

**Bethel College Mennonite Church Creation Care Committee
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Boost Women to Bust Poverty

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Global policymakers scheduled to hold special U.N. talks starting next week must boost women's share of resources and political standing in the developing world if they hope to make a significant dent in world poverty, researchers say. The Washington, D.C.-based International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) on Wednesday urged policy makers "to take action in three critical areas to advance women's status in developing countries: increase resources in the hands of women; reduce discrimination against women; and place women's issues at the forefront of policy action." Its call, contained in a statement, came in advance of a review of progress made in implementing a sweeping plan of action adopted in Beijing, China in 1995 to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

The Feb. 28 - Mar. 11 talks, which also will recommend further action, are to be held at U.N. headquarters in New York under the aegis of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women. "Across most of the developing world, women are on the frontlines in the fight against hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation," said IFPRI, which belongs to a larger network of national and international agricultural research centers funded by the World Bank, U.N. agencies, governments, and philanthropies.

While most women in the developing world serve as the primary caretakers in the family, they often lack the power and resources to carry out this role effectively. "Unequal access to land, education, and other key resources undermines development efforts," the group said. "Securing land rights for women can lead to greater agricultural productivity and improved environmental stewardship", said IFPRI research fellows Agnes Quisumbing and Lisa Smith.

Additionally, in much of the developing world, women are much more likely than men to spend time, money, and other resources on nutrition and education for their children. They said, "research had shown that improvements in women's education and status within the household contributed 55 percent to the overall reduction of child malnutrition between 1970 and 1995". South Asia has a much higher rate of child malnutrition than Sub-Saharan Africa, despite having a better record on economic growth, poverty reduction, and education. IFPRI attributed this in large part to the low status of women in South Asia. The region includes three of the world's 10 most populous countries--Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan--according to the Washington, D.C.-based Population Reference Bureau. "Cash, food, and other transfer programs targeted to women improve overall household welfare", IFPRI said. For example, benefits under Mexico's anti-poverty PROGRESA program resulted in a 14 percent increase in female enrollment in secondary school and cut sickness among both girls and boys by 12 percent. The group urged greater support for micro-credit programs, which lend very small sums to villagers who want to start or buttress businesses too small to qualify for bank loans. In cities, it added, poor women needed good childcare services so they could work to earn incomes.

U.N. officials said that over the past decade, a number of countries had introduced or strengthened laws that protect women from discrimination, abuse, and violence. "However, there is much more that needs to be done to put the (1995 Beijing) Platform for Action into practice, especially in terms of alleviating poverty, improving health, creating opportunity for economic advancement and political leadership, and reducing human rights violations," said Rachel Mayanja, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special adviser on gender issues and the advancement of women. Even so, the lives of women and girls around the world have improved, the World Bank said in a report released Thursday. The global gap in the numbers of girls compared to boys enrolled in primary school had narrowed to five percentage points in 2000, compared to 16 percentage points in 1975, the bank said. Since 1970, average life expectancies for women have increased by 15 to 20 years in developing countries, it added. And since the 1995 Beijing plan was adopted, women's property and inheritance rights have improved somewhat in several Latin American and Asian countries.

Some 1.3 billion people, about one-fourth of the world's population, live in severe poverty, according to the U.N. Development Program (UNDP). Nearly 800 million people do not get enough food, and about 500 million people are chronically malnourished. Malnutrition afflicts more than one in three children worldwide. More than 840 million adults cannot read or write and 538 million of them are women. Yet, poverty can be eradicated for the scant price tag of one percent of global income, UNDP said. Providing all people with access to basic social services and transfers to boost their incomes would cost \$80 billion, less than the net worth of the planet's seven richest men, it added.

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