

Who has power over food?

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Addressing the twin crises of malnutrition around the world—hunger and obesity— demands that we ask who has power over food, rather than question just the mere presence or absence of food. This is the argument of Raj Patel, activist, author of *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* and fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Development Studies, in a new Essay in *PLoS Medicine* this week, which says that "understanding hunger and malnutrition requires an examination of what systems and institutions hold power over food," including the role of gender and the importance of food sovereignty.

To understand power over food, the concept of "food security" has been useful to capture "the notion of hunger not as a deficit of calories, but as a violation of a broader set of social, economic, and physical conditions," says Patel. "Gender is key to food insecurity and malnourishment, because women and girls are disproportionately disempowered through current processes and politics of food's production, consumption, and distribution."

Advocated by leading organizations like La Via Campesina, the concept of food sovereignty is emerging, through which communities have the right to define their own food and agriculture policy, and in which women's rights are central. "It is through food sovereignty...that food security might be achieved, and undernourishment eradicated," says Patel.

Importantly, food sovereignty raises concerns about corporate power

within the global [food system](#) that is controlled by a small number of multinational companies. Patel says: "The food system's dysfunction continues to be lucrative for a range of food and agriculture companies. Profits often derive from the increased consumption of processed food, which in turn have driven a global obesity epidemic. Yet the distribution mechanisms within the food system that ration food on the basis of ability to pay have produced the paradox of a billion hungry during a time when there are more than 1.5 billion people overweight."

"Identifying inequities in power within the global [food](#) system is more than an academic exercise—it is a means not only to interpret the system, but also to change it", concludes Patel.

More information: Patel RC (2012) Food Sovereignty: Power, Gender, and the Right to Food. PLoS Med 9(6): e1001223.

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