Rev Agric Food Environ Stud (2016) 97:75–77
DOI 10.1007/s41130-016-0002-9

BOOK REVIEW

Aya Hirata Kimura, 2013, *Hidden Hunger. Gender and the Politics of Smarter Foods*

Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 226 p

Sandrine Dury[1]

Published online: 23 March 2016

In this book, Aya Kimura, associate professor of Women's Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa (USA), examines how nutrition structures the meanings of, and prescriptions for, the "world food problem". She underlines the domination of the technical framing of problems and solutions about hunger that shadowed more complex political points of view and agency of women.

The book is written in a pedagogical and didactic way including many examples from a 1-year field research in Indonesia in 2004 and a long list of references. It is divided into eight chapters. The first three concern the central thesis of the book: micronutrient deficiency is claimed, by a complex collusion between scientists, government, donors and corporations, to be the actual major form of "hunger". The same pervasive and powerful network of stakeholders advocates for simple technical fixes such as fortification. The voice of victims (women, children, mothers) are eventually absent in both the definition of the hunger problem and its solution. The next four chapters provide illustrative case studies in Indonesia. In the whole book, she develops her arguments, zooming from global to local ideas and policies and vice versa, changing from academic to corporate realms, questioning international development funding agencies to the Indonesian kitchens. Her central area of interest is the developing world, but her analysis remains stimulating for the rest of the world and is certainly complementary to those of other scholars such as Marion Nestle (2013) for the USA.

✉ Sandrine Dury
sandrine.dury@cirad.fr

[1] CIRAD, UMR MOISA, F-34398, Montpellier, France

Micronutrient deficiency and fortification, the latest avatar of *nutritionism*, fit perfectly with the neo-liberal governance of the development

Kimura exposes how "hidden hunger" or "micronutrient deficiency"—the lack of proper micronutrients (vitamins and minerals)—became central in the 1990s in the international food policy community to describe the "food problem" in the developing world, and why fortification (addition of micronutrients to processed food such as noodle, wheat flour, cooking oil) and biofortification (change in plant biology so that the plants contain more micronutrients) became the most celebrated instruments to address the problem, rather than other solutions such as changes in food systems.

She argues that "this micronutrient turn was driven by 'nutritionism' and that it ought to be understood as a manifestation of a scientized view of food insecurity in developing countries".

Food is a source of nutrients; food for an active, healthy life; or how to empty the food question from social or political issues

Nutritionism refers to the pervasive and reductionist view that food is primarily a vehicle for delivering nutrients. Health improvement becomes the foremost purpose of food and of the act of eating. It denies the other individual (pleasure, identity), social (power, status, linkages to other) and cultural meanings of food and eating. Referring to Michel Foucault, Kimura situates nutritionism as a "technique of power", a part of the long history of problematizing people's food and bodies. Nutritionism naturalizes and depoliticizes the food problem. It defines it as chemical and individual, by calculating the poorness of particular diets as the discrepancy between an

individual's intake of nutrients and scientifically set standards. It frames the vocabulary and solutions. As a consequence, the proposed solutions take some specific "simple" forms such as educational programmes (to correct bad habits) or into delivery of pills, fortified foods or biofortified crops, instead of broader solutions that would be linked to a large vision of the nutrition problems (including access, social differentiation, etc.). The domination of experts, the only people able to diagnose hidden hunger that is invisible to lay persons, prevents a democratic process in food politics. Kimura refers also explicitly to *agrofood studies*, which examine the political economy of food, the history of the industrialization of agriculture and its geopolitical structure. Using Harriet Friedmann's and McMichael's works on food regimes, she analyses the rise of hidden hunger, fortification and biofortification in an international historicized and political context: the neo-liberal framework. This same global context explains why fortification is now preferred to supplementation (micronutrients given as pills), which used to be the favourite solution of many international organizations. Supplementation requires a heavy support of government while fortification is deemed to cost less and can be part of efficient public-private partnerships. Again, in the current neoliberal ideology, private partners are deemed more efficient service deliverers than government.

The role of the World Bank and the economics of nutrition

Kiruma also shows how the World Bank (WB) became "a formidable powerhouse in pushing the fortification agenda in international development" (p. 47) and a major funder of many different projects. Kimura underlines the shift in the international lending institutions toward nutrition and suggests that it is due to the impact of studies on the productivity impacts of malnutrition, following the theories of development emphasizing the "human capital" (p. 49). The fact that the World Bank became a strong advocate of fortification is interrelated with this "economized view of nutrition", where "nutrition is seen as an investment and malnutrition as economic Loss" (p. 20–54). The WB not only has an immense power in terms of funding international development but also has a significant epistemological power to impose certain policy assumptions and frameworks. In its 1994 publication, *enriching lives* (WB 1994), it developed its instruments such as the "disability adjusted life years" (DALYs) which enables to estimate in a numeric way the "return on investment on micronutrients". Kimura questions this indicator, which gives a lower value to the life of the very young, the elderly and the disabled people. This economic view is spreading far beyond the economists and the Bank and prevents other approaches to raise.

Charismatic nutrients or how to communicate on magic bullets to keep its visibility, influence and position and drive money back, from health to agriculture for example

She discusses different historical examples of "charismatic nutrients", so called as a reference to Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority. These nutrients (proteins, vitamin A, micro-nutriments etc.) have been celebrated as the key to combating the Third World food problems at different historical periods. They emerged as icons, with their joint solutions, and after a while, disappeared from the debates, replaced by other magic bullets. She underlines the contingency of these couples of problems and solutions. For instance, in the 1960s, the protein deficiency was seen as the higher priority to tackle hunger in the Third World and the distribution of skim milk was one of the main solutions. Protein-rich food products were engineered, and different projects all over the developing world were funded to create and distribute these protein-rich food products. However, all these nutritional fixes ultimately failed for various reasons, and both the description of the problem and its related consumption standards—for example, the level of minimum requirement per person—changed. She refers to the "nutritional isolationism" that prevailed in the late 1980s when multisectoral approaches (joint efforts in development projects with agriculture and education for example) were considered as failures (p. 29). At that time, charismatic nutrients helped nutritionists to be visible and needed in the complex world of the food scientific and development community, where several overlapping jurisdictions, including agriculture, population and nutrition, are in competition. In chapter seven, she deals with Golden rice, a rice that has been biofortified, i.e. genetically changed so that its endosperm contains beta-carotene. It is an example of a hypervisible product that is actually never used by the target (poor women). Kiruma states that it was an opportunity for the international agricultural research to drive funding from the health sector, which international funding exceeded the agricultural one in the 2000s (p. 145). It was also an excellent means to provide a moral virtue for biotechnology. "Biofortication and golden rice embody *benevolent biotechnology*—biotechnology that benefits people in the underdeveloped world by helping them to produce more food and more nutritious food".

Women: the victims, the culprits and the solution

Kimura addresses the linkages between *nutritionism*, hidden hunger, fortification policies and women. She uses the framework of *feminist food studies* to question the power of women

in the shaping of food and nutrition policies. Women are usually invisible in the policies, although they are the ones who produce and prepare the food and feed the people all around the world. Or, if they are visible, it is because of their "bad habits" (cooking ability, feeding practices, breast-feeding patterns) that have to be changed. They have to be educated because they are considered as the source of the problems. Kimura draws a parallel between population and food since in both cases, women and women bodies are a "key site of state policing and surveillance".

Women are often presented as victims of micronutrient deficiencies ("biological victimhood"). Kimura discusses the consequences of the situation where women, although being since the 1990s officially part of the international agenda of world food policies, are at the same time considered as not reliable to apply (or to comply with) the nutritional guidelines that would prevent them and their children to suffer from micronutrient deficiency. For the proponents of fortification, it is thus much easier to rely on fortification than on any other strategies (supplementation, home gardening) that require nutrition education and the compliance of women. Kimura develops the idea that women are then at the same time the centre of interest as bodies and list of biological parameters (height, weight, blood parameters, pregnant or not, etc.) and are obfuscated as social and political persons. She advocates for food policies that would consider women as social persons, who can actively contribute to the policies that target them. The "visibility of women as biologically vulnerable blinds us to the key social dimension of vulnerability" (pp. 54–61).

Concerning Indonesia, she insists on the view of women as workers who have to be well fed and controlled to be more productive in different factories that support the economic growth of the country. She insists on the opposition between the bad working conditions of women, the denial of their basic rights of association and representation, and the will of the government and developers to provide them with nutrients and good health (Health without justice) (p. 80).

Fortification of wheat flour in a country of rice and cassava eaters and how the supply can change the demand/expectations

In chapter 4 to 7, she develops three Indonesian cases. First, she explains how the global concern about nutrient deficiency interweaves with the local concern.

She explains how the wheat flour industry has developed under the reign of Soharto in a *country of cassava and rice eaters*. She argues that fortification of instant noodles and wheat flour was driven not only by corporate interest but also by nutritionists (p. 95). She then gives a very detailed description of the political local history of fortification of monosodium glutamate and instant noodles and of the invention of smart baby food.

She reports the results of interviews she conducted with poor women in urban slums (pp. 123–138), showing the willingness of women to buy commercial baby food. She shows how women are facing conflicting nutrition recommendations, coming from old governmental slogans, health workers or nowadays TV advertisement and how they tend to believe that they need commercial fortified products, although they cannot buy them because of their budget limitation. They have doubts about the quality of the food they give to their children, including their breast milk. This anxiety related to food and nourishing role of women is increased by nutritionism which imposes new questions and stresses to women and mothers.

References

Nestle M (2013) Food politics: how the food industry influences nutrition and health. Revised and expanded tenth anniversary edition. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 510 p.

World Bank (1994) Enriching lives: overcoming vitamins and mineral malnutrition in developing countries, Washington DC, 84 p.