

April 2011
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Gender, IFIs, and the Global Food Crisis

Rising Food Prices, Rising Poverty

In March 2011, The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Price Index, which tracks the price of 55 food commodities for export, rose for the ninth consecutive month. The index has now reached its highest level in both nominal and real terms since the inception of the index in 1990 (FAO, 2011).



While higher food prices have benefited food corporations, they have contributed to a stark increase in poverty in developing countries. A recent World Bank (WB) report revealed that an additional 44 million people have been forced into poverty due to the drastic rise in food prices since June 2010 (WB, 2011). Having already surpassed the levels witnessed during the 2008 food crisis, the recent upsurge in food prices suggests that yet another food crisis has struck poor women, men, girls and boys.



The Feminization of Food Insecurity and IFIs

Women, who account for the majority of both the world's poor and the world's small-scale farmers, bear the brunt of rising food prices and growing food insecurity in developing countries. When men migrate to find employment, women are usually left to work family farmland. Women are also responsible for gathering essential household resources, such as firewood and water, preparing meals and tending

livestock (Gender Action, 2011). Despite women's critical role in food production, facts inside this primer demonstrate that International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have failed to translate gender-mainstreaming rhetoric into action. To ensure that women and men equally participate in and benefit from IFI investments in developing countries, Gender Action works to raise awareness of some of the IFI-related causes and gender-specific impacts of food insecurity.

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Did you know?

- Food represents the majority of household expenditure in poor countries.
- Developing countries are net importers of food.
- Recent price increases are highest for food staples like wheat and corn.



IFI Policies Undermine Local Markets

Although several factors contribute to rising food prices, decades of economic reforms imposed by IFIs have undermined local food production, created dependence on food and imports increased vulnerability to fluctuations in global food prices. IFI loan conditions have required poor countries to privatize agriculture and unilaterally liberalize trade through policies such as the reduction or removal of government

farm subsidies. While developed countries have maintained their agricultural subsidies, cheap food imports have flooded into developed nations. By removing the safeguards needed to protect local food production, IFI-imposed deregulation crushes local markets and destroys the livelihoods of poor farmers, the majority of whom are women, and dismantles long-term production capacity of developing countries.

"There are more hungry people in the world than ever before. More than one billion people, almost a sixth of humanity, are now undernourished." — World Food Program, 2009

Import dependence exacerbates poverty

In most developing countries, poor households spend the majority of their income on food (Plan UK, 2010). Without the buffer of local food production and subsidies, global price volatility increases local prices and contributes to malnutrition among the most vulnerable. Meanwhile, rich countries consistently maintain government food support.

Price increases are highest for staple foods. Grains, such as corn and wheat, account for more than half of poor Africans' daily caloric intake (USDA, 2008). Cereals have shown the highest food price increases, and are projected to rise even further in cost (FAO, 2010).

Rising Food Prices Impact Women and Girls

IFI pressure to abolish tariffs on imports and repay debts reduces governments' ability to pay for healthcare and education. In addition to their role in alleviating hunger and malnutrition in their households and communities, women are also responsible for caring for children, husbands and the elderly. When developing countries are forced to reduce or abolish taxes on food imports and debt burdens force low-income countries to make budget cuts to repay IFIs, governments have fewer resources to spend on vital health, education and other social services. Spending cuts in these sectors inevitably have the greatest harmful impact on the health and development of women and girls (Gender Action, 2006).

Rising food prices put additional pressure on already strained household budgets. With the majority of income spent on subsistence, escalating food prices mean less money for education and healthcare. When women enter the formal, or more likely informal, work force to help support household consumption, girls are often forced to leave school to attend to household chores and care for younger siblings (Plan UK, 2010). The negative impact on girls' education severely limits opportunities for social and economic development and undermines their ability to break out of poverty.



IFI Investments Intensify Gender Inequality

IFI agriculture investments support big businesses, not women farmers. IFI investments tend to focus on agro-processing and commercial agriculture, which mainly utilize male laborers and focus on external markets. These investments tend to overlook women, who are often restricted to subsistence farming, and instead mainly benefit the transnational corporations that win IFI procurement contracts. Further, women lack access to innovations in agricultural technology and limited access to lucrative markets, which leaves women subsistence farmers with few means to improve their income and their food security (FAO, 2011).

IFIs do not hold themselves accountable for promoting women's land ownership. IFIs have a plethora of gender equality policies, strategies and guidelines but they are rarely enforced. For example, the World Bank's "Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook" recognizes gender inequity in agriculture and offers "technical advice that will help development practitioners better integrate gender-responsive actions into agriculture and rural projects" (World Bank, 2009). This sourcebook, however, only provides suggestions to improve WB land policy and administrative investments; it fails to mandate promoting women's equal access to land and natural resources.

Food security is dependent on women's equal access to land and natural resources

"When women, and particularly rural women, secure property rights and access to finance, they have a better chance of ensuring their own food security."
— Population Reference Bureau, 2004

"Land rights increase women's power in social, economic, and political relationships. Rural women claim that secure land rights increase their social and political status, and improve their sense of self-esteem, confidence, security, and dignity. By diminishing the threat of eviction or economic destitution, direct and secure rights to land can increase women's bargaining power in their families and participation in public dialogue and local political institutions." —ActionAid, 2008

"Men more than women are likely to abandon agricultural work at home and migrate first to seek income in other sectors. Women are being left to carry the full burdens of agricultural production, but often with no legal protection or rights to property ownership" —World Bank, FAO, IFAD, 2009



Photo by Find Your Feet

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Gender Action's analysis demonstrates that IFI-led macroeconomic, financial and trade policies in developing countries intensify gender inequalities by disproportionately impoverishing women and girls. IFIs policies must not only alleviate the impact of escalating food prices on the poor, but must also address the disproportionately negative impact of food insecurity on women and girls.

In order to improve food security, IFIs must:

1. Eliminate harmful investment conditions, such as the requirement to privatize agriculture, and procurement practices that undermine local markets.
2. Uphold their commitments to promote women's empowerment and gender equality in all agriculture, rural development and nutrition investments.
3. Address long-term threats to agricultural productivity, including climate change and resource degradation.

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Gender Action's mission is to promote women's rights and gender equality and ensure women and men equally participate in and benefit from International Financial Institution (IFI) investments in developing countries. Visit our website to see our first [Gender, IFIs and Food Insecurity country case study on Ethiopia](#) and other resources.



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