

GENDER EQUALITY

The Role of Dietitian-Nutritionists in Contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

GOAL #5

Target: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (1)

Women and girls represent half the world's population, and thus half the potential (2). Despite the increase in the number of girls in school (3) and women in the labour market, gender disparity exists, and has long-term and intergenerational impacts on nutrition. Empowering women and girls supports economic and social advancement (3), while gender inequality stagnates social progress (2). This brief will cover how nutrition and food systems are related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #5, and how dietitian-nutritionists can help achieve it. To note: Equality means giving everyone the same thing, whereas equity means giving people what they need to reach their best health (4).

GLOBAL TARGETS

- ▶ End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

- ▶ Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life
- ▶ Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels
- ▶ Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

How Does Gender Equality Impact Nutrition and Nutrition Impact Gender Equality?

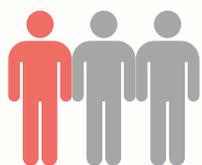
Gender equality is not only a human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful and sustainable world (8). A third of countries have not achieved gender equality in primary education (2), impeding the skill development and career advancement of their girls (2). This sparks a cycle as women experience more financial distress, leading to food insecurity, malnutrition, and chronic diseases (6).

Healthy well-balanced diets grow healthy minds and are imperative for learning, so when women and girls are well nourished they learn better and earn more. They are then better positioned to share their knowledge, take actions on existing nutritional barriers, and engage in local health agendas to improve conditions for other people (5).

** Gender represents socially constructed roles, behaviours and identities. Sex is a set of biological attributes assigned at birth (6).*

Education is the vehicle for women empowerment and improved food security (6). Education and work opportunities, financial stability, and therefore proper nutrition, help women thrive mentally, physically, and socially. If women had these assets, they would be closer to reaching their full potential, contributing to a thriving economy and social success.

For example, a study in India showed children in villages that are led by women have higher immunization rates and improved school attendance (6). Their communities also invested in clean drinking water, therefore improving food security (6).



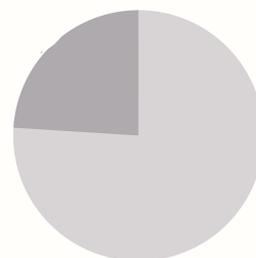
Less than **1 in 3** senior and middle management positions are held by women ⁽²⁾

Women play paramount roles in reducing food insecurity, both within their households, and in the agricultural industry of low-income countries. Research has shown that when women have more resources, assets, and power within households, the health, happiness, and fortune of their family is cultivated (6). For example, greater investments into their children, especially girls', education are made (6). Women also invest more of the family's conditional cash transfers from the government into food for their families (6). However, many familial practices favour men and boys' access to food and restrain women's involvement in family spending and food distribution decisions (6). Women and girls experience food insecurity secondary to these gender inequalities that restrict their access to education, income, agricultural technology, and land (6).

Women and girls experience adversities that impact their health and ability to work. For example, they suffer disproportionately from physical and sexual violence, female genital mutilation, and imposed marriage during childhood.

One fifth of women and girls aged 15 to 49 have reported experiencing physical or sexual violence by their intimate partner (7) and 49 countries have no laws protecting women from domestic violence (7). This impedes women's educational and work opportunities, and ultimately, their health.

Women who are able to overcome adversities enough to enter the workforce, still experience sexual violence and exploitation there (3). They face limited employment rights, more household and domestic responsibilities, and discrimination in public office (3). These conditions systematically undermine women's ability to participate in activities that shape economic and social progress.



Only **24%** of national parliamentarians are women, having increased by just 5% in the past 10 years ⁽³⁾

Clearly, women and girls are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing services or assets needed to improve nutrition, and this deprivation of power is rooted in discriminatory social norms.

ACTIONS THAT ADVANCE GENDER EQUITY

- Implement legal frameworks that prioritize equality in work environments (7)
- Eradicate harmful practices targeted at women and girls to prevent gender-based biases (7)
- Address unconscious biases that form barriers to equal opportunity (2)
- Host educational campaigns about unhealthy cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (2)
- Abolish laws like child marriage, marry-your-rapist, and rapist parental rights, which limit the rights of women and girls and prevent them from achieving success (2)
- Strengthen sexual and reproductive rights (8)

Framework for Action

Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, employment, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes, will benefit communities and humanity as a whole (7). Achieving gender equity is reliant on equal rights in society, and rights to sexual and reproductive health care (3). This is a shared responsibility with mutual benefit; when gender relations are informed and equally powered, decision-making for nutrition improves (5). When women and men possess equal rights, their health and nutrition as well as that of their families and communities, improve (5).

Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls requires action at the policy, health-systems, academic, and community levels, and there are opportunities for action from dietitian-nutritionists in each.

Academic Level

More research into the intersection and reciprocal impacts of gender equality is needed. There are ample opportunities to research and teach others about these impacts in various socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

This presents an opportunity to contribute to sustainable development in diverse ways. Furthermore, binary ideas of gender are dissolving, increasing the need for research on how gender equity and nutrition are impacted by diverse gender identities.

Community Level

Dietitian-nutritionists working in communities should educate clients about the effect of gender equality on nutritional health and society (9). A key action is to work in programming that supports men and women to share power over their resources, in particular finances and food, in their household. Gender equality programming has been found to be effective in improving access to sanitation, water, and better health, especially among women and girls (6). In all the programming that dietitian-nutritionists run or are involved in, they must account for gender dynamics to ensure that women are not systematically being marginalized in their access to food, and participation in sustainable food systems. Such programming has improved food access, security, and consumption (6).

Policy Level

Identifying and addressing implicit biases held by key decision makers, and structured into policies, is critical to making progress (9). Dietitian-nutritionists have a place in this through their involvement in designing policies that empower women and increase their power within households (6). This could mean the development of, or advocacy for, policies that support and uphold gender equalities such as raising minimum wage, as women disproportionately work minimum wage jobs. Although not all such policies are overtly nutrition related, they are nutrition sensitive. A dietitian-nutritionist is in a unique position to ignite a new cycle: with better access to nutrition comes better education and with better access to education comes better nutrition. Women themselves benefit, and society as a whole, as educated women share their expertise and step into more decision making roles. When women and girls can access education, healthcare, employment and power, they can contribute to sustainable economies and societies.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ Food security has a dramatic impact on the economic and social sustainability of populations, and this improves when gender equality improves (10).
- ▶ When women and girls are well nourished they learn better and earn more. They are then better positioned to share their knowledge, take actions on existing nutritional barriers, and engage in local health agendas (5).

Key Roles for Dietitian-Nutritionists

- ▶ Work with clients and design programs to empower girls and women in and outside of the household
- ▶ Identify and address implicit biases in key decision makers and systemic inequities in policies (10)
- ▶ Examine the relationship between nutrition and gender in diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts, including non-binary genders

Organizations That Acknowledge Gender Equality

To learn how organizations use these values in practice, consider looking into the work of the following organizations.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recognizes the relationships between food security, sustaining peace and gender equality (10)

Asian Development Bank (ADB) explores how gender equality can contribute to food security, focusing on Asia and the Pacific, and describes the relationship between gender-based biases and access of food (11)

Nutrition International believes that good nutrition and gender equality are mutually reinforcing, and improving nutrition is critical to achieving gender equality, and in turn improving gender equality leads to improved nutrition (5)



Recommendations for Further Reading:

[Gender equality and food security: Women's empowerment as a tool against hunger. \(2013\).](#)

Retrieved from

<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/30315/gender-equality-and-food-security.pdf>

Text modified from original, which was created by Thaarenee Wiswannadan, Acadia University.

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