

A gendered perspective on nutrition rights

GEORGE KENT writes that the best way to obtain adequate nutrition for all is the full achievement of human rights for women. He argues for a rights-based approach to food programmes in which governments would contract out the design and implementation to women's organisations

Many different approaches have been tried to reduce malnutrition within nations, including food production, feeding schemes, subsidies and educational programmes. Their impact has been limited. The human right to food and nutrition is well established in international human rights law¹. This *briefing* argues for a gendered rights-based approach to addressing nutritional needs. Such an approach recognises the profound effects women have when they are involved in decision-making on nutrition programmes. It argues that empowering women through the full realisation of women's human rights would be the best way to realise the human right to adequate food and nutrition for all. The approach is best concretised in nutrition programmes through a strategy of contracting-out to groups of women.

A great deal of work has been done on the special roles of women in relation to nutrition². Two major conclusions can be drawn from these studies. First, women have special nutritional vulnerabilities. For example, iron-deficiency anaemia is widespread among women in developing countries, and it leads to high levels of maternal mortality. Second, women play important roles in providing food, health and care – the three major factors contributing to good nutrition.

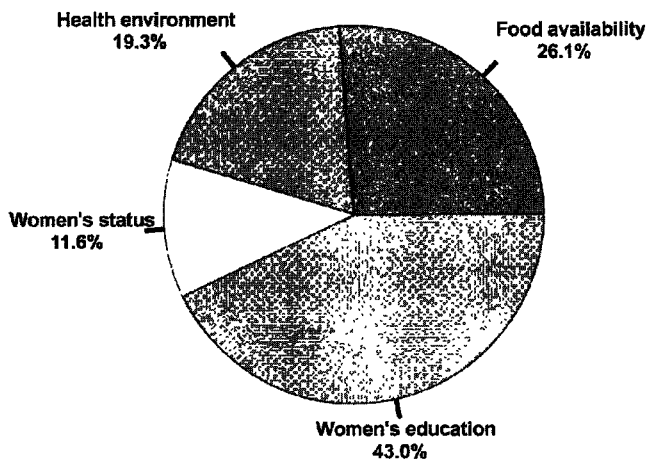


Image A

In late 1990, the cover of *United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination/Subcommittee on Nutrition News (SCN News)* focused attention on a poor woman in Southeast Asia, with downcast eyes, uncertain of her capacities for breastfeeding (image A). The picture was repeated inside the newsletter. *SCN News* used her picture

SOURCE: SCN NEWS

Estimated contribution of major determinants to reductions in child malnutrition, 1970–95



Source: L. Smith and L. Haddad, "Overcoming Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries: Past Performance, Future Possibilities," Draft 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment Discussion Paper (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, photocopy).
 Note: Malnourished children refers to underweight children

on the cover again in May 1991, this time in colour. On May 11, 1998 the *New Yorker* magazine used a very different image of a woman breastfeeding, as an obviously powerful woman for its cover (image B). What a remarkable difference in messages!

We need to get beyond the disempowering images of women. Surely, poor uneducated women require attention, but they are not simply bundles of needs. We need to give more attention to what women can do, not only as farmers and caretakers but also as policy-makers, as agents of change for helping to end malnutrition for all people everywhere.

Women's roles

The research referred to above shows that women play important roles in food and nutrition systems. Yet there is still widespread and per-

sistent malnutrition in the world. Does this simply mean we should call upon women to work harder? Or is the widespread malnutrition a result of the fact that women have not been able to play a larger role in their societies? The key is not simply having women work harder at food production and preparation, but to have women play more of a decision-making role, helping to shape the social conditions under which food systems function. The impact women can have on nutrition is clear. There is much empirical evidence that societies in which women have status closer to men are likely to suffer less malnutrition, and that women as active agents can have profound effects on social and economic development.

In comparative studies of Africa and Southeast Asia, the two regions were shown to have similar levels of poverty, food deficiency and health care,

but children's mortality rates are significantly lower in Africa. Systematic analysis of the data indicates that the major factor accounting for the difference is that women in Africa tend to have higher status than women in South Asia (Ramalingaswam *et al*, 1996; Osmani, 1997).

Consider, also, the following figure, which summarises the findings of a study by Smith and Haddad of the International Food Policy Research Institute. Women's status and women's education were found to account for 54.6 percent of the variation in child malnutrition (Smith and Haddad, 2000). Thus, this study indicates that women's roles are far more important than food availability in determining children's malnutrition.

Lawrence Summers, formerly of the World Bank and later Secretary of the United States Treasury, observed that:

When one takes into account all its benefits, educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world (Fritschel and Mohan, 1999:1).

A careful empirical study done in India indicates that women's education can improve child nutrition (Mishra and Retherford, 2000). Thus, it may be that the most cost-effective means for reducing malnutrition in the world would be to provide increasing funds for primary education for girls, and to take other measures that would enhance women's status.

The policy recommendations for addressing issues of nutrition that come out of this is that women should have increasing roles in the design and implementation of nutrition programmes, and should be generally empowered and more fully involved in governance in every way.

Rights implications

So evidence shows the profound effects on nutri-

tion of allowing women to be active agents. But many of the discussions on women and nutrition in effect ask, 'How are we going to feed them', as if women are to be the appreciative beneficiaries of programmes that 'we' have to offer. The 'we' usually is not specified, but often it appears to mean government, and almost certainly would tend to be dominated by men. One way to achieve women's participation in food programmes, and through all levels of society, is to adopt a human rights approach. Empowering women through achieving their full human rights may be the best way to secure nutrition for children and society as a whole.

A rights-based approach recognises that full participation in societal processes is a fundamental human right, and sees women as active agents in development:

*...it is important that the issue of malnutrition should be moved from the agenda of welfare to the agenda of rights... . The stress on a rights approach as opposed to a welfare approach may seem academic. But there is a very practical difference in the processes that are likely to be developed from these two different premises... . A welfare approach too easily becomes a process which treats people only as recipients, as passive beneficiaries, resulting in all the familiar failures and problems which add up to alienation and unsustainability. A rights approach, on the other hand, lends itself to seeing the poor as key actors in the development process, building on rather than overriding their own coping strategies, and leading towards the kind of community involvement and ownership that is the key to all sustained improvement (Ramalingaswami *et al*, 1996).*

The human right to food and nutrition, which is universal (like all human rights), must be interpreted and applied in different locations. It can be concretised in terms of particular inputs or

services; for example, children who meet particular criteria are entitled to particular services. Or, preferably, it can be concretised in terms of particular outcomes, such as, no child will be underweight, or no woman will suffer from iron deficiency anaemia. These goals can then be understood as rights: every child is entitled to be of normal weight, and every woman is entitled to be free of anaemia.

If people have these rights, they are entitled to the services that are required for realisation of the rights. Those who have these rights, or their representatives (such as the child's parents) must know it, and they must know what actions they can take if they feel their rights are not being realised.

Womens human rights

If parents know about the importance of their children's malnutrition, know how to assess it, and know that they are entitled to specific services to make sure that their children are adequately nourished, the rate of child malnutrition is likely to decrease sharply. Similarly, if women of childbearing age are well informed about the importance of preventing or curing anaemia, if they are provided with the means for assessing their health conditions, and if they understand that they are entitled to particular means of prevention or cure, the incidence of anaemia among women is likely to plummet. It may be that not every woman fully grasps the significance of anaemia, but if women in groups understand it they are likely to look after each other.

Addressing nutrition involves the general empowerment of women in all spheres of society – this can be achieved through the full realisation of all women's human rights. Such action is not solely a matter of fulfilling women's interests; it is a means for meeting the needs of children.

It is the right of a child to have adequate care... .

But in practice this will mean little if the violation of women's rights continues to be regarded as normal and acceptable. The rights of women – including her right to education, to dignity and respect, to time, to rest, to adequate food and health care, to resources, and to special care in pregnancy and childbirth – are a priority both in and of themselves and as a fundamental part of any permanent solution to the particular problem of child malnutrition (Ramalingaswami et al, 1996).

Young children cannot act effectively as agents serving their own interests. When parents are unable to provide adequately for their children it is often because their own rights have been violated.

Women tend to assume more responsibility for the family's nutrition than men do. If women are empowered by having their rights fully realised, they will accelerate the realisation of the human right to food and nutrition for all³.

Design strategy

What are the implications of this analysis for the design of strategies for reducing malnutrition? Programmes designed and operated primarily by women are likely to be more effective than programmes operated by men. The gendered human rights approach, which aims to empower women and enable communities to meet their own nutritional needs, is best implemented in nutritional programmes, through a contracting-out strategy.

National governments are obligated to take positive action to assure the realisation of the nutrition rights of people under their jurisdiction. Broadly, the goal with regard to nutrition programmes should be to enable people to provide adequately for themselves, at the individual and community level. Endless delivery of services by government is not simply wasteful but also has negative long-term effects – feeding people every

day weakens them, when the same resources could have been used to strengthen them. Historically, those who have been responsible for programmes to reduce malnutrition have been paid regardless of whether or not they succeeded. As a result, the programmes have often been rather desultory, and designed to deliver services eternally (Measham and Chatterjee, 1999).

In a contracting-out strategy:

...government can tap available private local human resources through contracting out, rather than delivering those services by the public sector (Marek et al, 1999:382).

In contracting out, you get paid according to what you actually deliver. You sign what is called a 'performance contract', under which you expect to be paid according to the actual results, and not just for the time you put in.

The approach has been highly successful in nutrition projects in Madagascar and Senegal:

The two projects have filled a niche not being adequately served by the government nor another provider by targeting very poor areas and by providing preventive nutrition services. They are reaching directly tens of thousands of malnourished children and their mothers by implementing the delegated contract management approach, which permits adequate handling of a large number of contracts and implementation of strict efficiency criteria... [I]n both projects malnutrition rates decreased rapidly among the children directly reached by the project (Marek et al, 1999:383-384).

Project managers believed that

...the decrease in malnutrition rates is due more to



Image B

the better care provided by mothers to their children through regular growth monitoring and promotion, as well as to the education these women receive, rather than to the food supplement itself (Marek et al, 1999:386).

Women had a strong role in implementing the projects in Senegal and Madagascar, but it is not evident how much of a role they had in designing and managing it. By making it more decisively women-centred, the benefits may have been even greater. Imagine what might

SOURCE: New Yorker Magazine

happen if the money budgeted to be spent on a nation's nutrition programmes for the next five or 10 years were turned over to a strong women's organisation.

The arrangement would not be a simple grant, but a contractual arrangement. In a very business-like manner, payment would be based on successful completion of the project, as defined in terms of specific indicators agreed to in advance. Thus the contract between the central government and the women's organisation might be comparable with the contract the government would make with a construction firm to build a bridge. The central women's organisation would in turn work with local women's organisations as subcontractors. Their compensation also would be based on contractual agreements, depending on agreed pre-arranged measures of their success.

Much of the programme would be about education, goal setting, and techniques and incentives for assuring steady movement toward the goal of reducing malnutrition. At the 'ground level' specific targets would be agreed upon, to reduce specific types of malnutrition, as determined by specific measures, by specific dates. A structure of incentives would be shaped to motivate co-operative endeavours among neighbours and assistance to the needy. Some incentives would be established at the individual level. To illustrate, women who breastfeed exclusively for four months, following specific instructions, would be given recognition for the achievement. The systematic recognition of successes at all levels would be a major driving engine for the effort.

Women at the community level would be advised on how to maintain records and how to track their own, their children's and their community's nutrition status over time, and would be

recognised and rewarded for doing so. Thus the programme would be embedded with strong systems of record-keeping and base-level research that would allow people to see the results of their own efforts. This would allow learning over time, and would support the dynamic reallocation of resources towards what works best.

The contracting-out approach proposes that people who undertake the effort to reduce malnutrition – whether women or men – should be justly rewarded for their efforts if they succeed. Women engaged under fair contracts are likely to produce good results on a cost-effective basis.

Conclusion

Many governments already spend large sums on nutrition programmes, but typically they find that these programmes have little effect in moving them toward the goal of ending malnutrition. In many countries, the single most under-utilised resource that can be used to combat malnutrition is women. However, women should not be seen merely as implementing agents for a process designed and controlled by men. If women took command of the process and were provided with appropriate tools for the task, they could do a great deal to combat malnutrition. In the process they would also do a great deal to elevate their own status, and thus help to realise their own human rights. Thus women should be asked to take charge of a decisively goal-directed mission to assure the realisation of every individual's human right to adequate food and nutrition.

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FOOTNOTES

1. As a result of a call by the World Food Summit of 1996 for clarification of what this means, the right to food was explored in a series of conferences, consultations and studies (Kent, 2000a; Kent, 2000b). In 1999, the United Nation's

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Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights issued a detailed, authoritative explanation of the meaning of this right (United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999).

2. The many studies of the roles of women in nutrition include the following: the United States Agency for International Development has sponsored studies such as *The Time to Act: Women's Nutrition and Its Consequences of Child Survival and Reproductive Health in Africa* (Baker *et al*, 1996); the Hunger Project, based in New York, has a special Women's Initiative for Ending Hunger, and has focused on The African Woman Food Farmer; the World Bank has reviewed women's roles in health and nutrition programmes (World Bank, 1995); the International Centre for Research on Women has published a series of studies on women's roles in alleviating micronutrient malnutrition (Johnson-Welch, 1999); the World Health Organisation, and the non-governmental World Alliance for Breast-feeding Action have given a great deal of attention to breastfeeding; the Food and Agriculture

Organisation of the United Nations has organised a broad variety of activities on the roles of women in development generally, and food and nutrition in particular; in 1989 the United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination/Sub-Committee on Nutrition (SCN) published a study on *Women's Role in Food Chain Activities and the Implications for Nutrition* (Holmboe-Ottesen *et al*, 1989); in 1990 the SCN published its report on a symposium on Women and Nutrition (SCN, 1990); at its annual meeting in November 1998 the SCN organised a special symposium 'Challenges for the 21st century: a gender perspective on nutrition through the life cycle (SCN, 1998).

3. Booth (1999) has made a similar argument.

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