

Women play a key role in feeding the world

On the Occasion of the International Women's Day 8 March the International Alliance Against Hunger makes an appeal to take Action

Women play a vital role in farming and food security in developing countries. In rural areas women grow most of the crops for domestic consumption and are primarily responsible for preparing, storing and processing food. They also handle livestock, gather food, fodder and fuel wood and manage the domestic water supply. In addition, they provide most of the labour for post-harvest activities. In Southeast Asia, for example, it is women who provide up to 90 percent of the labour for rice cultivation. They also play a big role in growing secondary crops, such as legumes and vegetables that are crucial ingredients for a healthy and well-balanced diet.

However, studies have shown that in almost all societies women tend to work longer hours than men. The difference in workloads is particularly marked for rural women. In addition to being the world's principal food producers, women are responsible for preparing and cooking food while also fulfilling their fundamental role of nurturing and caring for children and tending to elderly members of the household.



Unfortunately, the voices of women are seldom heard by decision-makers. Action is needed to enable rural women to have equal access to resources, such as land, water, credit and technology, and to open the way for them to participate fully in policy making.

Statistics show that

- Women make up 51 percent of the agricultural labour force worldwide.
- In Africa and Asia, women work about 13 hours more than men each week.
- In Southeast Asia, women provide up to 90 percent of the labour for rice cultivation.
- In the world's least developed countries, 23 percent of rural households are headed by women.

As a response, many international organizations are becoming increasingly engaged in activities to enhance the status of women in rural societies.

Bioversity International takes great care to disaggregate gender roles in many of its projects for retaining agricultural biodiversity. For example, women often have knowledge that is important for decisions regarding the varieties of crops that the family grows. They know that some varieties have superior nutritional traits, that others taste better or are easy to prepare

and cook, while yet other varieties have a special role in rituals and social activities. Men have tended to have other priorities in selecting preferred varieties.

The ***Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*** is working with its member countries to eliminate legal constraints to women's access to resources and agricultural support services. Initiatives such as the *Dimitra* project focus on empowering rural populations in Africa, and women in particular, through sharing knowledge in order to improve their living conditions and food security. The Organization is also actively promoting equitable benefit-sharing between women and men in its work on enhancing crop diversity, preserving traditional knowledge systems, and reducing risks in cropping systems so as to achieve higher levels of food security. In many countries, women have gained in self-confidence through taking part in farmer field schools in which they have discovered that they have the capacity to overcome, through their own efforts, many of the problems faced by their communities and families.

The ***International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD)*** has been supporting development activities that target poor women in all regions of the developing world, aiming to increase their access to key assets such as land and water, and to strengthen their decision-making role within their communities.

The ***World Food Programme(WFP)*** has a special commitment to helping women gain equal access to life's basic necessity. Women are responsible for food production, but they also take care that the food they produce reaches the mouths of needy children. For these reasons focus on women is a major part of WFP's programmes and projects.

Rural Women Organizations such as the ***International Food Security Network (IFSN)*** and ***Action Aid*** have been running campaigns and projects worldwide with the aim to enhance the capacities of rural women, and to improve their access to land and resources.

At global level, the **International Alliance Against Hunger (IAAH)** – a voluntary partnership of local, national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations brings together major international institutions responsible for agriculture, food and nutrition with a growing number of international NGOs committed to ensuring that all people have enough to eat healthy diets.

As part of its global advocacy programme, the IAAH would like to make an appeal to all concerned on the occasion of the ***International Women's Day – 8th March*** - to act to improve the status of rural women.

Together, we can make the difference!