ACROSS the developing world, millions of people are migrating from farms to cities in search of work. The migrants are mostly men. As a result, women are increasingly on the front lines of the fight to sustain family farms. But pervasive discrimination, gender stereotypes and women's low social standing have frustrated these women's rise out of poverty and hunger.

Discrimination denies small-scale female farmers the same access men have to fertilizer, seeds, credit, membership in cooperatives and unions, and technical assistance. That deters potential productivity gains. But the biggest barriers don't even have to do with farming — and yet they have a huge impact on food security.

As sole or principal caregivers, women and girls often face a heavy burden of unremunerated household chores like cooking, cleaning, fetching water, collecting firewood and caring for the very young and the elderly. These uncompensated activities are equivalent to as much as 63 percent of gross domestic product in India and Tanzania. But they result in lost opportunities for women, who don’t have the time to attend classes, travel to markets to sell produce or do other activities to improve their economic prospects.

To be sure, some female-headed farm households get remittances from absent men, but that is often not enough to compensate for the economic pressures they face. And we know that when women get more education and improve their social and economic standing, household spending on nutrition increases, child health outcomes improve and small farms become more productive.

A 2000 study of developing countries by the International Food Policy Research Institute found that as much as 55 percent of the reduction in hunger from 1970 to 1995 could be attributed to improvements in women’s status in society. Progress in women’s education alone (which explained 43 percent of gains in food security) was nearly as significant as increased food availability (26 percent) and health advances (19 percent) put together.

Many governments have recognized the causes of the poverty trap but have not done enough to remove the obstacles facing women. For example, several Asian countries have introduced stipends to keep girls in school, but many schools lack adequate sanitation
facilities; there is a paucity of female teachers, which discourages socially conservative parents who do not want their daughters to be taught by men; and not enough is done to prevent farmers from pulling their children — girls first, usually — out of school to till the fields.

Countries like Indonesia have introduced microfinance programs to help women pursue small-business ideas instead of housework. But creditworthy women are sometimes used as intermediaries to obtain loans for businesses run by their male relatives.

In a report to the United Nations Human Rights Council that is being released today, I urge a comprehensive, rights-based approach focused on removing legal discrimination and on improving public services — child care, water supplies, sanitation and energy sources — to reduce the burden on women who farm. But such an approach must also systematically challenge the traditional gender roles that burden women with household chores in the first place.

In Bangladesh, a program begun in 2002 by a nonprofit group, Building Resources Across Communities, shows how this might be achieved. It provided women with poultry (easier to raise than pigs, cows, goats and sheep); subsidized legal and health services; clean water and sanitary latrines, and a temporary daily stipend to tide over extremely poor women who were working as maids for extra income, so that they could focus on farming. The program also secured support from local elites, who among other things could help ensure that the women’s children were enrolled in school.

In the Philippines, a conditional cash-transfer program, started in 2008, covers 3 million households. Aiming to improve women’s access to obstetric care, and to improve spending on children’s health and education, the program includes a “gender action plan” that requires that bank accounts be set up in women’s names (which protects their control of the money and prevents fraud); trains women on their rights with respect to domestic violence, child care, nutrition and other areas; and trains fathers to share responsibility as caregivers.

In Yunnan Province in western China, women’s groups were enlisted for a rural road-maintenance program in 2009. The participants, mostly drawn from ethnic minorities, received an average payment of $686 for an average of 110 workdays, allowing them to rise above poverty. The women were able to work while maintaining other income-generating activities like raising pigs or selling vegetables. They also got training to improve their agricultural productivity.

Recognizing the burden that the feminization of global farming places on women requires us to overturn longstanding gender norms that have kept women down even as they feed more and more of the world. The most effective strategies to empower women who tend
farm and family — and to alleviate hunger in the process — are to remove the obstacles that hinder them from taking charge of their lives.

Olivier De Schutter, a professor of law at the Catholic University of Louvain, is the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food.