

Linking Women to Hunger-Fighting Efforts Results in Greatest Benefits

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Women throughout the developing world bear primary responsibility for the procurement and preparation of food, fuel and water for their households as well as caring for



their children's health, education and overall well-being. At the same time, the discrimination faced by women in access to education and productive resources, combined with the restrictive violence many face in their homes and communities, undermines their ability to provide adequate food and care for their children. In this way, gender discrimination itself is a fundamental cause of hunger and malnutrition, especially among children.

Mounting Evidence

Our current understanding of the importance of women's status and access to resources in combating malnutrition and disease throughout the lifecycle is based on

evidence dating to the 1990s, when researchers began documenting differential impacts of income controlled by women versus men on household consumption patterns. The data showed that higher shares of household income controlled by women are associated with higher expenditures on children and reductions in the prevalence of child malnutrition.¹

A separate study of data sets from 36 developing countries in Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa show that improvements in women's status—defined as their decision-making power relative to men in their households and communities—is significantly associated with reduced child malnutrition rates.²

Another analysis found that improvements in women's education, which is closely associated with control over income and status, was twice as powerful as increased food availability in explaining reductions in children's malnutrition rates between 1970 and 1995 in 63 countries.³

Moreover, a qualitative study in Nigeria found children's nutritional status was significantly better in female-headed households than in male-headed ones with the same or higher incomes.⁴ And a second generation of similar studies, using increasingly sophisticated analytic techniques, are confirming these findings and extending them to analyses of household health expenditures.⁵

Challenges for Policy and Program Development

Despite the mounting evidence that improving women's education, income and status helps break the hunger-malnutrition-poverty cycle, women and girls throughout the developing world continue to face discrimination and violence in their homes and communities.

Women and girls need access to education, land, credit, complementary inputs, new productive technologies, extension services and training. Increasingly, researchers, activists and development organizations across all sectors are acknowledging these needs through strong pro-active policies to increase girls' access to education, promote women's presence and voice in decision-making bodies at all levels of society, and guarantee and increase women's access to productive resources.

But to fully succeed, all community members need to be engaged in processes which help raise their awareness and understanding of how discriminatory gender norms undermine their communities' social and economic development. Case studies of 16 projects in Niger, Kenya, Zambia and Ghana suggest that raising gender awareness leads to "greater agricultural yield, improved sanitation, improved health and nutrition, and expanded primary school enrollment, especially for girls... as men move from initial resistance to active support... and divide household and farm work more equitably."⁶

Whether addressing international development concerns from the perspective of microcredit, water and sanitation, health, or agricultural production and marketing, programs which also increase gender equity within households and communities see an additional payoff in terms of reduced malnutrition. If these efforts seek to improve both gender equity and nutrition, then the payoff is even greater.

In Ghana, for example, women's micro-credit loan institutions have found they can reduce rates of sickness and malnutrition among children by providing members with ongoing nutrition education classes.⁷ Working in five sites in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, ICRW enabled women to improve their families' nutrition by providing them with extension resources, nutrition education, and opportunities to participate in active decision-making.⁸ The Agriculture-Nutrition Advantage project sought to reduce hunger in four African countries by educating key technical specialists and country leaders on the benefits of linking gender, nutrition and agriculture.⁹

The basic thrust of the approach being described is simple but powerful: by linking gender and nutrition to projects in a variety of traditionally isolated development "sectors," the payoff in development investments to reduce poverty, hunger and malnutrition is greater than would be achieved from investing in any single component alone.

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