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POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

*sustainable solutions for ending hunger and poverty*

# WOMEN

## Still the Key to Food and Nutrition Security





**T**he 1995 Beijing Platform for Action set goals for empowering women in developing nations. Over the five years since the Beijing +5 review assessed progress toward these goals, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has generated new studies reaffirming that empowering women is the key to ensuring food and nutrition security in the developing world. This brief brings together IFPRI's most recent research findings on gender and food security and offers proof to policymakers that reducing gender disparities promotes better food and nutrition security for all.

## PRIMARY FINDINGS

### Targeting women in agricultural technology dissemination can have a greater impact on poverty than targeting men.

When farmers adopt new agricultural technologies, they directly experience the effects of agricultural research. Adoption can depend on whether the technologies make farmers less vulnerable; whether farmers have the assets to adopt the technologies; the nature of disseminating institutions; and cultural factors, such as gender roles.

A recent IFPRI assessment of the impact of vegetable and fishpond technologies on poverty in rural Bangladesh found that untargeted technology dissemination was more likely to benefit men and better-off households. Efforts designed to reach women within poor households—such as through NGO provision of training and credit for vegetable improvement—achieved greater impacts on poverty. Successfully reaching women with these technologies gave them greater mobility, more control over resources, and political awareness, and resulted in fewer incidents of domestic violence.

The NGO vegetable program was successful because vegetables could be grown on homestead land, allowing even women from very poor households with no agricultural land to participate. Because the women had less need to seek employment outside the homestead, they felt less vulnerable to harassment. Also, NGOs have been successful in reaching poor women in Bangladesh, where status issues make it difficult for these women to access government extension services.

#### SOURCES

K. Hallman, D. Lewis, and S. Begum, *An Integrated Economic and Social Analysis to Assess the Impact of Vegetable and Fishpond Technologies on Poverty in Rural Bangladesh*, EPTD Discussion Paper 112 and FCND Discussion Paper 163, IFPRI, 2003; R. Meinzen-Dick, M. Adato, L. Haddad, and P. Hazell, *Impacts of Agricultural Research on Poverty: Findings of an Integrated Economic and Social Analysis*, EPTD Discussion Paper 111 and FCND Discussion Paper 164, IFPRI, 2003.

### 2 Equalizing agricultural inputs between men and women results in significant gains in agricultural productivity.

Although women are often seen as less efficient farmers than men, a review of gender differences in agricultural productivity found that yield differences actually result from inequalities in agricultural inputs between male and female farmers. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, women play a key role in food production and yet they have less access to education, labor, and fertilizer than men do. Therefore, unequal assets could have a greater impact on food and nutrition security in this region than in others.

In Burkina Faso, men have greater access to fertilizer and to both household and nonhousehold labor for their farm plots. Reallocating these resources to women could increase household agricultural output by 10 to 20 percent. In Kenya, if women farmers are given the same levels of education, experience, and farm inputs as their male counterparts, they increase their yields for maize, beans, and cowpeas by 22 percent. Educating women is a key method for boosting agricultural productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa. Simulations using data from women farmers in Kenya suggest that yields could increase by 25 percent if all women attended primary school.

#### SOURCES

H. Alderman, J. Hoddinott, L. Haddad, and C. Udry, "Gender Differentials in Farm Productivity: Implications for Household Efficiency and Agricultural Policy," in *Household Decisions, Gender, and Development: A Synthesis of Recent Research*, ed. A. Quisumbing, IFPRI, 2003; A. Quisumbing, "What Have We Learned from Research on Intrahousehold Allocation?" in *Household Decisions, Gender, and Development: A Synthesis of Recent Research*, ed. A. Quisumbing, IFPRI, 2003.

### 3 Gender disparities in property rights threaten natural resource management.

Rights to property increase women's status and bargaining power within the household and community and provide them with greater incentives to adopt sustainable farming practices and invest in natural resource management. Yet even where women are primarily responsible for food production, such as in

Sub-Saharan Africa, land is predominantly owned by men and transferred intergenerationally to males. This means that women must gain access and user rights to land indirectly, through male family members.

Insecurity of tenure discourages women from investing time and resources in sustainable farming practices. This is especially true of agroforestry technologies because of the delay between investment and returns. In many regions, the increasing scarcity of common resources is forcing communities to substitute privately held resources for publicly held ones. Hill households in Nepal, for example, have responded to deforestation by using private instead of public land to produce fuelwood and fodder. Because women are primarily responsible for household firewood collection, they bear the greatest cost of forest loss, but without control of land they cannot plant their own trees.

#### SOURCES

R. Meinzen-Dick, "Women, Land, and Trees," in *25 Years Young: Reflecting on Achievements and Planning for the Future*. World Agroforestry Centre, forthcoming; P. Cooke, "Changes in Intrahousehold Labor Allocation to Environmental Goods Collection: A Case Study from Rural Nepal, 1982 and 1987," in *Household Decisions, Gender, and Development: A Synthesis of Recent Research*, ed. A. Quisumbing, IFPRI, 2003.

## 4 Raising a woman's status dramatically improves the health, longevity, and productivity of her children.

IFPRI recently explored the relationship between women's status—defined as women's power relative to men's in their households, communities and nations—and children's nutrition in three developing regions: South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The study found that women's status significantly affects child nutrition because women with higher status have better nutritional status themselves, are better cared for, and provide higher quality care for their children.

In South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, increases in women's status have a strong influence on both the long- and short-term nutritional status of their children. The study estimates that equalizing gender status in South Asia would reduce the rate of underweight children under age three by approximately 12 percentage points, meaning that 13.4 million fewer children would face malnourishment in this age group alone. If women and men enjoyed equal status in Sub-Saharan Africa, child malnutrition in the region would decrease by nearly 3 percentage points, reducing the number of malnourished children under age three by 1.7 million. In Latin America and the Caribbean, however, women's status has a positive effect only on children's short-term nutritional status and only in households in which women's relative decision-making power is very low.

#### SOURCE

L. Smith, U. Ramakrishnan, A. Ndiaye, L. Haddad, and R. Martorell, *The Importance of Women's Status for Child Nutrition in Developing Countries*, Research Report 131, IFPRI, 2003.

## 5 Targeting programs to women benefits the whole household, but particularly girls.

Recent IFPRI evaluations of innovative government projects found that targeting development projects to women improves overall household welfare. One such project is PROGRESA, an antipoverty program in Mexico that provides a health, nutrition, and education package to poor families and directs monetary transfers directly to women. PROGRESA benefits resulted in a 14 percent increase in the enrollment of girls in secondary schools and a 12 percent reduction in illness among both boys and girls. With increased income, women were more likely to make joint decisions with their husbands regarding their children's medical care and school attendance as well as food expenditures and home repairs. They also exercised greater control over how the extra income was spent. Research shows that placing assets in the hands of women increases household spending on children's clothing and education and reduces the rate of illness among girls.

#### SOURCES

E. Skoufias and B. McClafferty, *Is PROGRESA Working?: Summary of the Results of an Evaluation by IFPRI*, FCND Discussion Paper 118, IFPRI, 2001; A. Quisumbing and J. Maluccio, *Intrahousehold Allocation and Gender Relations: New Empirical Evidence from Four Developing Countries*, FCND Discussion Paper 84, IFPRI, 2000; K. Hallman, *Mother-father resource control, marriage payments, and girl-boy health in rural Bangladesh*, FCND Discussion Paper 93, IFPRI, 2000.

## 6 The social and economic status of women is one of the most important factors affecting the spread of HIV and the ability of households and communities to withstand its impacts.

HIV/AIDS heightens vulnerability to food insecurity, and food insecurity in turn heightens susceptibility to HIV exposure and infection. This cycle is particularly devastating for women, who are physiologically, economically, and culturally more at risk of HIV infection than men and who bear a double burden as both producers of food and caretakers of the sick.

HIV/AIDS severely threatens agricultural production and food security because of its impact on all the major classes of assets, including human, social, and physical capital. The disease is also undermining natural capital, particularly in the case of women who may be forced to leave their husband's village upon his death and who often have no control over land and other assets used jointly. In some cultures, "widow inheritance," in which a woman is expected to marry the brother of the deceased, is the only way she can retain rights to her husband's land. However, such practices place women at even greater risk of acquiring the disease.

Guaranteeing women's property and inheritance rights thus has a two-pronged effect on HIV/AIDS: (1) It can help prevent the spread of HIV by promoting women's economic security and empowerment, thereby reducing their vulnerability to domestic violence, unsafe sex, and other AIDS-related risk factors, and (2) it can enable women, as the primary caregivers in AIDS-affected households, to better manage the impacts of the disease.

#### SOURCE

S. Gillespie and S. Kadiyala, *HIV/AIDS and Food and Nutrition Security: From Evidence to Action*, Food Policy Review 7, IFPRI, 2005.

## 7 There is no single path to strengthening women's property rights.

It is often argued that women's land rights tend to decline as customary land tenure institutions evolve toward individual-ownership systems. However, recent IFPRI research on the emergence of gift transfers of land in Ghana's western region shows that analyses of women's property rights must consider the specific context because these gift transfers have actually strengthened women's land rights.

Akan households in Ghana's western region have traditionally practiced "uterine inheritance," in which land is transferred from a deceased man to his brother or nephew, a decision made by the extended family, or matriclan. Recently however, land has been transferred from husband to wife, provided that the wife and children helped the husband establish cocoa fields. Although daughters still receive fewer transfers of land than sons, this bias against women is weakening as the adoption of cocoa farming increases the demand for women's labor and hence their bargaining power. These findings suggest that individualization of tenure gives women in Western Ghana an incentive to invest in land. In other cases where women's labor is less important for cash cropping, individualization might decrease women's control over land. Thus, efforts to strengthen women's property rights must begin with an understanding of their often-complex existing rights.

### SOURCE

A. Quisumbing and K. Otsuka, with S. Suyanto, J. B. Aidoo, and E. Payongayong, *Land, Trees, and Women: Evolution of Land Tenure Institutions in Western Ghana and Sumatra*, Research Report 121, IFPRI, 2001.

laws so that women may hold individual or joint title to land, in inheritance and divorce laws, and in laws pertaining to violence against women. Of course, legal changes do not automatically translate into changes on the ground. Effective change requires that both those who implement the laws and the public are aware of the changes. Legal literacy campaigns are therefore needed for both groups, and women need ready access to administrative and judicial channels. Although legal reforms may not dramatically change women's rights if major differences exist between statutory and customary law, they do provide a basis for women's appeals for more substantial rights. With enough appeals, even social norms and relationships based on power can change.

## 2 Target resources to women.

Increasing resources in women's hands makes a powerful contribution to food and nutrition security. As HIV/AIDS threatens to undermine agricultural production, targeting resources to women becomes even more critical. For example, directing food aid to women has the potential to mitigate the impact of AIDS on food security and reduce the spread of the virus by reducing high-risk behaviors such as transactional sex, the main income earner for some desperate women and orphaned children. Labor burdens in HIV-affected households may be mitigated by increasing women's access to labor-saving technologies, such as lightweight plows and fuel-efficient stoves.

## 3 Increase women's ability to actively participate in the development process.

Women need to be empowered to make their own choices and respond to increasing economic opportunities. Investing in the human capital women offer is a key to sustainable and gender-sensitive food policy. This can be done through education and by removing barriers to the productive use of women's time and energy. Women must also be included alongside men in the design of agricultural and nutrition programs. One effective way of securing women's participation is through networks or group-based programs. These groups help women access critical support services and strengthen their social capital so that they can engage in other activities. Because women are not a homogeneous group, particular attention must be given to ensuring that all women can participate effectively in such programs. Involving more women in development processes may require special outreach and training for poorer and less educated women and for those who hesitate to voice their needs in front of men for cultural reasons.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

IFPRI's research findings provide empirical evidence that empowering women leads to greater household food and nutrition security. Accomplishing this task requires policies that eradicate gender discrimination, proactively promote catch-up for women, and involve women directly in their implementation. IFPRI recommendations include the following:

### Reform and monitor legal institutions to eradicate gender discrimination and improve the status of women.

Legal institutions must be changed to create a level playing field for men and women and an environment in which women can realize their full potential. Change is needed in property rights



INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

2033 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006-1002 USA

TEL +1-202-862-5600 • FAX +1-202-467-4439

EMAIL [ifpri@cgiar.org](mailto:ifpri@cgiar.org) • WEB [www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org)

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