What general forms of discrimination do women face?

Despite the existence of a range of instruments that prohibit discrimination against women in international law, such discrimination remains pervasive in all spheres of life. It may result from laws that are themselves discriminatory. More often, however, the discrimination women face is the result of social norms or customs, linked to certain stereotypes about gender roles; unequal access to productive resources such as land and to economic opportunities, such as decent wage employment; unequal bargaining position within the household; gendered division of labor within households, that result both in time poverty for women and in lower levels of education; and women’s marginalization from decision-making spheres at all levels.

This report argues that only by addressing these different forms of discrimination, including by challenging the existing distribution of family responsibilities between women and men, shall the root causes of the discrimination women face be effectively addressed. It describes a cycle of discrimination in which disempowerment of women results in women being less economically independent, being exposed to violence and having a weaker bargaining position within the household and the community. As a result, they continue to assume a highly unequal share of tasks and family responsibilities within the household – taking care of the children and the elderly or the sick, fetching wood and water, buying and preparing the food: in middle-income countries, this unpaid care work would represent the equivalent of 15 per cent of the GDP if it were to be valued in monetary terms; and the figure is 35 per cent for low-income countries. If this unpaid care work were to be financed by the public purse, it would represent 94 per cent of the total tax revenue of South Korea, and 182 per cent of the total tax revenue of India.

This “care economy” for which they remain chiefly responsible results in time poverty for women. Women work more hours than men, although much of the work they perform remains informal, essentially performed within the family, and unremunerated, and thus is neither valued nor recognized. This leads to lower levels of education for women, and an inability to seek better employment opportunities outside the home. They may also be discouraged from improving their qualifications because of the lack of such opportunities, due to the discrimination they are confronted within the labour market. This may further feed into negative prejudices about their ability to perform as well as men. The lack of recognition of reproductive rights is part of this cycle: marrying early means having children early, and having to take care of them, even though this may interrupt the education of the mother, or make it difficult or impossible for her to seek employment. It is this cycle of discrimination that must be broken.
How does this discrimination affect the right to food?

These various forms of discrimination against women affect directly the right to food of women and girls. They also have impacts on the right to food of others through three pathways.

First, discrimination against pregnant women and women of child-bearing age has intergenerational consequences. Maternal and child undernutrition affect the learning performance of children, and their incomes as adults thus depend on the quality of their nutrition as young infants, during the 1,000-day window during pregnancy and until the second birthday. The disadvantage of poor nutrition during pregnancy or early childhood is also carried over from one generation to the next: a woman who has been poorly fed as an infant will have children with a lower birthweight.

Second, socially constructed gender roles and the weak bargaining position of women within households result in a situation in which they may not be able to decide to which priorities the household budget should go. Yet, because men are currently insufficiently sensitized to the importance of caring for children and for their nutrition needs in particular, the nutrition, health and education of children significantly improve when women are enabled to make such decisions. Research shows that a child's chances of survival increase by 20 per cent when the mother controls the household budget. This explains why improving the education of women and, thus, their economic opportunities, is the single most important determinant of food insecurity. A cross-country study of developing countries covering the period 1970-1995 found that 43 per cent of the reduction in hunger could be attributed to the progress of women’s education, almost as much as increased food availability (26 per cent) and improvements to the health environment (19 per cent) during that period combined. An additional 12 per cent of the reduction could be attributed to the increased life expectancy of women, so that we owe in total 55 per cent of the gains against hunger during those 25 years to an improvement of women’s situation within societies.

Third, discrimination against women as food producers has society-wide consequences, because of the considerable productivity losses entailed. Access to productive resources such as land, inputs, technology and services are decisive in explaining the difference in yields between male and female smallholders; the greater ability for men to command labor, both from (unremunerated) family members and from other members of the community, also plays a role. Countries where women lack land ownership rights or access to credit have on average 60 per cent and 85 per cent more malnourished children, respectively. 79 per cent of existing studies on fertilizer, seed varieties, tools, and pesticide use concluded that
men have higher access to these inputs. Considerable productivity losses result from discrimination against women in their roles as small-scale food producers, and this is an issue that becomes of vital importance as agriculture becomes gradually feminized, with men often the first ones to exit agriculture and migrate to cities. In 2010, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concluded that “if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 percent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 percent”.

What specific forms of discrimination do women face on the farm?

The report describes in detail the various types of discrimination women face as small-scale, independent food producers; as waged workers on farms; and in access to off-farm employment. It also examines how social protection schemes can be better tailored to women’s needs and can be “transformative” in challenging existing gender roles. Its key conclusions are the following:

As small-scale food producers, women face multiple forms of discrimination in accessing land, in benefiting from extension services, in access to financial services, or in the design of agricultural research and development. In many countries, the law regarding inheritance of land still discriminates against women, and even when the discriminatory elements are removed, the laws are often circumvented under the pressure of social and cultural norms.

Extension services also often do not reach women effectively. Women are underrepresented among extension services agents, though male agents may have less understanding of the specific constraints faced by women; and there seems to be a presumption that any knowledge transmitted to the men will automatically trickle down to the women so that they benefit equally, without taking into account the specific time and mobility constraints of women.

Access to credit has been improved thanks to the development of microcredit schemes that often target rural women specifically. However, improved access to loans for rural women does not necessarily imply that women will control the use of the loans: because the creditworthiness of women (as measured by loan repayment rates) is higher than that of men, women in practice may be used as convenient “middlemen” by the lending institutions’ field workers and by the male members of households. Moreover, there is an inherent tension between the hope that microfinance programmes can function as a financially self-sustaining means of addressing rural poverty, and the objective of supporting the poorest women and single women with a low capacity to improve their productivity levels – because they may be poorly qualified or illiterate, or cannot move beyond home-based activities due to their household responsibilities. The result is that while microfinance programmes increasingly target rural women, they mainly benefit the women who already have most assets or who have male relatives to work with them, and often do not reach the poorest, who operate in a “mini-economy” of very small transactions, so small in fact that the transaction costs of dealing with them are too high even for microcredit institutions.

Finally, agricultural research and development could take into account the specific constraints faced by women and their preferences. For instance, women may prefer crop varieties that can be more easily prepared for the family or that are easier to cultivate, for instance, those that are less threatened by weeds or can be easily husked. Because of the obstacles women face in accessing credit, they may prefer to grow crops following agro-ecological, low-external-input techniques, which also avoid the need to transport bags of fertilizers, which could be difficult in the absence of adequate means of transportation. Rural women possess traditional farming knowledge and skills that, in many cases, represent a huge, largely untapped potential.

Women face various forms of discrimination as waged workers on plantations. They are disproportionately represented in the “periphery” part of the workforce that coexists with the “core” segment of permanently employed farmworkers. This “periphery” is made up of unskilled workers, often without a formal contract of employment, and their work is often seasonal or temporary (or classified as such even when it is in fact continuous). The main reason why women are disproportionately represented in this segment is because they have fewer alternative options and are thus ‘easier’ to exploit. It is not unusual for the remuneration in this “periphery” segment to be calculated on a piece-rate basis, based on how much of the task has been accomplished. This mode of calculation
of the wage generally means that the employer does not provide benefits or social security in addition to the wage earned, and it is a method of calculating wages that is self-enforcing and requires much less supervision. Yet, though the most efficient women sometimes benefit, this mode of calculation of wages may be unfavourable to women in the heavier tasks, where the pay is calculated on the basis of male productivity standards. In addition, it encourages workers, especially women, to have their children work with them as “helpers”, in order to perform the task faster.

How can social policies empower women and help secure the right to food?

Improving access of women to off-farm employment requires the removal of the barriers that girls face in education. Many poor households are unable to send girls to school because of both direct and indirect costs (school fees or other costs related to attending school, such as uniforms and books); because of opportunity costs (girls who go to school are not available to work within the household); because of the commute involved, when the family lives far from the nearest school, and associated security concerns. The absence of separate sanitation facilities for girls in schools can also be a major obstacle.

Some experiences have proven effective. Bangladesh launched the Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP) in 1993, that has markedly improved girls’ access to education. A female school stipend programme was introduced by the Government of Punjab, Pakistan, in 2004, as part of the broader Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme (PESRP), inaugurated in 2003. School-feeding programmes can also make a significant contribution to improving access to education for girls, especially when they include the provision of take-home rations to pupils: in Malawi, the introduction into the school-feeding programme of take-home rations of 12.5 kg of maize per month for girls and double orphans attending at least 80 per cent of school days led to a 37.7 per cent increase in girls’ enrolment.

Social protection schemes (in the form of cash or asset transfers, or public works programmes) should take into account the specific needs of women, but should also be “transformative”, by challenging existing gender roles. For instance, some conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes such as those launched in Mexico (Progresa/Oportunidades) and in Brazil (Bolsa Familia) have been highly effective in reducing poverty, but the approach adopted by some CCT programmes may also reinforce gender stereotyped roles as women are prioritized as “mothers” and “caregivers”, rather than empowered as equal to men, and the conditionalities attached may not always take into account the specific constraints, including mobility constraints, that women face. The same is true for public works programmes which, although they may include quotas in favor of women – as does India’s Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), introduced in 2005 and now benefiting more than 52 million households –, do not always take into account the need to relieve women from childcare in order to allow them to participate: creating opportunities shall only be truly effective if the burden on women in the “care” economy is at the same time relieved, by the provision of childcare services, of electricity and running water.

Transformative social programmes should include mechanisms to challenge the existing division of gender roles. In public works programmes for instance, the assets created by the programme could serve to ease the situation of rural women in the areas concerned: digging boreholes or planting trees can reduce the time women spend fetching water or fuelwood in the community where such work is performed; as illustrated by Ethiopia’s cash-for-work Productive Safety Net Programme, public works programmes could serve to support agricultural work on the private land of female-headed households which generally suffer from chronic labour shortage.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations. It suggests that States should (a) make the investments required to relieve women of the burden of the household chores they currently shoulder; (b) recognize the need to accommodate the specific time and mobility constraints on women as a result of their role in the “care” economy, while at the same time redistributing the gender roles by a transformative approach to employment and social protection; (c) mainstream concern for gender in all laws, policies and programmes, where appropriate, by developing incentives that reward public administrations which make progress in setting and reaching targets in this regard; (d) adopt multisector and multi-year strategies that move towards full equality for women, under the supervision of an independent body to monitor progress, relying on gender-disaggregated data in all areas relating to the achievement of food security.