Women and girls are key to ensuring food security – report

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A farmer harvests wheat on a field in Kathmandu May 6, 2013. REUTERS/Navesh Chitrakar

BANGKOK (Thomson Reuters Foundation) – Focusing the lens of social and economic development on women and girls is the most inexpensive and effective tool in the fight against hunger and malnutrition, says a new study on gender and food security in the Asia Pacific region.

Women’s education alone resulted in a 43 percent reduction in hunger from 1970 to 1995, while women living longer led to an additional 12 percent decline in hunger levels, according to the report by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Gender equality is “the single most important determinant of food security”, wrote Olivier De Schutter, the U.N. special rapporteur on the right to food and author of the report, Gender Equality and Food Security: Women’s Empowerment as a Tool against Hunger, released this week.

Increasing economic growth or improving people’s access to food were not enough on their own to combat hunger, he said.

The Asia Pacific region “is particularly illustrative of the fact that neither strong economic growth nor increased food availability per
capita are sufficient to reduce hunger, and especially child malnutrition, unless we integrate the
gender dimension more fully,” De Schutter told Thomson Reuters Foundation.

He specifically noted a shift five years ago in the understanding of the causes of hunger and
malnutrition: the 2008 global food crisis led to a realisation that there was an underinvestment
in agriculture, and especially in small-scale family farms, in which women play a key role as food
producers.

Also that year, a series of studies in the Lancet highlighted the importance of nutrition during
pregnancy and the first 24 months of a child’s life on a child’s development.

“Bring these two shifts together … and you see why, suddenly, the intersection of gender and
food security becomes key,” De Schutter said. “The report builds on these shifts, providing
compelling evidence, I think, that empowering women and achieving gender equality is the most
cost-effective measure to ensure food security.”

COSTLESS MEASURES, HUGE IMPACT

In the Asia Pacific, widespread discrimination against women and girls – socially, culturally and
legally – results in lower agricultural productivity and poorer health and nutrition, especially
among women and girls, who make up 60 percent of undernourished people worldwide, the
report says.

It details how three crises – the spike in food prices, the global economic downturn and climate
change – disproportionately affect women and girls. They are given less food than men and
boys, are not sent to school when household funds are low and are the first to be laid off when
employers suffer financial setbacks.

Amid more drought and floods, women, who make up the bulk of small-scale farmers, are hard
hit in both their loss of income and their ability to feed their families.

De Schutter proposed the establishment of school-feeding programmes that source food from
women farmers. In the report, he describes a school-feeding programme at 81 schools in India
that offers employment to poor women, who make up two-thirds of the programme’s cooks.

“It does not require massive investment. In fact, some measures are costless, yet their impact
can be huge in improving nutrition within the household,” he said.

LABOUR AND LAND

The removal and amendment of discriminatory land and labour laws would also help women
farmers and food producers, said De Schutter and ADB food security and agriculture specialist
Lourdes Adriano, who provided technical support for the report.

“Paying women a decent wage, improving their access to tools, fertilisers, and credit, and
guaranteeing their right to own and access land will have a huge multiplier effect on food security
and hunger reduction,” Adriano said.

Change might not be easy to achieve because “it requires socio-cultural paradigm shifts and
political commitment,” Adriano told Thomson Reuters Foundation. “But investing in rural women
to have equal access to inputs and other productive resources is cheap and will take a shorter
time to achieve more wide-reaching, multiple, and long-lasting developmental outcomes.”

She cited a $1 million, 6-year ADB project in Nepal that reached 12,150 people, 70 percent of
them women. For about $100 per person, the project enabled them to organise self-help groups
and access funds for quality seeds, irrigation tools, fertilisers and technical skills for cash crop
production and financial management. Their incomes increased by more than 33 percent and
more than half of the households moved out of poverty.

“The next agenda is to up- and out-scale these experiences,” she said.