

# **GENDER**

Key to Sustainability and Food Security

## **PLAN OF ACTION**

Gender  
and Development





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## FOREWORD

FAO's Gender and Development Plan of Action for the years 2002 to 2007 embodies the continuation of the Organization's longstanding commitment to the equality of opportunities and rights for women and men. The unanimous endorsement of the Plan by the FAO Conference in November 2001 also represents a major step forward in our efforts to translate that commitment into action in the context of the fight against poverty and hunger.

For decades, FAO has championed women's contributions to food production and food security and has spearheaded efforts to remove barriers that limit women's opportunities and their full enjoyment of their rights. This is the third Plan of Action that the Organization has enacted as a way to energize and coordinate analysis and action for the benefit of both women and men.

Under the banner of Women in Development, previous plans covered the periods 1989–1995 and 1996–2001. Both plans focused on increasing women's participation in agriculture and rural development through projects and programmes that targeted resources, training and other services. Both succeeded in raising awareness and increasing support for women's invaluable role in food production, while upgrading their socio-economic status.

With this new Plan of Action, FAO has adopted a new name – Gender and Development – and a new emphasis – gender mainstreaming. The new name, which met a vast international consensus, represents far more than a change in terminology. With the Gender and Development approach, the Organization has defined the different roles and unequal power relations between women and men as a central category of analysis, analysis that will be applied not just to selected “women's projects” but to all of FAO's work, both at headquarters and in the field.

The entire Organization participated in formulating the Plan of Action. The Plan includes specific commitments, with measurable outputs, from 24 technical divisions. More important, it represents an Organization-wide commitment, guaranteed by linking the Plan of Action directly to FAO's Medium-Term Plan and Strategic Framework. This link provides both a mechanism and an obligation for management at all levels to monitor implementation and progress in all of the Organization's areas of work in support of more egalitarian and sustainable rural development.

**Jacques Diouf**  
*FAO Director-General*





## The FAO Gender and Development

**Plan of Action** (2002–2007) reflects changes in perspective based on experience and new paradigms that emerged from international conferences in the 1990s and that generated a broad-based consensus on the approach to gender and development (Environment and Development, 1992; Human Rights, 1993; Population and Development, 1994; Social Development, 1995; Human Settlement, 1996).

The Plan is FAO's framework for follow-up to relevant recommendations in the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995, Article 14 on rural women in the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), and the outcome document of the Special Session of the General Assembly, entitled *Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century*, held in June 2000 (Beijing +5 Review).

The Plan echoes and expands on the objectives of the *Rome Declaration on World Food Security* and the *World Food Summit Plan of Action*, which was adopted in 1996 and which clearly reflects the importance of gender in all its seven commitments. It integrates the outcome of the High-Level Consultation on Rural Women and Information, convened by FAO in Rome in October 1999, including The Strategy for Action entitled "*Gender and Food Security – The Role of Information*".

Finally, it is the Organization's continuing response to the imperative "to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable", as expressed in the *United Nations Millennium Declaration*.

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« A GROWING WORLD POPULATION AND THE URGENCY OF ERADICATING HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION CALL FOR DETERMINED POLICIES AND EFFECTIVE ACTIONS. A PEACEFUL, STABLE AND ENABLING POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT IS THE ESSENTIAL FOUNDATION WHICH WILL ENABLE STATES TO GIVE ADEQUATE PRIORITY TO FOOD SECURITY, POVERTY ERADICATION AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES, FORESTRY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT. PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT AND THE PROGRESSIVE REALIZATION OF THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD FOR ALL AND THE FULL AND EQUAL PARTICIPATION OF MEN AND WOMEN ARE ALSO INDISPENSABLE TO OUR GOAL OF ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL »

**[PARAGRAPH 13]**, Rome Declaration on World Food Security, World Food Summit, 13–17 November 1996, Rome, Italy)



# CONTEXT AND TRENDS

Sustainable agriculture and rural development and food security cannot be achieved by efforts that ignore or exclude more than half of the rural population. The truth of this statement should be self-evident, especially in light of the fact that half of the rural population (i.e. women) also constitutes more than half of the agricultural labour force and is responsible for most of the household food production in low-income food-deficit countries. Agriculture is still the main source of employment for women in the developing world. About two-thirds of the female labour force in developing countries, and more than 90 percent in many African countries, is engaged in agricultural work.

Development strategies are clearly more equitable when they consider the different needs, constraints, opportunities and priorities of men and women.

Compelling evidence suggests that such inclusive strategies are also far more effective and sustainable. Recognition of men's and women's valuable and distinct skills and knowledge can help to shape policies and programmes that contribute significantly to both economic growth and equity objectives.

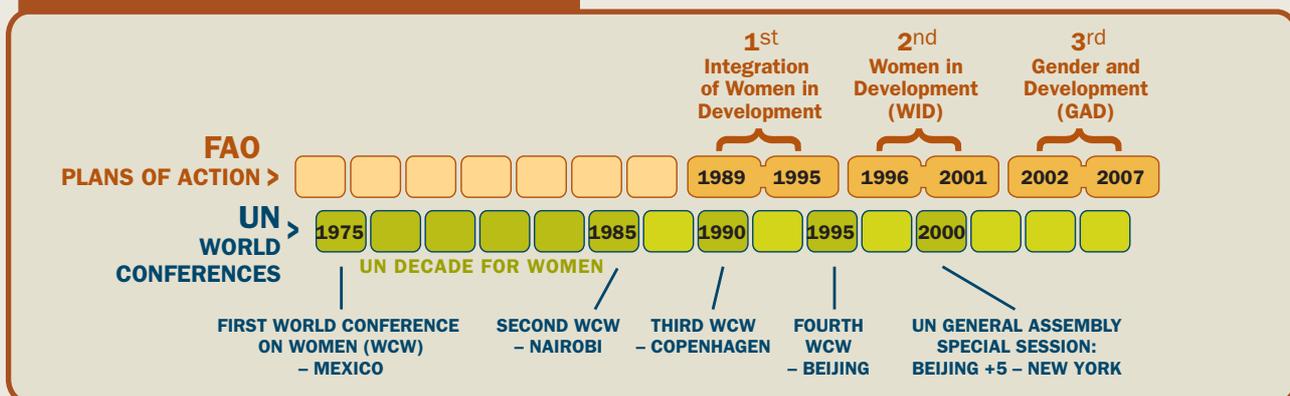
For decades, FAO has been involved in efforts to improve the status of rural women, and it recognizes and supports their contributions to rural development. The Gender and Development Plan of Action (2002–2007) strengthens this commitment by making gender considerations a key factor in all FAO activities. It is based on the recognition that women's and men's full and equal participation in agriculture and rural development is absolutely essential for eradicating food insecurity and rural poverty.



## From “Women in Development” to “Gender and Development”

Ever since the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, approaches to “women's issues” have changed considerably. Development agencies, including FAO, first advocated the Women in Development (WID) approach, which was useful in making the importance of women's productive work more clearly visible, as well as in recognizing women's essential role in development. This approach focused on using development resources to improve women's conditions, for example through projects for women. However, the WID approach tended to focus solely on

### Some milestones towards gender equality





### ► FROM “WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT” TO “GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT”

women as a separate, homogeneous entity and to ignore the basic structure of the unequal relations between women and men. Because it failed to take into account the wider social and economic context, WID often ignored the issues of how men might be affected and how important gender interactions are.

Over time, WID evolved into Gender and Development (GAD), which focuses on analysing the roles and responsibilities that are socially assigned to women and men, the social relations and interactions between women and men, and the opportunities offered to one and the other. The GAD approach defines gender and the unequal power relations between women and men as essential categories of analysis. Rather than focusing solely on women and “women’s projects”, GAD provides a framework and an obligation to re-examine all social, political and economic structures and development policies from the perspective of gender relations. In order to implement this new conceptual approach,

*gender mainstreaming* has emerged as the common strategy employed by FAO and other development agencies to promote gender equality. Within the UN system, mainstreaming has been defined as “a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.”

With the new Gender and Development Plan of Action, FAO will continue to make efforts related to implementing this strategy in different fields, including: building capacity on gender issues; providing gender-specific technical advice on policy and the planning of projects and programmes; conducting studies on key issues, such as land tenure and access to resources; and promoting gender-disaggregated data collection.

## WHY A GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN OF ACTION?

**The Plan of action presents** a framework in which FAO can mainstream gender into all aspects of its work and improve its capacity to assist Member Nations in achieving equitable and sustainable agriculture and rural development. Its purpose is fourfold:

- ⊙ to improve FAO’s capacity to assist Member Nations in mainstreaming gender issues into the Organization’s normative and operational activities;
- ⊙ to establish measurable and realistic medium-term goals for gender mainstreaming in relevant FAO priority areas;
- ⊙ to achieve institution-wide commitment and support for implementation of the Plan of Action;
- ⊙ to present a framework that enables FAO staff to mainstream gender into their work at headquarters and in decentralized offices.

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE PLAN OF ACTION

**FAO has established** four medium-term objectives for its Gender and Development Plan of Action, which are derived from the global goals of *FAO’s Strategic Framework 2000–2015*. These commitments aim to promote gender equality in:

- ⊙ access to sufficient, safe and nutritionally adequate food;
- ⊙ access to, control over and management of natural resources and agricultural support services;
- ⊙ policy- and decision-making processes at all levels in the agriculture and rural sector;
- ⊙ opportunities for on- and off-farm employment in rural areas.



## Global trends

As recommended in the FAO Gender and Development Plan of Action, application of the Gender and Development approach entails focusing on a number of important global trends that will have a major impact in the coming years on gender roles and relations in agriculture and food security.

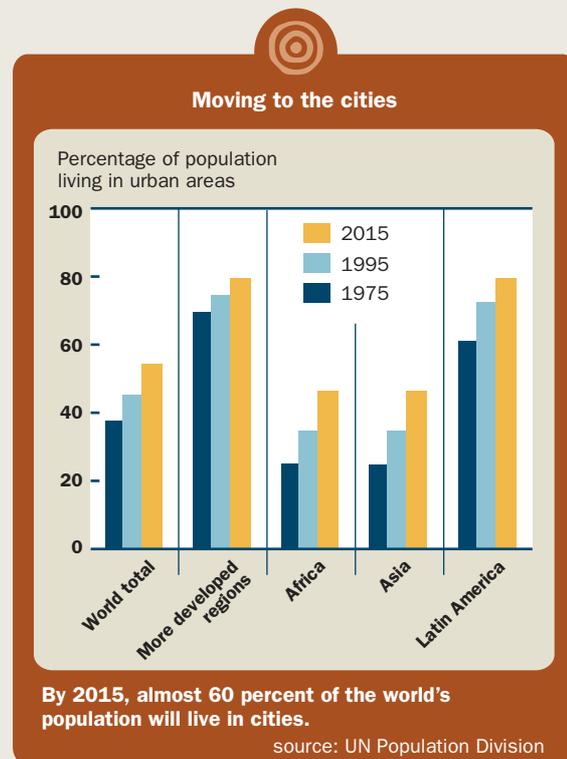
### ■ Globalization

As state controls on trade and investment are removed, countries all over the world are experiencing greatly expanded markets. More and more aspects of life have been commercialized. Some countries and regions have benefited from rapid growth. Others have suffered growing inequality and marginalization. Overall, income inequalities among countries have grown sharply. In East Asia and the Pacific, per capita income quadrupled between 1975 and 1999. In sub-Saharan Africa and other least-developed countries, on the other hand, per capita incomes fell to below their 1970 levels. The benefits and risks of globalization have also been distributed unequally within countries. The impacts of globalization differ profoundly depending on whether they affect urban rather than rural areas, commercial farmers rather than smallholders, or men rather than women, those particularly in rural areas. Globalization tends to favour large-scale, commercial farming over household subsistence production. Small-scale farmers in low-income food-deficit countries have been hurt by temporary surges of lower-cost imports and diminishing attention and resources for agricultural development. Most of these farmers are women, who already suffer from limited access to resources, markets, training and decision-making opportunities.

### ■ Population dynamics

**Rural–urban migration** - By 2020, most of the people in developing regions will live in cities. The paces and patterns of urban migration vary considerably. Latin America and the Caribbean are already as highly urbanized as Europe and North America, while sub-Saharan Africa and South-Central Asia remain predominantly rural. The impacts of migration on women and men also differ markedly. In Latin America, women who migrated to cities play a major role in reducing rural poverty by sending money back to their home villages. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa, male migration to urban areas has led to a rapid rise in the number of female-headed rural households. Migration may challenge the traditional patterns of gender-based roles in rural areas, but the barriers that limit women’s access to essential resources and services remain as strong as ever. In many countries, rural–urban migration has contributed to both the “feminization of agriculture” and the “feminization of poverty”.

**Rural ageing** - As birth rates decline and people live longer, the world’s population is ageing. Worldwide, the number of people over 60 years of age is expected to triple by 2050, reaching a total of almost 2 billion.



## GLOBAL TRENDS

Because many younger people migrate to the cities, ageing is often felt first and proceeds fastest in rural areas. The combination of urban migration and ageing has already had a major impact on the composition of the rural labour force and the division of labour by age and sex. Policies will need to take into account the specific needs and contributions of elderly rural men and women. In many rural areas, HIV/AIDS is decimating the rural workforce and elderly people are facing increasing workloads as they assume responsibility for growing numbers of AIDS orphans.

**HIV/AIDS** - The HIV/AIDS pandemic is a major threat to food security and rural development. At the end of 2001, an estimated 40 million people worldwide were living with HIV/AIDS – 95 percent of them in developing countries. Within these countries, AIDS is hitting rural areas even harder than cities. FAO has estimated that in the 25 most-affected African countries, AIDS has killed 7 million agricultural workers since 1985. And another 16 million could die over the next 20 years. The impact on agricultural production and food security has been devastating. As adults fall ill and die, farm output plummets. Invaluable knowledge about indigenous farming methods and strategies for coping with food shortages are lost. Furthermore, biological and social factors make women and girls more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS than men and boys (HIV infection rates in young women are sometimes three to five times higher than they are for young men). The epidemic has also increased the unequal burden of work borne by women and girls, who are traditionally responsible for growing most of the food and caring for the sick and dying.

## Increased pressure on natural resources

As the world's food producers, rural women and men play leading roles in both the use and the preservation of natural resources. Traditional farming systems are of crucial importance, often reflecting generations of experience in adapting to local conditions, relying on a variety of indigenous crops, recycling biomass and using specific techniques such as terracing and water harvesting. However, farming can also be a leading cause of environmental degradation, particularly when population pressure and a demand for greater production lead to the clearing of marginal lands, the overuse of mineral fertilizers and pesticide, or the mismanagement of soil and water resources. The rapid growth of commercial agriculture has increased the pressure on both the environment and smallholders,

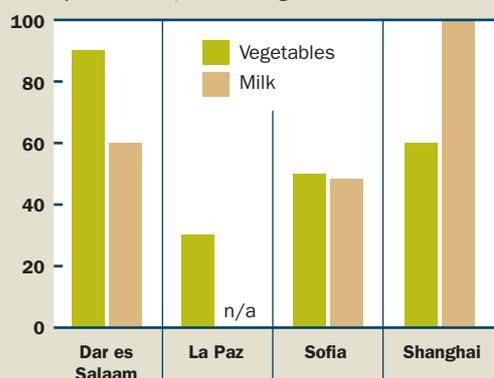
whose limited access to new agricultural technology and inputs often leads to greater exploitation of natural resources and thus to environmental degradation.

## Urban and peri-urban agriculture

The rapid growth of cities has been matched by a rapid growth of agriculture in and around urban areas. FAO estimates that about 200 million urban farmers worldwide supply food to 700 million people – one-quarter of the world's urban population. Urban and peri-urban agriculture are an important source of fresh food in cities, and also provide employment and income for millions of men and women. Female and male urban farmers have successfully established intensive vegetable gardens on small plots, making efficient use of limited water and land resources. However, urban farms can pose risks to public health and the environment. Fertilizers, pesticides or wastes from farm animals can pollute the air, soil and drinking-water. Women and men farmers in urban areas have also confronted many of the difficulties faced by smallholders everywhere, including land scarcity and lack of services. Because of their lower economic, social and legal status, women farmers face particularly severe obstacles.

Food provided by urban and peri-urban agriculture

Percentage of local needs met by urban and peri-urban agriculture



Studies confirm that urban and peri-urban agriculture provide a large share of the vegetables, meat and dairy products consumed in cities around the world. Most of this food is produced by smallholders, especially women.

source: FAO



## ■ Disaster-related and complex emergencies

As disasters and emergencies become more frequent and larger in scale, there is greater awareness of the need for a better understanding of how social factors affect both communities' vulnerability and their ability to respond. Emergencies affect women and girls differently from men and boys. Men are usually the primary casualties in wartime, while women often lose the capacity to sustain their families' livelihoods as a result of loss of seeds, livestock, tools and productive gardens. As women often have the primary responsibility for family care and feeding, they are put under great stress. In addition, conflict situations considerably increase the trauma of gender-specific physical insecurity for women and girls; and they are also at high risk of nutritional deficiencies. Gender analysis can help the development of disaster mitigation and recovery strategies that address the needs of both women and men effectively. FAO and the World Food Programme (WFP) have jointly produced a socio-economic and gender analysis guide for emergency situations.

## ■ Information technology

New information technologies are radically transforming the way that information and knowledge are disseminated and shared around the world. The technology revolution could accelerate progress towards gender equality, but it could also exacerbate existing inequalities. Much has been written about the digital divide between rich and poor countries: more than 70 percent of the world's Internet users are based in Europe and North America, where – in addition – more than 90 percent of the data on Africa are stored. Similar gaps persist between urban and rural areas and between men and women, especially in developing countries. Rural women usually have less access than men to information and new technologies. Consequently, they are at a disadvantage in making informed choices about what to produce. Lack of information also limits women's influence in their communities and their ability to participate in decision-making. When assessing the opportunities and risks of new technologies, it is essential to give attention to gender differences and to ensuring that women's voice is heard so that technological developments can be exploited in the way that best prevents them from increasing inequalities.



## Dimitra, exchange of information and network: essential requirements in the fight against hunger and poverty

**D**imitra is an information and communication project that has been implemented by FAO in Europe, Africa and the Near East since 1998. It has gathered information on 844 organizations concerning rural women (650 of which are in Africa and the Near East), 1 909 project descriptions involving or concerning rural women and development, and 830 publications. Dimitra is based on the active cooperation of a network of ten local partners in Africa and the Near East. Its main goal is to empower rural women and to improve their living conditions and status by highlighting the extent and value of their contributions. It provides a tool with which grassroots organizations can make their voices heard internationally and is guided by three main principles: **partnership** – valuing local knowledge and working closely with local partners; **participation** – involving the active contribution of civil society organizations; and **networking** – encouraging the exchange of good practices, ideas and experiences.

The project uses both traditional (such as rural radio) and new communication methods and tools to distribute information (for example, the Dimitra online database is accessible free of charge at [www.fao.org/sd/dimitra](http://www.fao.org/sd/dimitra) and on CD-ROM). The database is also published in guidebooks, such as the *Dimitra guidebook on European organizations working with/for rural women in the South* and the *Dimitra guidebook on African and Near Eastern organizations*. A biannual newsletter provides information about the activities of the project and its partner organizations.

After five years of implementation, Dimitra continues to consolidate and extend its Africa and the Near East network, aiming to promote information exchange by strengthening information and communication skills and to update and disseminate information on gender and rural development issues. It aims at facilitating access to information, sharing local knowledge and expertise and guaranteeing that rural people, especially rural women, are less marginalized. Dimitra is a useful instrument for making gender issues, information and communication an integral part of development strategies and policies. ■

The strategic objectives of the **Gender and Development Plan of Action (2002–2007)** will be pursued through gender mainstreaming efforts that focus on four priority areas of intervention:



## PLANNED ACTIONS FOR MAINSTREAMING FALL INTO THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES:

- ⊙ capacity building and the development of curricula and training materials
- ⊙ development of gender-sensitive methodologies and guidelines
- ⊙ awareness raising and institutional measures
- ⊙ information collection, analysis and dissemination
- ⊙ communication, participation and partnership building
- ⊙ technology development and transfer
- ⊙ policy advice
- ⊙ skills enhancement of rural women and men, for both on- and off-farm employment

## Glossary of gender-related terms

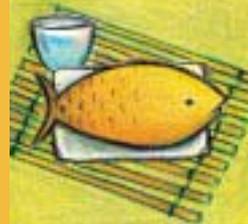
**Gender** - Refers to the social, economic and cultural roles and relations between women and men; takes into account the different responsibilities of women and men in a given culture or location and in different population groups (children, aged people, ethnic groups etc.).

**Empowerment of women** - A process through which women, individually and collectively, become aware of how power relations operate in their lives and gain self-confidence and strength to challenge gender inequalities.

**Gender analysis** - A tool to assist the strengthening of development planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in order to make programmes and projects more efficient and relevant.

**Gender mainstreaming** - Involves ensuring that attention to gender equality and the different roles and needs of women and men is a central part of all development interventions.

**Gender-sensitive indicators** - Used to monitor the progress made in achieving gender equality.



# FOOD AND NUTRITION

Although both rural women and rural men each have different and complementary roles in guaranteeing food security at the household and community levels, women often play a greater role in ensuring nutrition, food safety and quality. In much of the developing world, women produce most of the food that is consumed in their homes, and are generally responsible for processing and preparing food for their households. Women tend to spend a considerable part of the cash income that they generate from marketing activities on household food requirements.

Recognizing women's and men's distinct roles in family nutrition is a key to improving food security at the

household level. To tackle this issue, FAO bases its approach to nutrition on the economic and cultural context of the area concerned, and considers that food security depends not only on the availability of food, but also on access to food, as well as on food adequacy and acceptability to consumers. Other underlying causes of malnutrition must also be addressed. These include dietary intake and diversity, health and disease, and maternal and child care – areas in which women play decisive roles. Another key issue is respecting the knowledge of traditional communities, particularly women, about the nutritional value of local crops and foods gathered from the wild.



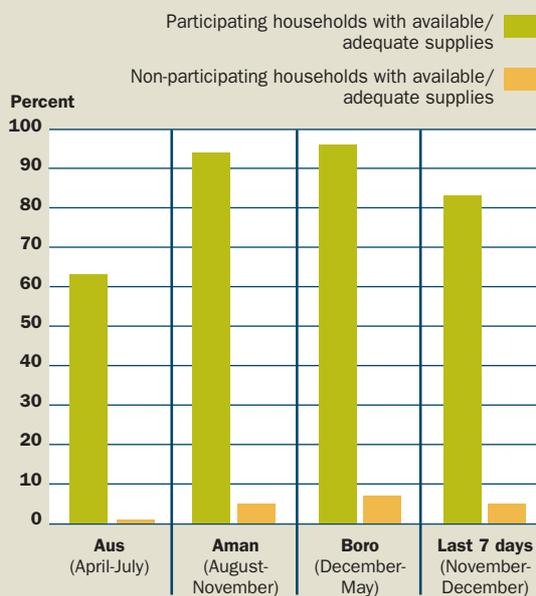
## Home gardens

Across most of the developing world, people typically rely on one or two staple crops – such as rice, wheat, maize or millet – for as much as 80 percent of their daily caloric intake. Home garden foods also have an important “safety net” function as supplements to staple crops. Unlike field crops, home garden foods can be cultivated to provide food for the family to eat all year round, as long as enough water is available. During the lean season between harvests, home garden foods can augment or replenish family food supplies. And cash earned from selling the produce of home gardens can be used to purchase food items that the family cannot produce itself.

As the main cultivators of home gardens, women often grow most of the secondary crops that provide the diversity needed for a healthy diet. Home garden foods typically include roots and tubers, green leafy vegetables, legumes and fruits, all of which are rich in vitamins and minerals. A study in Nigeria, for example, found that women grew as many as 57 different plant species in their home gardens.

Teaching women and men about the nutritional value of certain foods, such as green leafy vegetables, and

### Home gardens and nutrition education boost the availability of vegetables



A study by Helen Keller International found that most households participating in a home gardening and nutrition education project had adequate supplies of vegetables throughout the year. Among households that did not participate in the project, the figure was less than 10 percent.

source: FAO. Food, Nutrition and Agriculture Review

## planning for action

FAO's Gender and Development Plan of Action includes a number of commitments aimed both at improving women's access to adequate nutrition and at providing them with the knowledge and resources they need to improve their families' nutritional status. Key areas of activity include: capacity building and the development of curricula and training materials for gender-sensitive nutrition education; the collection, analysis and dissemination of gender-disaggregated data on nutrition; and technology transfer to increase efficiency and reduce men's and women's workloads in food processing, storage and related agro-industries.

### Food processing and food safety

- ⊙ Develop and disseminate scientific information material integrating the concept of gender in food quality and safety issues.
- ⊙ Integrate a gender approach to increasing consumers' awareness of food quality and safety and promoting food safety risk analysis.
- ⊙ Give special attention to providing technological options and reducing the workload of women and men entrepreneurs in agro-industries, as well as improving the efficiency of cottage and small-scale operations.
- ⊙ Develop manuals that support and advise Member Nations regarding the organization and management of effective national food control programmes that are capable of providing the necessary consumer



— A project in Viet Nam combined nutrition education with home gardening. Within two years, there was a significant drop in the rate of malnutrition.

encouraging them to grow and eat these is an effective way of improving nutrition and preventing micronutrient deficiencies. For instance, a pilot project in Bangladesh encouraged landless and at-risk populations to cultivate vegetable gardens. By the end of the pilot period, target households were eating an average of almost 30 percent more vegetables, with particularly notable gains in infants' and young children's consumption. Night blindness in children, a symptom of vitamin A deficiency, was reduced by nearly half. The project emphasized the need to educate both men and women about the importance of a diverse diet and the use of foods from home gardens to provide it.



### Improving household food security and nutrition

As part of an FAO project in Viet Nam, some 12 000 poor households, each with at least one malnourished child under the age of five years, received training and grants to establish home gardens. Interviews and evaluation confirmed that home gardens had a greater productive impact when men and women understood their nutritional and economic benefits. The project resulted in measurable gains for the poorest, most food-insecure households: 82 percent of participating households improved their food availability, and children increased their daily consumption of vegetables and fruits. The project was credited with reducing the rate of malnutrition by 12.8 percent within just two years. ■

protection and of promoting food production, processing and distribution, while taking into account gender issues.

#### Nutritional needs and food discrimination

- ⊙ Specifically address nutrient requirements for women at FAO expert consultations on human nutrition requirements.
- ⊙ Prepare an analysis of specific gender-related nutrition issues, and report the results in the regular updates to *Nutrition Country Profiles* and the annual *State of Food Insecurity in the World* (SOFI).
- ⊙ Ensure that gender-disaggregated dietary and nutritional status data for all age groups are generated, compiled and disseminated.

#### Nutrition education

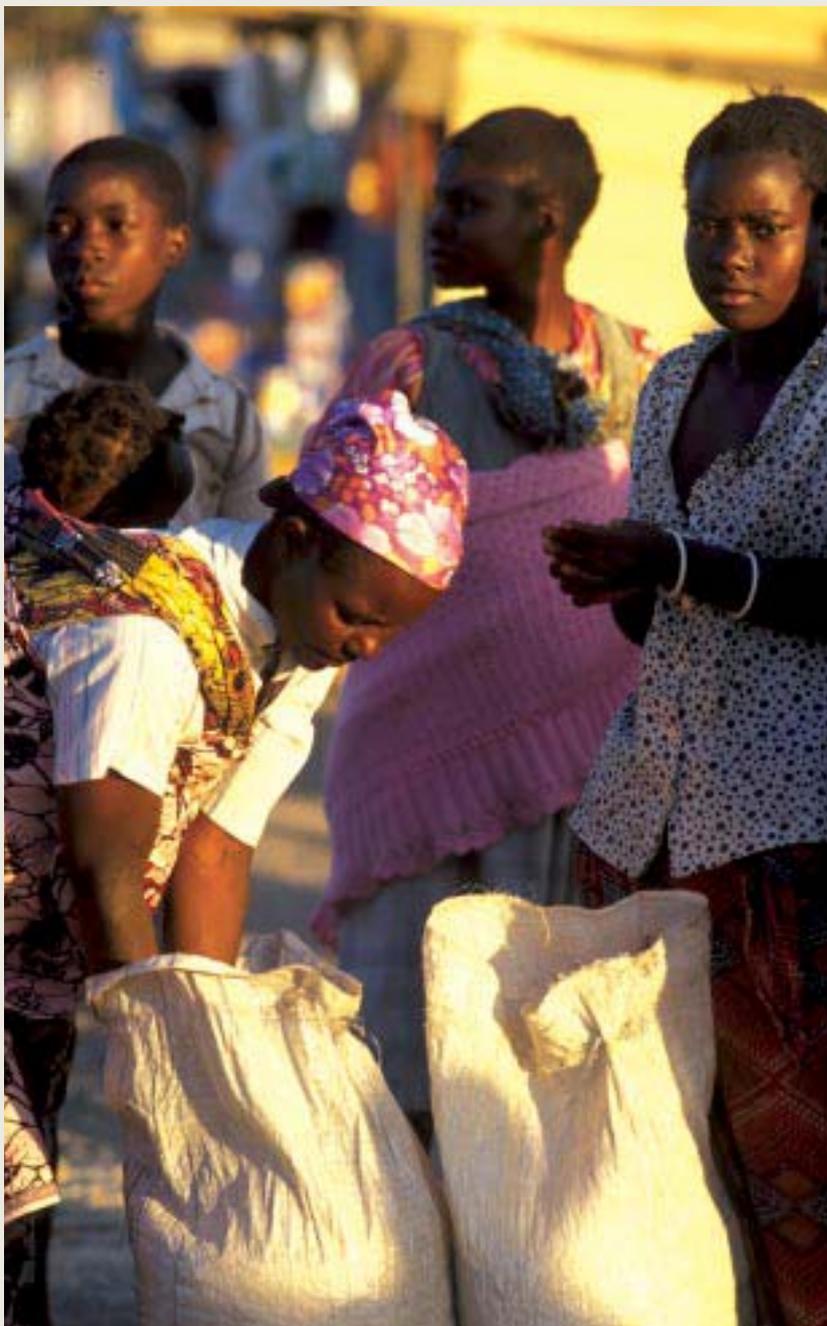
- ⊙ Explicitly address gender issues in promoting nutrition education in schools and communities (the roles and contributions of both men and women).
- ⊙ Identify men's roles and responsibilities in securing nutritional well-being for all household members.
- ⊙ Take gender into account in the preparation of technical materials, programme guidelines and training support materials for initiatives in nutrition education and communication (in order to strengthen nutrition education, risk communication and consumer awareness)
- ⊙ Ensure both women's and men's participation in the testing and use of materials for nutrition education and communication initiatives.
- ⊙ Update the Food and Nutrition Web site regularly in order to enhance public understanding of food and nutrition issues.



### Food processing and storage

**Food processing** contributes to food security by regularly assuring a diversity of diet, minimizing waste and losses and improving the marketability of foods, thereby enabling women to participate in the trade of food products. In developing countries, women carry out most food processing activities, which often create a heavy workload. In parts of North Africa, women may spend up to four hours a day grinding wheat for couscous.

Food processing also contributes to nutritional well-being, not only by making food more digestible, but also by enabling foods to be preserved and marketed, which generates additional income and gives people access to a wider range of products and nutrients. Drying, smoking, pickling and other ways of preserving nutrient-rich foods help protect families against protein or micronutrient deficiencies during seasons when fresh produce is hard to come by. Using solar dryers to preserve fruits can provide a year-round supply of vitamin A.



For example, by smoking and drying much of the daily catch, women in fishing communities improve both incomes and nutrition. Losses through waste and spoilage, which often amount to at least 25 percent of a catch, can be cut by more than half. And fish as a rich source of protein and other nutrients can be eaten or sold over a much wider area and for a much longer time.

**Food storage** also greatly increases food security. Men are usually responsible for constructing storage facilities, while women prepare the food to be stored and maintain and use the stocks and facilities. In some developing countries, as much as 25 percent of the food produced becomes spoiled or is eaten by insects and other pests before humans get to it. Reducing such post-harvest losses can make more food available as effectively as increasing production in the fields can.

As in many other areas, women are often hampered in their ability to acquire tools and skills for food processing and storage because it is difficult for them to obtain access to credit and training services. By the same token, agricultural research and extension programmes often fail to consider the distinct roles that men and women play in food processing and storage. As a result, these programmes rarely benefit from women's valuable knowledge of traditional techniques, conditions and materials.



## Food safety

**Good nutrition** depends on the quality and quantity of the food that is available, as well as on health. Contamination of foods by bacteria or chemicals can make them inedible, dangerous or even deadly. Through their responsibilities for processing food for markets and preparing it for the home, women generally play a key role in ensuring the quality and safety of what people eat.

Even when they do not kill, diarrhoea and many other food-borne illnesses accelerate the passage of food through the digestive system, reducing the body's capacity to absorb nutrients and increasing the loss of water and body salts. Where food-borne illnesses are widespread, even people who consume adequate amounts of food are frequently malnourished.

In many cases, lack of access to adequate water, sanitation and fuel may prove to be the principal cause of food-borne illnesses. If the only water available is polluted, or if fuel scarcities make it impossible to boil water and cook food, families will suffer from illness and malnutrition.

Improving food safety can be achieved only by taking into account women's and men's roles in producing and processing food. As women do most of the cooking in their homes, education about hygiene and sanitation needs to target their concerns and schedules. Furthermore, policies that take account of women's key roles in preparing food and collecting water and fuel can simultaneously reduce their heavy workload and improve their families' nutrition.



## Food discrimination

**Nutritional demands** vary depending on age, sex, health status and activity level. In their reproductive years, especially during pregnancy and lactation, women have specific additional nutrient requirements, which determine both their own and their children's nutritional status. These extra needs are not always recognized, and women and children suffer the consequences. For example, nearly half of women in developing countries suffer from anaemia, which affects their health, limits their activity and greatly increases the risks that they face during pregnancy and childbirth. Their babies also suffer much higher rates of infant mortality and birth defects.

Women themselves are often the victims of food discrimination, which compromises the nutritional and health status of female family members. In many households and communities, women and girls eat only the food that is left after the males in the family have eaten. This often results in chronic undernutrition. In parts of South Asia, men and boys consume twice as many calories, even though women and girls do much of the heavy work. A study in India found that girls are four times more likely to suffer from acute malnutrition than boys are. FAO pays special attention to the economic and social dimensions of these issues, including the gender



### ▶ FOOD DISCRIMINATION

approach, and concentrates on the need to improve total dietary intakes, without focusing on a single micronutrient. Efforts to deal with micronutrients should not be isolated from efforts to address other malnutrition problems. It is therefore essential to take into account the distinct nutritional requirements of men and women, as well as their roles in the household.

— Experts estimate that effective policies to treat anaemia can raise national productivity by as much as 20 percent.

## Nutrition education

**Food and nutrition education** plays a vital role in promoting food security, as it is especially important for poor households to make the optimal use of local foods and to follow healthy eating patterns. Education that draws on traditional knowledge, usually that of women,

can focus on the local foods and plants that are used to prevent or cure the illnesses caused by malnutrition and to combat diet-related diseases.

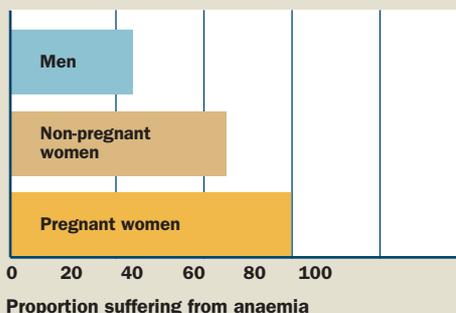
Nutrition education helps people to make the best choice of foods for an adequate diet by providing them with information on the nutritional value of foods, food quality and safety, preservation methods, processing and handling, food preparation and eating habits. Successful nutrition education leads to positive actions, such as growing and eating specific fruits and vegetables in order to protect the body from infectious diseases or learning how to store maize in order to reduce nutrient losses and increase household food reserves.

Successful nutrition education requires the active participation of both men and women, their awareness of nutritional problems and their willingness to change. Because women play such a key role in growing, choosing and preparing foods, nutrition education for women can have an enormous impact. For example, a project in Tamil Nadu, India, trained the mothers of healthy children to become nutrition workers and led to 55 percent fewer incidences of severe malnutrition in more than 20 000 villages.



### Prevalence of anaemia by gender

More than 1.8 billion people in the developing world suffer from anaemia. The incidence and the risks of anaemia are both much higher for women. Anaemia afflicts 60 percent of pregnant women and contributes to 20 percent of all maternal deaths.



source: FAO