their children is not available, then they will be able to provide nutritious food for their children all of the time.”⁴⁷

As food insecurity intensifies women will likely search for jobs outside of the home, which will change the workforce as well as how the family unit functions. Throughout Ghana women are striving to achieve economic and social independence. The economic means through which they adapt to food insecurity also illustrates cultural changes occurring throughout Ghana. The women I spoke with are all part of the emerging work force, and in some cases find it difficult to achieve a balance between their profession, and their role in the household. This suggests that the challenge of food insecurity may cause women to distribute household tasks to other members of the family.

Childraising

Childraising is a form of education women use to pass on their caretaking skills, and distribute some of their roles throughout the household. Childraising is also one of the most important jobs in the community because it ensures that cultural skills and practices are maintained. In terms of food preparation, it demonstrates the intricate relationship between women and food. Many mothers use childraising as an avenue through which she teaches her daughter how to prepare food for her family. “As the daughter gets older the mother takes the opportunity to teach her how to perform activities such as cooking... and setting a table. Thus she passes her

⁴⁷ Boohene.

knowledge on to her daughter who will be able to utilize it in her own process of womanhood.”⁴⁸ I have observed that as the food insecurity threatens the community, childraising allows women to pass on valuable knowledge about quality of ingredients and preparing a healthy diet, so that their children will be healthy in the future.

Maggie’s mother taught her how to cook when she was a teenager and from that point on she prepared the meals for her family, in much the same way that Grace prepares meals for the Opares. Regina’s mother also taught her to cook when she was fourteen and now she prepares the same meals for her own son.⁴⁹ The period when a mother teaches her daughter to cook is critical in a girl’s preparation for motherhood. The mother-daughter relationship ensures that many of the cultural aspects of food preparation are maintained in the household and in the community, which in turn reinforces traditional gender roles.

In some cases, mothers also use food preparation as a vehicle to talk about their culture or family traditions. During my home stay experience, Maggie excitedly taught me to cook because she said it would help me become a true Ghanaian. Every time she prepared a meal she talked to me about the ingredients she used and her impressions of the dish. Mama Joyce also expressed a desire to pass on her knowledge of Ghanaian food to her children. For a period of time her family lived in the United States, but Mama Joyce insisted on teaching her children Fante and how to cook Ghanaian dishes.⁵⁰ Similarly, Mohammad explained that he only prepares local rice because he wants to teach his children about where their family came from. His family moved to Cape Coast from the Northern Region and Mohammad uses rice from that region as an avenue through which he can teach his children about their culture.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Sasha Moseley, “Bragoro: Celebration, Orientation and Instruction: The Fante Girl’s Passage to Womanhood.” SIT Independent Student Project, Fall 1999.

⁴⁹ Barnes.

⁵⁰ Joyce Mensah in discussion with Diana Lay, February 18, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

⁵¹ Anonymous Interview, April 21, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

For children in Cape Coast without a traditional family unit, institutions are emerging that aim to teach children how to prepare nutritious meals for themselves and future families. I spoke with the founder of the Baobab Children’s Foundation in Cape Coast about the NGO’s role in the community. She explained that the foundation aims to teach skills to children from families that can no longer afford to support them. In the Baobab school in Kissi, students learn “life skills” such as cooking and sewing so that when they graduate from school they can earn a living and provide for their own families. In addition, the children learn how to prepare local foods and are encouraged to prepare highly nutritious meals.⁵² Baobab serves as an educator in the community, and illustrates that nutrition and food preparation are considered important life skills in the community.

Nutrition Education in Cape Coast

In Cape Coast, groups of malnourished children serve as a visible sign of food insecurity in the community.⁵³ Most of the women I spoke of with related child malnourishment to a lack of nutrition education in the community. Many of my respondents pointed out that some mothers do not know what constitutes a healthy diet. “People tend to give more carbohydrates than protein sources,”⁵⁴ or they will feed their child whatever is available and consider it a complete meal. For example, Henrietta said that she saw mothers on the road who bought “some bread, they put some margarine over it, and they say that child has eaten. I would not give that to my child and say it has eaten, because that is just carbohydrates, nothing nutritious, and it will not protect the child from diseases.”⁵⁵ Auntie Hattie’s comment reveals her belief that mothers protect their children through a nutritious diet.

⁵² Edith de Vos in discussion with Diana Lay, April 18, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

⁵³ Malnourishment does not go unnoticed in Cape Coast. Auntie Hattie, Doe and Mama Joyce all referenced children suffering from malnourishment. Mary at the FRI also pointed out that there are malnourished children, especially in certain parts of Accra.

⁵⁴ Dzomeku.

⁵⁵ Kuofi.

You see that is another problem in this country. Those who cannot afford food, most of them go through people who will help them. They sometimes solicit help, but if they can't get it, then a lot of people eat what they can. That is why there is so much disease around. Those people are not eating well. They can't afford it, so they go and buy the cheapest things they can which may not be of good nutritional value.⁵⁶

Maggie also believed there was a relationship between diet and knowledgeable caretaking. During ISP I visited her after I had suffered from food poisoning. She was very concerned about me, especially when I told her that I was sick from something I ate before I arrived. She asked me exactly what I had eaten that day and how it was prepared. She also asked what the specific ingredients were. Maggie then offered me foods that would “make me healthy again,” such as black tea, groundnut soup and so on. She had a specific idea of what constituted a healthy diet. Finally she said, “it is almost funny that this happened. You left my home and then all of a sudden you are sick. No child will be sick in my home, under my roof. When you were in my home, you stayed healthy. Every time I host a child, before she arrives, I pray that she will be healthy. I pray that under my roof she will eat good food.” Maggie’s statement resonated her sense of womanhood and her ability to keep children healthy through the food she prepares.

In another instance, I spoke with the Doe, a caterer at One Africa, and a mother of two young children. Doe related nutrition to locally grown rice. She suggested that many women do not know how to prepare the local rice, or do not have the time to prepare it, so they make their children meals with foreign rice. She also explained that the foreign rice is largely stripped of many of its nutrients and has almost no nutritional value. The local rice, on the other hand, “is full of nutrients. It is entirely natural.”⁵⁷ Doe only feeds her children local ingredients, which she prepares for them every night while she cooks in the kitchen.

The stories my respondents shared reveal the intimate connection that exists

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Thompson.

between motherhood and the preparation of nutritious foods for their families. Henrietta concluded that, “we have a few malnourished children around... but that happens when the mother herself does not know what she is feeding her family.”⁵⁸ Matilda Dzomeku said that though this is the case, there are “groups poised towards getting the right type of food to children, but sometimes [she] thinks they need more education. We need more education on how to look after children.”⁵⁹ Professor Awedoba, as well, mentioned that nutritional education “can make a big impact on helping women prepare healthy food using local ingredients.”⁶⁰

In Cape Coast, institutions are emerging that are designed to educate women and help them provide food for their families. Henrietta believes there are around ten child welfare clinics in the community. “Women are being encouraged to work and get money so that they can feed their children. They go to child welfare clinics and are given food supplements, which they can bring home to their families. They are then asked to buy more of the same ingredients they are given in the hospitals... They show them how to prepare local food and then they are told to prepare food for their children in the same way.”⁶¹ These types of initiatives serve several purposes. Primarily they help educate women on proper nutrition, but they also reinforce the food industry that already exists in Cape Coast. By encouraging women to purchase local foods, they are maintaining their relationship with the market and instilling lessons on their role as women in the community.

I found that in some cases, my respondents explained that they take it upon themselves to teach other women how to prepare nutritious meals. Their reaction is part of a larger trend, in which “African women are becoming increasingly active on their own behalf, and are seeking solutions.” Educated women, like the mothers that I spoke with, “often articulate concern for other women not able to speak on their own behalf. For example, the issues of hunger and malnutrition are of special

⁵⁸ Kuofi.

⁵⁹ Dzomeku.

⁶⁰ Awedoba.

⁶¹ Kuofi.

concern.”⁶² Henrietta, in particular, expressed her female identity by teaching another woman how to care for her child using specific ingredients to prepare a nutritious meal.

I have come across a mother whose two year old was not yet walking, so she came to me and I asked how old her child was... I asked why she wasn't walking, and I looked at the food she was eating. She had given the child nothing but just porridge, from corn. If the mother was eating a meal, she would put a little in the child's mouth and say that the child had eaten. And I said, no, you are not feeding the child. This is too much for the child. The child's intestines are not strong enough to be able to use this food, so give this child what it can eat and digest. So I sat her down and I even gave her money to go and buy the ingredients that I thought was good for the child, and she purchased all of them, and I showed her how to prepare the food. She began feeding her child what I showed her and the child began walking. She continued with the child welfare program as well. She called me and said, 'finally, the child is walking'.”⁶³

Henrietta's story also exemplifies the role women play outside of the family unit. Part of a woman's role is to protect all of the children in the community. If a woman sees a child that is misbehaving, she will likely reprimand the child, or inform their parent that the child was acting out. Similarly, if a woman sees that a child is malnourished, or believes that her family is not taking adequate care of the child, then she will likely consider it her responsibility to care for the child. For this reason, many families will adopt children who may not have a stable home life or need funding for school or a healthy diet. For example, one of my respondents, Mohammad, explained that he and his wife adopted three children whose families “could not afford to give them healthy meals.”⁶⁴ Every child is protected.⁶⁵

⁶² Hazel M. McFerson, “Women in Africa.” In *Africana Studies: A Survey of African and the African Diaspora*. Ed. Mario Azevedo. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005).

⁶³ Kuofi.

⁶⁴ Anonymous Interview, April 21, 2011. Notes in possession of author.

⁶⁵ Opoku-Agyemang, “Festivals in Ghana: Individuals and Communities.” January 30, 2011.

Conclusion

The emergence of nutritional education in Cape Coast represents a large-scale effort to reduce the impact of the current food crisis, and mitigate its future effects. Women are key players in nutrition education and food insecurity awareness programs because of their relationship to food preparation. In many ways food insecurity in Cape Coast reveals aspects of what it means to be a woman in the community. Their role as caretakers, educators, and their increasing influence in the work force are all part of a nation-wide effort to empower women, which is led by women, for women.

By becoming key players in the community's response to food insecurity, women are taking ownership of the issue and participating in efforts to mitigate the consequences of malnutrition. Their movement to find solutions for the issue will likely lead to long term solutions, considerate of the its cultural effect on both rural and urban communities. "When groups perceive themselves as taking part in deliberations on a new policy framework, it is assumed that will produce a sense of ownership which is expected to enhance the possibility of acceptance of a policy. Participation also advances notions of fairness, especially when existing producers do not consider the needs of groups which are not on the radar screen of policy-makers."⁶⁶

I believe that my interviews and conversations with women in Cape Coast revealed their awareness of certain challenges inherent in food insecurity, whether that is manifested in high food prices, or the visibility of malnourished residents. However, I also recognize that there are many limitations to my study, in terms of my access to respondents. I had access to families within a middle-income economic bracket. Their perspectives were based on the knowledge that they were able to feed their families every night, whether it would be with local or imported food. They had the luxury of considering choices and making the most responsible or favorable

⁶⁶ Puplampu. 186.

decision. However, there are residents of Cape Coast that may not know how they will afford food within the coming weeks. For future study I would recommend examining the stories of those individuals, to give voice to people who are largely underrepresented in conversations about the food crisis and its affect on individuals in urban locations.

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