

March 8, 2010

Women are key to eliminating hunger and poverty. Their pivotal roles as farmers, mothers and caregivers have immense implications for improving livelihoods, food security, and the health and nutrition of their families.

Today marks International Women's Day, an opportunity to celebrate the achievements and contributions women make in the workplace and at home, as entrepreneurs and as mothers. At the Beijing World Conference on Women 15 years ago, governments committed to strive for gender equality at all levels of society. Despite these lofty pronouncements, vast inequalities still impede the social, political, and economic inclusion of daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and grandmothers around the world.

Focusing greater attention on the links between gender equality and nutrition is critical if we are to reverse the recent increase in hunger and poverty.

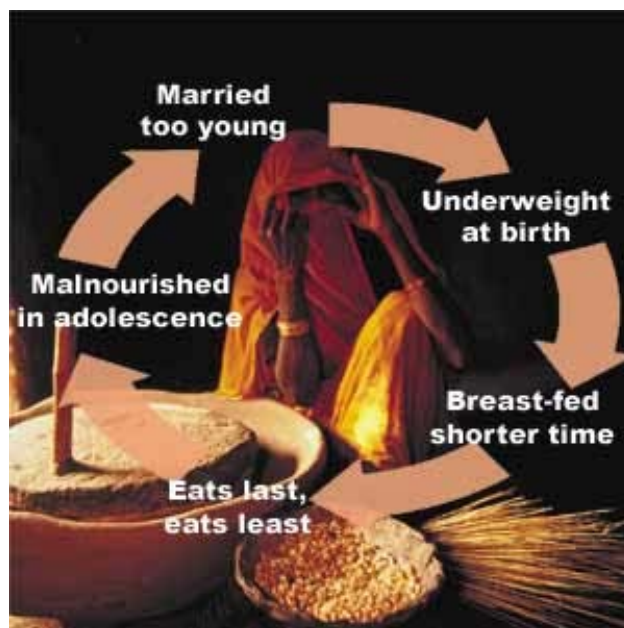
Global commitments to achieve the Millennium Development Goals are undermined by inattention to gender equality. This is true in many areas, including in the fight against hunger. After decades of declining rates of hunger and the compounding effects of the global economic crisis, the rise in food prices in 2008 has reversed global progress.

Around the world, women do the majority of farm work that helps feed families. They are also the primary caregivers responsible for children's health and well-being. Despite the vital roles women play, inequalities in education, economic empowerment, political participation, and access to basic health services have a strong impact on hunger and malnutrition.

The cycle of malnutrition that results from gender inequality is passed from generation to generation.

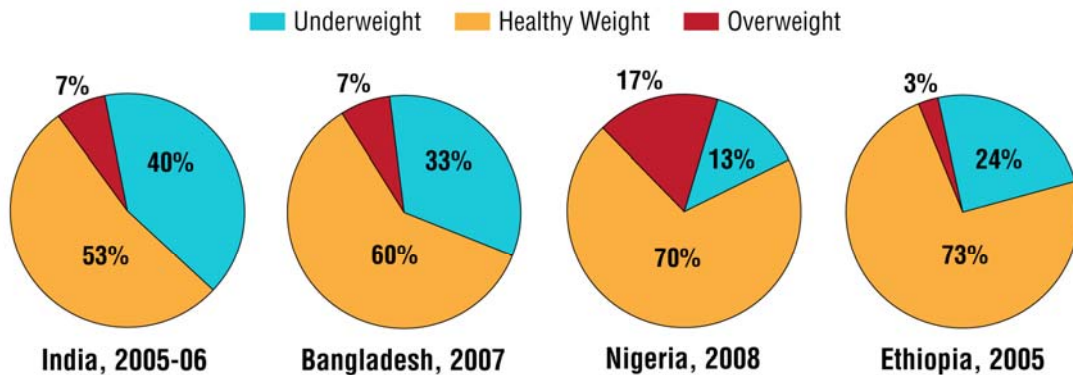
The practical consequences of gender discrimination are that girls are often valued less than boys. Girls eat less and last when a meal is served. They are less likely to receive medical attention than their brothers when sick, and adolescent girls are often kept out of school. Young girls (especially those not in

school) are often married off at young ages and begin having children before their bodies are fully developed, leading to further health problems and increasing the likelihood their children will be malnourished.



- Women who are undernourished before and during pregnancy are likely to give birth to children who are underdeveloped physically and cognitively. Countries with high rates of malnourished women also have high rates of child malnutrition (see figure page 2).
- About 11 percent of children in the developing world are born small.¹ Faced with a poor start to life, these children are more likely to grow up physically and cognitively impaired, factors that will make it more difficult for them to escape hunger and poverty later in life.
- Iron deficiency anemia, a problem easily addressed with proper nutrition, kills about 100,000 women annually.² Children without mothers are up to four times more likely to die in infancy than children with mothers.³

Women's Nutritional Status in Select Countries (Body Mass Index)



Source: USAID, Demographic and Health Survey.

- In many sub-Saharan African and south Asian countries, more than 20 percent of women are undernourished. In a handful of countries—such as India, Bangladesh, and Eritrea—the prevalence of undernourished women hovers near 40 percent.⁴
- Educated girls have higher self-esteem, are more likely to avoid HIV infection, violence, and exploitation, and to encourage good health and sanitation practices. An educated mother is far more likely to send her children to school. Although school enrollment for girls is up, girls' primary school completion rates are below 50 percent in most poor countries.⁵
- In developing countries, 195 million children under age 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition. Preventing micronutrient deficiencies in young girls, pregnant and nursing women, and children under age 2 has the greatest impact on lowering levels of chronic malnutrition.⁶

As caregivers, women are the gatekeepers of good nutrition.

- Poor households headed by women often provide more nutritious food for their children compared to male-headed households.⁷ This demonstrates the importance of female input in the household decision-making process, as well as the importance of gender-sensitive investments to improving food security and agricultural productivity.

- Research shows that women are far more likely than men to financially invest in their children's health, education, and household needs.⁸

Women are food producers but often lack access to the resources they need to farm more productively.

- Women are responsible for between 60 and 80 percent of all food crop production in developing countries.
- Despite their significant contribution to food security, investments in agriculture are seldom targeted to meet the needs of women farmers.⁹ In recent years, women working in agriculture, forestry, and fishing have received only between 7 and 9 percent of agricultural development assistance.¹⁰



- Women face systemic barriers in the labor market and at home, where defined gender roles often increase the amount of unpaid household work for women and girls. In developing countries, women earn on average 22 percent less than men.¹¹

Gender inequality, hunger, and malnutrition are intimately linked.

- Using an aggregated measure of gender inequality across economic, educational, political, and health spheres, the research institution IFPRI finds that higher levels of gender inequality correspond closely with higher rates of hunger within a country.¹²
- The strongest correlations exist between hunger and lack of education. When girls are not able to attend school, they are more likely to continue the cycle of malnutrition that plagues many countries in the developing world. About 43 percent of the global reduction in malnutrition between 1970 and 1995 can be attributed to improvements in women's educational attainment.
- Of the 759 million adults around the world who lack basic literacy skills, two-thirds are women.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Black, R., et. al. (2008). "Maternal and Child Undernutrition: Global and Regional Exposures and Health Consequences." *The Lancet*.
- ² Micronutrient Initiative (2009). *Investing in the Future: A United Call to Action on Vitamin and Mineral Deficiencies: Global Report 2009*.
- ³ Gill, K., et. al. (2007). "Women Deliver for Development." *The Lancet*.
- ⁴ op. cit. Black, R., et. al. (2008).
- ⁵ Lloyd, C.B. (2009). *New Lessons: The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls: A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls*.
- ⁶ UNICEF (2009). *Tracking Progress on Child and Maternal Nutrition*.
- ⁷ World Bank (2009). *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ FAO Focus on Women and Food Security: Women Hold the Key to Food Security. <http://www.fao.org/focus/e/women/woHm-e.htm>. Accessed March 3, 2010.
- ¹⁰ OCED (2008). *Aid in Support of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*.
- ¹¹ Bunch, S., and Mehra, R. (2008). *Women Help Solve Hunger: Why is the World still Waiting?*
- ¹² Von Grebmer, K., et. al. (2009). *2009 Global Hunger Index: The Challenge of Hunger: Focus on Financial Crisis and Gender Inequality*.