

Towards Gender-Just Food and Nutrition Security

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Women harvesting rice in Guinea Bissau. © Photographer: JB Russell/Panos Pictures

1 Why is it vital to put gender justice at the heart of food and nutrition security policy?

There is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone, but over 805 million people are affected by hunger and malnutrition, a figure which is ‘unacceptably high’ (FAO 2014: 4). Food and nutrition insecurity is a political and economic phenomenon fuelled by inequitable global and national processes. It is also an environmental issue, with increasingly unsustainable food production methods resulting in pollution, erosion of natural resources and climate change.

Most notably, food and nutrition insecurity is a gender-justice issue. As a direct result of gender inequality over 60 per cent of the hungry are women and girls. They are also most disadvantaged by the inequitable

processes that govern food systems at local, national and international levels. Yet too often gender is not integral to the way food and nutrition insecurity is framed, or to the development of solutions.

This Policy Brief draws on recent evidence to explore the unequal gender power relations which create and perpetuate experiences of food and nutrition insecurity. It examines current policy directions on hunger and malnutrition through a critical gender lens. It goes on to consider how gender-just solutions to food and nutrition insecurity can be created that promote gender equality and women’s empowerment, and alleviate hunger and malnutrition for all.

¹ This Policy Brief draws on the BRIDGE *Cutting Edge Pack* on Gender and Food Security (2014), which was produced as a result of a collaborative process involving an international working group and global community of practice. More details of the process can be found in the BRIDGE report: www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/ids-document/A69889?lang=en (accessed 30 March 2016).

2 Mapping gender inequality and food insecurity

The role of women and girls as producers of food is invisible and undermined

Women – and often girls – are vital contributors to food security yet ironically much of their work is ‘invisible’ and unrecognised. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that women comprise around 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries. The percentage is as high as, or even higher than, 80 per cent in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa (FAO 2011).

Women are heavily involved in all aspects of agricultural production, processing and distribution. They are largely responsible for production that benefits local consumption, including subsistence crops such as vegetables, while men tend to be more involved in producing cash crops. Girls also make important contributions to agricultural production and food availability. They are often integrally involved in work on farms and in households, with their workload increasing as they grow older (Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2011).

Many women find it hard to sustain the work they do, or to move beyond the domestic realm of production for several reasons. First, they lack access to productive resources, perhaps the most significant being land. Across the developing world women are less likely to

own or operate land; when they do, the land they can access is often of poorer quality and in smaller plots. For example, in Kenya, men’s landholdings are on average three times larger, and in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Pakistan they are twice the size of women’s (FAO 2011; also see Razavi 2007). Even when women’s right to own land is recognised in formal law, this is often contradicted by customary laws at the local level.

Women farmers’ opportunities to build their capacity are also limited. Only five per cent of women farmers spanning 97 countries have access to agricultural and other training activities, and only 15 per cent of agricultural extension agents are women (FAO 2013).

In situations where they have access to land and knowledge, women’s ability to move beyond subsistence production is further constrained by their exclusion from higher-value markets because they often lack the capital, information and market linkages needed to move from small-scale retail (IAASTD 2009; Kabeer 2012; FAO 2009).

There is enormous pressure on women to safeguard family food security and act as shock absorbers

There is growing recognition of the vital unpaid care role women play in ensuring their families receive nutritious meals. However, evidence shows that in the face of rising prices, increasing food scarcity and climate change they become shock absorbers of household food security, reducing their own intake of nutritious food in favour of their families and also expending more energy to secure food and search for water and wood for cooking (Quisumbing *et al.* 2008; O Campos and Garner 2012; Hossain and Green 2011).

It is therefore vital that food and nutrition security programmes do not add to women’s existing burden by relying on them to cushion the impacts of these external shocks.

Cultural norms affect household distribution of food

Even when food is available or affordable, accepted and unquestioned gendered cultural practices can affect the way it is distributed within households. For example, in parts of India there is ‘often an unspoken rule, reinforced through cultural and religious norms, that the male breadwinner eats first while women and girls eat last, and often least’ (Neogy 2012: 4).



A girl eating sugarbark, a honey produced by native bees in the Northern Territory, Australia. ©Photographer: Penny Tweedie/Panos Pictures



A young woman takes a short break from her work in the vineyards in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. © Photographer: Andrew McConnell/Panos Pictures

Gender-based violence (GBV) and food insecurity are linked

There is an undeniable correlation between food insecurity and GBV. Domestic violence affects thousands of women and girls all over the world. It can affect women's ability to produce and sell food, or even to access inputs essential for food productivity (FIAN International 2013).

Food scarcity itself can lead to violence against women. For example, insufficient food in the

home creates tensions and can lead to physical or psychological violence and discrimination by men towards women, or by older women towards their daughters-in-law. In support of this, there is evidence that the global food price crisis that erupted in 2008 has seriously undercut the capacity of men to provide for their families, leading to arguments in the household and fuelling alcohol abuse and domestic violence (Hossain and Green 2011).

More and better research is needed to more clearly understand and address these linkages.

3 Key gender gaps in food and nutrition security policy

Hunger and malnutrition are not being framed as social/gender-justice and rights issues

The global food crisis sparked a number of high-level strategic processes and discussions that increased the visibility of hunger and malnutrition as critical issues.

However, too often the problem is being framed in a partial, a-political, decontextualised way that does not put people at the centre, or consider the complex social dynamics and gendered inequalities that affect access to food and the ways it is distributed. The focus of

many discussions, frameworks and reports is primarily how to improve technical processes and investment for increasing **availability** of food, by boosting trade and agriculture. Yet fundamental questions are not being asked about the sustainability of existing food systems and about who they exclude.

Because of the partial way in which the problem is being framed, the solutions being proposed are inadequate. Most notably, there have been global calls for a '**twin-track**' approach that focuses on '**medium/long-term** actions to build resilience and address the root causes of hunger' and '**direct action** to immediately tackle hunger and malnutrition for the most vulnerable' (CFS 2013: 15).



A woman cultivates betel leaf in Bangladesh. ©Photographer: G.M.B. Akash/Panos Pictures

Twin-track approach: medium/long-term agricultural development

The long-term solution to food insecurity is focused on increasing agricultural productivity for sub-Saharan Africa and other countries affected most by hunger. For example, the *World Development Report 2008* states that '[a]griculture has special powers in reducing poverty' (World Bank 2007: 6 (overview); also see Scoones and Thompson 2011). Increasing the productive assets of small-scale farmers is seen as particularly important, enabling them to grow food for household consumption and contribute to food markets.

These calls have led to significant and much needed investment in agriculture. For example, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) urges African countries to devote at least 10 per cent of their national budget to agriculture. This is a very welcome development, but it is important that these investments support equitable, sustainable food systems through which food is produced in environmentally friendly ways and is affordable and appropriate for local consumers, as well as for national and international markets.

The value of women's role in agriculture is being recognised in these discussions on addressing food insecurity, with a particular focus on the benefits of enhancing women's productivity for poverty reduction and the wider economy. *The State of Food and Agriculture* report in 2011 focused on women farmers and stated: 'If women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by

20–30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 percent. [This in turn] could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 percent' (FAO 2011: 5).

This commitment to invest in agriculture and in female farmers is very welcome but should not be seen as a 'magic bullet' for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. As many have argued, achieving gender equality is a long-term process that requires investment in shifting deep-rooted discriminatory attitudes, practices and structures, and in promoting women's rights. Improving women's productivity is just one element of a more complex process towards gender-just food security. Unless women farmers are enabled greater access to land, credit and markets, they are unlikely to benefit from these investments. Therefore, investments in agriculture need to be informed by a detailed participatory analysis of gendered forms of exclusion and a detailed plan of how to overcome them.

Also, in the rush to realise women's 'untapped potential' it is important to step back and ask how women and girls are themselves benefiting from these investments. At an absolute minimum it is vital to ensure that interventions to increase women's productivity do not have the effect of increasing their already heavy work burdens. Ideally, interventions should focus on providing opportunities that contribute to the transformation of women's opportunities and status in ways that promote rights and the ability to choose life paths and livelihoods.

Short-term interventions: food assistance and social protection

In response to the immediate threat of food insecurity, direct action is being promoted in the form of food assistance and other safety net strategies. These include social protection strategies such as conditional and unconditional cash and voucher transfers, and school feeding programmes.

In terms of gender justice, these strategies are often short sighted in two ways.

First, they tend to target a narrow group of vulnerable women and girls, with a particular focus on pregnant women, nursing mothers and infants. This means the nutritional needs of other vulnerable groups such as older women, teenage girls and vulnerable men and boys are often not met.

Second, social protection strategies do not necessarily challenge gender roles and power relations in transformative ways. Even though women are often the primary recipients of cash and food transfers, it should not be assumed that this will automatically result in the redistribution of gendered power and status within households (Molyneux 2007; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2007).

4 What are we calling for?

A commitment to gender transformation

If responses to hunger and malnutrition are to both enable gender-just food and nutrition security and contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment, **a commitment to gender transformative approaches is non-negotiable**. This means promoting gender justice and women's empowerment and the transformation of unequal gender power relations, both as a route to food and nutrition security and as goals in their own right. As part of this process there is a vital need for comprehensive, gender-aware strategies that are grounded in an evidence-based understanding of the complex gendered causes and impacts of hunger and malnutrition, and are coherent across a range of policies and actions.

Rights at the centre of all interventions

The **right to adequate food is a basic human right** that must be upheld by all governments and implemented as an integral part of all policies and programmes that contribute to enabling food and nutrition security (see BRIDGE 2014: chapter 3).

Solutions for and by affected people

Progressive solutions need to be based on an understanding of food systems that **put people at the centre** and take into account the specific experiences, knowledge, needs and concerns of women, men, girls and boys in relation to hunger and malnutrition.

Sustainable, equitable food systems

It is vital to promote gender-equitable food systems that support the **local production of culturally appropriate food through ecologically sound and sustainable methods**, and the ability of states and people to define their food and agricultural systems. There is much to learn from the concept of food sovereignty that is growing in global recognition.

Policy coherence

Food security interventions must move beyond policy silos towards more coherent, multisectoral approaches that link nutrition, gender equality, trade, finance, agriculture, HIV/AIDS and other relevant areas to ensure that positive, equitable actions in one policy area are not undermined by inequalities created by another. **Gender equality dimensions must be integrated** across all of these intersecting policy processes.

A clear vision of gender-just food and nutrition security

To develop policies and programmes that promote gender justice as both a means to food and nutrition security and an end goal, it is vital to have a clear vision of what success should look like. Below is a working vision.

Gender-just food and nutrition security means a world without hunger or malnutrition, where women, men, girls and boys have equal access to nutritious, healthy food at all levels, and access to the means to produce, sell and purchase food. It is a world where the right to food for all is realised. Importantly, it is a world free from GBV, where the roles, responsibilities and choices available to women and men – including unpaid caregiving and food provision – are not predetermined at birth but can, where possible, be developed in line with individual capacities and aspirations. Finally, it is a world where all countries are equipped to produce enough food for their own populations through environmentally sound processes, while also being able to participate in (gender-) equitable global and regional food trading systems (BRIDGE 2014: 71).



A mother feeds her children on nutritious supplement at a Save the Children feeding centre. © Photographer: Nyani Quarmyne/Panos Pictures

5 What are opportunities for change?

Some immediate entry points for making these changes are:

Focus on all four pillars of food security

The four pillars of food security identified during the second World Summit on Food Security in 2009 could provide a useful framework for integrating gender equality into food security interventions (BRIDGE 2014: chapter 3). As noted, much emphasis is on the availability pillar, which focuses on enhancing domestic production and food imports. However, attention also needs to be paid to the other three pillars – **access**, which is focused on distribution at the household level; **utilisation**, which is about addressing the specific nutritional needs of individuals; and **stability** of food supply.

Take action in line with commitments

It is vital for governments to uphold their commitments to the right to food,² the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other relevant agreements and frameworks they have ratified.

Learn from existing innovations

A huge amount can be learned from interventions that contribute to gender-just food and nutrition security at local, national and regional levels. These can be adapted or scaled up for application elsewhere, or can simply provide learning for new initiatives. Some examples of current innovations are included in Section 6, and more can be found in the BRIDGE *Cutting Edge* Overview Report on Gender and Food Security (BRIDGE 2014).

² First raised in January 1943 by American President Roosevelt at the Hot Springs Conference, the idea of a 'right to food' precedes the concept of 'food security'. The right to food is currently enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which is ratified by 161 states, as well as being mentioned in other frameworks and conventions. The ICESCR is the international instrument most often cited as the main legal source of the right to food (BRIDGE 2014: 32).

6 Learning from current innovations

Three key examples are:

Making rights real at national and local levels

FIAN International (formerly known as the FoodFirst Information and Action Network) focuses on promoting the right to adequate food in Nepal. It works with individuals and communities affected by right-to-food violations, and supports them in holding state actors to account on the right to food. FIAN works with community members to document issues relating to the right to food, particularly on access to natural resources such as land, forests and water. The organisation strengthens their capacity to make claims, linking communities to local civil society organisations to enable joint lobbying of government authorities at local, district and national levels. The process for making a claim begins with the formation of a 'struggle committee' from among the community members, in which the representation of women is mandatory. FIAN works closely with the struggle committee, which takes the lead in meeting government officials and presenting the evidence for their claim.

(Case study source: Basudha Gurung; BRIDGE 2014: 62)

Sensitive, locally appropriate approaches to enabling shifts in gender norms

Through an innovative project on maternal health named Join My Village, CARE India integrated gender and food concerns into the design of a maternal health project. Needs assessments indicated that women had adequate knowledge of food intake during pregnancy, transmitted through government programmes and the mass media. However, it became clear that in practice pregnant women often do not consume the recommended diet because of implicit cultural norms that mean they are expected to eat last and reduce their food intake when supplies are short. The CARE programme addressed these inequities in a number of innovative ways. Pregnant women and their mothers-in-law were brought together to discuss how the food intake patterns could be changed. Expectant fathers were also organised into groups and encouraged to reflect on some of the health needs of men and women, specifically during pregnancy.

The project has contributed to changes at the household level. Many of the men involved said they were happy to eat together with their wives and some also said that they had been helping with household chores such as cooking and childcare. Join My Village shows that small steps such as these can go a long way in challenging and changing food-related gender norms at the household level.

(Case study source: Suniti Neogy; BRIDGE 2014: 63)

Learning from coordinated responses to hunger, malnutrition and gender inequality

The African regional Gender, Climate Change and Agriculture Support Programme (GCCAP),³ led by the NEPAD planning and coordinating agency, was mobilised to ensure that all agricultural investments – including the CAADP (Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme) investment plan – are gender-aware and enhance women's participation. Implementation was a multi-stakeholder process which engaged actors from governments, regional economic communities, development partners, the private sector, farmers' organisations and smallholder women farmers, as well as research and academic institutions in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Malawi, Niger and Rwanda. The programme goal was to achieve more effective and equitable participation and to build capacities among African women smallholders in climate-smart agricultural practices. Stakeholder consultations with smallholder women farmers were conducted in all five countries, to raise their awareness of the programme and ensure it was informed by their knowledge and experience.

(Case study source: Gry Synnevag; BRIDGE 2014: 58)

³ www.nepad.org/nepad/news/3339/nepad-and-norway-join-hands-fight-impact-climate-change-agriculture (accessed 17 March 2016).

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Also available in the Cutting Edge Pack on Gender and Food Security:

Gender and Food Security: Towards Gender-Just Food and Nutrition Security, an overview report outlining the main issues, showcasing effective and promising existing strategies, and suggesting rights-based, gender-just and environmentally sustainable approaches. www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/bridge-publications/cutting-edge-packs/gender-and-food-security

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