

A VITAL LINK: FOOD, LAND AND GENDER

Within 30 years, we will have 2 billion new people to feed. To achieve food security, we must understand the role of women in food production and environmental protection.

 by Samira Omar Asem



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Developing countries are facing problems related to food security and environmental degradation manifested by climate change phenomena, poor economic growth and political instability. The high population in these regions puts more pressure on natural resources in land and sea and more demand for food commodities.

Food security means access to enough food by all people at all times for an active and healthy life, contributing to more effective economic development. The World Bank and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) suggest that about 800 million people in the developing world lack the food necessary for such a life. Asia and Africa show the highest numbers of undernourished people (525.6 million people in Asia and 226.7 million in Africa).

Availability and access to food are affected by population growth, demographic trends, economic development, government policies, income levels, health, nutrition, gender, environmental degradation, natural disasters, refugees, migration disease and concentrated resource ownership. These problems are beyond any national boundaries and extend throughout regions and around the world.

By 2045, we will have 9 billion people to feed, exerting more pressure on agricultural resources such as land and water. However,

it is believed that the degradation in the environment and decline in quality and quantity of available resources, as well as ignorance of gender-related impacts, are the main causes for food insecurity.

It is only recently that the world realized the important role women play in food security in many developing countries. Studies have shown that environmental constraints, land scarcity, armed conflicts and migration of men to cities to look for better wages or jobs reduced male labor in rural areas. That increases the number of female-headed households. As a result, women are taking on new agricultural and income-earning responsibilities.

FAO studies showed that by neglecting women's role in agriculture, development opportunities in developing countries will be lost. Empowerment of women is, therefore a logical priority of agriculture programmes and policies that seek to promote agricultural development, poverty reduction and development of food security.

Hunger reduction requires an integrated approach, which includes: public and private investments to raise agricultural productivity; better access to inputs, land, services, technologies and markets and rural development, including strengthening their resilience to conflicts and natural disasters. Specific nutrition programmes targeting micronutrient deficiency in women and children need to be targeted for hunger reduction.

Poverty, food insecurity and environmental impact often coexist. Indeed, they are a self-reinforcing cycle. To improve food security, policymakers need to integrate agricultural development with environmental considerations and awareness of gender issues. ■



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