Asia must knock down gender barriers to secure food future: Study

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Posted by Parvez Jabri

ISLAMABAD: Labour and land ownership laws throughout the Asia-Pacific region must change if women are to reach their full potential as farmers and food production workers, says a new report prepared jointly by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

The report, "Gender Equality and Food Security - Women's Empowerment as a Tool Against Hunger", is authored by UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier de Schutter and takes an in-depth look at women's role in food production, nutrition, and access to food in the region, and the steps needed to remove the barriers facing them.

Worldwide, around 60% of undernourished people are women or girls, and data shows that giving them access to education and employment opportunities has a strikingly large impact on reducing overall hunger and improving child health and education.

However, restrictions on female land ownership, limited access to credit and farm advisory services, and a lack of education hamper women's ability to produce and access more food and earn decent incomes.

An FAO study estimates that closing the gender gap in access to productive resources such as land, credit, machinery or chemicals could eliminate yield gaps of 20% to 30% among women and men, increase domestic agricultural output by 2.5% to 4%, and mean up to 100 million fewer people living in hunger.

Even rural women working off-farm in low-skill jobs in agribusiness face gender discrimination and low wages.

To address these problems, the report recommends that policymakers tackle laws and regulations which discriminate against women, particularly in land ownership, initiate programs to boost gender equality in agriculture and the labour market, while updating education and employment policies to be more gender sensitive.

Food security strategies must also be developed to improve women's access to childcare, farmer support mechanisms, and credit and agricultural services.

Social protection programs, such as active labour market programs with targets for women's employment should also be fine-tuned to incorporate women's needs.

"Removing the barriers women face in their roles as food producers, farm workers, and primary caregivers is achievable and inexpensive," said Lourdes Adriano, Practice Leader for Agriculture, Food Security and Rural Development in the Regional and Sustainable Development Department at ADB.
"Paying women a decent wage, improving their access to tools, fertilizers, and credit, and guaranteeing their right to own and access land will have a huge multiplier effect on food security and hunger reduction," Adriano added.