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# AFRICA

## Increasing the Effective Participation of Women in Food and Nutrition Security in Africa

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**T**he image of the African woman hoeing a plot of maize in poor, sandy soil, a baby on her back, captures women's important roles as producers of food, managers of natural resources, income earners, and caretakers of the household's food and nutrition security. Although women's roles vary owing to the diversity of Africa's cultures, religions, and ethnic traditions, women play a paramount role in family food security in all cultures. However, women are disadvantaged in many respects—in education, access to land and other resources, and access to public services.



**C**ustomary and legal institutions in many countries discriminate against women in terms of basic human rights. Despite growing evidence showing that increasing resources in women's hands leads to gains in agricultural productivity and nutritional status, many gender gaps remain. Worldwide, the gender gap has closed faster in education than in asset ownership, but both gaps are closing more slowly in Sub-Saharan Africa than they are in the rest of the world. Asset gaps are potentially more important for food and nutrition security in Africa than elsewhere because of women's key role in food production. Health care issues are also vital for women, who must care for the sick as well as themselves. In this context, the HIV/AIDS epidemic threatens not only to decrease food production but also to increase women's time burdens. Addressing all these concerns requires policies and resources to meet women's needs, as well as involving women themselves in the implementation of these policies.

**What can be done to increase the effective participation of women in food and nutrition security in Africa? This brief advocates a two-pronged approach. First, eradicate discrimination against women, and second, promote catch-up by implementing more active measures in key areas such as control over land, water, and other assets, and investment in education, health, child care, and other services for women. Since the set of actions that are most appropriate in a given situation will be context specific, we present examples of approaches that have worked in Sub-Saharan Africa.**

## ERADICATING DISCRIMINATION

**P**olicy reform to eradicate gender discrimination aims to create a level playing field for women and men. Strengthening women's political voice is vital to any fundamental shift that increases women's effective participation. Women's human rights—political, civil, economic, social, and cultural—need to be respected, protected, and realized. The strengthening of democratic institutions via legislation, the rewriting of constitutions so that they explicitly disavow discrimination, and the reform and enforcement of an antidiscriminatory rule of law are important steps. In Uganda, for example, the national constitution encourages participation by requiring that at least one-third of officeholders in all elective positions be women. The new South African constitution explicitly guarantees freedom from discrimination on the basis of, among other things, race, gender, and disability. While such declarations do not automatically translate into changes on the ground, they provide an important signal of the government's commitment, to which women can appeal for stronger rights.

Eliminating gender discrimination in ownership of and access to economically productive assets is also critical. For example, the ability to inherit land, to join a credit and savings club, to join a water users group, to access extension advice, to start up a small enterprise, and to survive in the event of a family breakdown must be equal for women and for men. Customary laws in many countries treat women as minors, thereby restricting their rights to such assets and opportunities. In Lesotho and Swaziland, women are considered legal minors: they cannot own property, enter into contracts, or receive bank loans without a male relative. Rwanda's Matrimonial Regimes, Liberties, and Succession Act, in contrast, passed in 2000, allows women to own property.

Social protection programs that reduce risk and mitigate the impact of shocks are often biased toward males. Retirement benefits, for example, are usually lower for women. Family allowances give benefits to employed men with dependent wives but not to employed women with dependent children. An important exception is South Africa's noncontributory means-tested pension system for the elderly. Pensions received by women have been shown to improve the

health and nutrition of children, especially girls, whereas pensions received by men do not show the same results.

Gender-based legal reform cannot be instituted without sensitivity to tradition. Customs do not change overnight, especially in countries with ancient cultures. Education and social marketing can play a role, but until majority values change, successful legal reform will have to build on positive traditional values. The Ethiopian constitution found a striking way of addressing the conflict between conservative customary laws and the progressive, egalitarian provisions of the 1960 Civil Code. First, after prolonged debate, it was decided that the constitution would revoke the abolition of personal laws (customary and religious). Disputants can participate in the decision regarding the application of laws concerning personal matters. If any party to a dispute does not wish to apply personal laws, she or he may opt for the application of the Civil Code provisions. Personal law arbitrators and courts, who formerly espoused the application of outdated customary law provisions, are rethinking their stand out of fear that women disputants may prefer to transfer the decision to the civil courts, thereby weakening the customary bodies.

To achieve nutrition security, men and women, girls and boys should have equal access to a given quantity and quality of public services. This includes equal access to schools of good quality, reproductive health facilities and information, agricultural advice and agricultural extension, and preventive measures related to HIV/AIDS, such as condoms and education. Effective programs often need to go beyond equal access and take into account women's relationships with men. For example, health care practitioners are realizing the need to meaningfully involve men in reproductive health and HIV/AIDS prevention programs that have traditionally been targeted to women.

In the area of food security, women should be free to grow the kinds of crops on their plots of land that they think are important for the food security and nutrition status of their family. This step may involve revising formal rules of access and including more women in the design and implementation of outreach programs, as well as in actually delivering the public services.

## PROMOTING CATCH-UP THROUGH ACTIVE MEASURES

The active promotion of catch-up in women's status is a more controversial proposition, even if the consequent increase in the overall pool of resources more than compensates for males' reduced share.

A first step is to raise the profile of gender issues. One method of doing this is to track the different implications of public budgetary allocations for men and women. Launched in the mid-1990s, the Women's Budget Initiative in South Africa is a collaboration between the parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Finance and several South African nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It tracks budget allocations to education, services, public sector employment, child care, and employment benefits—which have different implications for men and women. This information raises consciousness and develops an empirical base for further advocacy.

In addition, actual policies can be redesigned so that they target females in the areas where the gaps are most extreme. Here we give examples of successful attempts in Africa to close gaps in the areas of land, water, livestock, education and child care, technology, networks (social capital), and health and nutrition.

### **Land**

Although women have primary responsibility for family food production and provide the majority of agricultural labor in much of Africa, their rights to land are restricted. In most cases, women acquire only use rights to land through marriage. The loss of land in cases of divorce or widowhood is a major source of insecurity, particularly with increases in HIV/AIDS. To redress this problem, South Africa's land reform specifically targets women to receive land, but the incomplete implementation of the land reform and its more recent emphasis on black commercial farms have limited the number of women who have benefited. In Ghana women's inheritance rights were strengthened by the passing of the Intestate Succession Law (ISL) in 1985, which allows children and wives to gain access to land that they were previously denied under customary law. Tanzania's Land Act and Uganda's Land Law require the consent of both spouses for transactions involving family land. Legislation alone will not make a difference, however, if women cannot access the bodies that

implement the laws. Hence Tanzania and Uganda also require land management and adjudication bodies at all levels to have female representation, but these bodies again require resources to be effective, and governments may not have the necessary resources at the local level.

### **Water**

Women and men both need water for domestic uses and production, but their needs and priorities often differ. Women and girls bear the greatest burden when adequate clean domestic water supplies and sanitation are not available, because they have primary responsibility for supplying household water needs and for caring for family members who become ill due to inadequate water supply and sanitation. Women also need water for productive purposes such as agriculture, livestock, and enterprises. Even relatively small amounts of water can make a major difference. South Africa's Water Act of 1998 is exemplary in giving priority to meeting basic domestic needs in water allocation, redressing past racial and gender discrimination in access to water, and including women in Catchment Management Agencies that will implement the law.

### **Livestock**

Livestock are an important asset for women, providing them a way to accumulate wealth more easily than by acquiring land. To maintain and expand the benefits that the growing livestock sector can bring to resource-poor women, new policies and practices must protect women's ownership and use rights, favor small-scale operations, and provide strong training programs in the production, processing, and marketing of animals.

Women benefit most from the animals they manage, even without legal ownership rights, as long as they control the decision-making. Some livestock schemes allocate animals only to women, assuming that they will make decisions independently and will improve their bargaining position by bringing wealth into the household. This strategy can backfire. As with any intervention that attempts to redistribute assets to women, appropriation or domestic violence may occur when men's interests are not considered. In Kenya some women's groups maintain legal ownership of animals distributed to individual households, so that the group may remove them from homes where a

husband treats his wife badly. This legal threat of removal can help decrease violence and divorce.

### **Education and Child Care**

Reducing schooling costs, especially for girls, and increasing physical access to services, improving the design of service delivery, and investing in time-saving infrastructure are policies that have shown the most promise to close gender gaps in education. In Mozambique, where decades of civil war have devastated the country's physical infrastructure, building sturdy school buildings has been an effective way of increasing girls' enrollment. Raising the literacy of adult household members (heads or adult females) also increases girls' enrollment substantially. The latter implies a potentially important role for adult education or literacy campaigns in rural areas.

Improving service delivery also means improving the quality, gender balance, and attitudes of teachers. In Kenya studies based on household survey data show that the attitudes and quality of teachers affect the demand for girls' schooling more than that for boys' schooling. For example, whether teachers think math is important for girls and whether boys and girls receive (and perceive) equal treatment in the classrooms significantly affects girls' (but not boys') propensity to stay in school. Parents' attitudes have a similar effect. Changing attitudes among parents, teachers, and principals will require long-term efforts. To this end, training staff and reviewing and revising school curricula can all play important roles in ensuring that gender stereotypes are not perpetuated in the classroom.

Investments that reduce the cost of schooling (such as reducing the distance to schools) or increase







the benefits to families of sending girls to school (such as school meals, food for education, or school health programs) can help increase female enrollment rates. Similarly, increasing access to local health care facilities reduces the time women and girls need to spend on in-home care for sick family members. Equally important are investments in basic water and energy infrastructure. In most settings, collecting water and fuelwood is largely the responsibility of women and girls. In Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia, women account for two-thirds of household time devoted to water and fuel collection, with children—mostly girls—providing an additional 5 to 28 percent of household time devoted to these tasks. Investments in time-saving infrastructure benefit all household members, and girls in particular.

Low-cost child care can help both mothers and daughters. In Kenya a 10 percent reduction in the price of out-of-home child care increased the demand for such care and increased mothers' participation in the labor force. Low-cost child care can also increase girls' school attendance: in rural and urban Kenya a 10 percent decrease in the price of out-of-home care would be expected, as shown in a recent World Bank study, to result in a 5.1 percent increase in the enrollment rates of 8- to 16-year-old girls (after controlling for other factors) and have no effect on those of boys.

### **Technology**

Time is a scarce resource for African women farmers, and technology can help reduce their time burdens. For example, scientists at the West Africa Rice Development Association have used biotechnology to develop a rice variety that has high yields, drought resistance, and broad leaves, thus substantially reducing weeding by women and children. The new cassava-processing

methods developed by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture have reduced women's workloads and provided opportunities for commercialization. It is important to involve women in developing and selecting technologies because women often grow different crops or value different crop traits than do male farmers.

### **Networks**

Women have always drawn upon personal and family networks for survival. Group-based programs for microfinance, livestock development, tree nurseries, and other activities build upon such networks. These programs not only offer efficient ways of reaching women, but also strengthen women's social capital, enabling them to undertake other activities. Women's networks have even grown into effective advocacy groups to secure women's rights. In postwar Rwanda, women's groups from the grassroots to the national level played a key role in rebuilding the country. They helped women access critical support services such as health and shelter, assets such as land and livestock, and training, and helped them participate in political processes, including national reconciliation.

In many countries, governments are increasingly transferring responsibility for natural resource management, agricultural extension, health care, and other services to local organizations. When this happens, particular attention must be given to ensure that all women can participate effectively, so that their needs are met. Women are not a homogeneous group, and organizations may be dominated by elite women who may not always represent the interests of poorer women. Involving more women may require special outreach and training for poorer and less educated women, and those who are hesitant to speak in front of men for cultural reasons.

### **Health and Nutrition**

Women's health and nutritional status is important for both the quality of their lives and the survival and healthy development of their children. Because women's health and nutrition is a life cycle issue, interventions must attend to female malnutrition from adolescence through pregnancy and lactation, continuing with promotion of children's growth during infancy, preschool, school age, and adolescence. Direct actions to improve women's health and nutrition complement the struggle to achieve the long-term goals of gender equity and women's empowerment.

One area of concern in health and nutrition security

is the prevalence of inappropriate caring practices, which may adversely affect children's proper growth and development. Africa's percentage of infants who are exclusively breast-fed in the first four months of life, at 31 percent, is the lowest among the developing-country regions, and rates of vaccination and seeking health care for child illnesses are also quite low. Further, recent research shows that when women experience increases in their power relative to men, they choose to reduce the amount of time they breast-feed their children. In developing countries, where water supplies may be unsafe, breast-feeding offers more protection against infection, as infant formula is often used improperly. In the African context, however, the benefits of breast-feeding need to be weighed against the possible risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS.

In Africa HIV/AIDS is a major current issue for women's health and survival. Biologically and socioculturally, women are more at risk of HIV infection than men and are less likely to seek treatment. HIV/AIDS also exacerbates social, economic, and cultural inequalities that define women's status in society (such as inheritance practices). Experience from Kenya and Zambia shows that programs to reduce mother-to-child HIV transmission enable women to make informed choices regarding contraception and infant feeding. And reproductive health programs targeted to adolescent girls aim to prevent risky sexual behavior in the first place. But it is not enough to target women in isolation from men and from society in general. In the 1980s the Ugandan government, along with religious organizations and NGOs, launched programs to destigmatize people with AIDS and educate the public about how to avoid

infection. Most programs promoted abstinence for adolescents, monogamy for adults, and safe sex for all sexually active people. Senegal also appears to have stanching the epidemic through public health programs.

## CONCLUSION

**I**ncreasing resources in women's hands can make a powerful contribution to food and nutrition security in Africa, but more is required than just enlightened policies passed on behalf of women. Women themselves should be involved in deciding on the solutions in partnership with men. Moreover, it is not enough to have a few "pro-women" policies; governments and society need to make a concerted effort to value women's issues so that genuine change takes place. Finally, even good policies must have effective implementation, which requires giving priority to women's needs in allocating scarce financial and human resources.

**For further reading:** A.R. Quisumbing, ed., *Household Decisions, Gender, and Development: A Synthesis of Recent Research* (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2004); A.R. Quisumbing and R.S. Meinzen-Dick, eds., *Empowering Women to Achieve Food Security, 2020 Focus 6* (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2001); L.C. Smith, U. Ramakrishnan, A. Ndiaye, L. Haddad, and R. Martorell, *The Importance of Women's Status for Child Nutrition in Developing Countries*, Research Report 131 (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2003).

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