UN report: Women's education key to food security

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Improving education for women could dramatically reduce hunger in developing countries, says a United Nations report released today (4 March) that also calls for erasing gender inequalities in land ownership and financing to help address future food security.

Background

The EU adopted a five-year Gender Action Plan for its development aid programme in 2010. The plan calls for using development aid to achieved the UN Millennium Development Goals on gender equality and maternal health. It also calls for:

- Strengthen the lead role of the EU in promoting gender equality in development;
- Place gender equality issues on the agenda of political and development policy discussions with countries receiving EU aid;
- Giving civil society a greater role in gender equality advocacy and projects;
- Improving EU monitoring, accountability and transparency on allocation of funds for gender equality in development;
- Combatting gender violence and discrimination.

Women account for upwards of 30% of the food producers globally yet face major handicaps, including restrictions on land and inheritance rights, plus unequal footing when it comes to finance and technology, says the report released by the UN’s special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter.

“If women are allowed to have equal access to education, various pieces of the food security jigsaw will fall into place,” De Schutter said in releasing the report, ‘Gender and the Right to Food’.

“Household spending on nutrition will increase, child health outcomes will improve, and social systems will be redesigned – for women, by women – to deliver support with the greatest multiplier effects.”

The report was released five days after the European Commission outlined its negotiating positions on the successor to the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that expire in 2015.

EU also pushing gender equality

The Commission’s ‘Decent Life for All’ communication said the post-2015 framework for reducing world poverty should “put particular emphasis on moving towards a rights-
based approach to development, on reducing inequalities, as well as on the promotion and protection of women's and girls' rights and gender equality, transparency and the fight against corruption.”

The "decent life" roadmap also calls for the EU to carry through with goals set out in its 2010-2015 global gender action plan, which calls for using the EU’s muscle as a major development donor to encourage aid recipients to improve opportunities for women and girls.

The UN rapporteur’s report says the education of women is “the single most important determinant” of food security. It says a 43% reduction in hunger in developing countries can be attributed to progress in educating women, compared to 26% for better access to food.

Besides education, calls for governments to do more to help female food producers through public works projects, such as improving irrigation for farms, and changing laws to allow women to own or inherit land.

“Evidence suggests that countries where women lack land ownership rights or access to credit have on average 60% and 85% more malnourished children,” it says.

Resource imbalances also need to be addressed, the rapporteur said in the report. Women have less access to fertilisers, pesticides seeds, tools and technology – part of the broader limitations to the market and to agriculture cooperatives and organisations – he said.

**Social safety net**

De Schutter, a law professor in Belgium, and his colleague Magdalena Sepúlveda, a lawyer from Chile who serves as the UN special rapporteur for extreme poverty, last October urged advanced countries to pay into the Global Fund for Social Protection that developing nations can tap to co-finance insurance schemes.

De Schutter’s gender report also calls for improving social protections for women farmers, who also must cope with household duties and providing care to children and the elderly in addition to tending crops.

The rapporteur’s recommendations reflect similar suggestions made in the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s annual ‘State of Food and Agriculture’. That analysis sees gender equality as part of the overall need to improve food production and efficiency to handle the planet’s anticipated population growth from 7 billion to 9 billion over the next 40 years.

“Closing the gender gap and ensuring equal access by women to resources and assets is indispensable for accelerating agricultural and rural development and poverty alleviation,” the FAO report says.

**Next Steps**

- **8 March**: International Women's Day
- **Sept. 2013**: UN General Assembly to consider proposals for a successor to the Millennium Development Goals.