Are women the secret weapon in the battle for food security?

Empowering women at every level of society would dramatically reduce hunger and malnutrition, according to a top UN official.

The notion that gender equality can play an important role in reducing hunger and malnutrition has gained increasing traction in development circles. The UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation claimed in its 2010-11 State of Food and Agriculture report that equal access to agricultural resources could reduce world hunger by 12-17%. Gender and food security also came under the spotlight in the 2012 edition of the World Bank’s flagship annual report, where it was argued that parity in areas including land rights, employment and political representation could improve development outcomes.

These ideas are not new. Obliged to raise children, care for sick and elderly people, and run households — work that, valued in monetary terms, would be equivalent to 15% of GDP in low-income countries, rising to 35% in middle-income countries— it has long been argued that women are being denied education opportunities, marginalising them both economically and politically. The challenge lies in convincing policymakers to do something about these multiple challenges.

So, given the task of exploring the issues surrounding gender and food security, what fresh impetus could Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, lend the debate?

Well, for a start he hopes to persuade governments of the need for wholesale change at every level of society. "We must address how gender roles are being defined within the family and who makes the decisions in government," says De Schutter.

"We must refuse to take existing gender roles as givens, and instead allow women to shift the burden to men where possible, giving women access to more opportunities and better training and education, and exposure to something other than the traditional responsibilities they have been assuming."
One way of achieving this, De Schutter suggests, would be to offer access to education and business training for women participating in public works programmes. Another would be to make cash transfer mechanisms and healthcare initiatives conditional on fathers undertaking childcare training, where the importance of adequate nutrition for pregnant women and young children could be impressed upon them.

Crucially, says De Schutter, discrimination against women as food producers must be ended. Female farmers must be given equal access to land, extension services, credit and other resources so that they have greater opportunity and choice. "Women who want to succeed as commercial farmers do not have the same opportunities as men, and women who want to remain in small-scale family farming find it very difficult because of the burdens they shoulder," he says.

States must also invest more in women, argues De Schutter – not so much by finding new money, which may be difficult in the economic climate, as by channelling existing resources more effectively.

De Schutter's big idea – outlined in his Gender and Food Security (pdf) report, which was submitted to the human rights council on Monday – is to persuade governments that the empowerment and education of women is a secret weapon against food insecurity, a low-cost way to significantly reduce hunger and malnutrition.

"The scarce funds that we have may be better spent focusing on women's needs. Instead of investing in tractors and high-quality seeds and fertilisers, we may wish to spend more on supporting piped water systems, and providing electricity and childcare services.

"It's a matter of ranking priorities, not increasing budgets. Big investments are made today in agriculture – the question for governments is how to spend the money. My message here is to say look, in making these choices, in selecting priorities, be aware that a productive investment is the one made in women – that is the secret weapon, or the shortcut, to reducing hunger and malnutrition."

Professor Maxine Molyneux, director of the Institute of the Americas at University College, London, applauded the study's findings. "This report is most welcome for highlighting the multiple deprivations that women suffer in agriculture and for showing how gender inequality undermines food security," she says.

"So many policies still neglect women's needs or deliver the minimum to them, and then we wonder why they fail. We need dynamic, imaginative policies to get low-income agricultural producers out of the poverty trap, and that transform unequal gender relations rather than reinforcing them. ... We need policymakers to listen to women, [and] to learn from them."

However, Dr Jasmine Gideon, a lecturer in development studies at the University of London's Birbeck College, identifies a lack of nuance in the report's approach and a vagueness about some of its terminology. "The report talks about things like precarious working conditions, land ownership rights and access to credit, but it doesn't talk about how these things fit into the bigger picture of what's happening in agriculture," she says.

"It doesn't look at things like the ownership of the means of production in the agricultural sector, which is predominantly male.

"It talks about women as an undifferentiated group, but there is much more complex research about socially assigned gender roles. It's not as straightforward as the way it's presented, where it seems to be a case of 'Poor women, they need a bit of help' – which is not a very empowered vision of women."

De Schutter is optimistic the UN human rights council will adopt his central recommendations. These include greater state investment in women to liberate them from the burdens of the care economy; a redefinition of gender roles, particularly in terms of employment and social protection programmes; and the mainstreaming of gender concerns into policymaking.

But while this would oblige member states to report on progress, De Schutter believes local action is the real key to success. "If local NGOs and women's organisations and
unions mobilise, using the report to put pressure on the government from below, that will be even more effective than international pressure."

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