4. Relevance of gender

- A. Impact of gender on nutrition
- B. Best practices for gender sensitive nutrition

A. Impact of gender on nutrition

Worldwide, cultural norms, traditions and habits have a strong influence on the way food is produced and prepared for consumption – and by whom! Especially in rural areas of poorer countries, the roles and responsibilities of men and women are very pronounced in regard to tasks that relate to agricultural production, livestock raising, storage and transformation of agricultural produce, purchasing of food, and cooking.

When it comes to nutrition – and ways of improving it among individual household members – it is not only important to understand how these different tasks are managed, and by whom, but especially who takes what type of decisions, and based on what norms and understanding. These gender related patterns have a very strong impact on the nutrition of different individuals within a rural family. Typical patterns are:

- The man has control over the agricultural production and the raising of bigger livestock. He plans production based on yield and income expectations, considering market prices to anticipate what is sold and is produced for self-consumption.
- The woman is responsible for food preparation and cooking. She has access to different food sources produced for self-consumption (crops and meat), and buys additionally food and special ingredients that cannot be produced on-farm. These purchases are limited by the budget that is made available to her from the side of her husband.
- The decision what is cooked, how much, and for whom is highly context-specific. It will depend on the seasonal supply of agricultural produce, but being strongly influenced by cultural norms, eating habits and related perceptions. In many cases, the housewife’s priorities are strongly influenced by the man, with his expectations what food should be prepared and based on the presumption that his good nutrition is of primary importance to ensure his wellbeing and optimal work performance. With this logic, special own nutritional needs and those of children and elderly people within the household are many times neglected, i.e. not understood and targeted.
- As many men tend to leave the countryside for off-farm work, most agricultural work is done by women. This has important implications on roles and responsibility patterns at the household level. Also, fewer hands are available to do the agricultural work, thus less food is produced while more cash is available to purchase food, i.e. many small-scale farmers have become net buyers of food. If women have no control over cash and men are not aware and responsible for the nutritional needs of their family, household members are at risk to be malnourished.

B. Best practices for gender sensitive nutrition

Successful interventions in rural areas aiming to improve nutrition in poorer countries imply a sound understanding of how men and women are contributing to this objective, individually and/or jointly. This involves a thorough assessment of roles and responsibilities, including who takes what type of decisions and based on what cultural values and individual perceptions. As women play indeed a crucial role as main caretakers of their families in regard to food production and preparation, their active involvement is of greatest importance when designing and implementing nutrition sensitive interventions. As cultural differences imply different roles for women within the society and the level of households, best practices in regard to involving women and men are rather context-specific.

A main problem in traditional nutrition projects is that women are the main target group for education, which burdens them with additional work e.g. for improved hygiene and child caring practices – which is especially critical where women do not have the decision-making power to change wrong practices (e.g. selling of most nutritious own produce, purchase of nutrition food). At the same time, men my benefit from interventions that lead to increased income, however, without gaining awareness how to spend it best for the purpose of improving their families’ well-being in regard to health and nutrition aspects. As a consequence, it is crucial to recognize the role of men in child care activities and the role of women in productive activities. In nutrition sensitive agricultural projects, educational activities explicitly foster the dialogue between men and women on these topics, to also give room for agreeing on how to jointly improve the nutritional status of the household and its members through concrete action.

Here, good project examples inspire to reflect on best practices.

Further information

- UNIDO – Gender Mainstreaming Checklist for Project
- Scaling Up Nutrition – Empowering Women and Girls to Improve Nutrition: Building a Sisterhood of Success
- Integrating Gender and Nutrition within Agricultural Extension Services – Training Material of ‘Feed the Future’

Different documents that highlight the importance of gender for improving nutrition

- FAO – Gender Equality & Food Security
- SNV – Bringing agriculture and nutrition together using a gender lens
- Brot für die Welt – Equal rights: the best recipe against malnutrition