

GENDER AND NUTRITION

Women are in a unique position to reduce malnutrition, one of the largest threats to public health in the world.

NOURISHING THE WORLD

Chronic hunger and malnutrition typically go hand in hand, but there is no guarantee that an abundance of food will automatically stamp out malnutrition. Malnutrition is found in both developed and developing countries, even in households where people have enough to eat. Brought on, in part, by an improper selection of foods, malnutrition is one of the greatest threats to public health in the world. It takes an uneven toll on poor women and their children, leading directly or indirectly to an estimated 30 percent of all child deaths.

QUANTITY, QUALITY AND KNOW-HOW

Good nutrition requires access to a sufficient quantity and variety of safe, nutritious food, in addition to proper health and adequate care. But many vulnerable families lack the resources or information needed to maintain proper nutrition. A farmer may stand in a field brimming with maize, convinced that his family will be well fed after harvest time, while, instead, his children waste away from a lack of nutrients found in fruits and vegetables. Real food security requires not only the absence of hunger but also a diet which supports normal growth and a healthy, active life.

COPING MECHANISMS

When economic shocks, climate-related challenges or health problems strike a household, people tend to cope with the resulting loss in income or purchasing power by changing the quantity, quality and diversity of the food they consume. Clinics in poor, rural communities will frequently find that the mother of a malnourished child is able to produce a sufficient variety of vegetables and fruits at home, but will sell most of what she grows to earn cash for medicine, school fees and other foods.

WOMEN, MEN AND NUTRITION

More often than not, the face of malnutrition is female. In households which are vulnerable to food insecurity, women are at greater risk of malnutrition than men. Malnutrition in mothers, especially those who are pregnant or breastfeeding, can set up a cycle of deprivation that increases the likelihood of low birth weight, child mortality, serious disease, poor classroom performance and low work productivity.

KEY FACTS

- Malnutrition is the single largest contributor to disease in the world.
- Vulnerable women are at greater risk of malnutrition than men and more girls die of malnutrition than boys.
- Almost five million children under the age of five die of malnutrition-related causes every year in the developing world.
- Dependence on mostly staple foods and lack of crop and dietary diversity can contribute to malnutrition.
- Social and economic inequalities between men and women often stand in the way of good nutrition.
- Many women in developing countries cultivate, purchase and prepare much of the food eaten by their families, but they often have limited access to information about nutrition.
- Poor women, especially those in female-headed households, tend to have less access than men to income, credit and other financial services and other resources needed to improve food security.
- Women require two and a half percent more dietary iron than men, and women need more protein than usual when pregnant and lactating.
- In many societies, men and boys are given priority when meals are served. This can contribute to undernutrition in women and girls.



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BOOSTING NUTRITION AROUND THE WORLD

- In Afghanistan, half the women of child-bearing age suffer from iron deficiency and 50% of the children under five suffer from chronic malnutrition. FAO trained local literacy facilitators to inform women's circles about topics like health, sanitation, nutrition, backyard and farm management techniques, business development and running small-scale enterprises.
- In Malawi, a high incidence of HIV and AIDS interferes with food production and income. Mothers and other adult caretakers of malnourished children improved their family diets by establishing small vegetable gardens at home. FAO provided seeds, tools and hands-on training in sustainable gardening, processing and preservation of foods for year-round use and nutritious food preparation.
- In Vietnam, a project to improve nutrition and reduce vitamin A deficiency placed a special focus on pregnant women and mothers of children under five years. The project led to an increase in mothers' knowledge about nutrition and greater use of vegetables in weaning children.

At specific stages in the lifecycle, women require more dietary iron than men, and when pregnant or breastfeeding, they should consume more protein. Still, they typically eat a lower quantity and variety of nutritious foods than their male counterparts. In rural, developing communities, a woman's nutritional needs are compounded by the multiple responsibilities which she has in the field and at home as a worker, mother and caretaker.

WHY GENDER MATTERS

Despite their vulnerability to malnutrition, women are in a unique position to improve nutrition in their households. They are responsible for growing, purchasing, processing and preparing most of the food which is consumed. Yet vulnerable women, especially those in female-headed households, frequently have limited access to nutrition information and the resources they need to improve food security, such as income, land, equipment, financial services and training.

Gender matters because initiatives to improve nutrition cannot achieve lasting success without taking into consideration the social, economic and biological differences between men and women and, in particular, the gender inequalities which stand in the way of good nutrition. FAO has found that projects which promote gender equality and the empowerment of women significantly improve nutrition and well-being for the entire household.

FAO STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE NUTRITION

- Collection of information on gender differences in food security, food production and consumption, and knowledge of nutritious local plants and ecosystems.
- The use of mixed-vegetable gardens at home, school and in the community to provide vulnerable households with varied food sources and nutrition training.
- Showing women and men how to improve dietary diversity and crop marketability through food processing, storage and cooking.
- Increasing women's access to land, financial services and alternative-income opportunities.
- Working with policy makers at the national and regional levels to include gender issues in their social and economic strategies.



For more information:

<http://www.fao.org/gender>

<http://www.fao.org/ag/agn>