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CHAPTER 11

Labor and Leadership: Women in U.S. Community Food Organizing

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Introduction

The United States has a food system largely built on the backs of women, enslaved Africans, Native Americans and—most recently—migrant laborers from countries to our South. In other words, the US has never had a healthy and just food system nor a food secure society. Fortunately, tens of thousands of Americans are working to create one that is healthy and just, including building food security for all families and communities. That work, loosely forming the US community food movement,ⁱ has increasingly—if not sufficiently—tackled undoing racism and classism as inherent to creating a just food system. However, rhetoric and action aimed at undoing sexism in the work, including attending to gross gender disparities in food security, has largely been missing.

In this chapter, we aim to add gender to race and class as an anchor for achieving equity and food security through food system change. [... deleted text]

Gender and Food

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Inequity through Food

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Food Movement Labor & Leadership

Women appear to do their share, or more, in work to create a more just food system. With no official movement “membership,” it is impossible to count, but experience and anecdote indicate that women predominate in US community food movement action.

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Similarly, over 85% of respondents to our survey (which was publicized over food movement lists) identified as female. If women are doing their half or more of this food movement, then men are getting much more than their share of the credit for and voice in that work. While representation in leadership is only one measure of gender equity in the movement, it is an important one. One respondent in our survey wrote, “*I get really tired of seeing a few males trotted out over and over as the spokespeople for community food systems... I think women are doing and have done the lion’s share of this work, usually quietly and in ways that don’t blow their horns.*” This mirrors an observation by food movement journalist Tom Philpott: “We have our sage (Michael Pollan), our eminence gris (Wendell Berry), our star small farmer (Joel Salatin), our genius urban farmer (Will Allen), and our local-food chef (Dan Barber).” These “*anointed ones*,” he notes, are all male (Philpott 2010).

We asked survey participants to list up to six national leaders. Overall, of the 55 people who were mentioned by at least two respondents as national leaders, half are women, over a third are persons of color, and a quarter are both. However, males cluster more tightly at the top. Will Allen received the most mentions, with nearly half mentioning him. Over a third listed food journalist Michael Pollan. First Lady Michelle Obama came a distant third, with 17% of people listing her as an influential leader. Table 1 below lists the 15 people named most often by survey respondents. Of these top 15 leaders, 60% are male, 40% are people of color, and 20% (i.e., 3) are women of color. In the full list of over 150 different people mentioned as leaders, 56% are male.

Table 11.1: Survey Results of the Top 15 Most-Mentioned National Food Movement Leaders

Leader Name	Number of Mentions	% Respondents (n=181) Mentioning the Name
1. Will Allen	85	47%
2. Michael Pollan	66	36%
3. Michelle Obama	30	17%
4. Alice Waters	27	15%
5. Malik Yakini	24	13%
6. Joel Salatin	23	13%
7. Mark Winne	18	10%
8. LaDonna Redmond	14	8%
9. Marion Nestle	13	7%
10. Kathleen Merrigan	11	6%
11. Raj Patel	11	6%
12. Winona LaDuke	11	6%
13. Wendell Berry	11	6%
14. Andy Fisher	10	6%
15. Mark Bittman	10	6%

Women fared better in the local leadership question. Again, survey participants could list up to six names of people they saw as influential locally in their community's food work. Who was listed depended, of course, on where respondents lived; this likely was not nationally representative. However, out of the seven names listed at least five times, five are women.² Overall, 60% of the people named as local leaders were identified as female. That is nearly the inverse of the national leader list. About 22% of the local leaders were identified as being people of color and 13% as women of color.

Feminine and feminism in full color

[... deleted text on "feminine" ...]

Feminism, on the other hand, aims to end gender oppression. While women may be more likely to be feminine and/or feminist, men can be either or both as well; and certainly the gender equity struggle requires both sexes to succeed. Similarly, ending racism requires white allies, and racism remains a perennial struggle in US feminism

work. Histories of a white-women-led feminist movement and a men-of-color-led civil rights movement leave feminist women of color with little space to call home. This feminist erasure of women of color is relived, for example, in a recent column in *Ms. Magazine*, which notes that “today’s proponents of a ‘natural food revolution’ sometimes forget history – and return us to patriarchal fantasies of happy housewives at their hot stoves” (McGrath 2013). This review forgets the history of black women in fields and kitchens, drawing on mainstream white feminist history and discussing white women in the kitchen, and then closing with a nod to ending racism by quoting a male leader of color (Yakini, see Table 1) in the movement.

From this place of double marginalization, women of color have built a radical and practical body of work on how to undo racism and sexism (most notably, Anzaldúa and Keating 2002; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). This work underpins a more inclusive and radical vision of feminist leadership which, we argue, the food movement needs to generate food security and, to some extent, seems to be demanding.

Feminist leadership

Our survey asked for names of influential people. These questions fit conventional and largely white and male notions of individualist leadership (Batliwala 2010). Dozens of respondents challenged this by naming groups or leaving the names blank, and through comments such as:

The way your survey is structured, you will likely will get mostly talkers and not the ones who are truly influencing others.

While leadership is important; the power of community and building community and recognizing community is the key... we really need to resist the deification of leaders and by listing organizations, groups, or nothing at all in the slots for names.

I'm not completely comfortable with the idea of community food system leadership; to the extent that a community food system becomes identified with a single person, it becomes less a product and project of the community involved.

More important than getting involved with name-dropping it is best to think of anyone working in the movement as a community food systems leader.

Social change action, moral motivation, and collaboration constituted the dominant themes in participant comments about leadership. These themes fit a post-colonial feminist vision of leadership, which works as “a *means*, not an end. We build leadership capacity and skills *for* something, *to do something* or *change* something, and not because leadership is a product or service for consumption. This is especially true in social justice contexts” (Batliwala 2010). Respondent comments also fit with feminist leadership as defined by a Dutch organization working to end violence:

Feminist leadership should be oriented to a different arrangement of the human order: re-distribution of power and re-distribution of responsibilities. Fighting societal inequalities. Changing economic and social structures, beginning with transformation of psychic structures. Bridging personal freedom with collective freedom. Aiming at cooperation instead of competition. (Admira 2004)

Within the food movement, LaDonna envisions such re-distribution in what she calls Food Justice 2.0. In Food Justice 2.0, the movement is informed and led by the narratives of people most affected by food insecurity; in other words, women and of people of color. To collectively better understand the inequities in the food system, the work to change it must include people who have faced these inequities in finding solutions. The public health issue of violence is connected to the public health issue of chronic, diet-related diseases. In LaDonna’s community, it is about living or dying. You can die by the gun or from the lack of proper food. The stories that we tell ourselves in the food movement are as important as the stories that we've left out, such as those missing from the Ms. column cited above. We must include in this the narrative of modern slavery; our food system today is still based on the exploitation of the labor of immigrants in this country. While we are talking about access to free-range chickens and grass-fed beef, we need to also be talking about

immigration reform and fair wages for those farm workers. The people who serve us, who fix our food, should be paid fairly. This requires incorporating the truth about our food system and facilitating a deep engagement with the communities that feel most exploited. The food movement, to be effective, must aim to end oppression, including by crediting, building and following leadership in and from these communities, including and especially women of all races.

Fostering an Anti-Racist and Feminist Food Movement

Oppression is intertwined and so must be the work to end it. Ending sexism hinges on ending racism. Ending racism hinges on ending sexism. Pushing women, and especially women of color, “*off the edge of the table*” is one of the ways oppression manifests. However, food also provides a powerful opening for ending oppression.

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The food movement can realize this vision by developing anti-racist and feminist leadership around four “ps”: power, politics & purpose, principles & values, and practices (Batliwala 2010).

Power

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- Defining the principles and purposes of the work, in which the movement invests its productive power, and holding movement actors accountable to these principle and purposes. A survey participant said, “*Those who cherish dignity and the right to safe, affordable food should help ensure that on the issue of community food systems, there is no unaccountable change.*”

Principles and Purposes

Conventional, individualistic guides to leadership are cast as amoral, e.g., one might just as easily employ all “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” to destroy a community as to build it (Covey and Nathan 2011). In stark contrast, feminist leadership demands articulation of values and goals, including an “affirmative vision of change... rather than focusing only on oppression.” (Batliwala 2010).

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Practice

Promising practices for engendering more feminist labor and leadership in the work of the US community food movement include the below.

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East New York Farms! (ENYF!) of United Community Centers in Brooklyn, New York is one of the community partners in Food Dignity. African-American food blogger Erika Nicole Kendall cites their work in a recent column she entitled “America’s food debates are just white men talking: the Big Food-versus-Michael Pollan rhetoric ignores what low-income communities are already doing to get healthy.” She shows how communities like East New York are “making their *own* solutions” (Kendall 2013).

The work of ENYF!, CJFN, and Food Dignity form just small parts of a larger food movement to build “Food Justice 2.0” that includes food security for all communities. The social justice leader Winona LaDuke (who appears in the 11th spot in Table 1) is widely quoted as saying, “*if you’re not at the table you’re on the*

menu.” To succeed, the US food movement needs feminist and anti-racist leaders from communities most affected by food insecurity, not off the edge of nor on the table, but at the head.

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Notes

1. By this “movement” we mean those working to create local and regional alternatives to the dominant industrial food system and/or to resist that food system. This includes most of those using the phrases community food security, food justice, food democracy, and/or food sovereignty to describe their work. The movement also includes locovore groups; though these do not always work with the social justice goals of the others, they are literally growing alternatives to “big ag”. It excludes most conventional anti-hunger work via food banking and federal food programs, which help feed people but do not aim to change the food system.
2. We sent the survey link to comfood@elist.tufts.edu, growing_foodandjustice@lists.riseup.net, and local-foods@lists.extension.org. It was almost certainly forwarded to other food-related email lists as well. The two leadership-identification questions were: “Identify 3 to 6 people who come to your mind first when asked: who are the most influential leaders in the community food movement in the United States? And “Identify 2 to 6 of the most influential local community food movement leaders in your community (however you define that)”.
3. See www.cfjn.org and www.fooddignity.org.
4. The word “hunger” formed part of the official definition of food insecurity until it was discursively eradicated in 2006, when the USDA renamed “food insecurity with hunger” as “very low food security.” According to the panel tasked with reviewing USDA’s “food

insecurity” definitions and assessment, the word hunger “refers to the *consequence* of food insecurity that, because of a prolonged, involuntary lack of food due to lack of economic resources, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.”(Committee on National Statistics 2006: 47) Their report noted that hunger was an “individual-level concept” while the food security measures that USDA used were household level.

5. The women listed are Karen Washington, Miriam Grunes, Nancy Romer, Karen Early, and Nikki Henderson. The men are Robert Pierce and Will Allen. With the exception of Washington (based in New York) and Henderson (based in the West-Coast Bay area), these leaders are all in or near Wisconsin. Respondents were disproportionately (17% of them) from that state, likely because the Growing Food and Justice email list (one of several used to distribute the survey), while national, was fostered by Will Allen’s Wisconsin-based Growing Power.

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