Gender and Food & Nutrition Security

Background

Almost 870 million people are suffering from hunger worldwide. In many parts of the world, more women are affected by hunger than men, particularly following natural disasters. Women are often economically and socially disadvantaged: many household and community decisions are still made by men, frequently to the detriment of women.

Female workers play an important role in agriculture and thus in food production. They average 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, ranging from about 20% in Latin America to almost 50% in Eastern and South-eastern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (FAO 2012). Male out-migration in search of work is increasing numbers of female farm managers. But while the number of women in agriculture is on the rise, they still face many disadvantages. Women often have limited or no access to land. Males are favoured, both in quantity and quality, in land allocation, with women only gaining access to land through a male relative or after the husband’s death. Moreover, women’s access to financial services is limited, and they face inequities regarding access to livestock, inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, technology, market information, knowledge, skills and advisory services. Female illiteracy further aggravates the situation (FAO 2011). It is estimated that yields on their farms could increase by 20–30%, and thus reduce the number of people facing hunger worldwide up to 17%, if women had the equitable access to productive resources (FAO 2011). Improving women’s agricultural production is therefore smart economics.

Alongside food production and processing, women are also responsible to feed their families. If self-produced food is low in volume or diversity, women must find the financial means to buy market food. Yet many women in developing countries lack control over the household income, as well as income generation possibilities. Some women do not even receive their own generated income, as per cultural norms it is paid to their husbands. In turn, men are less likely to spend money for the benefit of the entire household, and prefer non-food items. There is a clear need to create awareness among men regarding the benefits of an adequate diet for the whole family. An increase in women’s control over household income usually has a positive impact on dietary diversity, thus benefiting children’s health, nutrition and education, and consequently food and nutrition security. Women also tend to save more of generated income, and thus improve the household’s food security in times of natural disasters, such as drought. Intra-household food allocation can be another limiting factor: even though a household may have enough food, girls and women may still suffer from malnutrition.

The multiple roles of women are challenging in terms of time allocation. Agricultural activities increase women’s workload and thus decrease the time left to care for their children. As a consequence, many children drop out of school in order to look after their younger siblings. Climate change and the progressive degradation of natural resources also increase the burden of women while further threatening food security. When extra household tasks are too great, e.g. caring for sick relatives, women do not have enough time for food production or income generation. This is particularly evident in societies affected by HIV/AIDS.

Women are key to breaking the vicious circle of generational malnutrition. Children born to malnourished mothers often are underweight and face a 20% increased risk of dying before the
age of five (UNICEF 2007). The health and nutrition of mothers directly influence the well-being of their children. The “window of opportunity”, i.e. the period from the start of a woman’s pregnancy until the second birthday of the child, is crucial. An insufficient supply of nutrients during a child’s first 1000 days can bring about lifelong repercussions, such as chronic health problems, cognitive and physical deficits, or impaired immune functions. However, women’s ability to give birth to well-nourished babies and to adequately feed and care for their children is often undermined by their own poor nutritional status, low education, and low social status. Also, many women lack access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Steps to Action and Best Practices

Promoting gender equality has been a fundamental principle of German development policy for many years. The following steps to action and best practices from concerned projects - implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) - have been proven as successful approaches and helpful starting points to increase the food and nutrition security of households.

Policy advice

- Carry out, at all levels, policy dialogue and advice regarding gender-specific issues contributing to increased food security. Relevant topics include reform processes, land rights, finance, and equal voice opportunity for women in professional and rural organizations. The participation of female household heads and married women in local councils is of particular importance.
- Support gender-mainstreaming approaches, as well as better coordination between sectors such as agriculture, health and education, at national and regional level.

Access to and control over resources

- Support equal access to land, in both quality and quantity. The distribution of land titles and certificates should be gender equitable. This also applies to other natural resources required for food production, such as equal access to irrigation water and pasture land. Women’s participation in community institutions also needs to be increased.
- Support equal access to capital. Women and other under-privileged groups should have access to income, credits and financial advisory services. Their rights regarding (re-)investments and control over income need to be strengthened.

Sustainable land management, Ethiopia

In the Ethiopian highlands of Amhara, Oromia and Tigray more than 50 % of the population – approximately 20 million people – live under the constantly rising threat of food insecurity. On behalf of BMZ, GIZ works to strengthen the competences, resources and capacity development of the Ministry of Agriculture, its decentralized structures and of small-scale farmers, both male and female. Approaches further develop and apply national gender-mainstreaming strategies relating directly to rural development, in cooperation with local agricultural authorities. Small-scale farm households - one fifth of them female headed - receive advice and support regarding sustainable land management.

To date, 77,000 hectares of land have been rehabilitated and a further 79,000 hectares of forest are being maintained by participatory forest management principles. Innovative and locally adapted cultivation techniques and erosion control contribute to increased crop and livestock productivity for both male and female farmers, and increase the resilience of rural households to the effects of climate change. Women in particular benefit from the project, gaining better access to advisory services, information and skills.

Female and gender-sensitive male advisors are key. The Ministry of Agriculture supports the access of women to innovative techniques and promotes their participation in watershed user groups. Due to cultural norms and traditions, women are often marginalised from community organisations and cannot advocate for their interests. The National Women’s Office supports the establishment of women’s groups and the representation of women at community level. Women’s groups serve as dialogue platforms for their development priorities, which include the promotion of animal husbandry or fruit/vegetable production, with surplus creating additional income.

Particularly innovative is the linkage of sustainable land management methods with HIV/AIDS-education and family planning, which further reduces the pressure on natural resources and increases food security.
Support equal access to agricultural inputs and advisory services for livestock and crop production. Advisory guidance should accompany agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, pesticides and veterinary medicine in order to achieve good results and increase food production. Advisory services need to take into account financial and intellectual capacity, as well as time availability of clients, and focus on both men and women and their specific demands and tasks. It has proven successful to initially start with gender-separated trainings, facilitating more open discussions.

Capacity Development

- Apply participatory methods in all phases of project planning and implementation.
- Sensitise partner institutions and project personnel regarding gender-specific operating principles, together with recruitment, training and promotion of local female specialists in long-term and short-term positions in GIZ projects.
- Support women’s presence in advisory services, as well as gender-sensitive training, thus strengthening and cross-linking different institutions and stakeholders regarding gender issues.

Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

- Promote the systematic integration of gender-disaggregated data in monitoring and evaluation systems. Project activities should aim to benefit men and women equally.

Stumbling Steps and Lessons Learnt

- Measures of sustainable land management must systematically address gender inequalities in access to and control over resources, and specifically promote women. Gender must be considered during all project phases and in policy dialogues with partner governments. Gender mainstreaming is a quality criterion which positively impacts all aspects of a project. Points of reference are the Millennium Development Goals, international gender policy guidelines, and international agreements on women’s rights and gender justice.
- Development projects can support the development of national gender strategies and action plans, but agricultural and government authorities are responsible for implementation. Gender competence is strengthened through targeted advice and tailor-made gender training on national, provincial and district levels.
- Men in leadership positions, as all employees, should take part in gender trainings. As women’s offices often have limited resources, support from government service providers is essential. A concrete definition of gender across sectors facilitates institutional awareness.

Best Practice

Restoration of local economic cycles and conflict transformation, Fizi region, DR Congo

Armed conflicts between economic competitors, ethnic groups and rival militias have profoundly destabilised the Fizi region in DR Congo. Hundreds of thousands of people have been internally displaced.

A project supported by German development cooperation aims to restore local economic cycles and basic services while creating sustainable conditions for securing livelihoods and food. A special focus lies on women, as they bear the main burden of work in the home and in the fields. They are also frequently the victims of sexual violence, particularly at risk when working in the remote fields. The project promotes women’s organisational and management skills in civil society groups to strengthen their role and self-confidence within their families and local decision-making structures. The male village population and local authorities are also being sensitised to improving the division of labour within the family, thus giving women better protection and opportunity to earn their own income. Local services have been reactivated and advise farming families on modern cultivation. Excess field produce can be sold at local markets, providing the women and families with additional income. Simple hand-built earth roads now link previously isolated mountain areas with the markets on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Village committees, supported or newly founded by the project, arbitrate in cases of conflict (usually over land rights) or pass on more difficult cases to the judiciary. Together with traditional authorities and in cooperation with judges and lawyers, traditional law is being revised and aligned with national law.

- Gender approaches for food and nutrition security can be usefully linked with health programs, reproductive and family planning services, and HIV/AIDS prevention. Coordination and capacity development of the multi-sectoral stakeholders should be applied at all levels.
- The participation of women in decision-making bodies contributes to sustainable development. Local committees are ideally composed of men and women of different status and position within households, when culturally feasible. Household and family tasks of women should be considered when scheduling meetings.
Female small scale farmers are not a homogeneous group. Differences in marital status, age, ethnicity, social status, etc. need to be continually considered.

Providing women with better cultivation techniques and agricultural inputs is not enough. Additional focus on marketing support, training in nutrition, and the organisation and mobilisation of women in producer groups for better input supply, marketing, saving and investment have all proven to sustainably increase food and nutrition security of households, even in times of conflict or following a natural disaster.

An increase of production and income for women promotes their social status in household and society, reduces domestic gender-based violence, and improves the food security, nutrition and hygiene of the family. Increased food production also leads to more bartering and sharing of food between affected households.

Male gender awareness is required to slowly change gender roles and decrease women’s workloads by a sharing of domestic duties.

Access to safe drinking water is essential. It reduces women’s workload, improves the health of the family, and overall increases food security.

Questions to be answered in gender studies

1. To what extent do women have access to land, capital, equipment, inputs, advisory services and formal education?
2. How do sociocultural and behavioral norms affect women’s decisive power and role within the household and thereby compromise their ability to secure adequate nutrition for the whole family?
3. How do policies and programs work together and coordinate across sectors, e.g. include women’s access to reproductive health services, family planning and nutrition education? How do projects create awareness among male household heads?
4. To what extent are women organised and mobilised, e.g. in producer groups or saving groups? To what extent do they have access to and participate in local decision-making bodies?

References