



"Sharing power with women is a shortcut to reducing hunger and malnutrition, and is the single most effective step to realizing the right to food," said the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, while urging world governments to adopt transformative food security strategies that address cultural constraints and redistribute roles between women and men.

"Family agriculture has become gradually feminized, with men frequently moving away from the farm in search of work. Yet the women who increasingly face the burden of sustaining farms and families are too often denied the tools to thrive and improve their situation – on and off the farm," Mr. De Schutter stressed as he presented his report on Gender and the Right to Food to the UN Human Rights Council today in Geneva.

The UN expert welcomed policy initiatives to empower women, such as quotas for women in Indian public works schemes, but warned that barriers to female participation in society are multiple. "Women will not benefit from female quotas in work schemes if no provision is made for childcare services," he said. "Individual measures will not suffice – gender roles and responsibilities must be challenged holistically and systematically."

As an immediate first step, Mr. De Schutter called for the removal of all discriminatory laws and practices that prevent women accessing farming resources such as land, inputs and credit. Meanwhile he called for women to be relieved of the burdens of care responsibilities in the home through the provision of adequate public services such as childcare, running water and electricity. Tasks such as fetching water and caring for the young and the elderly can amount to the equivalent of around 15% of GDP in middle-income countries and as much as 35% in low-income countries.

He also called for renewed focus on education. Data from a sample of countries shows that from 1970-1995 as much as 55% of the reduction in hunger could be put down to improvements in women's situation in society. Progress in women's education alone (43%) was almost as important as increased food availability (26%) and health advances (19%) put together.

"If women are allowed to have equal access to education, various pieces of the food security jigsaw will fall into place," he explained. "Household spending on nutrition will increase, child health outcomes will improve, and social systems will be redesigned – for women, by women – to deliver support with the greatest multiplier effects."

Furthermore, the UN expert called on States to implement multi-year transformative food security strategies that promote full equality for women by working to actively redistribute traditional gender roles and responsibilities.

Mr. De Schutter singled out the Bangladeshi Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction scheme as an example of how social support can be delivered in ways that are sensitive to the constraints on women, while working simultaneously to reduce these constraints. Less labour-intensive assets such as poultry are provided to women, along with extensive asset-management and social development training.

He warned that while the specific position of women should be recognized in such schemes, it should at the same time be challenged: "There is a fine line between taking into account specific constraints and reinforcing gender roles and stereotypes. Food security strategies should be judged on their ability to challenge gender roles and to truly empower women. Gender sensitivity is important, but is not a substitute for empowerment."

Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the UN Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization. Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur, log on:  
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx> or [www.srfood.org](http://www.srfood.org)

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