

## **WOMEN AND FOOD SECURITY: ROLES, CONSTRAINTS, AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES**

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### **Summary**

Hunger is a fact of life for many millions of people, especially in Africa, South Asia, and parts of Latin America. Many people are chronically food insecure—they never have enough food. Others are transitorily food insecure—at times they have sufficient food but many other times they lose their access, whether due to seasonality, uncertain employment, or other economic or natural shocks.

If the scourge of undernutrition in the developing world is to be removed, then attention has to be paid to empowering women. Poverty and malnutrition often go hand in hand, but they do not necessarily move in lockstep. Studies show that undernourished children are often found in nonpoor households and well-nourished children in poor households. This is often a reflection of women's level of influence in a household and control of resources. Economic development that increases the income of the poor will be more effective in reducing rates of malnutrition if it successfully empowers women.

Ensuring food security is a major task for the international community. This article explores the role of women in achieving food security. It lays out the various ways in

which women contribute to food security and highlights the obstacles that stand in their way, reducing their ability to achieve their goal. The consequences of missing opportunities to fully engage women in the whole process of food production, distribution, marketing, and post-harvest processing are outlined.

## 1. Introduction

The 1996 World Food Summit, hosted by FAO, was testimony to the fact that hunger exists in our world of plenty. Some 840 million people go to bed each night hungry or not knowing whether they will have enough food to eat the next day. In non-lay terms this is food insecurity. Its opposite, food security, exists when all people have sufficient food in terms of quantity, quality, and diversity to ensure a healthy and active life without risk of loss of such access. Many people are chronically food insecure—they never have enough food to satisfy the definition. Others are transitorily food insecure—at times they have sufficient food but many other times they lose their access, whether due to seasonality, uncertain employment, or other economic or natural shocks.

One hundred and eighty six nations signed on to the World Food Summit goal of halving the numbers of malnourished people by 2015. Those same nations also made specific commitments with regard to women:

- (a) Support and implement commitments made at the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995, that a gender perspective is mainstreamed in all policies;
- (b) Promote women's full and equal participation in the economy, and for this purpose introduce and enforce gender-sensitive legislation providing women with secure and equal access to and control over productive resources including credit, land, and water;
- (c) Ensure that institutions provide equal access for women,
- (d) Provide equal gender opportunities for education and training in food production, processing, and marketing,
- (e) Tailor extension and technical services to women producers and increase the number of women advisors and agents,
- (f) Improve the collection, dissemination, and use of gender-disaggregated data in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and rural development,
- (g) Focus research efforts on the division of labor and on income access and control within the household,
- (h) Gather information on women's traditional knowledge and skills in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and natural resources management

Why would women be explicitly recognized in terms of achieving the World Food Summit goals? One hundred and eighty six nations publicly recognized, in Rome, that women are often faced with a variety of obstacles and constraints, which render them unable to fulfill their role as gatekeepers of household food security, and committed to removing these obstacles. This article will explore the role of women in achieving food security. Using a “three pillars” approach to food security it will lay out the various ways in which women contribute to food security and highlight the obstacles which stand in their way, reducing their ability to achieve their goal.

## 2. The Three Pillars of Food Security

Food security is a major concern to millions (see *Socioeconomic Policies and Food Security*). It is built upon three foundational pillars—failure to build any one pillar will result in the failure of all. The first pillar is *food availability*—food production, the pillar most obvious to all. This pillar has been achieved in the present day at the global level. We produce more than enough food to ensure an adequate food intake for everyone, yet over three-quarters of a billion people go hungry. This is due to a failure to build the second and third pillars.

The second pillar is food access, largely economic access to food. Many countries are unable to produce enough food for their whole population and need to import food. Those with insufficient foreign exchange are dependent on food aid. Even when a nation, or subregion, town, or village is food secure, it does not mean that all households can afford the food that is available in the marketplace. Even household food security does not guarantee individual food security. Food distribution within the household can result in some members having insufficient, for instance women and girl children in many South Asian households. Their status and roles in society preclude them from commanding their fair share of household food (see *Economic Development, Food, and Nutrition*).

The third pillar is perhaps the most overlooked of all—food utilization or nutritional security. To achieve this pillar, complementary resources are required such as childcare, safe water, good sanitation, and access to healthcare. Merely having enough to eat may not be sufficient to produce good nutritional outcomes if a child's mother has insufficient time to feed her several times a day, or if children are often sick because food is prepared with unclean water.

Women play important roles in achieving all three pillars of food security, not just in the last one as many may expect. In fact, their role in achieving the first pillar is becoming more important as we witness what many are calling the “feminization of agriculture.” In many countries the rural male population is falling far more rapidly than the rural female population as males migrate in search of better incomes. In Malawi, for example, the rural male population fell by nearly 22% between 1970 and 1990, but the rural female population fell by little more than 5%.

## 3. Women and Food Production

### 3.1. Women as Farmers

Women are farmers in most regions of the developing world, playing major roles in the production of major food staple crops—maize, rice, and wheat. Generally men control the production of cash crops, or mechanized large-scale crop production. That is not to say women do not play a significant part, men control the crop, make the decisions, and accrue the revenue, but the use of women's labor may be nearly as high as that of men's. In Zambia women supply 44% of family labor to hybrid maize and 38% to cotton and sunflowers, the cash crops. Men, on the other hand supply only slightly more labor to hybrid maize, about 45.5%, and somewhat more to cotton and sunflowers,

53.5%. The remaining household labor for crop production is supplied by children. Despite the high levels of labor supply by women to cash crops, particularly hybrid maize, only 25% of hybrid maize cultivation and 29% of sunflowers and cotton is independently, or jointly managed, by women. However, for food crops, women independently or jointly manage cultivation of 57% of traditional maize cultivation, and 70% of other cereal crop production.

The perception of women's farming activities as the cultivation of home gardens can leave their contributions to food production and household food security severely underestimated. In Nigeria, while home gardens occupied only 2% of a household's farmland, they accounted for half of the farm's total food output. In Indonesia, home gardens are estimated to provide more than 20% of household income and 40% of domestic food supplies.

Women are most often recognized as farmers in sub-Saharan Africa, where men and women, in many countries, farm separate plots. The FAO estimated that women produce and market 80% of all food grown locally in the region. Figure 1 shows the difference between the proportions of the female and male labor force in agriculture for selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In general, the proportion the female labor force in agriculture exceeds that of the male labor force. Of the 47 countries for which data were available, in only three was there a greater share of the male labor force in agriculture than the female one, for example, in Cape Verde 14% of the female labor force versus 50% of the male labor force, in Mali with 75% of the female labor force versus 83% of the male labor force, and in Ghana with 50% of the female labor force versus 55% of the male labor force.

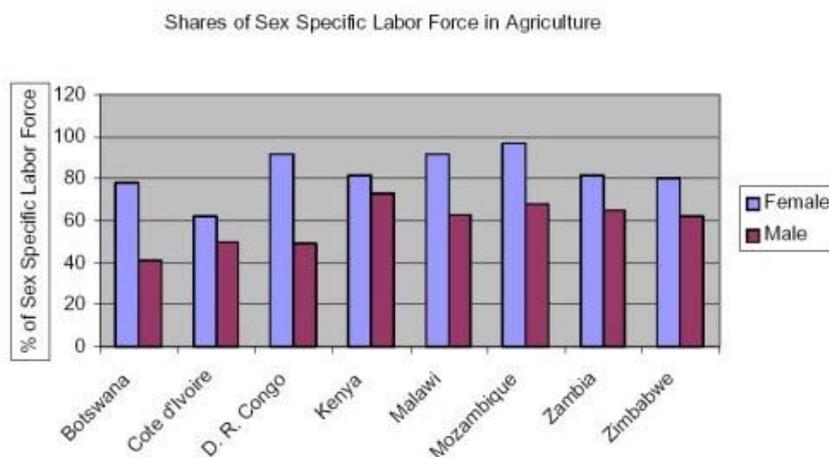


Figure 1. Proportion of labor provided by men and women in production of crops in several African countries

Women are perhaps most overlooked in South Asia. Popular perception is that agriculture and the family farm relies on male labor. Yet in India and Bangladesh, poor women, and the landless and poor, do up to 80% of the work growing rice. They do the rice seedling transplanting, weed the rice paddies, and help in the harvest. They handle much of the post-harvest activity including managing seed saving and storage for the

next season. In Thailand, Indonesia, and The Philippines, women supply up to half the labor used in rice production.

In Latin America women and men tend to farm together as opposed to farming separate plots as in much of Africa. Women make substantial contributions as hired labor on estate farms and not insignificant contributions in peasant agriculture. As in Africa women make major contributions to harvesting, post-harvest processing, and marketing. Surveys in Peru and Colombia indicate that women's participation in agricultural field tasks varies. It ranges from 25% to 45%.

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< <http://www.worldbank.org/gender/prr>> and <<http://www.worldbank.org/gender>>

### **Biographical Sketch**

**Lynn R. Brown** graduated from the University of Warwick, England, in 1990, did postgraduate work at the same university during 1990–1991 and at Cornell University, US, from 1991 to 1994.

She spent four and a half years at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington, DC, and three years at the World Bank. She is a specialist in food policy, gender in development, and gender in intrahousehold economics. She has edited 1 book, and authored about 25 articles and 5 book chapters.