

Working Group organized by the Group of Women Parliamentarians. Connecting women's rights to food security

Strategies to Enhance Women's Leadership to Address Food and Nutrition Security Under a Changing Climate

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Key Messages

Ensuring food and nutrition security and universal health access is essential for poverty eradication and climate-resilient sustainable development and requires a gender-responsive and human rights approach. By ensuring that women have the same access to productive resources as men, women could increase yields on their farms and this could reduce the number of hungry people worldwide and could increase access to health.

Empowering women is a cornerstone of fostering adaptation and addressing the impacts of climate change on food and nutrition security and health. Through drawing on women's knowledge and experiences based on their unique social, economic and resource management roles, climate adaptation planners can increase climate resilience. This means a greater role for women in decision making at all levels from local communities to national parliaments.

Women's capacity to address nutrition and health risks resulting from climate change must be enhanced through greater gender equality. This involves improved access to education, information, land, technologies, credit and social protection, as well as increased participation in climate change decision-making.

Strengthening women's role in promoting sustainable and diverse diets, resilient livelihoods, local food systems and climate-smart agriculture, including the production and consumption of nutrient-rich crops, is critical for ensuring food and nutrition security under a changing climate.

Facilitating access to reproductive, maternal and child care and health and nutrition services reduces hunger and malnutrition among women and children in the face of climate-related hazards and climate change impacts. This includes direct nutrition interventions, promotion of good nutrition and feeding practices such as breastfeeding, complementary feeding for infants and improved hygiene practices among others.

Protection and enhancement of health is an essential pillar of sustainable development, and of the response to climate change. Promoting health access and healthy environments through investing in health care systems, clean energy access, water and sanitation, all address significant climate change impacts on health. Policies and investments to mitigate and adapt to climate change have great potential for improving health.

Summary

Women serve as agents of social change and development, through their unique roles in the family and child care, agricultural labor, food and nutrition security, health and disaster risk reduction. The promotion of their engagement and leadership is critical to addressing climate change in equitable, healthy, and sustainable ways. Integrating women's empowerment as well as food and nutrition security and health in adaptation strategies is urgently needed to ensure the well-being of communities under a changing climate.

Stakeholders in the different fields have identified successful strategies for addressing the challenges that climate change pose to food and nutrition security and health and gender equality. But there is a tendency to address these issues through siloed approaches, which reduces their effectiveness and impact. Current climate change policies and strategies tend to inadequately address the needs of women and children, particularly in the contexts of nutrition, food security and health.

Women are also poorly represented in consultation and decision-making processes for the development of climate change adaptation strategies – both at the local, and at the national and global levels. At the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties 16 (UNFCCC COP16) in Cancun, women accounted for just 30% of all delegation parties and less than 15% of all heads of delegations (1).

The Millennium Development Goals recognize that key ingredients of development are improved access to education for girls; improved access to employment for women, particularly in sectors outside agriculture; and improved political representation of women (44).

This paper identifies successful strategies for addressing the challenges that climate change poses to food and nutrition security and health, and to promote women's engagement and leadership in climate adaptation planning and decision-making to ensure that these are gender, as well as nutrition and health sensitive.

Food and Nutrition Security, Climate Change and Gender

Food and nutrition security, health, gender equality, climate change and environmental degradation, including loss of biodiversity are closely interlinked. Climate change and environmental degradation undermine the ability of people to move out of poverty and compromise their full enjoyment of human rights. This has a direct impact on the health and food and nutrition security of millions of people – particularly women and their children.

Food and nutrition insecurity and ill health are associated with poverty and gender inequality: 60 percent of chronically hungry people are women and girls. Furthermore, globally and with few exceptions, rural women fare worse than rural men and urban women and men for every indicator for which data are available (33).

Climate change disproportionately impacts poor women and children as socially vulnerable members of society (20). Many of the world's poorest people are rural women in developing countries who rely on subsistence agriculture to feed their families. Women are on the frontline, in food production and gathering (including water and wood), and in preparing and distributing food within their households, which makes them exposed to climate change impacts on food and nutrition security and health. Climate change could add to water insecurity, thereby increasing the work burden of women subsistence farmers (21). This would adversely affect health and nutrition security through lack of time for necessary child caring practices, such as breastfeeding; and reduced access to and availability of food, due to inadequate

agricultural water (22). In areas threatened with drought and desertification, women's increased domestic care responsibilities could reduce their opportunities to engage in income-generating activities, with negative implications for household food security (23).

Strengthening Women's Rights and Opportunities to address food and nutrition security

There are a number of key issues related to women's rights and gender equity that need to be addressed in order to reduce vulnerability and to increase adaptation capacity and resilience to the impacts of climate change on food and nutrition security. These include, among others:

Education for Girls and Women

Empowering women through education is a key component of building women's resilience and leadership capacity. Governments must focus on educating girls and women, including the provision of educational incentives, such as school feeding programs and cash transfers for educating girls. Analysis from 32 countries in sub-Saharan Africa showed that girls' enrolments in primary schools went up by 28% through school feeding. When on-site school meals were combined with take-home rations for a student's family, girls' enrolment in the highest primary grade surged by 46% (27).

When climate-related disasters strike and household resources are diminished due to increased environmental degradation, girls are often withdrawn from school. It is therefore critical to incorporate school meals and food-for-education programs into climate change adaptation strategies in order to ensure full enrolment, educational gender equality and improved food security (36). Girls with more education also grow up to have smaller and healthier families (29). Educating girls and women on reproductive health and access to voluntary contraceptive methods will improve their livelihoods' resilience and their access to food and health services for them and their children.

At the same time, with the right education and training, women can better contribute to environmental, agricultural and health and nutrition decision-making (30). Providing women with the opportunity to pursue secondary education, including through scholarships for university studies in agriculture, health and nutrition-related areas, helps to enhance their ability to influence decision-making.

Women's Access to Resources and Property Rights

By ensuring that women have the same access to productive resources as men, women could increase yields on their farms by 20 percent to 30 percent; this could reduce the number of hungry people worldwide by 100-150 million (33).

Promoting equal access by women to land ownership and other resources, such as capital, technical assistance, technology, tools, equipment, markets and time, is needed for effective socio-economic participation (25, 31). Women produce up to 80% of the world's food, but own less than 2% of the world's titled land (32). This disparity leaves women incredibly vulnerable; the loss of a husband, father or brother often also signals a loss of land and with it, a main source of food security, income, bargaining power and status within the household and community.

Women's and girls' property rights must be strengthened in both law and practice. Where such legislative measures are not in place, customary rules and practices often have restrictive consequences for women limiting their access to key resources such as land and credit, and affecting household food security and nutrition (44). Not only are women and girls affected directly, but members of their households and communities are also affected inter- and intra-generationally (44).

Financial services provide opportunities for improving agricultural output, food security and economic vitality. Farmers who want to invest in more productive (but expensive) technologies or who are unable to cover their short-term expenses rely on credit markets or other credit sources to allow them to do this. Credit markets, however, are not gender neutral. Women face legal barriers and cultural norms that limit them from holding bank accounts or entering into financial contracts in their own right. Moreover, women often have less control over fixed assets, which are often necessary as collateral for loans. They may also face discrimination with institutions granting women smaller loans than they grant men for similar activities (24). These challenges impact women's production capabilities and ultimately, their livelihoods. It is thus important for women to be ensured access to savings, credit and loans. Access to financial services, in turn, influences access to technology, which is crucial to maintaining and improving agricultural productivity. In this context, it is critical to encourage the development of technologies that are tailored to the needs of women and to foster the transfer of technology to women (25).

Women's Access to Social Protection and Safety Nets

Social safety nets protect lives, livelihoods and human capital during crises and help the most vulnerable recover from shocks. They are essential to preventing the deterioration of food and nutrition security and health among the most vulnerable, and reduce the risk of more people falling into the poverty trap. Social protection policies and programmes can also catalyse women's empowerment. Labour-based safety nets – known as food- and cash-for-work programs –engage women in building assets that enhance the well-being and the resilience of their communities, such as schools or sanitary facilities, as well as natural resources and productive infrastructure. Safety nets can also be used to help women create assets that they use within their traditional sectors of activity, such as such as cooking stoves and vegetable gardens, or to allow women to spend time learning new skills like nutritional education or small business management (43).

Safety nets are critical for promoting nutrition security among children, particularly girls, and mothers. Conditional cash transfer programs in Columbia, Mexico and Nicaragua, in which families receive financial support on the condition that children attend school and receive vaccinations, and that pregnant women receive pre-natal care, have decreased stunting by rates of 7, 10 and 5.5 percentage points respectively (17). These programmes target the core of the vicious cycle of hunger and malnutrition that undermines maternal health, stunts children's physical and cognitive growth, impairs school performance and impedes progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Gender Equality in Agricultural and Other Extension Programs

While there are extension programs and projects designed to support women, they are often disadvantaged with regard to access to institutional support and information. In fact, as survey of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of extension services showed that only 5% of all extension resources were directed at women and only 15% of the extension workers were women (33).

With some cultural practices discouraging women from interacting with men from outside the community, their communication with male extension workers is significantly hindered (24). Moreover, extension services are often aimed at the farmers who are the most likely to be able to adopt innovations, for example farmers with sufficient resources in well established areas. These tend to be male farmers, so women may therefore get bypassed. In addition, women's active participation in training activities may be limited due to their lower levels of education, time constraints and cultural reservations. Consequently, female farmers have less access to information and institutional support than their male counterparts,

which has significant implications for supporting and building their resilience to climate change. It is thus essential that extension information and programs be designed in a way that ensures that climate-related information and support reaches women efficiently, enabling them to make sound decisions.

Studies have shown that when women and girls are given the opportunity to participate in development programs, there is a corresponding increase in efficiency and sustainability (34).

Women's Participation in Decision-Making and Climate Adaptation for Food and Nutrition Security

Women possess unique skills, experience and knowledge with respect to natural resource management, household food provisioning, and stewardship of community resources, all of which can contribute to robust climate change adaptation policies and strategies (34). Yet women are underrepresented in environmental governance and decision making. In order to strengthen the participation of women in climate change initiatives and to provide avenues for inclusion of their skills and knowledge in climate change plans and strategies, women must be equally represented in climate change decision-making bodies.

In order to promote women's participation in climate change decision making, governments must enforce gender mainstreaming in governance at the local, regional and national levels. Women's participation can be enhanced at various levels and in different sectors through the promotion of inclusive planning, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes of climate change-related measures and initiatives. Governments should support the development of National Gender and Climate Plans and the inclusion of women in the development of National Adaptation Plans, Mitigation Action Plans and corresponding local plans.

Empowering Women to Address the Challenges of Climate Change on Health and Food and Nutrition Security

Women's empowerment is not only a priority goal in itself but an intrinsic human right, recognized as such in pledges and commitments by governments (44). Women empowerment means a greater role for women in decision making at all levels, including the household, local communities, and national parliaments (44).

Empower Women to Enhance Food and Nutrition Security

Food-insecure people, the majority of whom live in fragile areas that are prone to natural hazards, are the least able to adapt to and cope with shocks. In most developing countries, women farmers are responsible for 60%-80% of all food production. Women are hence directly affected by the increasing frequency of droughts and potential changes in rain patterns that will affect crop production and crop susceptibility to disease. At the same time, women are a repository of traditions and knowledge of natural resource management that are indispensable for building resilience and adapting to climate change. For example in the Andean Region (Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador) women are central to their traditional agriculture systems. Women are stewards of natural and household resources, and could hence play a crucial role in climate change adaptation strategies in the agriculture sector that are health and nutrition sensitive.

Increasing Access to Reproductive Health, Maternal and Child Care, Nutrition and Health Care Access

Strategies to promote good maternal and child health and care practices requires the provision for family planning, maternity and other sexual and reproductive health services. Promoting childcare facilities and

other approaches to support women's caregiving role can be beneficial to address the impacts of climate change on health, and may contribute to transforming related gendered roles and norms (22).

Pregnant women, new mothers and young children are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Pregnant women with poor quality diets marked by micronutrient deficiencies or chronic malnutrition experience a higher rate of maternal mortality and are more likely to give birth to developmentally challenged or stunted children. Even mild stunting is associated with higher rates of illness and death, impaired cognitive function and reduced school performance in children. Health and nutrition interventions during the critical "window of opportunity" between conception and the first 24 months of a child's life can be particularly effective (35).

Women's nutritional status has a direct impact on the nutrition status of their children, with many effects over the life course. Focusing on women's roles in food production and distribution at the household level is an important strategy for improving children's nutrition outcomes. Aside from food security and health, maternal and child care practices are a key determinant in a child's nutritional status.

There is a need for the development of gender-responsive and accessible health services that reach the poorest populations and therefore address particular health needs of women and men (22). Incorporating gender into health interventions is a crucial component of addressing gender inequality and ensuring women's full access to comprehensive health services (37).

Adaptation and mitigation strategies have great potential for improving health while reducing emissions. Climate change adaptation plans should facilitate access to comprehensive health services and outreach initiatives to promote the availability of basic vaccinations, nutrition programs and gender sensitive education and communication programs on climate and health related risks. The potential health co-benefits of climate change mitigation should be considered and supported by financial mechanisms.

Conclusions

In order for climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies to be responsive to the needs of communities, they must be designed with the inclusion of women's voices. Gender equality begins when we empower poor and marginalized women to work together with all members of society to create a safer, more sustainable world. In turn, gender equality benefits society as a whole, and can contribute significantly to better, nutrition- and health-sensitive climate change strategies.

Women's roles in agricultural production and management, household food provision and nutrition security, and in natural resource management equip them with particular skills and knowledge that must be included in national climate change policies and strategies. To pave the way for women's leadership in climate change, women must be enabled to participate equally in the development of nutrition sensitive climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies at all levels. In addition, climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies must include gender- and nutrition-sensitive indicators, in order to address women's social and nutritional vulnerability.

Protection and promotion of health and nutrition are essential components of climate-resilient and sustainable development. Women can be instrumental in addressing climate change, health and nutrition in an integrated way. Promoting women's leadership on these issues requires an integrated approach focusing on both immediate and long-term actions. These include creating mechanisms to promote and protect women's rights, empowering women, and enhancing their capacity to address the challenges of climate change for nutrition and health. Promoting women's leadership will have a positive and significant effect on climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies, and ultimately, on the health and well-being of the societies of which they are members.

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