Innovative approaches to gender and food security
Changing attitudes, changing behaviours

It is a bitter irony that our world currently produces enough food to provide for every woman, man and child, yet a recent estimate by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) suggests that around 925 million people go to bed hungry each night.

The struggle of poor women and men in developing countries to ensure sufficient nutritious food for their families has been regularly reported in the media in Northern and Southern countries over the past four years. The global food price spikes have increased undernourishment by almost seven percent, and have driven at least 100 million more people into poverty. By 2050, the world population will be around 9.3 billion, and feeding everyone will require a potential 70 percent increase in supplies of cereals alone.

Gender justice – that is, the realisation of women’s rights as human rights – and ending hunger, are closely entwined, interdependent goals. Solving hunger now and in the future involves challenging the current global development model which permits – and is driven by – inequality. Gender analysis shows us that women literally ‘feed the world’, as producers, processors, cooks and servers of food. However, women’s vast contribution to food production, and their key role as consumers and family carers, is still largely misunderstood and underestimated.

A conservative estimate is that female farmers cultivate more than 50 percent of all food grown (UNHRC, 2010). In developing countries, 45 percent of economically active women report that their primary economic activity is agriculture, and in some least developed countries, this figure rises to 75 percent. Yet, in many parts of the world, women are still unable to own or control land in their own right, and have less access to resources such as seeds.

Women also have far less access to higher-value markets, and their crops and food products may be sold on their behalf by men – who then keep and control the income. When a woman farmer or waged labourer returns home, she begins a second shift of work to prepare food for her family. In many cases she eats least and last.

This issue of insights is the result of a collaborative process involving experts working in policy, research and practice on gender and food security in four global regions. At the centre of the process was a dynamic online discussion, which raised many issues and questions around the gender power.
dynamics of food production, consumption and governance. Particularly interesting, was the extent to which participants identified transformative development pathways that promote food security and poverty reduction while also enabling shifts in gender power relations. Focusing on six projects in South Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, the articles in this issue illustrate some of these pathways.

They demonstrate how development can support poor households to survive and move out of poverty by channelling resources to women for producing, selling, processing and cooking food. In meeting the intensely practical needs of women, development interventions can challenge and transform the unequal social, economic and political power relations which create a cycle of poverty. There is a synergy between the goals of efficiency and empowerment here: if women are supported to grow more food and control the produce and to have a stronger voice in the home, where food is distributed and consumed, this will be beneficial for families and wider society.

Furthermore, this issue of *insights* demonstrates that food security and agricultural extension programmes will be far more effective and empowering if they also challenge and transform unequal gender power relations. This means tackling the constraints around women’s access to resources and addressing the issue of unequal gender roles, responsibilities and workloads that perpetuate poverty for all, while leaving women exhausted and often malnourished. It means changing the attitudes and beliefs of all in society about gender roles and power relations – including, crucially, men and boys.

Emily Hillenbrand shows how Helen Keller International’s Homestead Food Production initiative in Bangladesh was a catalyst for change when it adopted a women’s empowerment perspective. This involved attitudinal change among project participants and staff, challenging gender norms of men as the main farmers and women primarily as family carers.

Suniti Neogy describes a project in rural north-east India which sets out to break the cycle of malnutrition among girls and women by working with men and women to emphasise the importance of nutrition for women. It challenged social norms that women should eat after men (reflecting the general view that women are of secondary importance in the family and wider society). Invoking men in these discussions helped bring about changes in attitudes.

In Syria, Alessandra Galié’s research shows that new technologies, plant-breeding processes and policies regulating access to seeds need to be developed with women’s specific interests and needs in mind. As men migrate to urban areas looking for work, women are becoming more involved in producing food and increasingly need access to relevant technologies.

A project in Zambia demonstrates the effectiveness and transformative potential of involving all household members in discussions on food security. Promoting gender equality among men and boys in a non-threatening way leads to improved household resilience and coping strategies, as Cathy Rozel Farnworth explains. Once the positive effects on household livelihoods are apparent to men, they are more likely to welcome significant changes to gender roles and relations.

Agnes Quisumbing and Neha Kumar analyse research from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), which investigated the long-term impact of programmes that provide agricultural technologies to boost assets and nutritional status of women and men in rural Bangladesh. In contrast to the Zambian project, this research indicates that in some contexts, working with women-only groups may be more beneficial for reducing inequalities in ownership and controls of assets than taking a household-focused approach, where often, only husbands are involved.

Food sovereignty has emerged in Latin America as an alternative way of understanding and responding to food insecurity. As Pamela Caro explains, food sovereignty asserts the need for:

- women and men to have equal access to resources, including land, so that they can become as efficient as possible
- equal sharing between men and women of reproductive work, including preparing and distributing food
- women to play a more significant role in decision-making concerning food production and distribution issues.

This issue of *insights* shows how development policy and practice can potentially improve food security while supporting women’s empowerment. They can focus on women’s critical role as food producers, consumers and family carers, while transforming gender norms and inequalities within households and communities. There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to achieving these outcomes, but it is vital to ensure that food security interventions:

- are informed by both women and men at the local level in their design and implementation
- are tailored to specific contexts, given the often vast disparities in experience, needs and gender roles within countries and regions
- take into account and respect women’s instrumental role in food production
- involve women and men equally in decision-making around food production, consumption and distribution.

Caroline Sweetman
Editor, *Gender and Development*

OXFAM GB
Oxfam House, John Smith Drive
Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK
CSweetman@oxfam.org.uk
www.genderanddevelopment.org
www.oxfam.org.uk

**See also**

www.unhchr.org/refworld/topic,4565c2252f,458a0852,4bbecd082,0.html

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**Women in agriculture**

**Closing the gender gap**

The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011, published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, focuses on women and their vital – but often underestimated – roles within rural economies. Important messages include:

- Women make essential contributions to agriculture but their roles differ significantly by region and are changing rapidly in some areas.
- Women have one thing in common across regions: they have less access than men to productive resources and opportunities. There is a gender gap for many assets, inputs and services such as land, livestock, labour, education, extension, financial services and technology. This imposes costs on the agriculture sector, the broader economy and society, as well as on the women themselves.
- Closing this gender gap would generate significant gains for the agriculture sector and for society. If women had equal access to productive resources, yields on their farms would increase by 20 to 30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 percent, which could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12 to 17 percent.
- When women control additional income, they spend more of it than men do on food, health, clothing and educating their children. This has clear benefits for household food security and wellbeing and for longer term economic growth through better health, nutrition and education outcomes.

**See also**

The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011: Women in Agriculture, Closing the Gender Gap for Development, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

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Page 2  www.eldis.org/insights
Transforming gender relations in homestead food production in Bangladesh

Gender inequity is an underlying cause of food insecurity and malnutrition in South Asia. In Bangladesh, women’s mobility is restricted by social norms of purdah, which limits their access to public spaces, information, income and tools for decision-making. Women cannot access markets but depend on husbands or sons to make transactions. Women are also excluded from land and asset ownership and extension advice.

Helen Keller International’s (HKI) homestead food production (HFP) model is a woman-centered, agriculture-based approach to dietary diversification. HKI establishes community-based demonstration farms where women receive technical advice, inputs, and nutrition education to produce nutrient-rich vegetables, poultry and small livestock on homestead plots. The HFP model has been recognised as a best practice in agriculture throughout South Asia and has improved nutrition for more than five million people in Bangladesh. Because the demonstration farms are nearby and the amount of land required for dietary improvements is small, most women have been able to participate despite restrictions on their mobility and inequalities in land ownership. However, gender issues were not initially discussed as part of the HFP project.

Recently, HKI Bangladesh has started an internal process of encouraging critical reflection on gender relations. It began by acknowledging that women in HFP programmes are often seen principally as a way to achieve better child nutrition, rather than from a rights or empowerment perspective.

This sparked a series of reflective trainings and qualitative research exploring gender norms with staff and project participants. One important insight was that ‘men control big things, but women control small things’. Women are often responsible for taking care of livelihood assets (land, ponds, trees, cows, poultry, nets) but only claim joint ownership of the smallest assets, such as poultry, vegetable plots or cooking pots. Women said that they often feel vulnerable and dependent on their husbands. Members of staff also recognised that they often deferred to the male head of household during programme delivery, assuming that decisions made ‘on behalf of the household’ would automatically benefit all members equally. Some male staff members even questioned their own practices and resolved to share more information, resources and decisions with their own wives. Staff at all levels offered ideas for transforming unequal gender relations and building the resource base, agency and achievements of women participants. Examples include:

- Group excursions to markets were organised for women, so that they could select seeds or livestock themselves.
- Women were trained to build and repair poultry sheds, traditionally a male activity.
- Group marketing programmes enabled groups of women to bring their produce to an accessible collection point and engage directly with a middleman, so that they could retain direct control over the income they generated.
- The land size requirement of 800 square metres for demonstration farmers and leaders was relaxed, enabling more women to take on these roles.
- Men became more systematically engaged in nutrition education, challenging the norm that ‘care’ is an exclusively female domain.

These changes represent an important shift from an instrumental rationale for including women to intrinsically valuing women’s empowerment. HKI found that creating structured opportunities for critical analysis of gender norms sparked a sense of social injustice among staff, unleashing their creativity and commitment to strengthen the gender-transformative potential of the programme.

Emily Hillenbrand
Helen Keller International
Road 82, House 10F
Gulshan 2, Dhaka
Bangladesh
ehillenbrand@hki.org
T +88(0) 1751 645727
www.hki.org

See also
www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ifpridp00928.pdf

Challenging cultural values that affect food security in India

The Indian government sees food security as a fundamental right and has introduced schemes to improve access to food and nutrition. A project in rural Uttar Pradesh, northeast India, reveals, however, that gendered patterns in the distribution of food within households often lie beyond the scope of its interventions, so deeply are they ingrown within local culture and tradition.

Women in the region, particularly poor women, are expected to take on sole (unpaid) responsibility for managing their families’ nutritional and other needs – in addition to tending crops and other duties. Even if men wish to share domestic activities, they often hesitate to take on what is seen as ‘women’s work’.

Despite women’s role in enabling food security, they often neglect their own nutritional needs. There is often an unspoken rule, reinforced through cultural and religious norms, that the male breadwinner eats first. Children, especially sons, eat next, while women and girls eat last, by which time there may be very little or no food left. Even during pregnancy, special care is not always taken to ensure women receive enough food, despite family counselling on the importance of eating nutritious food and getting enough rest during this vulnerable time. This is also true in many other parts of rural India.

Such cultural practices are being challenged through a project, ‘Inner Spaces Outer Faces Initiative’ run by Care International and the International Centre for Research on Women. The project aims to integrate discussions on gender and sexuality and cultural food practices into a maternal health programme. ‘Inner spaces’ refers to the beliefs and attitudes of staff and service providers that need to be in line with their ‘outer faces’ – the overall programme goals such as meeting primary healthcare and educational needs – if positive change is to happen. A public health adviser may advise women to eat three meals a day, for example, or encourage men to eat with their wives. The health adviser can help ensure a more gender equitable distribution of food within households and contribute to overall health improvements.

The project provides capacity building for local health and education service providers, including reflective sessions where participants are encouraged to challenge their beliefs relating to gender roles and responsibilities. Those showing a willingness to challenge and change their own cultural values can then act as advocates for change in the communities where they work.

Project leaders find discussing issues around food availability and intake a useful entry point for discussing gender inequalities within their own families and communities, whereas their professional training has not prepared them to do this. They are able to engage households and communities in discussing the importance of cooking and eating together, feeding children together, and of men and women sharing responsibilities in the kitchen. The project highlights the importance of involving men in discussions of gender roles.

Key to the success of this project has been the efforts to understand and address local cultural issues around food in sensitive ways that challenge gender norms. Involving both men and women in discussions about food security and gender is important, as is the facilitators’ willingness to challenge their own gender beliefs and practices.

Suniti Neogy
Care India, Uttar Pradesh
11 Krishna Colony
Mahanagar Lucknow
India 226006
sneogy@careindia.org
T +91 5223920487
www.careindia.org

See also
Gender Inequality, Mothers’ Health and Unequal Distribution of Food: Experience from a CARE Project in India, Gender and Development 18 (3), by Suniti Neogy, 2010
Engendering Change, film by CARE, 2010
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h400vz2fY8
Equal access for women to seeds and food security in Syria

In Syria, food security has been a national priority since the 1980s. Most poor people live in rural areas and depend on small-scale farming for survival. Women do manual work such as weeding, fertilising, planting, harvesting and food processing. Men are mainly involved in mechanised and marketing activities. However, small-scale agriculture can no longer sustain rural households. Men are migrating to urban areas looking for paid work whilst the women, children and older family members remain. Women are increasingly responsible for producing food yet they have limited access to, and control of, essential productive resources and the revenues generated through the sale of household agricultural produce.

Women need access to seeds – for growing food crops, for animal feed and to sell for income. Female and male farmers have different needs regarding seed varieties depending on what they do along the food chain. Women’s preferences are linked to planting, harvesting, weeding, food processing and cooking, whilst men tend to focus on marketing and prioritising customers’ preferences. Seeds are thus selected for marketing purposes rather than household food security. To improve food security and ensure equitable development, men and women need to be able to select and have access to good seeds of relevant varieties as well as to revenue generated by selling the produce.

Gender issues have generally been ignored by agricultural research or plant breeding in Syria more broadly in generating or selecting new seed varieties. Improving wheat and barley varieties, for example, usually focuses on increasing yields while other traits – such as quality of crops for food processing and handicrafts – are overlooked. Varieties are thus generally less relevant for women’s needs, with adverse effects on their role as food providers, and their right to enjoy the benefits of agricultural development more widely.

The Participatory Plant Breeding (PPB) programme in Syria is coordinated by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas. It shows that adopting a pro-active approach to ensure a gender-balanced involvement of Syrian farmers to improve barley varieties can provide both female and male farmers with access to crop varieties that reflect their needs.

Evidence from the PPB programme suggests that unless women’s access to and control of seeds and subsequent revenues are explicitly supported by programmes or policies, existing gender discriminatory customary practices are likely to continue. Yet, legislation currently being developed by the Syrian government to regulate management of its biodiversity does not include provision for equal access to and control of seeds and their benefits generated for women and men.

Integrating gender considerations into plant breeding and policies regulating access to seeds will receive new attention now, at a time when Syria and other countries across the Middle East are experiencing popular demand for change in their governance systems. New spaces for institutional reform and new opportunities could lead to innovative approaches by national plant-breeding institutes and policies that guarantee men and women equal access to seeds and enable them to share their benefits and ensuing revenue.

Alessandra Galié
International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas and Wageningen University Fraz. Castagneti, Via Tozzano 52a 63100 Ascoli Piceno, Italy a.galie@cgiar.org T +39 0736 41758

See also


Participatory Plant Breeding and Gender Analysis, PRGA and CGIAR, by Cathy Rozel Farnworth and Janice Jiggins, 2003

www.prgaprogram.org/descargas/plant_breeding/monographs/PPBMonograph4.pdf

A health worker in Djibouti discussing food and nutrition with a young mother while on a home visit. © Giacomo Pirozzi, Panos Pictures, 2004
Engaging the whole family in food security planning in Zambia

Food security is a challenge in Zambia, where 45 percent of children under five are stunted. Most food production systems are rain-fed and crops are harvested once a year at about the same time. This results in highly seasonal income flows, market gluts, and hungry months for many Zambians. Policies favour maize production even where conditions are unfavourable; other crops suffer from policy, marketing and research neglect. Of particular concern are poor gender relations in many farming households which reduce the effectiveness of decision-making.

Women comprise 85 percent of the total smallholder labour force and are largely responsible for food security at the household level. Men sell the produce (particularly larger volumes), manage most household income and are often responsible for deciding what to plant where. Women, on the other hand, cannot make important decisions in the absence of their male partners. Women in female-headed households are freer in this sense but often lack sufficient assets to create viable livelihoods.

The Agricultural Support Programme (2003-08), largely funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, aimed to stimulate attitudinal change amongst smallholders and to encourage women and men to take responsibility for household food security. The programme did not carry out formal gender awareness-raising activities. Other incentives were used instead, for example, meetings had to have 30 percent female attendance, otherwise they would be cancelled. Women were asked to sit with the men (which traditionally does not happen) at meetings and the facilitators were trained to ensure women felt free to speak.

At a household level, extension workers met regularly with all adult household members and older children. They would discuss and agree a vision for the household and prepare a joint action plan. Farmers were discouraged from selling produce on the market unless they had set aside enough food (maize) for home consumption for the entire year. Farmers were also trained to diversify away from growing just maize to developing mixed crop and livestock production systems.

The practice of reserving food grains for household consumption is still going on beyond the life of the programme. Men and women believe that agricultural outputs have increased and that household food security is better. The household approach has started to create a shift in decision-making concerning assets: household members understand that assets belong to the whole household rather than one individual. These attitudinal changes to the cultural norms governing ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles and responsibilities are said to have been ‘astonishing’.

Furthermore, there are indications that men are not asserting ownership of ‘female’ crops that have become lucrative, as has happened in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Women can market these in their own right, or if men market them, everyone in the household benefits. Intra-household relationships are less tense and more productive and men and women feel empowered as a result.

Empowering women is now seen in positive terms by men, rather than as a threat to their masculinity. Men appear to have developed better relationships with their wives and closer rapport with their children and can speak to them more freely. Working with the entire farming household has increased the resilience and coping strategies of many households: all family members understand their farming system and have been actively involved in shaping it.

Most significantly, the programme showed that there is much to be gained from planning and decision-making processes that involve women and men (of all ages) at the household and community levels. Joint ownership over food production decisions can both increase food security and be transformative, enabling lasting shifts in gender attitudes, roles and behaviour.

Cathy Rozel Farnworth
cathyfarnworth@hotmail.com

See also

www.sida.se/Global/Gender%20in%20Agriculture%20working%20paper%202010-8%20Zambia.pdf

Feed the Future Gender Assessment, by Cathy Farnworth, Vincent Akamandisa and Munguzwe Hichaambwa, USAID Zambia, 2011
How can we achieve food security for women and girls? Should interventions target households, including men, or should they aim to reach women through women’s groups? Working with groups is an effective way for development programmes to enable women to increase their control of assets, improve productivity, and enhance their status and wellbeing. The social capital generated by groups is recognised as an important asset in itself.

Programmes working with women’s groups in Bangladesh – microfinance programmes for poor women in particular – have developed innovative means to address context-specific constraints, such as the low levels of asset ownership by women and barriers to mobility outside the household. How do group-based approaches compare to targeting households with the aim of improving food security and nutrition within the household?

Research from the International Food Policy Research Institute has investigated the long-term impact of agricultural technologies (vegetable and polyculture fish production) on men’s and women’s asset accumulation and nutritional status in rural Bangladesh. Household surveys were carried out ten years apart (1996-97 and 2006-07) at three sites where non-government organisations have disseminated these technologies to increase incomes and address micronutrient deficiencies.

The three projects provided credit and training in the following areas:
1. polyculture fish production for households, with a pre-requisite of (sole or shared) pond ownership in central Bangladesh
2. small-scale vegetable growing for women’s group members growing vegetables on their families’ homesteads in central Bangladesh
3. polyculture fish production for women’s groups, for whom long-term leases of ponds were arranged, in south-west Bangladesh.

Project results include:
• In site one, the technology mainly targeted men, who took charge of most production decisions and took the fish to market. This strengthened their ownership of their productive assets, whereas women’s ownership of assets weakened.
• In site two, improvements in women’s and girls’ nutritional status in particular, and a reduction in the gap in asset ownership between men and women were significant.

• In site three, where technologies were disseminated through women’s groups in a collective ownership model, women’s assets increased more than men’s in the same households.

These findings show that the way in which projects are implemented affects their capacity to increase women’s and men’s assets, and that targeting women’s groups rather than the household in general may be a more effective way to achieve gender equity.

Targeting groups may achieve gender equity and nutritional goals more easily, yet this does not necessarily lead to more effective governance or increased income. Some groups in the group fishpond programme (site three) dissolved because of conflicts within the groups and income gains were relatively small due to the need to divide the proceeds among many members.

Such programmes can, however, lead to greater cooperation between women and men. Some of the women’s groups, have begun bringing in male members to act as a link between the group and the wider community, and to fulfil specific functions (such as bookkeeping) that the women are not trained in.

A more nuanced approach to group formation and technology diffusion would allow groups to tap both male and female resources within the household and the community – with the clear goal of reducing gender inequities in ownership and control of assets.

Agnes Quisumbing and Neha Kumar
International Food Policy Research Institute
a.quisumbing@cgiar.org
n.kumar@cgiar.org
www.ifpri.org

See also
Does Social Capital Build Women’s Assets? The Long-Term Impacts of Group-Based and Individual Dissemination of Agricultural Technology in Bangladesh, CAPRI Working Paper No. 97, by Neha Kumar and Agnes Quisumbing, July 2010
www.capri.cgiar.org/pdf/capriwp97.pdf

Access, Adoption and Diffusion: Understanding the Long-Term Impacts of Improved Vegetable and Fish Technologies in Bangladesh, IFPRI Discussion Paper 00995, by Neha Kumar and Agnes Quisumbing, June 2010
www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ifpridp00995.pdf
Food sovereignty and women’s rights in Latin America

In Latin America, the concept of food sovereignty has emerged as an alternative approach to tackling food shortages and agricultural problems. It focuses on people’s rights to define their own food and agriculture rather than having food largely subject to international market forces. It aims to protect local agricultural production and trade with a view to achieving sustainable rural development.

The food sovereignty movement has the potential to address gender inequalities: it is grounded in the need to recognise that rural food producers – men and women – have equal rights. As in many parts of the world, women play an invisible but significant role in food security. For example, there is a long tradition of women collecting and propagating seed varieties for nutritional and medicinal uses.

Several women’s organisations in Latin America have made this link, including Bartolina Sisa in Bolivia and the Network of Rural Women in Venezuela. They promote food sovereignty as a way to ensure ownership over food production and underpin the struggle for women’s rights.

What is the best way to challenge fixed gender roles and achieve greater gender equality and empowerment? For lasting change, it is vital to move from rhetoric to reality, by:

- enabling women to have equal rights to land ownership
- ensuring equal participation by men in unpaid care and other reproductive activities
- giving reproductive activities the same value as productive activities, such as agricultural work
- making the preparation and distribution of food the responsibility of both women and men
- ensuring greater involvement of women in decisions concerning food production and distribution.

Pamela Caro
CEDEM
Manuel Thompson 4270, Estación Central
Santiago, Chile
pamecaro@cedem.tie.cl
www.cedem.cl

Useful weblinks

Eldis Food Security and Gender Resource Guide

BRIDGE resources on gender
www.bridge.ids.ac.uk

FAO Focus on Gender

Gender in Agriculture E-Platform
www.genderinag.org/ginag

Global Food Security Initiative
www.globalfoodsec.net/modules/gfs/knowledge_resource/gender_and_food

ICRW Focus on Agriculture and Food Security
www.icrw.org/what-we-do/agriculture-food-security

IFPRI Focus on Gender
www.ifpri.org/book-20/ourwork/researcharea/gender

Irish Aid Focus on Hunger
www.irishaid.gov.ie/development_htf.asp

WDR 2012: Gender Equality and Development
http://go.worldbank.org/CQCMT5SF40

WFP Empower Women on the Frontlines of Hunger
www.wfp.org/women4women

Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resources Management
www.wocan.org

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insights
Institute of Development Studies
University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
T +44 1273 915777
F +44 1273 621202
www.eldis.org/insights

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