States must pursue transformative food security strategies that address cultural constraints and redistribute roles between women and men.

Fight hunger and discrimination by empowering women – Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food

In rural areas around the world it is often men who migrate first to cities in search of waged labour. When they do so, it falls to women to sustain small-scale farms – and with them the food security of families and entire communities. Yet all too often women are denied the tools to improve their situation on and off the farm.

The burden of cooking, cleaning and caring for the young and elderly – not to mention fetching water and firewood – imposes a major time and mobility constraint on women and girls, which makes it impossible for them to attend school or training sessions. Lower levels of education mean that women have less access to economic opportunities, and in turn hold weak bargaining power within the household. As such they are often saddled with a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities, and the cycle of discrimination closes.

Women are thus held back from prospering on and off the farm, despite ample evidence now showing that women’s empowerment – as well as being necessary in order to fulfil their rights – is the single most important factor in reducing hunger, and that global hunger could be reduced by up to 17% if women had access to the same productive resources as men.

What must States do to break the cycle of discrimination and fight hunger by empowering women? They must go beyond piecemeal actions, and start to think systematically and holistically about challenging gender roles.

Measures such as quotas for women in Indian public works schemes are a positive step, but women will not benefit if no provision is made for childcare services and they remain bound by domestic chores. Efforts to expand female school attendance are also welcome and several Asian countries have introduced stipends to keep girls in school – but many schools lack adequate sanitation facilities, and there is often a shortage of female teachers, thus discouraging socially conservative families who do not want their daughters taught by men. Credit is another area where development strategies have tried to target women. Countries like Indonesia have introduced microfinance programs earmarked for female-headed households, but credit-worthy women can be used as middlemen to channel funding to businesses run by their male relatives.

Individual measures such as these are susceptible to fail unless more is done to tackle the underlying norms and cultural practices. States must therefore pursue transformative food security strategies that address cultural constraints and redistribute roles between women and men.

Pioneering schemes in several countries are already showing how this might be achieved. In Bangladesh, the Building Resources Across Communities initiative has provided women with poultry – a less labour-intensive asset than livestock – alongside subsidized legal and health services, clean water and sanitation. The scheme has thus freed women up in order to prosper as farmers and in other economic activities. Meanwhile, a conditional cash-transfer program in the Philippines, now covering 3 million households, not only looks to alleviate rural poverty, but also includes a gender action plan that requires that bank accounts be set up in women’s names, trains women on their rights with respect to domestic violence, child care, nutrition and other areas; and trains fathers to share responsibility as caregivers. These schemes have proved themselves gender-sensitive, and taken action to challenge the underlying gender roles.

Steps like these are the most effective way to empower women, and are a shortcut to tackling hunger and malnutrition.

Olivier De Schutter is the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. A copy of his recent report on Women’s Rights and the Right to Food can be found here.