UNHRC: Empowering Women Would Alleviate Hunger

by Lisa Schlein

The U.N. special investigator on the right to food said empowering women would help to reduce hunger and malnutrition. The investigator, who has just submitted his report to the U.N. Human Rights Council, says giving women the means to improve their situation also would improve the well-being of their families.

The report examines how discrimination against women keeps them powerless, forces them to work hard both inside and outside the home, denies them the right to education, and the opportunity to seek work that could improve their economic status.

U.N. Special investigator Olivier De Schutter said women increasingly face the burden of sustaining their farms and families. He said men in developing countries frequently move away from the farm in search of work. Yet, the women who are left behind to do the farming too often are denied the tools to thrive and better their situation.

He said women also have to care for their children and the elderly, fetch wood for fuel and water, prepare food, and do a multitude of other tasks. Women have no control over the household budget, though, he said.

"Women, when they are not able to decide where the household budget should go to, which priorities it should be dedicated to, are not in a position to improve as they could the health, educational, nutritional outcomes for the children," said De Schutter. "In fact there is research, as I describe in my report, showing that where women have decision-making power within the family, the chances of children surviving is increased by 20 percent simply because women make the right choices in the interest of the children."

De Schutter said that recent research shows the education of women to be one of the best ways of achieving food security. He said women who are educated marry later, have fewer children, are better able to make better and healthier choices for their families.

A study of developing countries over a 25-year period, 1970 to 1995, found a 43 percent reduction of hunger during that time was due to progress of women's education.

De Schutter said greater effort must be made in achieving gender equality.

"We will only succeed in doing this if men understand that they have a stake in this transformation, that they are not threatened by this transformation, but instead can have a lot to gain by this redefinition of the respective roles of men and women," said De Schutter. "And, we must do these reforms with men rather than against them... There are experiences that show that by involving men, it takes more time. It is more difficult to achieve, but it has more lasting impacts."

The U.N. investigator is calling for the removal of all discriminatory laws and practices that prevent women accessing farming resources such as land, input and credit.

A 2010 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization concludes if women had the same
access to productive resources as men - such as fertilizer, seed varieties, tools, and pesticides - they could increase yields on their farms by 20 percent to 30 percent.

He is urging governments to relieve women of many of their burdens and care responsibilities in the home by providing adequate public services such as childcare, running water and electricity.

http://www.voanews.com/content/unhrc_says_empowering_women_would_alleviate_hunger_malnutrition_de_schutter/1615033.html