

## **Increasing women's role in food security in Africa**

Women play a key role in securing food throughout Africa, yet local customs and legal institutions often discriminate against women, denying them access to land, resources, education and public services. Healthcare is also an issue, particularly HIV/AIDS. Women have to care for themselves and for sick relatives, leaving less time to find or produce food. Research shows that increasing the rights of women also increases food productivity, but the gap between men and women still exists in many countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Research from the International Food Policy Research Institute in the United States, studies the needs of women in sub-Saharan Africa. In many countries, women do not have equal rights to men. In Lesotho and Swaziland, for example, women are considered 'legal minors' which means they cannot own property, enter into contracts or obtain bank loans without the involvement of a male relative. Policy reform is essential in several areas:

- Land: although women are responsible for providing food, their rights to land are restricted. Women can often only acquire land through marriage and then lose it through divorce or widowhood.
- Water: women are primarily responsible for providing water for household needs and for agriculture and livestock purposes. They also maintain water quality and sanitation.
- Livestock: women can accumulate wealth from animals more easily than through land. Even without owning animals, women benefit if they are involved in the decision-making processes.
- Education and child care: reducing the costs of school (such as travel) and increasing the benefits to a family of sending girls to school will encourage higher attendance.
- Technology can reduce the time spent on food production - vital for women with many other responsibilities.
- Networks: personal and family relationships provide support for women, strengthening their ability to work together and form cooperative groups.
- Health and nutrition is important for the quality of women's lives and their children. Significant times for health care include adolescence, pregnancy and when caring for children.

There is evidence that the situation for women is improving in many countries. In Uganda, the national constitution requires that at least one third of office workers

are women. The Matrimonial Regimes, Liberties and Succession act in Rwanda, passed in 2000, allows women to own property. Programmes to reduce mother-to-child HIV infection in Zambia and Kenya enable women to make better decisions regarding contraception and infant feeding.

Further improvements and policy reforms are needed, however. The research identifies three areas for change:

- rewriting laws to end discrimination and ensuring that these are enforced
- reduce the gap between men and women by improving access to assets, such as land and water
- invest in education, health, child care and other services for women. Prioritising women in allocating scarce resources is highly important.

For reforms to be successful, they must be sensitive to traditions, especially in countries with ancient cultures: education can help in this regard. It is important too that women are involved in decision-making and finding solutions, working alongside men. Reform will be slow, but initiating change gives an important signal of commitment to stronger and more equal rights for women.

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