

IFPRI food policy statement

Women: The key to food security

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Eight hundred million people in the developing world currently face food insecurity, and the challenge of meeting their food and nutrition needs is likely to become greater in the years ahead. One untapped source of agricultural growth to help meet these needs could lie in reducing the bias against women in agriculture. Women in developing countries play significant roles in maintaining the three pillars of food security: food production, economic access to available food, and nutrition security. But they play these roles in the face of enormous social, cultural, and economic constraints.

Women: The Key to Food Security, an IFPRI Food Policy Report, brings together the latest evidence on the key roles that women play in ensuring food security and examines ways to strengthen the three pillars of food security through policies and programmes that enhance women's abilities and resources to fulfill their roles.

Women and food production

The sustainable production of food is the first pillar of food security. Women account for 70% to 80% of household food production in sub-Saharan Africa, 65% in Asia, and 45% in Latin America and the Caribbean. They achieve this despite unequal access to land, to inputs such as improved seeds and fertilizer, and to information. Given equal access to resources and human capital, women farmers can achieve yields equal to or even, as some studies show, significantly higher than those of men.

Laws governing women's rights to land vary widely. Some religious laws forbid female ownership of land. Even when civil law gives women the right to inherit land, local custom may rule otherwise. In sub-Saharan Africa, where women have prime responsibility for food production, they are generally limited to user rights to land, and then only with the consent of a male relative. Some resettlement and irrigation projects have actually eroded women's rights to land by providing formal titles only to men. This insecurity of tenure reduces the likelihood that women will invest much time or many resources in usufruct land or adopt environmentally

sustainable farming practices.

The weakness of women's land rights results in an inability to use land as collateral to obtain access to credit. Social and cultural barriers, women's lower educational levels relative to men, and their lack of familiarity with loan procedures may also limit their mobility and interaction with predominantly male credit officers or moneylenders.

Despite women's prominent role in agriculture, they do not get an appropriate share of agricultural extension advice and other services. One potential remedy is to increase the number of women trained as agricultural extension agents. A second is to give agricultural training to women working as community development or home economics officers. A third strategy is for extension agents, whether men or women, to meet with farmers in groups. This practice would reduce or remove the cultural constraints against interaction between individual male extension agents and female farmers and would enable the women in the groups to share information among themselves. Agricultural research institutions also need to make use of women's indigenous knowledge of farming systems, which has been largely untapped.

Providing women with basic education would help raise agricultural productivity and incomes, for better-educated farmers are more likely to adopt new technologies. A study in Kenya found that increasing the primary education of women farmers not only makes them more likely to plant coffee, a high-value crop, but also increases the adoption of coffee by other women farmers, who are more likely to copy women than men.

Women and economic access to food

The second pillar of food security is economic access to available food. In recent years, studies have shown that improvements in household welfare depend not only on the level of household income, but also on who earns that income. These studies find that women, relative to men, tend to spend their income disproportionately on food for the family. Moreover, women's incomes are more

strongly associated with improvements in children's health and nutrition status than are men's incomes.

Why do men and women tend to spend income differently? Societal and cultural norms may assign women the role of ensuring that household members, especially children, receive an adequate share of available food. Also, since women's income tends to come in smaller and more frequent amounts than men's income, it may be more readily spent on daily subsistence needs.

Since income is a critical determinant of a household's ability to obtain food, poverty is a major threat to household food security. The combination of poverty and gender inequality poses an even greater threat because of the nutritional benefits associated with increasing women's incomes. The growing percentage of female-headed households around the world is a cause for concern, for past studies suggest an association between female headship and poverty. These women require improved access to education and other resources that tend to raise income levels.

Women and nutrition security

The third pillar of food security is the achievement of nutrition security—that is, adequate protein, energy, micronutrients, and minerals for all household members. Nutrition security depends not only on sufficient food at the household level but also on factors such as health and child care and access to clean water and sanitation. Ensuring the nutrition security of the household, through the combination of food and other resources, is almost the exclusive domain of women.

Nearly all non-food inputs into nutrition require time investment, and in general these investments are made by women. For example, a crucial input into good nutrition is the provision of “care,” namely, the time and attention devoted to meeting the physical, mental, and social needs of growing children and other household members. Care affects nutrition security in two broad ways: first, through feeding practices such as breastfeeding and the preparation of nutritious foods, and second, through health and hygiene practices such as the bathing of children and the washing of hands before food preparation. These caring behaviours are time-intensive.

Women constantly face difficult choices in their time allocation decisions. Increased time spent in generating income (translated into higher food expenditures) and in using health and educational facilities can improve child nutrition, but the loss of direct time spent in child care may offset this. However, increasing female employment outside the home may increase women's bargaining power

within the household. Development of technology that relieves women's time burdens in agricultural production and household maintenance without sacrificing their ability to earn independent incomes is therefore critical.

Protecting female nutrition status is important in providing a head start for children's nutrition status. As a result of improvement in prepregnancy nutrition status, weight gain during pregnancy, diet during lactation, and breastmilk production, better-nourished mothers lead to higher-birth-weight infants and better-nourished children. But women's nutrition status may be threatened when women act as shock absorbers for the household by the liquidation of their own nutrition status in lean seasons. In addition, evidence from South Asia suggests that a strong pro-male and pro-adult bias in the distribution of food and other resources within households may also reduce the health and nutrition status of women and girls.

Conclusion and recommendations

To allow women to fulfill their potential in generating food security, national governments and international organizations must take policy steps in three broad areas. First, they must increase women's physical and human capital. Women's ability to produce food can be enhanced by improving their access to resources, technology, and information. Literacy training for women and increased education for girls will increase productivity both today and in the future. Second, policy makers must increase women's ability to generate income to maximize the benefits of women's incomes for household food security and nutrition. Strategies should aim to increase women's productivity both in paid work and in domestic production, so that women can increase their incomes without sacrificing additional time, their children's welfare, or their own health and nutrition status. Third, they must protect women's health and nutrition status to allow women to fulfill their productive and reproductive roles. Development of safety net programmes for women should increase women's income-earning potential while reducing the energy or time intensity of their activities. Other programmes should address girls' and women's specific health needs and empower women to seek health care for themselves and for those who depend on them for food and nutrition security.

Copies of the Food Policy Report Women: The Key to Food Security can be obtained free of charge from the International Food Policy Research Institute, 1200 Seventeenth St., NW, Washington, DC 20036-3006, USA. Tel: (202) 862-5600; fax: (202) 467-4439; e-mail: IFPRI@CGNET.COM.