



EMPOWERING WOMEN TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY OVERVIEW

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Women play important roles as producers of food, managers of natural resources, income earners, and caretakers of household food and nutrition security. Giving women the same access to physical and human resources as men could increase agricultural productivity, just as increases in women's education and improvements in women's status over the past quarter century have contributed to more than half of the reduction in the rate of child malnutrition. In many countries, increasing assets that women control also has a positive impact on the next generation, particularly on education and health.

Despite improvements in building women's capabilities, gender gaps in entitlements—the resources that women can command through available legal means—continue to persist. Improvements have been greatest in increasing opportunities to invest in and make use of human capital, but smallest in assuring women's rights to natural and physical capital. These disparities have serious consequences for wellbeing, not only for women themselves, but also for their families and for society.

Empowering women is key to achieving food security. These briefs consider different strategies for empowering women by strengthening their asset base—natural and physical capital, human capital, social and financial capital—and by providing the legal and institutional framework to guarantee their command over resources.

NATURAL AND PHYSICAL CAPITAL

Natural capital (land, water, trees, livestock, and other natural resources) and physical capital (buildings, houses, infrastructure such as roads and electricity, transportation, and various technologies) are the most tangible forms of assets. They play a major role not only in economic production, but also in providing security against difficult times. Rights to land and houses, in particular, also convey status and power within a community.

Yet these assets are unequally distributed between men and women. Even where women are primarily responsible for food production (as in many African societies), land is owned or controlled by men. Women acquire use rights through relationships to a man—usually a husband or father; maintaining those rights depends on continuing the relationship. As a result, women's productivity is often constrained because they do not have rights to make decisions, and often cannot get credit without land rights. Just as significantly, women's dependence on men for use rights reduces their security because they can lose the right to use land if they are widowed or divorced. Thus, measures to increase women's control over land are important strategies to empower rural women.

Women often have primary responsibility for domestic water uses like drinking, cooking, and washing. Lack of access to clean

convenient water sources costs women millions of dollars and hours in time and labor to fetch water, and adds the burden of caring for those ill from polluted supplies. Responsibilities to collect water or care for the sick can also limit girls' school attendance. Domestic water supply programs often overlook women's productive uses of water for irrigation, household gardens, livestock, or other enterprises. Irrigation and other water supply programs need to make stronger efforts to include women and to ensure that they have decisionmaking rights over water.

Limited in their control over land, women may try to accumulate other assets, such as livestock, that are culturally and economically valuable, and provide needed micronutrients. Expanding women's control over livestock contributes to their empowerment and their family's welfare by increasing their incomes and access to nutritious food, as well as by increasing their skill base, confidence, and social networks. Roads, transportation, and communications infrastructure may also empower women by offering greater mobility for marketing, seeking health care, attending school, and networking. This is especially important to women who are often tied to their homes. Infrastructure that supplies energy can reduce the time or drudgery for food processing, cooking, and cleaning, freeing women's time for other productive activities, caring for their families, or even much-needed recreation. Technology designed specifically to address their needs can empower women by increasing their productivity or reducing their workloads.

HUMAN CAPITAL

In contrast to natural and physical capital, there have been dramatic improvements in women's human capital capabilities in the last few decades. In the last twenty-five years, life expectancy has increased 20 percent faster for females than for males, fertility rates have declined, and gaps in educational attainment have begun to close. Such investment in women's human capital is important, since women are both agents of and beneficiaries of development. Investment in their human capital, more than any other form of investment, increases women's capabilities, expands opportunities available to them, and empowers them to exercise their choices. And there is evidence that women, their families, and their countries—and the world, by extension—will benefit in terms of improved food and nutrition security.

Improving women's education is probably the single most important policy instrument to increase agricultural productivity and reduce poverty. Women's education also leads to lower fertility and child mortality, as well as better health, nutrition, and educational outcomes for children. Despite this, in many poor countries, notably in Sub-Saharan Africa, women's educational



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levels are still low, and in other regions, such as South Asia, gender gaps in schooling are still large. Policymakers have thus attempted to experiment with subsidies and service delivery schemes in order to increase women's education.

For many poor women, working as agricultural wage laborers may be their only contribution to family income. Often, women face barriers to working outside the home, resulting from cultural preferences for female seclusion, or domestic responsibilities such as childcare and providing fuel and water. Returns to female labor increase with female education, so higher rates of female labor force participation are typically observed in countries and regions with higher levels of female education. The Latin American experience suggests that progress is possible for women in the labor market, although barriers to female employment—lack of child care and racial and ethnic discrimination, for example—still exist.

Women's health and nutrition demonstrate most vividly the intergenerational payoffs to investing in women's human capital. Unlike disease, nutritional status is cumulative over time, and influences the nutritional status of the next generation. Malnutrition that occurs during childhood, adolescence, and pregnancy has an additive negative impact on the birth weight of future babies. Social, economic, and cultural factors, as well as the biological requirements of childbirth and lactation, have led to women's higher vulnerability to malnutrition relative to men. Women need to be empowered to look after their own nutrition as well as those of their families.

SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL CAPITAL

Working through groups is one major mechanism through which outside programs and women themselves can improve the status of women. In fact, the networks and collective action that groups generate are being recognized as assets in themselves. Social capital may be one asset in which gender inequalities are not as pronounced, or in which women even hold an advantage. Microfinance is perhaps the best-known type of program that works through women's groups. Group savings, credit, and insurance programs for women substitute collective action through the groups for conventional assets (such as land) as collateral.

Although microfinance programs may include insurance provisions, broader safety nets are required to reduce women's vulnerability to unexpected changes in weather, prices, economy, health, or relationships. Family and friendship networks have historically provided some measure of social security, but they have often been inadequate for the very poor, and pressures of migration and broader change are breaking down the institutions that provided such security. Thus formal, externally assisted safety net programs with explicit provisions for women are also required.

LEGAL RIGHTS

Finally, legal and institutional frameworks provide the basis for women to legitimately lay claim to all the types of assets mentioned above. Legal rights and voice in the political system are

“political capital” that enables women to strengthen their rights over other assets. In many countries, constitutions state equality before the law as a foundation of the legal system. International conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and the follow-up Special Session of the General Assembly (Beijing+5) have also played an important role in promoting women's legal rights and helping nongovernmental and advocacy groups in countries to make their national governments accountable. While many countries have promulgated statutory laws to reform discriminatory customary practices, they have often had unintended effects. If women are poor and uneducated, they may not be aware of the provisions of the law. Egalitarian laws and norms work best when both men and women have economic opportunities. Reforming the legal system and increasing women's asset base are thus complementary activities needed for women's empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Empowering women by strengthening their control over a range of assets is critical for enhancing their welfare as well as improving the status of future generations. Three broad types of action are required:

1. Change statutory laws to strengthen women's entitlements and increase the enforceability of their claims over natural and physical assets. Gender disparities in natural and physical capital persist partly because the legal framework supports property rights systems that are biased against women. Social and cultural institutions also need to be changed to create an environment where women can realize their full potential.
2. Design and implement creative programs enabling women to use and benefit from their own resources and capabilities. Such programs could include groups that provide women opportunities to build social capital or substitute for their lack of physical and financial assets.
3. Increase women's ability to actively participate in the development process by changing perceptions and increasing awareness of both men and women themselves. Women need to be empowered to make their own choices and to respond to increasing opportunities. Investing in women's human capital through education and training and removing barriers to the productive use of women's time and energy are key to sustainable and gender-sensitive food policy.

For further reading see *Women: The Key to Food Security; Looking Into the Household, Issues Brief 1* (IFPRI, June 2000); L. Smith and L. Haddad, *Explaining Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries: A Cross-Country Analysis, Research Report 111* (IFPRI, 2000); R. Meinzen-Dick, L. Brown, H. Feldstein, and A. Quisumbing, “Gender, Property Rights, and Natural Resources”

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