



## GENDER AND FOOD SECURITY

The high cost of food along with the global economic crisis has exacerbated vulnerability to malnutrition and hunger, with many families in developing countries using as much as 75 percent<sup>1</sup> of their income for food. There is a critical nexus between gender, food security and economic development. In times of crisis, women are often the hardest hit but are also an untapped resource for recovery. An understanding of the differing roles, responsibilities, capacities and constraints of men and women is key to developing and implementing effective food security programs.

Women are responsible for half of the world's food production, and in most developing countries they produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food.<sup>2</sup> Yet, women continue to be regarded as home producers or assistants on the farm, and not as farmers and economic agents on their own merit.<sup>3</sup> Women receive a small fraction of assistance for agricultural investments; women in Africa receive less than 10 percent of small farm credit and 1 percent of total credit to the agricultural sector.<sup>4</sup> Empowering women farmers is vital to lifting rural communities out of poverty, especially as many developing nations face economic crisis, food insecurity, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation and increasing urbanization.

Agricultural productivity and income gains are necessary but not sufficient to eliminate hunger and malnutrition. Women are responsible for nutrition in most homes, including the purchase and preparation of food. However, because of traditional norms, they often have limited access to education and control over resources. When given the opportunity to manage household finances, studies show that women are more likely than men to spend on their family's nutritional needs, healthcare, and school fees for children. Therefore, empowering women to increase access to and control over resources is critical to attaining food security in the developing world.

While the economic crisis is creating uncertainty worldwide, what is certain is that women in the world's poorest countries are well-positioned to be a driving force for development and economic transformation – only if we make them a priority.

### OBSTACLES WOMEN FACE IN FOOD SECURITY

- **In many developing countries, land is predominantly owned by men** and transferred inter-generationally to males. Therefore women may lack access to land, water rights and livestock. In addition, even when women are able to access land, lack of ownership creates a disincentive to invest time and resources into sustainable farming practices, which in turn lowers production and results in less income and food for the household.
- **Women and girls do not receive adequate education and training opportunities.** Education has proven to be an important tool to increase agricultural productivity and reduce poverty and malnutrition. Educated women are more likely to have greater control of their reproductive choices and better health and educational outcomes for their children. However, girls in developing countries often have less access to basic education and women receive only five percent of agricultural extension services worldwide.<sup>5</sup>
- **Women have less access to credit than men, as well as less control over financial resources.** Women in Africa access only one percent of available credit in the agricultural sector<sup>6</sup>, in part because women often do not have the necessary collateral. This lack of credit limits their ability

to purchase agricultural tools, seeds, fertilizers or hire labor that could increase their crop production.

- **Women often do not have the appropriate technology, tools and inputs for farming productively.** Studies in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia showed that due to differential control over resources, when men and women grew the same crop on individual plots women were at a disadvantage. Most inputs, such as labor and fertilizer, went to the men's plots. Some experts estimate that if women had the same inputs as men, household agricultural output in sub-Saharan Africa could increase between 10 to 20 percent.<sup>7</sup>
- **Time is a major constraint for women.** In many instances, women have to spend a great deal of time traveling on foot to collect water and firewood, preparing meals and feeding the family, and traveling between the home and fields, forcing them to make difficult trade-offs.
- **Women's mobility may be constrained because they are tied to their homes and are the primary care takers of children.** They may also lack access to transportation and roads. Furthermore, women may be confronted with risks to their safety, especially in conflict and post-conflict environments; violence against women is a serious problem around the world.
- **Households affected by HIV/AIDS have increased vulnerability to food insecurity.** Illness due to HIV/AIDS impedes a family's capacity to grow food while their nutritional needs are even more critical. Additionally, burdens on women as caretakers are increased.

## INTERVENTIONS

- Include women as well as men in the design of agriculture and nutrition programs.
- Encourage property, divorce and inheritance laws that allow women to hold title to land and provide a mechanism for enforcing the laws.
- Provide women and girls with access to primary education as well as training on agricultural production, resource management and conservation.
- Ensure agricultural extension agents understand and consider the needs of women farmers; and recruit more female extension workers.
- Provide training for men and women on nutrition, family planning and HIV/AIDS, focused on increasing knowledge, changing attitudes and improving practices.
- Facilitate lending to women entrepreneurs working in agriculture; make financial services more accessible to rural women.
- Ensure that agricultural programs consider the needs and preferences of both men and women when developing and introducing new varieties and technologies.
- Provide rural women with greater mobility and market information by facilitating access to roads, transportation, water and information technology services.
- Include gender specific monitoring and evaluation indicators in food security programs.
- Create innovative programs that link agriculture, nutrition and gender.
- Provide training for agriculture and nutrition specialists on how to apply gender methodologies to the design and implementation of programs.
- Build local leadership and leverage relationships with government ministries and other institutions to create responsible food security policies that prevent crisis, integrating gender considerations into policies using evidence-based advocacy.

<sup>1</sup> Catholic Relief Services. Retrieved June 12, 2009, from <http://www.crs.org/public-policy/food-crisis-causes.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> *FAO Focus on Women and Food Security*. Retrieved April 17, 2009, from <http://www.fao.org/focus/e/women/sustin-e.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Mehra, R. and Rojas, Mary H. (2008). *A Significant Shift: Women, Food Security and Agriculture in a Global Marketplace*. ICRW.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank. (2007). *Gender: Working Towards Greater Equality. Gender Equality as Smart Economics: A World Bank Group Action Plan*. Washington, DC.

<sup>5</sup> UNAIDS. HIV/AIDS, Gender and Rural Development. *Gender and HIV/AIDS Factsheets No 15*. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from <http://www.genderandaids.org/downloads/events/Fact%20Sheets.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> IFAD. (2001). *Assessment of Rural Poverty: Western and Central Africa*. Retrieved from <http://www.ifad.org/poverty/region/pa/english.pdf>