



Food and Agriculture
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Asia-Pacific Regional Fact Sheet

Closing the gender gap for better food and nutrition security

Gender inequalities and discrimination are major causes of persistent food and nutrition insecurity in the Asia-Pacific region. Sustained efforts to promote gender equality are needed to achieve food and nutrition security.

Malnutrition in all its forms - undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, or overweight and obesity - imposes high social and economic costs on countries.

Key Facts in Asia and the Pacific Region

- Around 490 million people suffer from chronic hunger.
- Some 80 million children under the age of five are stunted.
- In Asia, nearly three-quarters of people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies.
- Undernutrition is widespread in Asia and contributes to half of all deaths in children under five.
- Approximately two-thirds of all wasted children lived in Asia, while 50 percent of all children under five with wasting live in South Asia.
- Asia reduced its prevalence of underweight from 32 percent to 18 percent during 1990-2014.

The most widespread and severe forms of micronutrient malnutrition are usually found in developing countries. Subsistence farmers, children, pregnant women and the sick are most vulnerable to micronutrient malnutrition because of their special nutritional requirements.

At the global level, it has been estimated that US\$2.8-3.5 trillion, or about 4 to 5 percent of global GDP, are lost annually to malnutrition as a result of productivity loss and direct healthcare spending.¹

Recent data on the burden of disease - measured in disability adjusted life years (DALYs)² - indicate that child and maternal malnutrition still impose the largest nutrition-related health burden in Asia, with more than 80 million DALYs lost per year in 2010 compared with 34.5 million DALYs lost due to adult overweight and obesity.

Gender inequalities, poverty and hunger

Worldwide, 60 percent of chronically hungry people are estimated to be women and girls almost one-fifth of whom are younger than five years of age³. The proportion of chronically hungry women and girls in the Asia-Pacific region is likely to be even higher given prevailing socio-cultural norms that hamper their access to resources, services and opportunities, effectively preventing them from realizing their full human and productive potential.

¹ FAO. 2013. *The State of Food and Agriculture: Food systems for better nutrition*. Rome, p. 5

² One DALY represents the loss of the equivalent of one full year of healthy life, Ibid, p. 16

³ UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). 2007. *Strengthening Efforts to Eradicate Poverty and Hunger, Including through the Global Partnership for Development. Report of the Secretary-General*. UN doc. E/2007/71. New York: ECOSOC; World Food Programme (WFP). 2009. *WFP Gender Policy and Strategy: promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women in addressing food and nutrition challenges*. Rome.

In many countries of South Asia, women tend to eat the least, or they eat⁴ leftovers after other family members have eaten. Even when women produce food, they may not have the same access to it as other household members due to traditions that privilege men and boys. Malnutrition in women, especially those who are pregnant or breastfeeding, sets up a cycle of deprivation that increases the likelihood of low birth weight, child mortality, serious diseases and eventually children's poor classroom performance.



Women's role in agriculture, food systems and food and nutrition security

Across the Asia and Pacific region, women play a critical role in rural livelihoods and family wellbeing. Women are primarily responsible for food production, sales and procurement, as well as food preparation and distribution. All this comes in addition to their child rearing and care giving duties. Within Asia, the female share of the agricultural labour force ranges from about 35 percent in South Asia to almost 50 percent in East and Southeast Asia⁶; in China and India, women make up 21 percent and 24 percent, respectively, of all fishers and fish farmers.⁷ Furthermore, statistics do not fully account for women's unpaid and under-reported contributions to household economies.

Closing the gender gap in agriculture and empowering women farmers can result in improvements in nutrition and health for household members and education outcomes for children in addition to contributing to enhanced agricultural productivity and economic growth.

Source: FAO. 2011. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in Agriculture – Closing the gap for development*. Rome, FAO

South Asia still has both the highest rates and the largest numbers of malnourished children in Asia.⁵ The fact that gender inequality is particularly severe in South Asia, partly explains why rates of child malnutrition there are twice as great as those in sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence from Bangladesh shows that long-term nutritional status of children is better in households where women are empowered.

In spite of their important contributions to household income, women face constraints that keep them from realizing their full potential, because their autonomy and ability to fully contribute to agricultural production is stifled. Women generally have limited access and control over productive resources such as land and to services such as credit and extension. They are more likely than men to be confined to part-time, seasonal, low-paying jobs. They also face discrimination in access to education, training and technology.⁸ Women are held back by mobility and time constraints and by a lack of power when it comes to decision-making. Early marriage and repeat pregnancies at short intervals further limit women's ability to complete their education, which in turn reduces their income generating opportunities.

As men migrate to urban areas to take up non-farm employment,⁹ women are left to engage more extensively in the production of crops for household consumption and sale. They often find paid agricultural work and participate in income-generating opportunities in the forestry livestock and fisheries sectors. This phenomenon, broadly referred to as the "feminization of agriculture," is occurring rapidly in some countries in Asia and emphasizes the increased importance of women's role in agriculture and food systems. In South Asia, where the female share of the agricultural labour force was almost 35 percent in 2010, many countries see increasing numbers of women engaged in agriculture. For instance, in Pakistan the percentage of women economically active in agriculture jumped from 12.2 percent in 1980 to 29.6 percent in 2010; in Bangladesh it increased from 42.4 percent in 1980 to 51 percent in 2010.¹⁰

Gender equality as an effective strategy to achieve food and nutrition security

Interventions to reduce women's constraints, enhance their access to productive resources and opportunities and strengthen their participation in decision-making can have a positive impact on food and nutrition security. Investing in this agenda today is a responsible choice and a sustainable way to ensure the right of men and women to safe, sufficient, nutritious and affordable food. The following cases are tangible examples of how gender equality and food and nutrition security objectives can strengthen each other with positive outcomes for both.

⁴ UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). 2009. *Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security in Asia and the Pacific*. Bangkok: UNESCAP; Mukherjee, A. 2009. Eight Food Insecurities faced by women and girl children: four steps that could make a difference, with special reference to South Asia. Paper presented at the Regional Conference on child poverty and disparities at the invitation of UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia. Katmandu. 6–8 May cited in Asian Development Bank. 2013. *Gender equality and food security—women's empowerment as a tool against hunger*. Mandaluyong City, Philippines: ADB

⁵ World Bank. 2006. *Repositioning nutrition as central to development: A strategy for large-scale action*. Washington DC

⁶ FAO 2011. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in Agriculture*. Rome

⁷ FAO. 2011. *The role of women in agriculture*. ESA Working Paper No. 11-02, available at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf>. Rome: Agricultural Development Economics Division, FAO

⁸ FAO. 2013. *FAO Policy on Gender Equality – Attaining Food Security Goals in Agriculture and Rural Development*. Rome, FAO

⁹ de Schutter, O. 2013. *The agrarian transition and the 'feminization' of agriculture*. Paper presented at the International Conference Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue. Yale University, New Haven (CT), USA, September 14-15, 2013

¹⁰ FAO 2011. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in Agriculture*. Rome.



The FAO Farmer Field School Approach under IPM¹¹

The FAO Asia Regional Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Programme works with governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to carry out farmer education and participatory research activities to promote and support IPM by smallholder men and women farmers.

The programme has designed and adopted tools and strategies to facilitate women's participation in Farmer Field Schools (FFS). Gender analysis was carried out to increase knowledge and awareness on the division of labour and decision-making responsibilities in the households and inform the planning of FFS so that women's constraints are taken into account. Other strategies include the recruitment and training of female extension workers, setting up targets for women's involvement, designing specific sessions to address women's needs, raising awareness of local leaders, working through existing women's groups, promoting labour saving practices and including health and nutrition education.

In **Viet Nam**, FAO introduced minimum tillage labour saving technology for potato growing, using integrated pest management in lowland rice production systems. This labour saving method reduced the burden of women, especially the elderly, and provided additional income which, for example, they used to buy gas stoves or to send their children to university. The use of minimum tillage potato growing also greatly contributes to improved diets and increased farm incomes for families.

In **Nepal**, women farmers were given priority from the initial stage of participant selection to IPM FFS. The "gender analysis matrix" was used to assess women's key role in agricultural production activities. Although the level of women's participation varied from one area to another, overall, women made up 64 percent of FFS participants. Women held 35 percent of farmer facilitator positions and 40 percent of the farmer field chairpersons were women. Women applied IPM technologies on their own farms and were recognized as resource farmers in the community, managing group-based production and collective marketing initiatives

Key results

The introduction of IPM, pesticide risk reduction and labour saving methods benefit food security and nutrition and empower women. Trained women played a unique role in the adoption of IPM methods in the communities. In Nepal, thanks to women's vibrant role, the use of hazardous chemical pesticides was drastically reduced in the programme sites by up to 70 percent. The increased crop diversification and cropping intensity contributed to food security by providing more food and a greater variety of nourishment, which improved over all household nutrition and eating patterns. The programme has also contributed to concrete changes for women farmers through increased access to resources and enhanced equality within the family and the community. Involving women together with men in the shift from subsistence farming to market-oriented production proved that women, once empowered and given the opportunity to participate in making decisions, can effectively contribute to the process of socioeconomic development. Women's participation in FFS courses also raised the women's self-respect and encouraged rights-based advocacy aimed at ending violence against women and improving their access to land.

¹¹ Presented at "The Asia and the Pacific Regional High Level Consultation on Gender, Food Security and Nutrition: Ensuring the Other Half Equal Opportunities".

Protecting and promoting food security and nutrition for families and children in Bangladesh¹²

A joint WFP, FAO and UNICEF programme was undertaken in southern Bangladesh districts of Bhola and Barguna in 2010-2013. The overarching objectives of the programme were to contribute to the reduction of acute malnutrition among pregnant and lactating women and children aged 0 to 59 months, and also to reducing household food insecurity. Beneficiaries included 12 504 women in the two districts.

Although women's empowerment was not explicitly described as a main objective, activities were designed taking into consideration women's needs and constraints. For example, women were mobilized into groups that received training in home gardening,

food processing, marketing and small business management, including goat and duck rearing and nutrition education covering practical cooking techniques. The learning and acquisition of new skills contributed to confidence and built self-esteem, life skills management and social empowerment. It was found that when a man talked about the importance of good nutrition for women, including breastfeeding, food processing and home gardening, then husbands and mothers-in-law also took these issues more seriously. This suggests that involving different male and female household members in training activities leads to improved household food security, livelihoods and nutrition.

Key results

Child wasting and maternal malnutrition were significantly reduced and in some cases virtually eliminated in the programme areas. The prevalence of severe acute malnutrition in children under age five fell to zero from initial prevalence rates of between 2.12 percent and 0.89 percent, then rising subsequently only to 0.02 percent and 0.04 percent. Moderate acute malnutrition fell from between 9 and 11 percent to 1 percent. Malnutrition in pregnant and lactating women fell less sharply from 7.0 percent to 5.1 percent.

The initiative also improved household food consumption. The percentage of households in the programme areas with gardens increased more than four-fold, and the percentage of household income derived from gardens and poultry increased more than three times, from 2.7 percent to 9.3 percent. This, however, is still far from adequate to eliminate food insecurity in these families.

Significant increases were also recorded in both school enrollment and attendance. There was also considerable anecdotal evidence of school children taking messages home that helped improve the quality and safety of family nutrition.

In the context of highly unequal power relationships with men and other family members, the agriculture and nutrition training empowered women by improving their social status. Their communities recognize them as resource persons and agents of change. Finally the women themselves grew more confident of their knowledge and capabilities to care for themselves and their families.



¹² Presented at the Asia and the Pacific Regional High Level Consultation on Gender, Food Security and Nutrition co-organized by ADB, FAO and WOCAN, in Bangkok 24-26 July 2013.