



# **Women Help Solve Hunger.**

## **Why Is the World Still Waiting?**

Sandra Bunch and Rekha Mehra

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## Women Help Solve Hunger. Why Is the World Still Waiting?

A global food crisis has pushed agriculture to the top of the world's policy agenda, forcing governments and international bodies to rethink the ways in which the world produces and distributes food. While soaring prices and shrinking supplies are the result of multiple causes, experts are focusing on boosting agricultural productivity as a means to deal directly with food shortages, especially in the developing world where the effects of high food prices are most severe.

Glaringly missing from these debates, however, is a focus on the key role women play in producing food and growing agriculture.

Today, more than 862 million people in the world go hungry.<sup>1</sup> In developing countries, nearly 16 million children die every year from preventable and treatable causes: 60 percent of these deaths are from hunger and malnutrition.<sup>2</sup> A key failing of past efforts to reduce hunger and increase rural incomes has been the lack of attention paid to women as farmers, producers and entrepreneurs in their communities. Are we poised to make the same mistakes again?

It's not too late to integrate the lessons learned from the past four decades of international development work. To avoid the same pitfalls, we must look with fresh eyes at women's role in the agricultural economy and see women, not merely as subsistence farmers and caretakers of their own families, as often comes to mind, but also as vital actors in the agricultural economy and the expanding world of commercial agriculture.

### Women Help Solve Hunger

Women help answer the hunger problem in every way possible. They grow food, sell food, buy food, prepare food, and increasingly they are involved in agricultural businesses that help build the economies of many developing countries.

Best understood is the role women play in shoring up their families' food supply and ensuring that their families, especially children, receive proper nutrition. Researchers estimate that rural women produce half of the world's food and, in developing countries, between 60 percent and 80 percent of food crops.<sup>3</sup> Women also are more likely than men to spend their income on the well-being of their families, including more nutritious foods, school fees for children and health care.<sup>4</sup>

Donors, policy-makers and the general public increasingly recognize the picture of women at the heart of their family's food security. A July 20, 2008, Washington Post article, "In Africa, One Family's Struggle with the Global Food Crisis," typifies this traditional understanding of women's roles as food providers and caretakers, still common in many communities like Louda, Burkina Faso: "All day, Ruth Bamogo hacked at the ground with an iron hoe, trying to coax sorghum out of the hard, red dirt."<sup>5</sup> As she began the one-mile trek home, her 4-year-old son on her back, the article says, she grabbed low-hanging tree leaves so she'd have some food to bring back for her family. "'The leaves taste awful,' she said, 'but they are free' – one small advantage of living in the country side. Bamogo carried the leaves home on foot; her husband rode a bike."

Less understood and recognized, however, is the crucial role women can play in increasing overall agricultural productivity and growing agricultural businesses. In many African countries,

commercial banks that lend to women entrepreneurs to develop new agricultural products and services also significantly increase the numbers of women-owned businesses in the communities.<sup>6</sup> The Asian Development Bank has found that targeting women in such efforts has increased women's employment and income from livestock rearing and marketing.<sup>7</sup> More often than not, however, interventions that promote agricultural research, agricultural extension, land tenure rights and market access continue to leave women out of the picture.<sup>8</sup>

### **No One Farmer, No One Solution**

Part of the problem is that until recently, the international development community has failed to recognize that "women farmers" as a group are not homogenous. Donors, policy-makers and other experts have thought that simply including women in programs would be enough to make a difference. It's not. Like men, women enter and engage in the agricultural sector in varied and distinct ways.

Agriculture itself is a complex industry. On one side of the spectrum, subsistence farmers continue to eke out livings from the land, primarily growing food for their families and local markets. On the other side of the spectrum, multinational agribusinesses grow, develop and market value-added agricultural products – including horticulture and other non-food items – for local, national and global markets at some of the industry's highest profit margins.<sup>9</sup> In between these two extremes, a variety of other "farmers" – women and men – earn their livings and feed their families through various combinations of the two strategies.<sup>10</sup>

Within agriculture, women also face many complexities that differ from those faced by men. Gender norms, or the roles societies create for the two sexes, prevent women in many countries from accessing land, resources and technology. In Cameroon, for example, women hold less than 10 percent of land certificates even though they do more than 75 percent of the agricultural work.<sup>11</sup> In Burkina Faso, women have less access to extension services because as women, they have smaller plots of land and less political voice to demand these services.<sup>12</sup> Women in many communities also are tasked with time-intensive responsibilities outside of farming, such as caring for family members, retrieving water and collecting wood.<sup>13</sup> Because of such gender-related barriers, women often cannot invest in their own agricultural efforts.

An important, yet less recognized obstacle that many women farmers face is the international development community's inability to see women as economic actors in their own right, not as assistants to their husbands, brothers or other male relatives. If the global community is to increase agricultural productivity and income-generating activities in hunger-prone communities, it must be willing to adjust its vision and see women as central to both food security and agricultural economic development.

### **Women Provide a Double Dividend: Fight Hunger, Fight Poverty**

Bolstering women's role in agriculture through agricultural investments and entrepreneurial opportunities promises to reap a double dividend of both better food security and nutrition, and greater economic growth.

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Men and women are both pivotal to the well-being of their families and communities. Research shows, however, that the choices they make often differ. For example, studies show that when men have an extra \$10 to spend, they tend to reinvest it in their work or businesses or use it for leisure.<sup>14</sup> Women, on the other hand, tend to directly invest that money in their children and households. They are more likely to buy food and more nutritious food, pay for school fees and health care costs like medicine.

More than three decades of work at ICRW on women and agriculture suggests that improving women farmers' access to appropriate resources, technologies, markets and property rights will help enable them to increase agricultural productivity and ultimately improve household nutrition.<sup>15</sup>

One way to understand why investments in women have such significant payoffs for hunger and growing rural economies is to fully appreciate the crucial role women play in the health and well-being of their families and communities, and national economic growth. Consider these facts:

- A child whose mother has died is up to four times more likely to die than a child with a mother.<sup>16</sup>
- When a mother is ill, her children are more likely to be stunted from poor nutrition and receive less schooling and health care.<sup>17</sup>
- Women's education has the greatest effect on reducing child malnutrition, accounting for 43 percent of the reduction in malnutrition in the developing world from 1970-1995.<sup>18</sup>
- In India's economic transformation of the past 15 years, the World Bank finds that states with the highest percentage of women in the labor force grew the fastest and had the largest reductions in poverty.<sup>19</sup>
- The total value of women's unpaid house and farm work adds one-third to the world's gross national product (GNP).<sup>20</sup>

Despite such evidence, women still fail to be fully incorporated into and benefit from global development efforts.<sup>21</sup> In developing countries, women earn on average 22 percent less than men.<sup>22</sup> Women in Africa constitute the majority of farmers, yet they receive less than 10 percent of small farm credit and own just 1 percent of the land.<sup>23</sup> Women face more obstacles than men in labor markets, receive lower wages for the same work, dominate in the informal economy and have less access to credit, land, education and other productive resources.<sup>24</sup>

Amid these obstacles, women continue to produce the majority of food in many developing countries. They also continue to expand their roles in local agricultural and rural economies. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development, in the past decade, rural women's rate of participation in the off-farm labor market grew by 10 percent; their participation in the agricultural labor market grew by a third.<sup>25</sup> A study of 17 countries in the Americas showed that in 1999, rural poverty would have increased by more than 10 percent if rural households had not had access to women's new income gains – most from their paid agricultural labor.<sup>26</sup>

Now imagine what women could do if they had the agricultural investments they need like fertilizer, better seeds and time-saving technology as well as greater entrepreneurial opportunities through better access to credit, land and other assets. In Kenya, women with the same levels of education, experience and farm inputs as men increased their yields by 22 percent.<sup>27</sup> Studies in countries ranging from China, Ghana, Pakistan, Thailand and Vietnam have

seen clear links between secure land tenure and increased agricultural productivity.<sup>28</sup> Other experts estimate that household agricultural output in sub-Saharan Africa could increase by 10 percent to 20 percent if women used the same inputs currently allocated to men.<sup>29</sup>

### **Value Added: Putting ‘People’ Back into Agriculture**

As donors and policy-makers focus on boosting agricultural productivity to meet current food shortages, they should not lose sight of the women and men who work in various ways to put food on people’s tables. Success depends on it.

Research from ICRW, the World Bank and others finds that a better understanding of the different roles that women and men assume in various agricultural activities and businesses leads to better interventions for boosting productivity.<sup>30</sup> Referred to as “gender analysis,” such methodology allows analysts to examine the different opportunities and obstacles for women as compared to men in a given agricultural sector or industry (e.g., dairy, floriculture, fisheries). Moreover, women and men can use this information to devise new products and processes that improve competitiveness, ultimately contributing to economic growth.<sup>31</sup>

Increasingly, researchers are applying gender analysis to the agriculture value chain to better understand how it works – or doesn’t – for women. The benefit here is that analysts learn who does what along a particular agriculture sector chain as well as the inevitable effects of one part of the value chain on another. As producers, women can see where in the chain they work and how their products and labor impact the chain locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. In this way, women can begin to understand and visualize the workings of their particular agricultural industry and where they might leverage their comparative advantage or adopt a value-added activity like food processing to earn more money.<sup>32</sup>

Researchers and policy-makers also can use the analysis to identify points along the value chain where women are involved and where development interventions can be most effective in transforming and strengthening women’s roles and contributions.

World Bank reviews along this line show that by increasing farmers’ access to various agricultural inputs and services, agricultural productivity rises, benefiting the wider economy, “especially if women as well as men are assured better access to commercial farming based on a strong market and profit orientation.”<sup>33</sup> On the point of addressing food insecurity, the World Bank states: “It is critical not to associate women’s farming exclusively with subsistence and a food security agenda but to promote their opportunities for commercial farming.”<sup>34</sup>

Consider the Kuapa Kokoo cooperative in Ghana.<sup>35</sup> The farmers’ cooperative underwent a gender analysis of its operations in 1996 to identify opportunities and constraints in their cocoa business. The analysis found the following:

- 26 percent of Kuapa Kokoo members were women.
- Women had relatively small farms and were earning low incomes as compared to men.
- Men controlled most of the farms.

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- Farmers received an irregular income due to the seasonality of the cocoa crop.
- Women’s economic situation worsened if their husbands were not in the cooperative.
- Rural women were capable of generating income, but they needed funds to expand their work.

As a result, the cooperative devised the Kuapa Gender program in 1998 to stimulate economic activities and increase incomes, focusing on breaking the poverty cycle for many women. The program also sought to encourage savings, generate employment for vulnerable people and demonstrate that women could use and repay loans. A microcredit plan was put into place and, as of 2008, nearly 550 women had benefited from the loans with a repayment rate of 93 percent. Women also expanded into better-paying agricultural activities such as soap production, processing palm and palm kernel oil, extracting caustic potash from cocoa pod husk, baking and selling bread, producing cosmetics, selling batiks and growing crops beyond cocoa.

On one hand, women have benefited from these improvements in credit and diversification of agricultural products. On the other hand, women may not have benefited as fully as they could have. Though the analysis examined opportunities and obstacles for women in the cooperative operations, it did not focus on the agricultural value chain for cocoa. This may explain in part why more women were not brought into the cooperative’s key cocoa business. Today, the cooperative supplies fair-trade chocolate to markets in Europe and the United States that between 1993 and 2001 resulted in sales of \$1 million. Imagine what more might have been possible if women’s ideas and work had been part of those efforts.<sup>36</sup>

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### **Moving Forward**

Dealing with today’s hunger crisis requires the world community to learn from lessons past as well as look toward the future. Women continue to play key roles in producing food and securing their families’ nutrition. First and foremost, however, the international development community must move beyond its notion of women as farmers who grow primarily local food crops for their own families and see women as economic agents in agriculture – as farmers and wage-workers who grow both food and economies.

As in the past, women continue to need agricultural investments, such as connections to agricultural research and extension, improved rural infrastructure, time-saving technologies, and access to inputs such as fertilizer and seeds. But women today also need the ability to act on economic opportunities, which they gain through access to credit, land and assets, markets, and more and better information.

Also, more research is needed to better understand how new developments in agricultural technologies and changes in the broader agricultural economy are affecting women, and how best to design programs to support women’s infrastructure and resource needs to increase agricultural productivity and grow stronger rural economies.

Today's economic and hunger crisis demands that we do development better. We know that women help solve hunger. We also know that investments in women and agriculture pay double dividends in reducing hunger and increasing economic growth. With 862 million people hungry in the world today, and numbers rising, the question is, Why are we still waiting?

## Endnotes

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- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>11</sup> *Property Ownership for Women Enriches, Empowers and Protects*. 2005. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Washington, D.C.; Mason, K. and H. Carlsson. 2004. "The impact of gender equality in land rights and development." Paper presented at the Human Rights and Development: Towards mutual reinforcement conference hosted by the New York University School of Law. March 1. New York.
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- <sup>18</sup> Smith, Lisa C. and Lawrence Haddad. "Explaining Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries:



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<sup>19</sup> Besley, Timothy; Robin Burgess and Berta Esteve-Volart. 2005. "Operationalising Pro-Poor Growth: India Case Study," Washington, D.C.

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<sup>24</sup> Mehra, R. and S. Gammage. 1999. "Trends, Countertrends and Gaps in Women's Employment." *World Development* 27(3): 533-50.

<sup>25</sup> Bage, Lennart. 2004. Statement as president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) at the World Agricultural Forum Regional Congress. May 17. St. Louis, Missouri.

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<sup>27</sup> "Women: Still the Key to Food and Nutrition Security." 2005. IFPRI. Washington, D.C.

<sup>28</sup> ICRW 2005; Mason, K. and H. Carlsson. 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> World Bank 2007; Buvinic, Mayra and Rekha Mehra. 1990; Paolisso, Michael, Shibesh Regmi and Chandra. 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Dunn, Elizabeth et al. 2006. *Lessons Learned on MSE Upgrading in Value Chains*. USAID, Washington, D.C.

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<sup>33</sup> World Bank 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.kuapakokoogh.com/pages/page.php?contentid=7>

<sup>36</sup> The cooperative invested some of the \$1 million from its cocoa sales to community development projects such as the construction of 174 potable water hand-dug wells and four schools.



The mission of the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is to empower women, advance gender equality and fight poverty in the developing world. To accomplish this, ICRW works with partners to conduct empirical research, build capacity and advocate for evidence-based practical ways to change policies and programs.

Founded in 1976, ICRW is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., with an Asia regional office based in New Delhi, India and project offices in Andhra Pradesh and Mumbai, India and Kampala, Uganda. ICRW is supported by grants, contracts and contributions from international and national development agencies, foundations, corporations and individuals.

International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)  
1120 20th Street, N.W.  
Suite 500 North  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Tel. 202-797-0007  
Fax. 202-797-0020  
E-mail. [info@icrw.org](mailto:info@icrw.org)  
[www.icrw.org](http://www.icrw.org)

Asia Regional Office  
C – 139 Defence Colony  
New Delhi – 110024  
India  
Tel. 91-11-2465-4216  
Fax. 91-11-2463-5142  
E-mail. [info.india@icrw.org](mailto:info.india@icrw.org)  
[www.icrw.org/asia](http://www.icrw.org/asia)