



# Breaking Gender Norms: Lessons from the Women's Food Lab in La Paz, Bolivia

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*Women Food Lab group: Photo by © Verónica Leyton*

**The deployment of Hivos' Food Lab methodology in a women-only setting in La Paz, Bolivia, allowed stakeholders to hear from and truly involve female participants, who often lack a voice. The process led to the unexpected conclusion that the best approach to addressing gender issues is not always as concrete as lobbying, but it may require taking a step back and acknowledging the need for a cultural shift.**

Women play a fundamental role in food systems in Bolivia, from farm to fork. Both in rural and urban areas, providing food has been designated as one of the main tasks for women. However, local food systems, especially urban, are not designed to recognise or facilitate this work.

The double working day (doing both paid work and running a household), the rise of fast food venues, social pressure, difficult working hours, job insecurity, and increasing food prices are some of the reasons why city dwellers shift towards feeding themselves and their families less healthy food. With a continuously increasing urban population and more working women, healthy food is a lesser priority in the average family.

At Hivos Bolivia we asked ourselves, how should a food system be designed to improve the health of women and families? What do we need as a society to improve our diets without it being more time- or money consuming? In order

to know more about these pressing questions, we implemented a Women's Food lab in La Paz.

## What is a Food Lab?

A Food Lab is a methodology that has been implemented by Hivos in several different country and city contexts around the world, where multiple actors share knowledge, evidence and ideas, and together develop local solutions to transform the food system. Food Labs take a systems approach and integrate a combination of thinking, feeling, relating and doing into the multi-stakeholder process. Concrete coalitions and ideas on the ground are translated into prototypes (pilot initiatives), ranging from application of technology, advocacy for public policy, new business models, the framing of cultural values and behavioural change, or others.

## Why a women-only Food Lab?

Unfortunately, women in Bolivia still lack a voice in private and public spaces. There is still more attention paid to men's voices, and when talking about a topic that is both private and public, such as food, women's real thoughts, ideas and feelings can be shut down. This does not mean that Hivos and participants cannot have a joint conversation, but it means we need to hear uncensored voices before having the necessary joint conversation. That is why we decided to create a safe space so that women from different backgrounds can speak from their experiences as women first, and then involve their professional knowledge and expertise.

## Levelling the ground

In order for different voices to be heard at the same level, we

held two "pre-labs", at which we gathered women representatives from 60 low income neighbourhoods. We used different methodologies from Theory U (see Figure 1) to hear their stories and their voices and to give them the opportunity to raise their main concerns and dreams around food. From these events, the group selected representatives who attended the Food Lab event, which took place over six sessions.

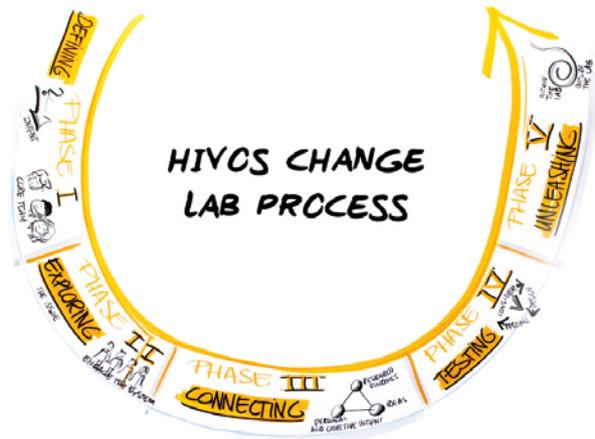
During the main Food Lab, we brought together women from different backgrounds. Aside from the neighbours, we had government representatives, cooks, representatives from youth and gastronomic movements, researchers, entrepreneurs, nutritionists, urban producers, NGO and cooperation representatives, etc. Between them, the participants had a wide range of knowledge that enabled them to share perspectives, experiences and ideas around the food system.

**Expectation vs reality**

The usual output of a Food Lab is to develop a prototype. We were expecting that the group would develop a strategy for lobbying and advocacy for more diverse markets in the neighborhoods, or a technological innovation that could help women make easier decisions regarding food consumption. What came out was the need to bring about cultural change so that families, especially men, are involved in the food process.

Women from all backgrounds agreed that culturally all the food work depends on them, regardless of their job, economic status or education. Although sometimes men

Figure 1. Hivos Lab methodology based on Theory U model



"help", they are rarely involved in food buying or preparation. Furthermore, many woman feel that men are the main blockers in their family for healthier eating. Many women have a vast knowledge about healthy food, have been in cooking workshops and know about dietary needs. But when they cook healthier meals for their family, if is not a large quantity of food, with plenty of carbohydrates and includes a big piece of meat, the food is often rejected. This means they have little opportunity to promote healthier eating in their families. One of the main needs that the women in the Food Lab discussed, was the need for a cultural change in which men are empowered in the kitchen and become part of all the food related processes.



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In order to prompt the cultural change, we drafted a number of action points:

**Care tasks: everyone's responsibility.** Principles of care must be taught at school and at home, in the same way, to boys and girls. Also, the state must provide professional and quality education and care for children, the elderly and the sick.

**Recognition of the vital role of food and feeding.** Food is one of the most important care tasks. If we economically quantify the work women do to feed society at large, we would recognise it as free work that contributes to the country's development.

**Food and nutrition education for everyone.** Food and nutrition education must be instilled from the first years of primary school and continue to university, for both men and women. It must occur in both formal and informal spaces.

**More flexible work hours and remote working.** If we want a well-fed and nourished population we need to work around meal schedules. Most jobs have very strict schedules that are often incompatible with family life. More schools must have dining rooms and more flexible office hours to allow for the preparation and consumption of healthy and adequate food for the whole family.

**Recognition and fair payment of women in the whole food system.** Work performed by women throughout the food system tends to be poorly paid. Pay and working conditions must be equal and fair. This recognition must come from the state, but also from consumers, as often they bargain and are

unwilling to pay the real economic value of food.

**Work with men and family.** Society must stop putting all the responsibility for food on women. This means having an open conversation about the role of men and finding ways to involve the entire family in food provisioning and preparation.

While bringing about this cultural change will be a long-term process, identifying the need for it is the first step. The results of the first women's food lab have prompted a coordinated approach from the municipality and other organisations to continue this work with women, families, giving particular attention to men.

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