

Why tackling malnutrition is key to women's empowerment

March 11 2021, by Atalanti Moquette, Emma Feutl Kent



Girls who are well-nourished do better and stay in school longer. Credit: UN Women/Urjasi Rudra, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Disruptions to food and health systems because of COVID-19 are causing rates of malnutrition to rise substantially. Experts predict that

severe hunger around the world [will more than double over the course of the pandemic](#) and in many parts of the world malnutrition will kill more people than the COVID-19 virus itself.

Women and girls have been disproportionately hit by the secondary effects of COVID-19, with the pandemic threatening both their immediate food security and the long-term benefits of good nutrition, which are critical to their empowerment and equality.

The spike in [food insecurity](#) triggered by the pandemic threatens to undo decades of progress and exacerbate the existing gender gap in malnutrition rates. Even before the pandemic, women and girls have faced barriers to accessing healthy food, meaning they are 9.3 percent more likely to be underweight and 36 percent more likely to be obese than men. Now they are at even greater risk, with women more likely to [eat last and least in their households](#) when food is scarce.

As countries strive to build back better from the pandemic, women and girls' nutrition must be front and center in global COVID-19 response plans. Prioritizing women and girls' nutrition will not only decrease the [death toll](#) from the pandemic, it will also set a generation of women up for [good health](#), fully realized cognitive development and better education, and higher earning potential. These three critical outcomes of good nutrition make nutrition an essential tool in the fight for women's rights and empowerment.

Good nutrition protects girls even before they're born and sets them up for life-long health. Nutrition is particularly important in the first 1,000 days between a woman's pregnancy and her child's second birthday, when there is a unique window of opportunity during which [nutrition interventions](#) have an outsized impact on the rest of that child's life.

Infants and toddlers who receive good nutrition catch fewer and less

serious cases of diarrhea, malaria, pneumonia and other diseases and, as they grow, they are less vulnerable to obesity and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes. Nutrition interventions are also key to healthy pregnancies and reproductive health. Women who are well-nourished during pregnancy are far less likely to join the 810 [women who die from preventable causes](#) related to pregnancy and childbirth every day.

Additionally, access to good nutrition is key to allowing girls' brains to develop fully, affecting how well women and girls perform in school. The impact of nutrition on the brain is astronomical –[children who remain well-nourished have up to an 18-point higher IQ](#) than their malnourished peers. Girls who are well-nourished do better and stay in school longer.

Finally, malnutrition also has a huge impact on a woman's employment prospects and earning potential. Children who are well-nourished are 33 percent more likely to escape poverty as adults, while anemia, a condition that overwhelmingly impacts women, reduces women's physical and mental capacity to perform their work. Small interventions such as supplying pregnant women with prenatal vitamins can make a huge difference to their financial security and economic empowerment.

Despite the well-documented benefits of good nutrition for both empowering women and improving community prosperity and resilience, nutrition programming remains grossly underfunded. Globally, even though malnutrition is responsible for 45 percent of all child deaths, only 0.6 percent of government ODA went to nutrition interventions in 2018.

This year is a pivotal year for nutrition and food systems, making International Women's Day all the more significant for highlighting the gendered impact of malnutrition. 2021 is the Year of Action on nutrition, which includes the UN Food Systems Summit and will culminate in the

December Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit. Governments and other key stakeholders can take this moment to show the world that they are committed to nutrition and to the futures of women and girls everywhere.

For governments, better nutrition is a cost-effective way to provide women with important tools to support their efforts to claim equal rights. Positive steps in this direction are already being taken, with a growing number of countries adopting feminist foreign policy agendas and advocates calling for feminist COVID-19 response plans. To maximize their impact, nutrition should be a key pillar of these plans.

Now more than ever, nutrition interventions that take into account gender inequalities are critical to making concrete and long-lasting improvements to the status of women and girls around the world.

Interventions in nutrition yield [one of the best value-for-money results](#) in terms of economic returns. If governments invest in women and girls' [nutrition](#) now, a generation of [women](#) will be empowered to actively drive forward future economies, leading to fairer and more equal societies where everybody can thrive.

More information: Motahar Heidari-Beni. Early Life Nutrition and Non Communicable Disease, *Primordial Prevention of Non Communicable Disease* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-10616-4_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-10616-4_4)

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