

theguardian March 8, 2014

## What does women's empowerment have to do with nutrition?

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So many of the adverse health outcomes like stunting are determined by the health and nutritional status of women and adolescent girls. Photograph: GAIN.

This week, as we celebrate International Women's Day, I have been reflecting on the numerous links between empowering women and improving nutrition. I was part of a panel at the UN International Trade Centre chaired by Arancha Gonzalez, which focused on women, and

entrepreneurship, which afforded a chance to remind people how fundamentally important nutrition is to women's empowerment.

Women are clearly the most critical target group from a nutrition standpoint. So many adverse health outcomes like stunting are determined by the health and nutritional status of women and adolescent girls. Women are also critical to food and nutrition security. They comprise [40% of the world's labour force](#) and undertake maternal roles central to the development of the next generation. In Africa, most food from smallholder farmers is produced by women, particularly in commodity sectors like coffee and cocoa. The workforce of the coffee industry in Ethiopia, for example, is 80% women.

As the role of women in society continues to evolve, along with the welcome increase in numbers of women entrepreneurs, landowners, farmers and community leaders, it is vital to help them be the best they can be, enabling both gender equality and the benefits of improved nutrition for future generations. But we cannot escape the challenges and obstacles. If we look at the overall nutritional status of women we still see that 50% of all pregnant women are anemic and at least 120 million women in less developed countries are underweight. These women often give birth to underweight children that are stunted.

If we look at women's role in food production, we continue to see enormous discrimination: women in the agricultural sector receive less than 10% of credit offered to small-scale farmers, only 7% of agricultural extension services, and own less than 1% of all land. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that if women farmers had the same access as men, agricultural output in 34 developing countries would rise by an estimated average of up to 4%. This could reduce the number of undernourished people in those countries by as much as 17%, translating to up to 150 million fewer hungry people.

Lack of access by women to education and training also has a striking impact on nutrition. In 2011, the HUNGaMA Report conducted the biggest ever public survey on hunger in India, covering nearly 20% of Indian children. It concluded that mothers' education level determines their children's nutritional status, finding rates of underweight and stunted children significantly higher among mothers with lower levels of education. Amongst illiterate mothers the survey showed the prevalence of underweight children at 45% and child

stunting at 63%. Among mothers with 10 or more years of education, prevalence of underweight children was much lower at 27%, and child stunting 43%.

Investments in women and overcoming these obstacles continue to be the best bet in development. The evidence is clear - when women farmers have the opportunity to earn and control income, they are more likely to focus their spending on their children's nutrition, education and health. Improving the knowledge and status of women within the household and at the farmer group level would deliver significant improvements to agricultural production, food security, child nutrition, health and education.

It is for this reason that GAIN has created programs that not only strive to address nutrient gaps, but also to educate and empower women. One example is our work with the World Food Program in Rajasthan, India. Here we have collaborated to deliver a project to produce supplementary food rations for children aged 6 to 36 months and for pregnant and lactating women, as part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Using semi-illiterate women organized in self-help groups, they have been trained and now own and operate production facilities that produce almost 300 metric tons a year of high quality blended food for ICDS. With this investment we hope to reach 37,500 children aged 6 to 36 months and 17,500 pregnant and lactating women by the end of the project. So, in addition to improving the nutritious value of the food rations, the project brings economic and social empowerment to these women through income generating activity. We are expanding this project to other states in India and it is an example of how so much more can be done through investing in women.

A larger scale example is in Bangladesh where GAIN is working to improve nutrition of female workers and their children in the textile industry. The garment industry is one of Bangladesh's biggest sources of income and employs 2.4 million people of which 84% are women, and the majority of them are of reproductive age from 18 to 35 years old. Almost half of these women are anemic and with their children suffer various forms of malnutrition. Moreover, we know from the Rana Plaza disaster last year how terrible the working conditions are in these clothing factories. This project, which has just started, aims to increase regular consumption of more nutritious foods. Women workers will have direct access to fortified foods and/or micronutrient supplements in factories and their children under-five to micronutrient supplements. Moreover, guidance is provided to factory management to support breastfeeding and to upgrade and improve the day-care centers. Workers will also receive extensive training on nutrition including appropriate infant and young child feeding practices, sexual and reproductive health from experienced health trainers. The project will reach about 100,000 workers and children. The benefits are to the women and their families, but are also in line with new global efforts to persuade companies to see returns in terms of reduced time off for ill health, poor productivity. There is no reason why we cannot roll this out to reach all women garment workers in Bangladesh.

We cannot end malnutrition if we do not invest in women. There are so many opportunities to invest in women, and we learn over and over again that these investments have the highest return on investment in development. As we celebrate International Women's Day, let's make sure we are refocusing our efforts on empowering women.

*Marc Van Ameringen, Executive Director of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), was recently awarded the World Food Program "Hunger Hero Award" by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon*