

The Role of Gender Equity in Promoting Food Security and Nutrition in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Food Security, at the individual, household, national, regional, and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy and active life (FAO, 2001). There is a strong link between food security, good nutrition and gender. A gender approach to food security can enable shifts in gender power relations and assure that all people, regardless of gender, benefit from, and are empowered by development policies and practices to improve food security and nutrition. The centrality of gender equity for inclusive development is a concept that is not contestable. The manifestations of inequality predicated on gender are myriad. These range from unequal access to educational opportunities, gender-based discrimination and social norms that constrain the participation of women and other groups that are unfairly marginalized from the development process. This brief gives an overview on why and how to consider gender aspects in both short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term development cooperation that address food security in Kenya.

KEYWORDS: *Gender Equity, Food Security, Nutrition*

INTRODUCTION

Food security can be defined as a situation where all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy active life. There is a strong link between food security, good nutrition and gender. A gender approach to food security can enable shifts in gender power relations and assure that all people, regardless of gender, benefit from, and are empowered by development policies and practices to improve food security and nutrition. The indicators of food security are; food production, income, total expenditure, food expenditure, share of expenditure on food, calorie consumption and nutritional status. Every woman, man and child has the right to adequate food. In many cases, women and girls are overrepresented among those who are food-insecure, partly because women often are denied basic human rights such as the right to own property, to find decent work, and to have an education and good health. People's overall access to food relies to a great extent on the work of rural women. Women comprise, in average, 43 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries. (FAO, 2011) Hence, securing women's

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human rights is a key strategy in assuring food security for all. Women are involved in a variety of agricultural operations such as crops, livestock and fish farming. They produce food and cash crops at subsistence and commercial levels. At community level women undertake a range of activities that support natural resource management and agricultural development, such as soil and water conservation, afforestation and crop domestication.

Similarly there is a link between women social status and nutrition. The wide difference in women's nutrition among countries that have similar income levels indicate that something other than income affects women's nutrition. Research indicates that cultural norms about eating and women's low social status often affect women's diets. In 2003, India and Bolivia had similar gross national incomes but 36 percent of Indian women were underweight compared to 1 percent of Bolivian women. (Ransom and Elder, 2003).

In 2019 several parts of Kenya that is Turkana and North Eastern were hit by drought. This led to food insecurity and malnutrition among the residents. In

2022 the same scenario has been witnessed in North Eastern .This therefore calls for an intervention

GENDER AND FOOD SECURITY

Food security is built on three pillars;

1. Food availability. Sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis
2. Food access. Sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet.
3. Food use. Appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care as well as adequate water and sanitation.

Food security issues at household levels are women's issues since men are more involved in paid work and most of them don't like farm work and would prefer working in offices or other white collar jobs. The FAO records that women produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food in most Sub-Saharan African countries and are responsible for half of the world's food production (FAO, 1998). Women produce and process food and use diverse coping strategies for ensuring food security for their households.

According to the African Development Bank (2007), female headed households were more food insecure than the male headed ones. This situation is attributed to various factors that include;

Undervaluing and limiting women's access to resources, services and labor market opportunities. Studies show that in most regions of the world, ladies tend to perform the bulk of unpaid work in both agricultural production and the "care" economy such as childcare, fetching water and fuel wood, purchasing and preparing food, cleaning and caring for the sick and elderly (Folbre 2006; Kabeer 2012). Without paying them then it means they find it hard to acquire foodstuff and meals to feed their household and therefore threatening the food security of their household. They are also unable to fulfill their traditional roles in caregiving and foods systems.

Women also face barriers to membership in rural organizations and cooperatives, agricultural inputs and technology such as improved seedlings, training and extension as well as marketing services. This jeopardizes their efforts of realizing food security in their households. A review of literature by IFPRI on the use of fertilizer, seed varieties, tools and pesticides show that more men have access to the stated inputs as compared women (Peterman et al. 2010).

High levels of unemployment among females compared to males in Kenya. A study carried out by African Women Studies Centre (2014a) found that

more women were unemployed compared to men. It also indicated that more women are likely to be engaged in informal economy compared to men. Most of the informal economy jobs are casual, risky and exhibit low productivity and low pay. Due to inadequate wages women will find it hard to maintain food security in their households and also limiting their possibilities of buying foods for their households.

Women have less power compared to men. For women to be able to access food they need to have power; power to produce, power to purchase and power to access food in intra household allocation mechanism. When women have less power than men, it translates directly into weaker access to food (Patel 2012). A low bargaining power among women is associated with lower food security and nutrition levels in their households. (Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003).

Inadequate education and outdated social traditions among women. Most women are denied a chance to be educated, this usually limit their ability to improve food security status for their households and communities at large as they are faced with high levels of illiteracy. Outdated social traditions include differential feeding and caregiving practices that favor men over women and boys over girls in food allocations within households and thus leading to poorer nutritional outcomes for women.

Cultural factors that favor men over women. In cases where crop fails due to harsh climatic conditions, cultural factors often make it easier for men to leave their farms in search of employment elsewhere thus leaving behind women to struggle feeding their families and make ends meet. In many of these cases the women left behind have diminished assets and resources to help them plan for and potentially avert the next crisis.

Discrimination in terms of reluctance on the part of input providers to lend credit for fertilizer purchases to households headed by women as compared to men headed households. The discrimination can also be in the form of fewer opportunities for women to borrow money or buy food on credit.

Rural women often spend a large amount of their time on additional household obligations rather than involving themselves in activities to deal with food production or other income opportunities. Such actions threatens the position of food security in households headed by women.

Inadequate attention paid to women who are farmers, producers and farm works; both wage and non-wage and especially the rural women who

practice small scale farming. Such women work as unpaid workers on their own plots and those of others.

GENDER AND NUTRITION

The World Health Organization (WHO) cites malnutrition as the single threat to the world's public health and the biggest contributor to child mortality in the world. Countries with the most alarming hunger status are predominantly located in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya inclusive) where one in three persons suffers from chronic hunger (WHO, 2014). FAO (2012) reports that about 870 million people are estimated to have been undernourished in terms of dietary energy supply. It is generally the work of women to ensure food security and nutrition at the household level worldwide. Generally women are more likely to spend their income on the well being of their families, through their participation in activities such as food processing and preparation. Studies have found a relationship between nutrition, especially children's nutrition and women empowerment. The results indicated that countries with the most severe hunger problems have the highest levels of gender inequality. An IFRI (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2009) study explored the relationship between women's status in the households and children's nutrition. The study found out that women with higher status have better nutritional status themselves, are better cared for and provide higher quality care for their children and often child hunger is inherited; a mother who is stunted or underweight due to inadequate diet will often give birth to low birth weight children. However, their productivity is constrained by lower access to productive resources and services which has implications for production, food security, economic growth and the well being of their families, communities and countries.

In Kenya, North Eastern, Turkana, West Pokot regions have hard hit by hunger and malnutrition among the children. These regions are known for discriminating against women

The following are ways through which gender mainstreaming can be used to improve food security

- There should be reforms in laws that restrict women's ownership of or access to productive resources such as access to land, credit and other productive resources that will increase the productivity of land and help boost food security at household and community level. The poor rural women should have secure tenure or similar rights of access to land and other

productive resources. If women have the same access to productive resources as men, there will be an increase in the farm yields. FAO (2013) claims that women would produce 20 to 30 per cent more food than men if they had access to the same resources such as land as men.

- Ensuring that climate smart agriculture initiatives are gender responsive. Changes in climate calls for new approaches in agriculture that employs policies and agro practices which ensure food security. Because of the gender imbalance in the agricultural sector affects how men and women contribute to and benefit from climate smart agriculture, the latter should be closely attuned to the unique needs and means of women and men.
- Ensuring that women's needs are catered for when developing agricultural technology and extension services. New technology and practices such as developing drought resistant crops, irrigation practices, dams construction that are aimed at improving food security .i.e. by bringing water closer to people, can only be achieved and be effective if women are involved in the development process and their needs catered for. Rural women in particular should be considered in the process.
- Collecting data on gender disparities in agriculture and food security. The data can be collected using indicators such as impact level indicator that looks at the share of population (women/men) in targeted areas suffering from starvation. Other data such as data on access to land tenure security, finance, extension services and agricultural tools. This will be helpful for designing gender responsive policies and monitoring on the same.
- Women's empowerment through education. Studies carried out in developing countries (1990-1995) found out that there was reduction in hunger attributed to progress in women's education. Education helps them to know the right nutritional value of certain foods and the right quantities for both themselves and their families
- Allowing equal participation of men and women in decision making, planning, implementation and management of food aid programmes. This is because gender inequality undermines sustainable and inclusive development of the agriculture sector. Results of the programmes addressing in access to productive resources have shown improvement not only in productivity and food and nutrition

security but also in the status of women. It has been recognized that additional income in the hands of women increase the budget share spent on basic household needs (Duncan 1997, Hoddinolt and Haddad 1995).

- Adopting mother and child health nutrition programmes. These will break gender barriers in childcare by including men and boys in nutrition and health education activities.
- Ensure that women have access to support facilities in the agricultural sector that will foster food security. Such support facilities include, access to affordable energy source for preparation of food, access to better storage facilities, access to markets to purchase foods which they do not produce themselves at affordable prices, access to proper infrastructure to transport the produce for sale or access food in the market. All these are aimed at achieving sustainability of food security.
- Women enjoying equal participation in the labor market. There should be government legislation that protects the interests of female workers in both formal and informal employment. When women have opportunities in the labor market they have more income at their disposal and this makes it easy for them to access food products thus improving the status of food security in their households.

In conclusion, where women have power to make decisions at household levels, particularly among agricultural communities their families are more likely to be food secure, therefore both men and women play crucial roles in food security and nutrition.

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