



The Effect of the Food Crisis on Women and Their Families

Recent reports from the UN indicate that food prices have risen 55 percent from June 2007 to February 2008, including an 87 percent increase in the cost of rice in March.ⁱ A spike in food prices can plunge households in developing countries even further into poverty, as they spend an average of 70 percent of their incomes on food, compared to the 15 to 18 percent that households spend in industrialized countries.ⁱⁱ

Even before the food crisis hit, an estimated 7 out of 10 of the world's hungry were women and girls.ⁱⁱⁱ Particularly vulnerable groups, such as young children and pregnant women, are now at risk of becoming permanently malnourished^{iv} – irreversibly impacting the next generation. Women are also more vulnerable to poverty, with less access to credit, property rights, education, training, good jobs, and farm inputs such as fertilizer and extension services, compared to men, making them one of the hardest hit groups in times of crisis. For example, women own less than 15% of land worldwide^v and make up some 60% of the world's working poor, people who work but do not earn enough to lift themselves above the \$1 per day poverty line.^{vi}

At the same time, investing in women is key to solving the food crisis. Rural women alone produce half of the world's food and 60% to 80% of the food in most developing countries, but receive less than 10% of credit provided to farmers.^{vii} Increasing women's access to the means of agricultural production, such as farming land or fertilizers, farm labor, credit and education, as well as decision-making authority within the household, is crucial to guaranteeing food security and improving the nutritional status of children.^{viii} In some places, if women had the same access as men to land, seed, and fertilizer, agricultural productivity could increase by up to 20 percent. Further, decades of research and experience have shown that when women have extra income, they reinvest in their children's health and education, creating a positive cycle of growth for the entire family.

Women Among the Hardest Hit by the Food Crisis

As the majority of the working poor, informal workers, and farmers in developing countries, women who have already been living without secure food access and without social protections are among the hardest hit in the food crisis.

- According to the ILO, “The women who work as street vendors are being directly hit by the increase in food prices, because they have no social protection nor benefits in times of trouble.” Further, “Even women working in [Asia]’s garment sector will be vulnerable despite getting a wage, because they do not enjoy benefits to deal with such a spike in food prices.”^{xix}
- In the Philippines, women make up the majority of those in the informal sector, some 27 million. “They have no social security, no protection and have to find small jobs that keep them afloat ... workers in this sector are eating less and less these days.”^x
- The UN estimates that 3.6 million people in Niger, out of a total population of 12 million, have been affected by the current food crisis. Pregnant and lactating mothers are among the groups considered most at risk, with more than 261,000 women in need of emergency care.^{xi} The increasingly poor nutritional status of pregnant and lactating women in Niger threatens to increase the already high rates of maternal and infant death and illness in regions hard-hit by the ongoing food crisis, according to reports from the Niger office of UNFPA.
- According to the FAO, “sudden increases in food prices would have negative repercussions in particular for poor households and vulnerable groups, particularly women and female-headed households, which tend to be particularly exposed to chronic and transitory food insecurity, due also to their limited access to income-generating activities.”^{xii}
- In times of crises, “such as periods of prolonged conflict or disease, malnutrition becomes even more acute, especially among women and children. Cultural practices in many societies mean that women and girls eat last and least.”^{xiii}
- Female workers in Thailand, the world’s largest rice exporter, are not immune from the hike in food prices either. “Women working in the informal sector are concerned about the rise in the cost of living. The cost of one meal with rice has almost doubled in some places.”^{xiv}
- In Malawi, as providers of food for their families, women are spending up to four nights at the state controlled grain marketing organization, the *Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation* (ADMARC) in order to buy the mere 25kgs of maize allowed per buyer, which has been rationed due to the food crisis. “This rationing is forcing women to spend most of their time making trips to ADMARC markets to buy maize as the 25 kgs is hopelessly inadequate for most families. ... Women at the ADMARC market are at risk of attack as they often leave home at around 1 am in the hope of making it to the queue in good time.”^{xv}
- In extreme situations in Malawi, girls are being forced to drop out of school to help and some parents are reported to be forcing their daughters to be married in exchange for food. Sex work is also on the rise. “Desperate rural women and girls as young as 15, are indulging in commercial sex for survival thereby exposing themselves to HIV infection ... Although sex work is illegal in Malawi, the sex workers said before the food crisis they used to charge K1000 (8 US dollars) for unprotected sex and K200 for sex with a

condom. Due to the food crisis, worsening economic conditions, and competition for few clients their rates have plummeted to as a low as K100 (81 US cents).^{xxvi}

- “The crisis is having a devastating effect on maternal health in particular. Malnutrition renders pregnant women more susceptible to infection, miscarriage and premature labor, and increases the likelihood that pregnant and lactating women who are HIV-positive will transmit the virus to their children.”^{xxvii}
- Food shortages and high poverty levels are also contributing to a “decrease in the number of women seeking family planning services and antenatal care. The number of home deliveries is also on the rise, as the constant search for food for their families leads women to neglect their own health.”^{xxviii}
- According to the FAO, “The establishment of energy crop plantations on ‘marginal’ lands might negatively affect women’s ability to meet household obligations, including traditional food provision and food security. The establishment of such plantations might also lead to a loss of wild edible plant species, which women are usually responsible for collecting and preparing and which play a key role in the food security of rural households.”^{xxix}

How Women can be Part of the Solution to the Food Crisis

In most places in developing countries, women produce the majority of the food and are responsible for feeding their families, and have done so with limited access to productive resources. Investing in women’s ability to access these resources, meaningfully consulting with women in food aid and agricultural planning, and giving them voice in household decisions will be critical in stemming the current crisis and preventing another food emergency.

- “Women are often the guardians of traditional knowledge of seed varieties and crops that can be grown in less than ideal climatic conditions. More efforts should be made to learn from their specific knowledge and to build on it with information on new ways to achieve nutritional goals.”^{xxx}
- “Women’s capacity to earn and control incomes is important in determining their ability to guarantee household food security.”^{xxxi}
- “Not only are rural women among those most vulnerable to food shortages, but more importantly, they are the driving force behind African agriculture.”^{xxxii}
- A recent FAO report indicates that “to stave off the worst effects of the global food crisis, it’s important for all women--not just female farmers--to get better access to land, capital and technology. That’s because an increasing number of households in developing countries are headed by women due to male emigration and HIV-AIDS.”^{xxxiii}
- “In comparative studies, households in which income was controlled by women demonstrated better levels of nutrition. Women tend to devote a greater share of their income to food and fuel as opposed to luxury items.”^{xxxiv}
- “The consequences of women’s exclusion from household decisions can be as dire for children as they are for women themselves. According to a study conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute, if men and women had equal influence in decision-making, the incidence of underweight children under three years old in South Asia would fall by up to 13 percentage points, resulting in 13.4 million fewer undernourished children in the region; in sub-Saharan Africa, an additional 1.7 million children would be adequately nourished.”^{xxxv}

In the short-term, response mechanisms that include the distribution of cash vouchers for food and grains and subsidies targeted to small farmers for farm inputs such as seed and fertilizer must be targeted to women to prevent malnutrition for both women and their families. The long-term consequences of malnutrition on lifetime health, educational outcomes and income generating ability are much more costly and complicated to address than preventing malnutrition in children, pregnant and lactating women in the first place. Similarly, preventing drop-out is much more cost-effective than creating interventions to re-enroll girls who have been pulled out of school in times of crisis. Long-term strategies to increase agricultural productivity and sustainability must also focus on increasing women's access to and control over productive assets such as land tenure and water, which will also help reduce overall poverty for women and their families. As consumers and producers, it is clear that women have borne the brunt of the food crisis. Investing in women is not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do.

ⁱ UN Department of Public Information, News and Media Division, New York. April 24 2008. "Press Conference by World Food Programme Executive Director on Food Price Crisis."

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ UNIFEM and Women's Funding Network, "World Poverty Day 2007: Investing in Women – Solving the Poverty Puzzle." http://www.womenfightpoverty.org/docs/WorldPovertyDay2007_FactsAndFigures.pdf

^{iv} UN Department of Public Information, News and Media Division, New York. April 24 2008. "Press Conference by World Food Programme Executive Director on Food Price Crisis."

^v ICRW. 2006. *Reducing Women's and Girls' Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS by Strengthening their Property and Inheritance Rights* (Information bulletin).

^{vi} ILO, 2006 quoted by UNIFEM and Women's Funding Network in World Poverty Day 2007: Investing in Women – Solving the Poverty Puzzle, Facts & Figures

^{vii} "Gender and food security: agriculture." FAO web site brief. <http://www.fao.org/gender/en/agri-e.htm> as cited by: USAID. March 2003. *Women's Property and Inheritance Rights: Improving Lives in Changing Times*.

^{viii} IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute). 2002. Reaching sustainable food security for all by 2020. Getting the priorities and responsibilities right. Washington, D.C: IFPRI

^{ix} Macan-Markar, Marwaan. "ASIA: Food Crisis Adds to Women's Burden." *Inter Press Service (IPS) News Agency*. April 29, 2008. <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42162>

^x Ibid.

^{xi} UNFPA. "Niger Food Crisis Especially Dangerous for Pregnant Women." Press Release. 24 August 2005. <http://www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID=660>

^{xii} Rossi, Andrea and Yianna Lambrou. "Gender and Equity Issues in Liquid Biofuels Production: Minimizing the Risks to Maximize the Opportunities." FAO: Rome, 21 April 2008. <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/ai503e/ai503e00.pdf>

^{xiii} Thaxton, Melissa. "Darfur Highlights the Impact of Food Insecurity on Women." Population Reference Bureau. September 2004. <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2004/DarfurHighlightstheImpactofFoodInsecurityonWomen.aspx>

^{xiv} Macan-Markar, Marwaan. “ASIA: Food Crisis Adds to Women’s Burden.” Inter Press Service (IPS) News Agency. April 29, 2008. <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42162>

^{xv} Phalula, Irene. “Malawi Food Crisis Hits Women Hardest.” Genderlinks via AfricaFiles. 8 December 2005. <http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=10378&ThisURL=./gender.asp&URLName=Gender>

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Del Vecchio, David. “Experts Plan Reproductive Health Response as HIV/AIDS Compounds Food Crisis in Southern Africa.” UNFPA. 26 February 2003. <http://www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID=185>

^{xviii} Ibid.

^{xix} Rossi, Andrea and Yianna Lambrou. “Gender and Equity Issues in Liquid Biofuels Production: Minimizing the Risks to Maximize the Opportunities.” FAO: Rome, 21 April 2008. <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/ai503e/ai503e00.pdf>

^{xx} Hansen-Kuhn, Karen. “Women and Food Crises: How US Food Aid Policies Can Better Support their Struggles – A Discussion Paper.” Actionaid: Washington, DC. http://www.actionaidusa.org/assets/pdfs/food_rights/report_women_and_food_crisis_paper300.pdf

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} Rossi, Andrea and Yianna Lambrou. “Gender and Equity Issues in Liquid Biofuels Production: Minimizing the Risks to Maximize the Opportunities.” FAO: Rome, 21 April 2008. <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/ai503e/ai503e00.pdf> as cited by: Ms. Magazine. “UN Official Says Women Hold Key to Solving Global Food Crisis.” Feminist Majority Foundation: May 5, 2008. <http://www.msmagazine.com/news/uswirestory.asp?id=10983>

^{xxiv} Pan American Health Organization. “Fact Sheet: Women, Health, & Development Program.” World Health Organization. <http://www.paho.org/english/ad/ge/foodsecurity.PDF>

^{xxv} UNICEF. *The State of the World’s Children 2007*. <http://www.unicef.org/sowc07/>. Pg. 16.