Women’s Empowerment: A Moral Imperative

Chapter Summary

Discrimination against women is a major cause of persistent hunger. Discrimination is reprehensible and also makes the effort to end global hunger so much more difficult. Women are the primary agents the world relies on to fight hunger. In developing countries, most women work in subsistence farming, the backbone of local food security. Discrimination is the reason women are paid less than men, have lower levels of education and fewer assets, and have to spend more time on unpaid care. Thus, development policies and programs that empower women contribute directly to ending hunger.

Women’s rights are simply human rights. Two generations have passed since 1948, when the international community adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration states clearly that all people are equal and should be treated equally. Today, most national constitutions prohibit discrimination—yet a chasm exists between what nations say in documents and what policymakers do to eliminate the factors that allow gender discrimination to continue.

Powerful forces perpetuate gender discrimination—including norms, values, religious beliefs, and laws. It is past time to take a more comprehensive, holistic approach to women’s empowerment. Change begins with each person, each community and all levels of government recognizing their role in ending discrimination. It will take policy changes but also changes in social and cultural norms. Because of their reach deep into communities, faith institutions and development organizations can be an urgent voice for change.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS IN THIS CHAPTER

- Ending hunger in the United States and around the world depends on women’s empowerment.
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by hunger and poverty because of discrimination.
- The public at large and the faith community in particular can play an important role in changing policies, norms, and behaviors that are harmful to women and girls.
A Question of Agency

Women’s empowerment is about overcoming inequalities in the way men and women are treated. Poverty exacerbates these inequalities. Both women and men who live in poverty lack “agency”—the ability to make one’s own choices and act on them. But poverty is crueler to women, and women are more likely to be poor. The women and girls we are concerned with in this report are those who are hungry and living in poverty.

Girls are taught at a young age what is expected of them at family mealtimes. They eat last, they eat less, and in times of scarcity they may not eat at all. That is what happened to a Guatemalan girl named Gilma. Bread for the World Institute staff met Gilma in the Dry Corridor region of Guatemala, an area suffering ever more frequent droughts because of climate change. During a severe drought in 2012, U.S. food aid provided a buffer between families and hunger, but the aid delivered to 5-year-old Gilma’s family was not enough for everyone. She is one of five children. Her siblings are all boys, so, to put it bluntly, they got to eat while she starved. Gilma had already reached a deadly stage of hunger—severe acute malnutrition—when she was rescued thanks to a U.S. food aid implementing organization, Save the Children. What happened to her illustrates one of this report’s main points: gender inequalities and poverty are a deadly combination.

Gilma’s story appeared in our 2013 Hunger Report, Within Reach—Global Development Goals, as an illustration of the discrimination girls experience in families. Gilma almost died, not because she is a poor child in a region where food is often scarce, but because she is a poor girl child. Within Reach introduced Bread for the World Institute’s priorities for the global development agenda after 2015, when the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) expire.
In that report, we called for a bull’s-eye goal to end hunger within a generation. Now, in the 2015 report, we show why a goal to end hunger cannot be achieved unless the international development community focuses more attention on ending gender inequalities and empowering women and girls. Put another way, the ability of women and girls to make choices for themselves, to set and pursue goals—their agency—is essential to making the world hunger-free and keeping it that way.

**Discrimination Starts Early**

In the year 2000, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) estimated that improvements in women’s status explained as much as 55 percent of the reduction in child malnutrition between 1970 and 1995. Progress on women’s education alone explained 43 percent of the gains. During this time frame, one motivation for families to educate their daughters had to do with the increasing demand for “brain” rather than “brawn” workers—especially in Latin America and parts of Asia. Parents saw that sending girls to school could make the family better off in the long run. In Bangladesh, for example, the expansion of employment opportunities for young women—linked to the growth of the garment industry—increased girls’ school enrollment. It also helped change social norms that had restricted female mobility, because in order to take jobs in garment factories, young women had to be able to travel back and forth to their villages. The story of the empowerment of female garment workers in South Asia is part of Chapter 3, starting on page 125.

Globalization has changed social norms and created new economic opportunities for women around the world. But globalization

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**BOX 1.1 VOICES OF WOMEN OF FAITH**

**DELIA REALMO**

*National Association of Evangelicals*

Clearly not all women and girls from impoverished homes are left to starve while their male relatives simply eat up what little food there is. Delia Realmo grew up in poverty in the United States. “My mother was loving and she was caring, sacrificing,” said Delia, an adult educator and spiritual director in Columbia, Maryland. “My father going out to work was a way of caring too,” she said emphatically. Delia’s father was a migrant farm worker who later found work in a Chicago factory. Delia and her mother willingly sacrificed at mealtimes so that he would have the strength to endure long days as the family’s breadwinner. Her brothers sacrificed too, though perhaps not as much: the males in the family ate from plates, while Delia and her mother ate from smaller bowls. Poverty forces families into making very difficult choices; people do what they can to care for each other when there is not enough to go around.
can be a fickle friend and sometimes an outright enemy. In the last decade, external shocks, particularly the 2008 global financial crisis, led to a rapid drop in private investment in developing countries. Even before that, the food-price crisis of 2007-08 wreaked havoc in developing countries, particularly in food-importing ones since major grain-producing countries imposed bans on exports. In Bangladesh, many of the youngest, most vulnerable children literally embodied the effects of these crises; malnutrition rates climbed in a country where child malnutrition rates were already alarmingly high. And, as we see in Figure i.1, economic crises are far more deadly for infant girls than boys: during these times, 1 to 2 baby boys per 1,000 births died who would have lived in a non-crisis economy, while the figure for baby girls was 7 to 8 extra deaths per 1,000 births.

The International Center for Research on Women describes adolescence as a critical stage of human development that sets the stage for a healthy, empowered adulthood and has repercussions for the broader social, economic, and political development of a society.\(^3\) Joyce Banda, former president of Malawi, often shares a story of her friend from primary school, Chrissy, a very bright girl who was forced to drop out of school in the 5th grade. Her family couldn’t afford the few dollars that she needed to continue. President Banda explained, “She got married at 15 and is still where I left her. She has seven children, locked up in poverty, and I’m where I am.”

In 2012, at the age of 64, Joyce Banda became only the third female African head of state. The challenges President Banda faced as one of a small share of female heads of state worldwide are described in Chapter 3, starting on page 133. President Banda’s own childhood circumstances were similar to her friend’s, except for a critical difference: her parents insisted that a daughter should receive the same educational opportunities as a son.\(^4\) Even
beyond their influence on the decision as to who should continue in school, parental aspirations influence both the aspirations of their daughters and the attitudes of sons towards their sisters, their wives, and eventually their own daughters.

It’s been more than half a century since President Banda was a child. Educational opportunities have greatly improved for girls in the developing world, but there are still far too many—tens of millions—who face the same stark situation that Chrissy did. In 2011, some 31 million primary-aged girls and 34 million lower secondary-aged girls were out of school. Lack of education makes it more difficult for women to earn a living and provide sufficient food for themselves and their children, in turn increasing the children’s risk of hunger and poverty as adults and setting in motion an intergenerational cycle. Educated women marry later than girls who leave school early, are older at the birth of their first child, are more likely to be employed, and share decisions more equally with their male partners. They are setting in motion a far different cycle, one that benefits their children as much as themselves. Women’s education has been linked to a range of health benefits for children—from higher immunization rates to better nutrition to higher test scores. Research in Pakistan found that children whose mothers have just a single year of education scored higher on tests than children whose mothers never attended school.

The MDGs, eight global goals that are non-binding but were adopted in 2000 by nearly every country, reflect a worldwide consensus and commitment to educational equality for girls. Since 2000, the global ratio of girls to boys in primary school has increased from 92 percent in 1999 to 97 percent in 2011. More than two-thirds of all countries will have reached gender parity in primary education enrollments by 2015, and even in regions with the largest remaining gender gaps—South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa—considerable gains have occurred.
When I was the Presbyterian Church USA’s representative at the United Nations in the late 1990s, we convened a meeting with Presbyterian leaders from all over the world to discuss our work in response to the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. A U.N. official who spoke to the participants raised the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) and how, in Africa, it was a reason the disease had spread so quickly. A male pastor from South Africa took offense and stood up to challenge the U.N. official, saying he had not come halfway around the world to participate in an attack on African traditions. Nontando Hadebe, a female church leader from South Africa who was also a nurse, then stood up and walked her South African colleague through the medical reasons that FGM increases the risk of HIV transmission. She did it calmly, and she did it commandingly. Afterwards her colleague took his seat and did not utter a word. It was a breathtaking display of one woman’s empowerment.

The credit for these gains doesn’t belong solely to a group of leaders who gathered at the United Nations and agreed that educating girls is the right thing to do. One major factor is rapid progress against poverty: the global poverty rate has been cut by more than half since 1990. In most of the world, being in poverty is now more significant than gender in explaining educational inequalities, according to Gender Equality and Development, the World Bank’s 2012 World Development Report. Poverty, as noted earlier, puts people between a rock and a hard place. Not being in desperate need makes it easier for parents to decide to keep girls in school rather than sending them into early marriages or pulling them out of school to help support the family (either by earning income themselves or by doing unpaid work such as caring for younger siblings so that their mother can work).

Poverty is the reason that in Vietnam ethnic minority women are three times as likely as ethnic majority women to have never gone to school. In nearly every country, households in the top income quintile have reached gender equality in education. Research in India has found that boys and girls ages 15–19 in the wealthiest fifth of the population...
reach grade 10 on average, but the median boy in the bottom fifth reaches only grade 6 and the median girl only grade 1. In rural India, parents express a desire to educate their sons and daughters equally, but when resource constraints require them to make choices about who can continue in school, they choose their sons. Again, we see that poverty and gender discrimination are closely intertwined. Social norms generally prioritize educating boys, but the norms translate into outcomes if and when the family’s economic situation forces parents to choose some children over others.

**Violence: The Ultimate Disempowerment**

Gender-based violence is one of the clearest manifestations of women’s disempowerment. It is directly associated with hunger. When a farmer is beaten so badly that she ends up physically disabled or with a severe mental illness, the household has lost farming skills that are crucial to ensuring its food security. The World Health Organization estimates that one in three women has experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner.

Gender-based violence occurs throughout a woman’s lifetime, though it’s more likely to take certain forms at certain ages. Women aged 15-44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, motor accidents, war, or malaria. Armed conflict, as we would expect, puts women at greater risk of gender-based violence. In the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, 29 of every 1,000 women were raped in 2006 and 2007 alone. During the three-month genocide in Rwanda in 1994, between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped. Rwanda’s transformation from the ashes of genocide, and what women’s empowerment in government had to do with this, is discussed starting on page 110 in Chapter 3.

Social norms that treat gender-based violence as normal may well be the greatest barrier to progress toward ending it. The fact that violence against women is socially acceptable is
one of the main reasons that survivors do not seek help and support. They are afraid to, knowing that they can expect little or no support from families, friends, or even authorities whose responsibility it is to protect them if they report cases of rape or domestic violence. See Figure i.2. As in many other contexts, victims are frequently blamed for provoking the violence. Police officers who investigate a woman’s charge of abuse belong to their own societies, after all, and they reflect their communities’ beliefs. Thus, in a survey of male police officers in India, all of those interviewed admitted that they believe a husband has a right to rape his wife.17

Child marriage, or the marriage of someone under the age of 18, is another form of gender-based violence.18 Around the world, one in nine girls is married before the age of 15.19 Married children—virtually all are underage girls married to older men—are vulnerable to rape and other types of violence.

Melka, who grew up in rural Ethiopia, arrived home from school one day when she was 14 to be told that she was to get married that very day to an elderly man she had never seen before. “After the wedding they took me to his house in the next village. He started pushing me towards the bedroom. I didn’t want to go inside, but no one would listen to me.”20 Months later, the marriage was annulled after Melka was beaten so savagely that she ended up in the hospital for 30 days and a nurse informed the police. Child marriage has been illegal in Ethiopia since 2004, although the law is violated in thousands of cases each year. After the
marriage ended, Melka found herself shunned by her family. Today, at the age of 21, she teaches girls about their rights. “No one asks me to do this work. I do it because I have to. I had been told that I was unlucky to be born a girl. I want them to know it’s not unlucky to be a girl in Ethiopia.” Melka is an exceptional woman. We can’t expect all traumatized girls to be able to escape or transcend such abuse.

In Niger, 75 percent of girls are married before the age of 18, the highest rate of child marriage in the world. Niger is one of the poorest countries as well, regularly ranking at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index. Only one in two girls in Niger attends primary school. Just one in 10 goes to lower secondary, and one in 50 reaches upper secondary school. Poverty, and the fact that as a result the odds are heavily against a girl of 14 or 15 being in school, give child marriage the appearance of normalcy.

In UNICEF’s 2013 edition of The State of the World’s Children, India had the world’s 12th-highest rate of child marriage. Of Indian women ages 20 to 24, nearly half (47 percent) had gotten married before they turned 18. Combined with India’s huge population, that rate means that India has more child brides than any other country.

The Indian government has not stood still waiting for people to respect the law against child marriage. The government of the state of Haryana in north India developed a conditional cash transfer program to try to reduce child marriage. Cash transfers promote goals such as keeping children in school by giving lump sums of cash to parents who ensure that their children are participating. The Haryana government program, which ran from 1994 to 1998, targeted poor households and disadvantaged castes, offering a payment of 500 Indian rupees (about $13-$14 in the mid-1990s) at the birth of a girl and another 25,000 rupees when she turned 18 as long as she was not married.

The initial cohort of beneficiaries turned 18 in 2012, when the value of the 25,000 rupees was about $465. The first program assessments have been completed, finding that the program did raise the average age of marriage and that participating girls did finish more grades in school than peers who were not enrolled. While both of these are important, it is not yet clear that the program went further and changed how girls are valued. It may take more than additional years of schooling: “Prevailing gender roles and expectations, particularly...
ENGENDERING THE RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Faustine Wabwire, Bread for the World Institute

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry underscored the seriousness of climate change by likening it to the threat of terrorism. Secretary Kerry made another important, but often overlooked point: the cost of inaction will be overwhelming unless the global community takes a more serious stand against climate change now.

In many parts of the developing world, climate change is already damaging food, nutrition, and water security. Climate change increases the frequency of shocks such as flooding, severe storms, and drought. Poor communities bear the brunt of this damage, largely because they have limited capacity to adapt. It is particularly unjust since these are the very communities that produce the lowest levels of greenhouse gas emissions and thus have contributed the least to causing the problem.

Women are central to agricultural production in the developing world; they are the main producers of their country’s food supply. It’s impossible for poor rural women and their communities to cope with the effects of climate change when both are perpetually in crisis mode. Their capacity to adapt must be strengthened.

Compared to men in poor countries, women face additional cultural, social and economic barriers that make them more vulnerable to climate change. They have limited access to productive assets such as land, credit, and extension services, and they continue to lack voice and decision-making power on agriculture policies and programs. As a result, they are in many cases the first casualties of volatile climate conditions, falling into food insecurity and malnutrition. This reality demands a gender analysis toward climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, so that women’s and men’s specific needs and roles are identified and addressed at all levels—household, local, national, regional, and global. Investments in strengthening women’s capacity to create and implement informed, effective adaptation measures can help poor communities become resilient in the face of climate shocks.
National governments, donors, and the private sector can improve access to new technologies, knowledge, and skills for climate change mitigation, as well as to encourage women to form networks to share information and develop new adaptation strategies. Agricultural research and extension programs, for example, should pay attention to the unique duties and responsibilities of women as primary caregivers in the community. Because of their responsibility to secure water, food, and energy for cooking and heating, they are likely to experience significant hardships as climate change causes their communities to suffer growing resource scarcities. Efforts must focus on increasing women’s adaptive capacity to deal with the shocks, while also providing the necessary support—such as social protection and financial and technical assistance—to cushion their communities against additional stressors.

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A Kenyan woman and boy struggle with the dusty wind looking for water. This is what climate change looks like in Kenya and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.
those that prioritize girls’ roles as future wives above all, limit the impact of education on girls’ empowerment, suggesting that other interventions are needed to help girls fulfill their potential,” said researchers at the International Center for Research on Women. In Chapter 3, starting on page 119, we describe some innovative strategies led by Indian women in government to address the multiple forms of discrimination that girls experience.

Finally, child marriage is a threat to its victims’ lives, health, and children. Pregnancy as a teenager is dangerous: girls younger than 15 are five times as likely to die in childbirth as women ages 20-24. According to a 2013 study, a 10 percent reduction in child marriages would lead to a 70 percent reduction in a country’s maternal mortality rate. That is a striking figure, particularly in view of the slow progress toward meeting the MDG target on maternal mortality.

Those who survive may suffer devastating physical injuries such as obstetric fibula, which is far more likely to affect young girls than mature women. Maternal depression is an important determinant of poor nutrition and problems in a young child’s development, and it is not surprising that girls who must leave school, fulfill “wifely duties” to much older men, and have babies—all against their will and all when they are too young—are at risk of depression. This is just one way that the harm done by child marriage may be passed on to the next generation.

Preview: The Impact of Paid and Unpaid Work on Empowerment and Nutrition

Globally, the majority of people living in extreme poverty are smallholder farmers or landless agricultural workers. Both women and men depend on earnings from agriculture to support their families. It’s strenuous work, done mostly with low-tech hand tools such as shovels, hoes, pickaxes, and machetes. On the whole, women have access to fewer resources to make their work more productive and less exhausting. This has implications for everyone: one well-known study found that if female farmers had equal access to productive resources, between 100 million and 150 million people could be freed from hunger.

Through USAID assistance, rape survivors who range in age from six months to 80 years get professional and compassionate support to help them cope with trauma and restore their shattered lives.

MILESTONES IN WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND EMPOWERMENT

1993 The United Nations General Assembly adopts the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

India amends its Constitution to ensure women a third of seats on local governing councils, making it the country with the most elected women representatives.
The many forms of discrimination against women hinder the effort to end global hunger in other ways as well. Perhaps the most critical chronic hunger issue today is early childhood stunting, which damages the health, development, and future of up to 40 percent of all children in some countries. Stunting reflects malnutrition that occurs before a child’s second birthday—during the 1,000 days “window of opportunity” between pregnancy and age 2. It causes the most damage and is largely irreversible. Thus, good nutrition is especially important for vulnerable populations such as pregnant women and the youngest children. The flip side is that medical research has shown that the 1,000 days is when investments in maternal and child nutrition yield especially high returns for children’s physical and cognitive development. When girls and women eat last and least due to discrimination, the opportunity of the 1,000 days is wasted.

In 2013, the Global Nutrition for Growth Compact was signed by 90 governments from developing countries, donor governments, multilateral organizations, businesses, and humanitarian organizations. Signatories committed to a deadline of 2020 “to ensure that at least 500 million pregnant women and children under 2 are reached with effective nutrition interventions; to reduce the number of children under 5 stunted by at least 20 million; and to save the lives of at least 1.7 million children under 5 by preventing stunting, increasing breastfeeding, and increasing treatment of severe acute malnutrition.”

Feed the Future, the U.S. government’s own global hunger and food security initiative, has committed to reducing stunting rates of children by 20 percent in countries where its programs are operating. Feed the Future is primarily an agricultural development assistance program, so to achieve its goal the program has been focused on the needs of women farmers. U.S. agricultural development assistance is discussed in more detail in the section of Chapter 1 titled “Agricultural Assistance to Help Build Women’s Bargaining Power,” starting on page 49.

With research on stunting and other forms of malnutrition yielding new insights, the emphasis of agricultural development efforts has
been shifting as well. One shift, as just mentioned, is addressing the unique challenges faced by low-income female farmers. Another is from a focus on calories to a focus on nutrients. With a clearer understanding that increases in food production do not lead automatically to improvements in nutrition, the traditional focus of development assistance to farmers—increasing the production of staple crops—has been reconsidered. We now know that the additional calories from consuming more staple crops such as rice, maize, sorghum, and wheat do not provide the nutrients people require for good health.

In the past, most agricultural development programs did not include nutrition indicators in their design. One of the rare exceptions is Helen Keller International’s (HKI) homestead food production program in Asia, launched well before researchers identified the overarching importance of maternal and child nutrition. The program operated in Bangladesh from 1993-2003. Very simply, it provided seeds and technical assistance to help women grow nutrient-rich vegetables in their home gardens. When the program started, a family’s diet in the targeted communities consisted mostly of Bangladesh’s staple, rice. Vitamin A deficiency was causing 30,000 Bangladeshi children to go blind every year. HKI worked through female community leaders, who established demonstration plots where they trained and supplied other women in their community. HKI reported that once the program was in place, children in the households participating in the homestead food production program consumed significantly more nutrient-rich foods. Women earned on average an additional $8 per month by selling their surplus; studies showed they used this income to purchase additional healthy foods not grown in the gardens, such as legumes and animal products. More recently, HKI has been implementing an Enhanced Homestead Food Production program, expanding the focus to include countries in Africa.

**MILESTONES IN WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND EMPOWERMENT**

- The United Nations General Assembly adopts the Millennium Declaration, which includes the Millennium Development Goals, eight specific goals with related targets that constitute an international agenda for the twenty-first century. Goal 3 is “to promote gender equality and empower women.”
- The United Nations Security Council passes Resolution 1325, the first resolution ever passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women’s contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace.
For the most part, nutrition-sensitive agriculture programs are still a new frontier, with organizers learning what works best as they go. But there is clearly appreciation for women’s empowerment as a key strategy to increase nutrition sensitivity in agriculture. Until recently most agriculture programs could be described as “gender neutral” in their planning and implementation as opposed to “gender aware” or the advanced “gender transformative” level. This underscores how far there is to go before researchers fully grasp how nutrition-sensitive agricultural programs should work.

Gender transformative programming sets out with the specific goals of bringing significant change to unequal gender relations and addressing the root causes of women’s subordination within their households. See Figure i.3. To be truly transformative, programs should include engagement with men, working to change their perceptions of and behavior on gender relations and the allocation of resources between male and female partners. The aim is to show the value of working together as a team rather than individually. The men who participate in these programs and enjoy the positive results become unwitting ambassadors for women’s empowerment.
and help change the attitudes of their peers. The section of Chapter 1 headed “Producer Groups: Strength in Numbers and Changes in Attitudes,” starting on page 57, shows how this works.

Research in a number of countries has shown that women invest a greater share of their own income in their children’s health and education than men do. Income-generating work is clearly important to women’s empowerment and their children’s wellbeing. The fundamental challenge of all assistance that seeks to empower women economically is negotiating a balance between income-generating work and women’s time caring for children and other family members. We’re interpreting the word “care” to include chores such as fetching water and firewood for cooking. Lack of access to basic infrastructure and labor-saving technologies blurs the distinction between caring for family and caring for the home. To care for children, other family members, and themselves, most women have to spend a great deal of time on household chores that cannot be neglected. While the gap between the time men and women spend on paid work has narrowed considerably, the gap in the time spent on care activities has barely changed. We will have a lot more to say about the care gap in Chapter 2.

BOX I.4 | VOICES OF WOMEN OF FAITH

VIRGINIA R. HOLMSTROM
Executive Director, American Baptist Women’s Ministries

When I became executive director of American Baptist Women’s Ministries in 2001, our organization’s mindset and practice were to be a support network for our denomination’s mission boards. That changed as we became more aware of the plight of women and girls enslaved in sex trafficking. From 2007-2010, American Baptist Women’s Ministries sponsored a national mission project, Break the Chains: Slavery in the 21st Century, to specifically address sex trafficking. In 2011, we renamed the project Break the Chains and Stop the Pain to recognize a shift in focus from solely on sex trafficking to one that encompassed any violence against women and girls. Through Break the Chains, $515,651 was raised and 25 grants awarded to new ministries addressing sex trafficking and other forms of violence against women and girls in the United States, Puerto Rico, and other countries. Fundraising for Break the Chains ended in April 2013, but our ministry continues to focus on empowering women and girls in church and society with the Women and Girls Mission Fund. The sex trafficking and gender-based violence issues made us deeply aware of systemic problems that fuel the exploitation of women and girls. We want to be about the work of empowering women and girls to live into the fullness of God’s purpose for their lives.

MILESTONE IN WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND EMPOWERMENT

2009

Elinor Ostrom of the United States becomes the first (and at this point only) woman to win a Nobel Prize in economics.

2010

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also referred to as UN Women) is established, consolidating a group of UN departments into a single entity with a focus on gender equality and women’s empowerment.
Inside the Home: His, Hers, and Theirs

World Bank president Jim Kim has set ambitious goals for his organization: leading and supporting global efforts both to end extreme poverty by 2030, and to boost shared prosperity for the bottom 40 percent of the population in developing countries. Ending extreme poverty has gotten a lot more traction in the media than sharing prosperity. But it would be hard to imagine ending extreme poverty in any sustainable way without also sharing prosperity more broadly.

Whether we end poverty or boost shared prosperity by 2030 is a matter of political will. One thing we know about political will—particularly to reduce social inequalities—is that reliable data are essential. Policymakers rarely commit to working to solve a problem without convincing evidence drawing the contours of a path forward. As former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton put it, “Data not only measures progress, it inspires it.”

We won’t know whether the world is making progress on the goals to “end poverty” and “boost shared prosperity” until we have confidence in the methodology being used and the accuracy of the information being collected. Robert Zoellick, Kim’s predecessor as president of the World Bank, sought to rebrand the institution as the premier source of knowledge on international development, making vast stores of the Bank’s data publicly available and making use of improvements in information technology to present the data online in new and striking ways.

Development specialists who pay the closest attention to gender inequalities have long advocated for more and better data that are disaggregated by gender. To get at the intersection between gender discrimination and other discriminating factors, of course, data also needs to be disaggregated by age, ethnicity, disability, and other criteria. Sex-disaggregated data would provide clearer ways of understanding women’s economic power in a household relative to that of men. Currently, the household surveys used to collect, analyze, and present data generally treat the household as a single unit. Inequalities within the household do not show up until the information is disaggregated by sex.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launches a new Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy, the first update in 30 years.

The Millennium Development Goals expire. It is highly anticipated that by the end of the year a new post-2015 framework will replace them.
Collecting the data might not require more than asking one or two additional questions on a household survey already being conducted by a data-collection agency such as a census bureau. The Gender, Agriculture & Assets Project (GAAP), led by the International Food Policy Research Institute, gives an example: Asset inequality in a household is very often a direct reflection of gender inequality. For women who work in agriculture, access to land is a very important asset. Gender differences in access to land translate into gender differences in food production as well as status and influence in their homes and communities. To calculate the gender asset gap, GAAP recommends a question as straightforward as, “If you sold the asset today, how much would it be worth?”

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) analyzed surveys from 20 developing countries to determine whether female-headed households were more likely to be poor than male-headed households. It turned out to be true in some countries but not in others. We often hear that women are the majority of people living in poverty, but we don’t actually have the data to back this up—because of the same lack of data disaggregated by sex. Poverty is measured at the household level rather than individually. But a survey of poverty is clearly incomplete if it does not capture the distribution of resources within a household. If a household’s income rises above the international poverty line of $1.25 per day per person, we can hardly say that the women and children are better off if the male head of the household spends all the additional income on himself.

Thus, to design anti-poverty programs that are as effective as possible, it is important to know how the income is shared within a household. Similarly, to reduce hunger, it’s essential to have data on the food security status of a household, but we also need information that is more “nutrition sensitive.” The world certainly still has people who are hungry because they consume too few calories, but stunting, wasting, and other deadly forms of malnutrition are not only caused by insufficient calories but also by insufficient nutrients. Micronutrient deprivation, sometimes called “hidden hunger,” needs to be measured by recording what kinds of foods people in the household are eating.

The MDGs have been credited with refocusing policymakers’ attention on reducing poverty; they also deserve credit for driving improvements in data collection. “Although it seems obvious to track progress on intended targets,” says Todd Moss of the Center for Global Devel-
INTRODUCTION

“common practice in the past was simply to calculate inputs: how much money was spent, how many books were bought, etc., rather than on the hoped-for change in countries, such as healthier and more educated people. In fact, the approach of finding out how we are actually doing is obvious now in part because of the [MDGs].”

There are large data gaps in every major domain of women’s empowerment: health, education, economic opportunities, political participation, and exposure to violence. Counting the number of girls in school is, of course, not the same as finding out how much they are learning. The United Nations has identified a minimum set of 52 indicators crucial to measuring progress in women’s empowerment. On page 36 we show how little data exists for these 52 indicators. The agenda for gender equality in the post-2015, post-MDG framework should include filling these gaps as a top priority. Improving data collection also means going beyond filling in gaps to developing common standards, so that indicators are comparable from one country to the next.

2015 and Beyond

2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, a watershed event for supporters of women’s empowerment around the globe. The timeline that runs along the bottom of each page of this chapter shows a number of other milestones. Among these, however, Beijing was particularly momentous: it showed how, in the modern world, it has become possible to unite women from all parts of the globe, and, by the power of collective voice, create the momentum for change needed to accelerate the slow but inevitable march to equality between the sexes.

The conference produced the Beijing Platform for Action, undoubtedly the most influential statement on women’s empowerment to date. Twenty years later, the impact of the Beijing Platform continues to reverberate. “Beijing was the catalyst for seeing the world through a gender lens,” writes Linda Tarr-Whelan, a U.S. delegate to the Beijing Conference, in a 2010
article for *Human Rights*, a magazine of the American Bar Association.\(^{50}\) One can read the Beijing Platform as a Bill of Women’s Human Rights composed for, if not by, the most disempowered women in the world. Figure i.4 is an example of the statement’s effect on domestic violence legislation at the national level. Another example to demonstrate its enduring influence, the choice of the 52 indicators identified by the United Nations was guided by policy concerns highlighted in the Beijing Platform.\(^{51}\) But the influence has been greater on policy development than it has on development outcomes. This report contends that progress in reducing gender inequalities has been slow primarily because social, economic, and political forces operate to push the world away from respecting women’s rights.

Barbara Howell, Bread for the World’s government relations director in 1995, attended the Beijing Conference. She had also attended two of the three previous U.N. Conferences on Women, in 1980 and 1985 in Copenhagen and Nairobi, respectively. But in Beijing, Howell was struck by an atmosphere of excitement many times more intense than the mood at the earlier conferences. The tens of thousands of women who had traveled there from around the world resolved to “bring Beijing home.”\(^{52}\)

Barbara Howell tried to bring Beijing home as well, but back in the United States, she encountered a public that was mostly indifferent to the spirit of Beijing. U.S. writer Jo Freeman, who was also in Beijing, reflected afterward: “Although I didn’t read the Western press until I returned, most of the reportage missed the message of the conference, which was admittedly diffuse and hard to grasp. Instead the press focused on a perception of oppressive security measures and the numerous logistical problems.”\(^{53}\) The women Howell spoke to who had not attended didn’t feel any more empowered than when she’d seen them last. Men listened politely but were no more interested in supporting a new era in gender relations than they had been before.

Faustine Wabwire, who is now a policy analyst with Bread for the World Institute, was an adolescent living at home in Kenya at the time of the Beijing Conference. What she remembers is the derogatory treatment of Kenyan women who had attended the conference.
upon their return. It wasn’t until she was in college, associating with other ambitious young women, that she understood finally how the women who had been at Beijing saw the conference much differently.

2015 brings another moment of opportunity to press for women’s rights in the context of a new global agreement. At the end of 2015, upon the expiration of the MDGs, member states of the United Nations are expected to adopt a framework that will serve as the successor to the MDGs and include new global development goals. Much as the MDGs were the focus between 2000 and 2015, the new goals (whose anticipated name is the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs) will set international development priorities through at least 2030.54

While there are certainly people who do not believe that the MDGs have been a success, this does not mean that they think the SDGs won’t be worth the effort.

The MDG framework—eight goals that are simple to grasp—galvanized political will and public support to cut hunger and extreme poverty in half by 2015. The extreme poverty goal was met, and the world is expected to come very close to achieving the hunger goal. Thus, experience shows that ending chronic hunger—presently suffered by one in every eight people on the planet55—is a sustainable, realistic goal. There may be outbreaks of hunger as long as there are natural and man-made disasters. But with a strong global commitment to contain and limit the impact of such shocks, hunger can be a temporary problem rather than a life sentence.

As we said at the very beginning of this introduction, ending hunger depends on gender equality. This statement is no exaggeration. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—a group of countries that includes the major donor governments—put it in stark terms: “It is evident that continuing discrimination against girls and women will make it difficult to fully achieve any of the MDGs.”56 Lack of progress against gender inequality spells diminishing returns to investments in fighting hunger. And the reverse is also true: lack of progress against hunger spells diminishing returns for investments in reducing gender inequality.

The interconnectedness of the MDGs creates many ties between and among groups of two, three, or more of the goals. These connections also extend to scores of issues that were not part of the MDGs (child marriage, climate change, and unpaid work are three examples). Advocates are pushing for a more comprehensive treatment of gender inequality in the SDGs than there was in the MDGs. The gender equality goal (Goal 3) of the MDGs
leaves out many important gender issues—and yet across all the other MDGs, there are clear synergies with gender equality. We know that when women’s income increases, they generally spend it on food (Goal 1). When women complete more years of education (Goal 2), it’s a significant boost to efforts to reduce child mortality (Goal 4) and maternal mortality (Goal 5). Greater economic independence for women reverses the spread of HIV/AIDS (Goal 6). Lack of access to clean water and proper sanitation (Goal 7) is among the top reasons girls stop attending school.

The risk of creating a framework that includes every important issue is that what it’s trying to achieve may be clear only to the technical development experts who put it together. The SDGs’ framers must remember the need to build and sustain political commitment—and therefore to communicate with engaged citizens around the world. The biggest surprise for governments that signed on to the MDGs may have been not the fact that the world has already achieved the poverty goal and is within reach of the hunger goal, but the emergence of an energized, vocal, and remarkably well-networked global citizenry determined to hold them and their successors in government accountable.

Had the Beijing Conference taken place in an era with Facebook, blogs, tweets, and other social media, who knows how many more women would have been able to bring Beijing home? But moments of opportunity are for their own times. The Beijing Conference and all it stood for belong to 1995—although its goals remain alive. As we look to this new opportunity, it is time to get serious about empowering women and girls. We laud the progress of girls attending primary school at the same rate as boys—and yet we overlook the one in nine that are pulled out of school and forced to marry. We understand how important women farmers are to feeding the world—and yet we act indifferent to how much time they have to devote to drudgery. We do what we can to empower them with policies and programs, while resisting the fundamental nature of the problem, the discrimination they face. Let’s seize this opportunity to get it right for women here and now and for future generations who will live in a world without hunger.
MUKTA’S STORY

Gloria Das, World Vision

Mukta is 12 years old and lives in a tin hut in the remote village of Munshipara, Bangladesh. She is studying in grade seven at the high school in her community. Mukta’s parents eke out a meager existence for themselves, so when Mukta turned 12 they arranged for her to marry a trolley driver [a three-wheeled motor vehicle] from a neighboring village—a man more than twice her age.

Mukta’s father said he gave consent for his daughter’s marriage under economic duress (because in Bangladesh, the older a girl is, the more expensive her dowry). “I feared I would have to pay a huge dowry if she is married off at age of 14,” he said.

Fortunately, Mukta’s mother is a member of a World Vision supported community-based organization that, in addition to helping members economically, works to create child marriage-free zones to stop early marriage. When another group member learned of Mukta’s situation, she approached Mukta’s mother and explained the negative physical and mental effects and legal consequences of child marriage. The family agreed to break the betrothal, and Mukta’s mother says she will now work to prevent child marriages elsewhere in her community.

“We were convinced by our neighbors to arrange Mukta’s marriage because we did not know about its harmful consequences, which we do not want for our daughter,” she says. “I did not know about the existing laws against child marriage.”

Members of this and other World Vision supported community-based organizations share success stories and work to end violence against women through yard meetings and other community gatherings. They also advocate with religious leaders to persuade them to spread anti-violence messages during weekly prayer services. So far, the initiative has prevented 33 child marriages, provided support for hundreds of women survivors of violence through trainings, and supported and stopped dowry practices in a number of communities.

Mukta’s parents now say they will not allow Mukta to be married off during the remainder of her childhood. “I am happy that I have escaped child marriage,” says Mukta. “I can pursue my dreams for a higher education now.”

Gloria Das is the Documentation and Publication Officer at World Vision in Bangladesh.
At Bread for the World Institute, we wanted to come up with a compelling way of visualizing women’s empowerment around the world. We partnered with a group of volunteers who specialize in helping nonprofit organizations like ours visualize the stories they want to tell from the data they have on hand.

The United Nations has defined a set of 52 indicators essential to telling the story of women’s empowerment. This is by far the largest, most comprehensive set of gender indicators ever assembled. However, more than half of the indicators average less than one data point per country from 1990 to 2013. Telling the story then is quite challenging. Millions of women—especially in developing countries—remain in the shadows.
The volunteers are coders, data scientists, statisticians, and graphic designers, and they offered to lend us their specialized skills in an event called a hackathon. On June 21, 2014, we invited them to Bread for the World Institute to sort through all the available official data sets we could get our hands on. Mostly what we had to offer them were spreadsheets with lots of empty cells.

The graphic to the left is a snapshot from the interactive online tool we created to tell the story of missing data. It maps the availability of all 52 indicators related to women’s empowerment in sub-Saharan African countries since 1990. On the vertical axis appear five domains of empowerment (Economic Participation, Education, Health, Public Life & Decision Making, Human Rights) containing all 52 indicators, while the horizontal axis lists all low-income countries in the region.

The “pixels” show how much of the data are missing. A pixel is opaque when there are no data available for a given indicator and country. A pixel is saturated with color when data are collected annually for an indicator and country.

If every country were collecting data annually on all of the indicators, the portrait of the woman would be entirely visible. The less data we have, the less we see of her.

Sub-Saharan Africa is hardly an anomaly. Women are barely visible in all regions of the developing world.

Before the hackathon, we found no attempts to visualize the gaping holes in women’s empowerment data. Now, thanks to what we were able to produce in the hackathon and follow-up work, the 2015 Hunger Report website features an interactive tool that shows users in a single glance just how far we have to go to bring women out of the shadows.

Derek Schwabe is a research associate in Bread for the World Institute.

You can explore the data gaps in greater detail online at hungerreport.org/missingdata.

A Data Do-Gooder

My name is Asal Nassir and I’m a data analyst at a firm in Washington, DC. I got involved with hackathons because I’m interested in volunteering at organizations that promote causes I believe in. The skills I have to offer in data analysis seem not to be all that common at nonprofits.

I accepted the invitation to participate in the hackathon at Bread for the World Institute because the subject is of special interest to me. I care deeply about women’s empowerment. I’m from the Middle East and when I was 13, my parents arranged for me to marry my first cousin who had just finished college. I wanted to finish school and then go to college, and I told him that I’m probably not the kind of wife he wanted. He was a good man and accepted what I told him, and the marriage was called off.

Today, I have a master’s degree. I’ve travelled to 26 countries. I’ve been able to do things that many women from countries where I grew up cannot. I’m proud of what I’ve been able to achieve, and I hope my contribution to this Hunger Report in some small way makes it possible for other women to feel as empowered as I do.
A DEEP DIVE INTO DATA ON WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT AND MALNUTRITION

At the Hunger Report hackathon, we asked our data do-gooders to help us clarify the relationship between women’s empowerment and progress against child malnutrition. The charts on this page and the next pair stunting rates of children under 5 in low- and middle-income countries with indicators for women’s health, education, human rights, and gender equality. The dates covered in these charts range from 1990 to 2013. In the charts shown here, we can see that stunting rates are lower in countries where women are more empowered. This is an issue that merits a more robust research agenda.

As More Girls Complete Secondary School, Stunting Rates Fall

As More Girls are Married before Age 18, Stunting Rates Rise
Stunting occurs when a child is too short for her age due to chronic malnutrition, but has other effects that can’t be seen, including damage to brain development and overall health. Stunting undermines how well a child can do in school and even how much income she will earn as an adult during her most productive working years. At the national level, stunting can cost percentage points of GDP growth. Stunting currently afflicts one in four of the world’s children.

Visit hungerreport.org/nutrition to customize your own charts highlighting the relationship between stunting and other indicators of women’s empowerment.