

Our secret weapon against hunger: gender equality and women's empowerment

by Olivier De Schutter

There are at least three reasons why the promotion of gender equality and women's rights should be seen as a key component of any policy aiming at improving food security.

The first reason is that it may significantly improve the productivity of the activities in which women are involved as food producers. Women comprise close to half of the world's agricultural labor force, including two-thirds of all livestock keepers, twelve percent of fisher folk, and a large share of agro forestry workers. But they face a number of obstacles both as independent food producers and as waged agricultural workers or in the processing industry. Removing these obstacles would lead to an increase in their contributions to the food system and lead to an overall increase in food available.

This first argument was presented in detail by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in its flagship publication, the *State of Food and Agriculture*, in 2010. It noted for instance that, while all smallholders face constraints in having access to financial resources, "in most countries the share of female smallholders who can access credit is 5–10 percentage points lower than for male smallholders."¹ The lack of access to credit diminishes the amount of assets female smallholders can obtain, thereby perpetuating a gender asset gap in whole regions such as South-East Asia.² And the gap is one that is difficult to bridge: in Bangladesh, where microcredit programs are particularly strong, the change in percentage of women receiving loans was minimal despite the emergence of programs specifically geared towards women.³

Access to inputs and technology are decisive in explaining the difference in yields between male and female smallholders. When International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) researchers reviewed the existing literature on fertilizer, seed varieties, tools, and pesticide use, they found that 79 percent of the studies concluded that men have higher mean access to these inputs.⁴ Yet, the literature also shows that with equal access to inputs, yields for men and women are very similar: since the current yield gaps are between 20-30 percent, a more equitable distribution of inputs may therefore significantly contribute to increasing overall production.⁵ One study on Burkina Faso concludes that reallocating inputs more equitably between male-controlled and female-controlled plots could increase overall output by 10-20 percent.⁶

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization 2010, *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010 – Women in Agriculture* (hereafter: SOFA 2010), p. 38.

² In China the evidence shows better financial access (ibid., p. 34).

³ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴ A. Peterman, J. Behrman and A. Quisumbing, *A Review of Empirical Evidence on Gender Differences in Nonland Agricultural Inputs, Technology, and Services in Developing Countries*, IFPRI, Washington DC, 2010, p. 6.

⁵ SOFA 2010, p. 40.

⁶ C. Udry, J. Hoddinott, H. Alderman and L. Haddad, "Gender differentials in farm productivity: implications for household efficiency and agricultural policy", *Food Policy*, 20(5) (2005): 407–423.

Access to inputs and technology alone is not enough, however. Without adequate training services directed towards them, populated by female agricultural extension workers, improved access to inputs may not be sufficient to improve yields significantly.⁷ A recent study in Zimbabwe also shows that de facto female heads of household receive lower prices for their output and do not have access to the same selling consortiums as men, so that disadvantages due to market access will still persist.⁸ In other terms, for productivity increases to result from a more gender-sensitive approach to the allocation of resources, all the elements of the production chain should be re-examined, from access to land to access to technology and capital, and from extension services to marketing opportunities: tackling one or some of these elements in isolation may not significantly improve outcomes.

A second, far less obvious reason why gender equality should play a greater role in discussions concerning food security, is because taking into account this dimension may change our perspective about the direction of agricultural development as a whole, and where the key investments should be made in the future. Take for instance the ongoing discussion between the two directions in which modern food supply chains are moving. On the one hand, the growth of markets for high-value crops (particularly for fresh fruit and vegetables) -- driven both by increased export opportunities and by the "supermarketization" of the food retail sector -- takes the form of contract farming, in which small, independent farmers produce crops with the support of buyers: the buyers provide access to credit, technology and inputs, in exchange of which the farmer commits to sell a predefined portion of his or her produce to the buyer, in accordance with conditions specified in advance. On the other hand, vertical integration in modern supply chains also leads to the growth of estate farming: large, more mechanized plantations, relying on the labor of waged agricultural workers, and generally better equipped to achieve the economies of scale required by the modern food industry.

Which of these two pathways should be encouraged? Because of the contribution that smaller-scale, "family" farming makes to rural development and because of the importance of the production of food crops for local consumption to local food security, there has been a general tendency especially among non-governmental organizations to prioritize contract farming, and to express concern at the displacement of this more labor-intensive type of farming by large agro-industrial estates. Yet, we now have come to understand that contract farming is strongly biased in favor of men. Even though the women may be doing most of the work on the family plot of land, it is almost always the men that are contracted by the buyer, both because they are considered the formal owners of the land and because they can command the work of the family members. It is also the men who receive the cash and, often, decide how it should be allocated, worsening the position of women within households.⁹ Thus, research done on large contract-farming schemes involving many thousands of farmers in China showed that the contracts were exclusively with men.¹⁰ In bean contract farming in Kenya, while women performed most of the work, they received a limited portion of the revenues from the contract; in addition, where they received cash, they were expected to contribute to the expenditures of the household even where this would normally have been the husband's responsibility.¹¹ In a 1997 study, Porter and Philips-Horward report that in sugar contract schemes in South Africa the majority of contractors are

⁷ V. Bindlish, R. Evenson & M. Gbetibouo, Evaluation of T&V-based extension in Burkina Faso. World Bank Technical Paper No. 226. Africa Technical Department Series. Washington, DC, World Bank, 1993.

⁸ S. Horrell and P. Krishnan, "Poverty and Productivity in Female-Headed Households in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Development Studies* 43 (8) (2007): 1351–1380.

⁹ I have discussed this in detail in a report to the 66th session of the UN General Assembly (see UN doc. A/66/262, 4 August 2011).

¹⁰ C. Eaton and A. Sheperd, Contract Farming: Partnerships for Growth. FAO Agricultural Service Bulletin No 145, 2011.

¹¹ C. Dolan, *Gender and Witchcraft in Agrarian Transition: The Case of Kenyan Horticulture*, 33 DEV. AND CHANGE 659, 671 (2002).

men.¹² Empirical research on the French bean export sector in Senegal found that, in the sample considered, only one out of the 59 contracted bean farmers was a woman.¹³

In contrast, it has been shown that women can benefit significantly from the creation of employment on agro-industrial estates. Although it is not unusual for women to be disproportionately employed in seasonal or part-time work, and although instances have been reported in which the wages paid to women were lower than those of men, there are also studies that conclude that agro-industrial estates recruit primarily among women, and that by receiving wages, women significantly improve their bargaining position within the household. That is not to say, of course, that discrimination against women is absent in waged agricultural work: it exists, and it must be combated. But just like contract farming should not be idealized, on-farm waged employment should not be demonized -- and in our assessment of the respective benefits of both pathways towards modernized food supply chains, and of the various combinations that can exist between them, the gender dimension has a key role to play.

A third area in which the contribution of gender equality to food security is both significant and widely underestimated is in social protection. Both because *access* to food, rather than food *availability*, is the major obstacle to the ability for each individual to enjoy the right to adequate food, and because of the increasingly high rate of urbanization in all regions, the right to social security is key to the effective realization of the right to food. Yet, in the design and implementation of social protection programmes, the gender dimension is often either entirely overlooked, or is simply reduced to a question of "targeting women", i.e., ensuring that they, too, benefit from social protection schemes that should in principle be accessible to all.¹⁴

But the situation of women is specific in a number of ways, and calls for a design of social protection that takes that specificity into account. For instance, far more than men, women face difficulties in balancing income-generating opportunities outside the home with domestic chores: in Viet Nam, economically active rural women spend seven hours a day on domestic tasks, while their male partners spent 30 minutes on such chores.¹⁵ They may face mobility barriers that men do not. Because they generally are the first ones to make sacrifices in times of economic difficulty, they are the most susceptible to ill-health in crises, and even countries that have generally robust schemes to protect the population against famine or severe under-nutrition may fail to protect women and girls as well as men and boys. India is a case in point : while a range of programmes exist against severe malnutrition, including the Public Distribution System (PDS) (entitling households below the poverty line to subsidised rice and wheat), the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) (providing up to 100 days of employment at minimum wage to poor households), and the national midday meal scheme provision in primary schools, women and girls continue to suffer from wider rates of malnutrition than men and boys, a situation that appears to have worsened in the 1990s.¹⁶ The decision-making power of women within the household is generally weaker

¹² G. Porter and K. Philips-Horward, Comparing Contracts: An Evaluation of Contract Farming Schemes in Africa. *World Development*, 25(2) (1997): 227-238.

¹³ M. Maertens and J.F. Swinnen, Gender and Modern Supply Chains in Developing Countries, LICOS Centre for Institutions and Economic Performance, Discussion paper 231/2008, p. 12.

¹⁴ On why this is insufficient, see R. Holmes and N. Jones, *Social Protection Programming: The Need for A Gender Lens*, Overseas Development Institute Briefing Paper 63, Oct. 2010 (noting that 'many programmes [assume] that the transfer of economic resources to women will automatically translate into their empowerment in the household and beyond. However, few have prioritised transforming intra-household relations in their design to ensure that increased household income or benefits are allocated equally or to challenge inequalities in decision-making, ownership or divisions of labour in the household').

¹⁵ Le Anh Tu Packard, *Gender Dimensions of Viet Nam's Comprehensive Macroeconomic and Structural Reform Policies*, UNRISD Occasional Paper 14 (February 2006).

¹⁶ M. Gragnolati, M. Shekar, M. Das Gupta, C. Bredenkamp and Y.-K. Lee, *India's Undernourished Children: A Call for Reform and Action*. HNP Discussion Paper. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005.

than that of men, so that benefits going to the household may not benefit them equally. Women, more than men, also are vulnerable to being abandoned by their partner, in which they face a stigma and a social isolation that their male counterparts would not face in a similar situation.

Yet, despite all these specificities, only a minority of social protection schemes effectively integrate the gender dimension into their design and implementation. In 2010, a multi-country review that examined cash transfers in Ghana and Peru; asset transfers in Bangladesh; public works in Ethiopia and India; and subsidised food and services in Indonesia, Mexico and Viet Nam, found that only in Bangladesh and Mexico was women's empowerment a key part part of the programme. In Bangladesh, the Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction (CFPR) programme, which provides for the transfer of productive assets (such as small livestock) to support income generation activities of poor households and covers some 272,000 women, the women are expected to participate in the specially created Village Poverty Reduction Committees, which include local village elites and staff from the NGO (Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC)) implementing the programme. In Mexico, the *Estancias* programme (*Programa Estancias Infantiles para Apoyar a Madres Trabajadoras* -- Child Care Programme to Support Working Mothers) was explicitly designed to fulfil a gender equality objective, by supporting mothers who are working (mostly in the informal sector), looking for a job or studying, as well a single fathers responsible for the care of children, through a subsidy to access child care services.¹⁷

Ensuring equality between women and men and moving towards the better empowerment of women at household, community and State levels, are important objectives in themselves, and a requirement under international human rights law. But they also have an instrumental value : strengthening the status of women and their decision-making power within the household over the family budget, in particular, entails important benefits both for household food security and for children's health, nutrition and education.¹⁸ This is why no food security strategy is likely to succeed without taking into account this dimension. Strengthening women's rights is the secret weapon against hunger.

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¹⁷ R. Holmes and N. Jones, *Rethinking Social Protection Using a Gender Lens*, Overseas Development Institute Working Paper 320, 2010.

¹⁸ Man-Kwun Chan, *Improving Opportunities for Women in Smallholder-based Supply Chains*, for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010, p. 23; M. Walsh, *Women in Food Aid Interventions: Impacts and Issues*, Time for Change: Food Aid and Development, WFP, Rome, 23–24 October 1998 (concluding that a child's chances of survival increase by 20 per cent when the mother controls the household budget).