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Women are key to Strengthening Food Systems, Livelihoods and Economic Advancement

Agriculture, Food security, poverty alleviation, women empowerment as well as climate change are all interconnected. They are impacting livelihoods already and will do so even more in the future. In Africa, I can safely say that they impact women livelihoods more. These issues are important to me not just because I am a woman but because as a scientist, I appreciate how science and technology if properly leveraged can help make a difference in addressing the cause and concerns of rural women and assure a better and more secure life.

To start with, accelerating the process of implementation of SDG's requires bringing back women transformation, empowerment and equality,

food security and hunger at the center of the international agenda as outlined in the UN Agenda 2030 and within the realm of the current COVID-19 pandemic. One has to recognize that rural women are privileged partners in helping address the scourges of poverty, malnutrition, and hunger and without their active collaboration and participation, all our efforts are bound to fail.

Access to food is a basic and fundamental human right. Every person on this earth is entitled to a daily diet that is safe, affordable and nutritious. We therefore need a vibrant, productive and resilient food system that will help end extreme poverty, boost shared prosperity for the poorest and the hungry in most parts of the world and more so, in developing countries where the majority of the world's population live.

If in the industrialized nations, agriculture is a commodity producing enterprise, in the developing countries, it is the backbone of the livelihood security system of a high proportion of the population. In developed countries, only 2-3% of the population is classified as farmers, in contrast to 50-70% of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is widely acknowledged that many countries as well as regions have made enormous progress in the recent years to fulfill their MDG's commitments. But it is also true that the world continues to bear a triple burden of related and distinctly different problems such as energy deficiencies, hunger, and micronutrient deficiencies that include hidden hunger and excessive net energy intake and unhealthy diets leading to obesity. The statistics are sobering indeed: an estimated 800 million people go hungry everyday: 1 in 4 people in Sub Saharan Africa and 1 in 6 in Asia. These data are set to increase over the past year. They do not consume their minimum dietary energy needs and the corollary of this is that over 150 million children under 5 years old are stunted due to chronic malnutrition which have life-long consequences preventing them achieve their full potential.

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Malnutrition imposes large human, economic, fiscal and social costs. It perpetuates poverty in affected populations. But what is more serious and alarming is that among the chronically hungry, 60% are women and girls. In some communities, women and girls often eat last and least, due to economic and cultural barriers. And here, may be, it is timely to raise a number of questions in view of enhancing the deliberations of the Food Systems Dialogue. For example, are the present food systems addressing the triple burden of hunger, hidden hunger and obesity? How can we harness the best contribution from rural women in matters of food security, hunger and health? How can they be empowered and their transformative capacity enhanced to tackle such burdens?

There are also other elements that are exacerbating access to safe foods in many countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. In many parts of the world, contaminated food is contributing to poor health outcomes and is impacting 1 in 10 people globally. Climate change, which has a negative impact on agriculture, is continuing to worsen nutrition and health. Urbanization, on the other hand, is leading to a 'dietary transition' in many low and middle-income countries while at the same time affecting opportunities and risks for human health and nutrition.

A strategic shift that mainstreams nutritional considerations and outcomes in agricultural and food security strategies is needed urgently to tackle hunger, and in this regard, technology has a crucial role to play. Because, there is a direct correlation between the increased adoption of crop and livestock technology, aquaculture and fisheries productivity, resilience and sustainability to ensure availability of sufficient calories, especially, in poorer countries. In the same breath, it has become imperative to reduce gender inequality, improve water management and its sustainable use, strengthen land governance and minimize land degradation, enhance farmer skills and knowledge, as well as boost aquaculture production practices in order to help raise productivity in poor countries and rural areas.

The adoption of climate-smart technologies with lower Green House Gas emissions, not forgetting traditional practices, will help improve climate-resilience as well as help tackle the ravages of climate change. In many poor countries, there is also urgency in the handling of postharvest and storage facilities. The FAO had estimated that post-harvest handling and storage loss of cereals and maize in Africa is between 8% and 1.4 to 6%, respectively. Losses in perishable goods are higher. Milk losses range between 7 to 21% in some East African countries.

Hunger can also be tackled through homegrown school feeding programs where crops and livestock products produced from small holder farmers act as living outlets for the local school and help strengthen the local economy.

In order to reduce micronutrient deficiency or hidden hunger as it is referred to, small scale farmers must be encouraged to promote a more diversified crop/farm enterprise production systems including homestead gardens and not forgetting the under-utilized and neglected foods. A more diverse set of foods results in greater dietary diversity, higher micronutrient intake, and positive impacts on the nutritional status of children in the household. Also, simple nutrition messages around specific crops can be effective if they are targeted to the farmers who grow the crops and packaged with seed delivery and other pertinent information about the crop.

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It is here that the contribution of rural women and girls becomes even more critical for achieving food and nutrition security and long term sustainability. Women, especially rural women, in many countries form the backbone of the agricultural sector and food production systems. It beholds Governments in these countries to ensure that the gender balance among agricultural extension workers is properly attained to help improve the delivery of services that meet the needs of women farmers. Importantly, an increase in discretionary income opportunities along with the promotion of labor-saving technologies for women enable them to earn more income without compromising on breastfeeding and meal preparation time.

In several African countries, bio-fortified crops as well as the promotion of micronutrient-fortified fertilizers have contributed to diversify the diet of children and young adults with vitamin A and minerals. The rich orange sweet potato as well as the zinc-enriched cereals, are prime examples. However, more research and development is needed on the nutrient-rich indigenous crops as it can help alleviate malnutrition. The availability of such products can also be made more accessible and culturally acceptable when nutrition education, through school feeding program, get taught in schools. School feeding program is also a powerful tool to tackle obesity. Food labels, particularly on packaged and processed foods, on the other hand, can play an important role in consumer protection by conveying safety information and nutritional content.

Food safety and health can also be improved by using pesticides more optimally, designing and managing irrigation schemes that do not cause an increase in water-borne diseases like malaria, and putting in place basic post-harvest food safety standards and regulations that address risks associated with staple foods (such as aflatoxin in cereals and ground-nuts) and improving hygienic conditions and practices in informal markets.

The implementation of some of these measures will empower women, especially, rural women. The connection from food systems to nutrition and health outcomes passes primarily and inevitably through women. Unfortunately, women have less access to and control over assets, inputs, services, and finance than do men. As the child bearers and child care providers, women play a critical role in the health of infants, and are often responsible for producing the food, purchasing it, processing it, and preparing the meals. Thus, any effective program to improve household nutrition and health must necessarily address gender inequalities.

Policies and programs need to abandon a gender-blind approach and instead, expand women's role and engagement in areas around: decisions about agricultural production; access to and decision-making power over productive resources; control over use of income; leadership in the community; and time use.

There are many tested solutions, but no one size fits all. Countries need to tailor the combination and form of interventions to suit their own circumstances. Doing so will require leadership towards a greater focus on the needs of women, more collaboration between institutions and sectors, learning and innovation, and broad partnerships.

In conclusion and according to Dalai Lama, *"The problems we face today-violent conflicts, destruction of nature, poverty, hunger and so on, are human created problems which can be resolved through human effort, understanding and the development of a sense of brotherhood and*

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sisterhood. We need to cultivate a universal responsibility for one another and the planet we share.”
And according to Mahatma Gandhi, *“There is enough on this planet for everyone’s needs but not for everyone’s greed.”* [Unquote]

This is our fourth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Pre-UN Food Systems Summit 2021. This Thought Piece is part of the discussion Issues presented by the author during “Selected Advocates for Africa’s Development Dialogue”. You can get more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You many also share your thought piece about the Food Systems with us by writing to e.adipala@ruforum.org and copying e.acan@ruforum.org

About the Author

Her Excellency Prof. Ameenah Gurib-Fakim was the 6th President and First Female President of the Republic of Mauritius. She has been the Managing Director of the Centre International de Développement Pharmaceutique (CIDP) Research and Innovation.

She was awarded l’Oreal-UNESCO Prize for Women in Science, and Trailblazing award for political leadership by World Women Leaders Council in Iceland. She was in the Forbes List for the 100 Most Powerful women in the world and First among Top 100 Women in Africa Forbes List of 2017 and 2019. She is nonoured as one of Foreign Policy’s Global Thinkers and Honorary President of the International Engineering & Technology Institute, among several other international and national awards.