

»»» The gender dimension of hunger

One Pager

No. 5, 12 July 2023

Author: Marie Florence Prümm, Editor: Heide Kühlken

The consequences of climate change, the growing number of armed conflicts and rising prices for fertilisers and energy mean that, around the world, more and more people are being affected by acute food insecurity. This is particularly the case for women and girls: this demographic currently accounts for 60% of people suffering from malnourishment. This is partly because, due to biological factors, they have a higher need for micro-nutrients, i.e. vitamins and minerals. In the following, we will look at the factors leading to women being disadvantaged in their access to and production of food, and how this can be addressed.

Systematic disadvantages in access to food

In the vast majority of cases, it is women who are primarily responsible for preparing meals, especially in households affected by poverty. Yet it is often the male family members who receive a meal first. Many women and girls only eat “what’s left” and therefore systematically receive less (and also less nutritious) food than the male household members. Boys are also often breastfed longer than girls. The consequences are manifold and cross-generational:

- malnourished and undernourished girls have difficulty following school lessons or drop out of school altogether, which limits their educational and future employment opportunities and also comes with an increased risk of unplanned pregnancies and gender-based violence.
- Malnutrition often manifests itself in iron deficiency, which can lead to organ damage if left untreated. Anaemia also raises the risk of pregnant women dying during childbirth.

- Nutrition-related growth disorders of the foetus can increase the risk of certain chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure and diabetes later in life. Newborns of malnourished mothers are more likely to have a low birth weight and are therefore more susceptible to illness.

Disadvantages in the education and healthcare systems increase hunger

Women and girls are often denied access to educational services, leading to a lack of knowledge about what makes a balanced diet. It is also often difficult for them to access health services (especially family planning and contraceptives). Unplanned pregnancies cause many households to have fewer resources per capita, which usually also leads to lower food consumption per capita. If the population grows at an above-average rate, individual households have even less productive space available for agricultural use. High population pressure can increase the risk of violent conflicts, which in turn further jeopardise food stability.

Unequal access to resources and lack of decision-making power adversely affect food production and consumption

Although in the countries of the Global South, most agricultural workers are women and girls, they have difficulty accessing land titles and resources (such as finance, infrastructure and agricultural technology). Globally, less than 20% of women own their own land. In some regions such as West and Central Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, this figure is as low as under 10%. If women had equal access to better equipment and more money for good fertilisers, seeds, etc., their crop yields

would increase by 20-30%. They would also be able to grow a wider variety of products and, in doing so, provide a wider range of food throughout the year.

Although it is often women who generate agriculture-based income for their families, it is mostly men who reinvest this. However, men and women make different investment decisions: when women have control over income, they spend comparatively more on their children’s health and education.

Overcoming hunger only possible with multi-sectoral solutions and structural changes

The above analysis shows that hunger has a strong gender dimension. Although humanitarian food security measures are important for overcoming hunger, they cannot solve the hunger problem on their own. Rather, more in-depth measures are also required to reduce gender-specific disadvantages in many social and economic sectors, from the education and health systems and the financial sector to changes in social norms and within family decision-making structures. Many of these issues can be addressed using a feminist development policy. ■