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Educate, Empower, Enrich: Meeting Nutritional Security Through the Power of India's Women

INTRODUCTION:

"However much a mother loves her children, it is all but impossible for her to provide high quality child care if she herself is poor and oppressed, illiterate and uninformed, anemic and unhealthy, had five or six children, lives in a slum or shanty, has neither clean water nor safe sanitation, and if she is without the necessary support either from health services, or from her society, or from the father of her children"-Vulimiri Ramslingaswami, "The Asian Enigma" (Coonrod, 1).

The work of Dr. Norman Borlaug has led to substantial increases in yields to feed the world's poorest countries. Though there have been many recent breakthroughs in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to reduce world hunger, there are still many unsolved problems that remain. In addition to the success of agricultural technologies, the Green Revolution has entered a new phase, which looks beyond high yields and ventures toward new solutions such as biodiversity, eliminating discrimination against women, and depleting harmful environmental practices. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2005* report identifies eight keys to unlocking the success to overcome world hunger: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, *promote gender equality and empower women*, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, and finally, to develop a global partnership for development. (Food and Agricultural Organizations (FAO), 2). Ideally by following these far from simple goals, MDG hopes that by the year 2015 hunger and starvation will be cut in half. I choose to study a country that could have a great impact on meeting these goals: India.

India, the second largest country when comparing population, (Murphy, 79) has a female population larger than Canada, the United States, and the Russian Federation combined. One would hope a population of women this size would have a powerful voice, but the opposite is true. "The majority of women go through life in a state of nutritional stress-they are anemic and malnourished. Girls and women face nutritional discrimination within the family, eating last and least." A correlation has also shown that infants of illiterate mothers in India have a higher mortality rate (Menson-Sen, 7, 11). As the opening quote reflects, women in these conditions have little power to combat food and nutrition insecurity and so there is little surprise that India is home to over one third of the world's malnourished children (Shiva).

In this essay I will examine these problems by investigating the impact they have on a family farm in India by exploring the domestic policy initiatives addressing gender discrimination particularly against women. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru once said, "You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women." In India women are perceived as detrimental and incapable of changing outcomes and improving society. Ironically, women are responsible for providing assistance in growing 50 percent of the world's food (Reddi, 3). They truly hold the success of the MDGs in their hands.

FAMILY FARM:

In India, a typical family lives in a one-room house made of mud and bricks. They do not usually have running water, electricity, or furniture (Murphy, 23-24). My representative family consists of Amar, (husband) Shari, (wife) Shikha and Sachi, (daughters) Hari, (son), and Janak and

Hita (Amar's parents). Sachi, Shikha and Hari are among the one third of the children in the world that are malnourished. Their diet is simple and made up of millet (coarse grains) and pulses (beans, dried peas and lentils). They season these dishes with spices such as curry to add extra flavor. In addition to being in charge of taking care of the home and children, Shari works along side Amar on their three-acre farm consisting of wheat, beans, and pepper using a combination of traditional agricultural and biotechnology practices. Although the use of genetically modified seeds has increased the yield of crops, the 20Rs (\$0.50, USA) a day they earn does not meet their family needs. Therefore, Shari also supplements the family income as a laborer on another nearby rice farm getting paid less than the men doing the same work (Menon-Sen, 8).

Women make up 62 percent of the illiterate people in India, while men make up only 34 percent (Coonrod). Shari falls into this category as a result of not attending school as a child and has yet to receive an education. This puts her family at a disadvantage as she makes daily decisions that impact their existence. Uneducated women are more likely to have unhealthy families. Their children are at a higher risk for malnutrition, and less likely to attend school themselves (*Food and Agriculture Organization, 16*). Although children are entitled to a free education from ages 6-14 (Rossi, 11), education becomes less of a priority and most drop out early to help with the family farm. In fact, due to hardships on the farm Shari's family can no longer afford to send their son to private school.

NUTRITION INSECURITY:

"Poor nutrition for women is one of the most damaging outcomes of gender inequality. It undermines their health, stunts their opportunities for education and employment and impedes progress toward gender equality and empowerment of women" (FAO, 16). This is a prime example of how domestic policy initiatives pertaining to discrimination against women contribute to food and nutrition insecurity in India. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2005* report indicates that gender inequality depletes women of education and employment opportunities and from "participating in making decisions"(FAO, 18). This then results in "millions of mothers (that) have neither the knowledge nor the means nor the freedom to act in their own and their children's best interest."

PRESENT STATUS:

In India, gender discrimination is currently prominent and a major issue. "70 percent of the female labor force is engaged in food production," yet less than 20 percent of those women actually own land. Also, women farmers in India only receive 10 percent of loans given to small holders, and less than 1% of the total credit that is advanced to the agriculture sector. This means that women are working for menial jobs at menial pay. This can be linked to the fact that "women complete only about half as many years of school as men, and that secondary rates are more than 30% lower" (FAO, 16).

TRENDS AND IMPACT OF IMPROVEMENT:

The outlook for women in India is improving. More women own land, more girls attend school and more women are living longer (Swaminathan, Coonrod, Henderson, Menson-Sen). According to the FAO, recent gains in educating women "made the single largest contribution to declines in malnutrition" (16).

If more women had proper education then their family's income would increase. If Shari pursues an education and encourages her children to do the same then she is providing them with the knowledge and likelihood of raising a strong healthy family in the future. Not only would women have more control in their lifestyles, but there would also be less poverty and hunger; they would have the knowledge to ensure that their families had a bright future free of hunger and malnutrition.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Educate. There are three areas to focus on to educate the women of India: nutrition, literacy, and agriculture. In the area of nutrition, outreach programs could meet with new mothers in rural areas to provide instruction on the nutritional needs of their families and ways to meet those needs (including the consumption of uncultivated plants). In the area of agriculture, women need to be educated on ways to blend the best of both environmental and biotechnological practices. They need to be taught about crop diversification, crop shifting, and effects of genetically modified seeds and fertilizers and their compatibility with the environment (Das). In order to be proactive in their progress, women need to build their literacy skills. Starting small community education centers in rural villages that are accessible for women is key. Women and their children can learn side-by-side. Mothers would become models of active learning and support their children's education as well.

Empower. By empowering women we empower change. Through my research, there are several initiatives that hold promise for the future women of India. There is enough food currently produced to feed the world's hungry, however, as Dr. Norman Borlaug stated in an interview, the distribution of food is not necessarily where poverty is distributed. Women can help with this challenge. (Penn Jillette of Penn & Teller Interviews His 'Biggest Hero' Dr. Norman E. Borlaug). One initiative empowered Dalit women farmers to start their own local distribution system through a Non Governmental Organization (NGO). Through this process, they were able to enrich their farmland so that it would support crops grown with indigenous seeds. They then used the grains harvested to repay their seed loan and store it in a community grain fund. Storing the grain in their village enabled access to food in the case of desperation or emergency. This strategy not only empowered and educated women, but it enriched the lives of the villagers and increased food production every season (Kohli). Dalit women were able to accomplish what was thought to be far too complicated to achieve while strengthening their food security at the same time.

The government of India has also seen the need for these local distribution systems; however, they are leaving local women out of the formula. The Dalit model of empowerment can be replicated in India's efforts to create local distribution systems. Putting control of the distribution systems in the hands of local rural women could ensure community grain banks store food that is grown locally according to their customs and practices (Kohli). If we can increase the knowledge about proper food distribution and create more local distribution systems, we will decrease the number of hungry and malnourished.

Another strategy applied the "rich and traditional knowledge" that women possess. The 2002 article *Turning the World Upside Down* provided insights from a woman stating, "...in my hands I hold all these seeds, which I can also share with others. These seeds give us good, nutritious food and excellent fodder for our animals. We know them very well. We know our land very well." Women are crucial in order to strengthen conservation and sustainability (Menon). Because of their active role in the traditions of agriculture, we need to show them the power of the knowledge they already possess, and empower them to apply it to strengthen their nutritional security.

Enrich. Imagine being a woman in India whose life is not valued nor given the opportunity to grow as an individual. You do the same work as your brother, yet get no recognition and are paid less. You are treated as less of a person just because you are a girl. This would have a great impact on how you perceive the world, how you raise your family, and how you live your life. Although gender discrimination is not an easy practice to conquer, doing so is a necessity that would enrich the lives of the women in India. "Parents must change their attitudes to their children and bring them up in a way that reflects equality" (Menon-Sen, 83). Sons must be raised to respect their sisters. If parents are able to enforce a respecting and equal environment, then the results can only lead to a better future. It would show children that there is hope, and women have voices and need to be heard.

National governments, the international community, and other organizations such as UNICEF, The United Nations, World Food Bank, and non governmental organizations can help accomplish these recommendations by reflecting women's issues in their practices and actions. When trying to solve a problem, these organizations must always ask themselves: *Have we thought about the women? What can we do to include women? Are we empowering women?* These questions will remind them to make choices that impact women in a positive way. At a local level, village leaders could have 'town meetings' with the women who live there. This would raise awareness within the village of concerns and ideas women are having. At a national level, the women of India need a stronger voice in political offices. Women need to be part of the decision-making policies to reflect the needs of India's population. However, India is not in this alone. At an international level, other countries could aid in diminishing gender discrimination by holding the Indian government accountable for its practices and supporting its efforts to empower, educate and enrich the lives of women. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stated, "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance" (Coonrod).

CONCLUSION:

Trends in India show that the objective of supporting family farms in food security was to increase yields. This is being accomplished by applying MDG's goals. The world is beginning to realize that yields are important, but not enough. "India today has over 30 million tons of wheat and rice in government go-downs; yet poverty induced hunger affects over 200 million persons" (Swaminathan). It is now time to look *beyond* higher yields.

After furthering my research on gender discrimination in India and its effects on farming, it is evident that women are a major part of the solution to curing the problem of food and nutrition insecurity. Since gender discrimination is a daily challenge for Indian women, it is even more crucial that we fight to change it everyday. It has been proven that education increases the family income. With more income, families have more control over their life styles and provide better food for their nutritional needs.

India could be on its way to a hunger free nation by focusing on these three guidelines. *Educate* women about nutrition, literacy, and agriculture. *Empower* women active in their village and the agricultural process as leaders instead of laborers. *Enrich* women by treating them as equals, giving them hope for a brighter future.

If these recommendations are met Shari, the mother from my family farm, will reap the benefits. She will go to school, receive an education and increase her earning potential. She will continue to work on the family farm harvesting grains, pulses and uncultivated foods full of nutrition to feed her family, sell at market, and contribute to the local grain bank. She will stop working at the rice farm, and will instead have more time and energy to care for her family. She will have an equal voice in her village to make positive changes for her daughters. Shari is counting on India; Shari is counting on *us*.

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