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# THE GENDER EQUATION OF NUTRITION; A Review of Nutrition Issues of Rural Women in Uganda

By: Emily Murray

Uganda is at an interesting junction from a nutrition perspective; it must consider and take into account undernutrition, overnutrition and the impact of HIV. While nutrition affects everyone, it is important to reflect on the burden borne by women and how their role as caregivers influences the nutrition of others. This article will review the available nutrition indicators of women, reflections on food security and some of the stakeholders taking action.

## NUTRITION INDICATORS

Dietary intake is predominately based on foods of vegetable origin with limited intake of animal products including meat, fish, poultry, eggs and milk (FAO 2010). These dietary patterns of women [and children aged 24-59 months] are highly inadequate for vitamins A, B-12, iron, zinc and calcium (FAO, 2010).

In 2011, the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) measured the following nutrition indicators of women aged 14-59: height, body mass index, iron status and vitamin A status. It should be noted that certain infections and parasites increase the requirement for specific nutrients, and while the UDHS measures indicators on various infections and parasites, they will not be discussed here. Nutrition statistics on women's nutritional status can be found in the box above.

Vitamin A is a fat-soluble vitamin that is critical for normal vision, reproduction, growth and immune

functions, among others. A deficiency of vitamin A most commonly presents as trouble with vision. Iron is a mineral that is essential for growth due to its role in blood development. Of the 23% of women that are anemic, <1 % are severely anemic, 5% are moderately anemic and 18% are mildly anemic (UDHS, 2011). The spread between underweight and overweight speaks to the dichotomy faced by Uganda by the three challenges of undernutrition, overnutrition and the impact of HIV.

There is a clear divide between rural and urban women. Urban women are more likely to receive a post-partum vitamin A supplement (51% than rural women 40%) (UDHS, 2011). In regards to body mass index, rural women are more likely to be thin than urban women (13% versus 8%)(UDHS, 2011). Looking at the overall trend for women between the UDHS in 2006 and 2011, overnutrition rates are increasing while undernutrition rates remain constant.

## FOOD SECURITY



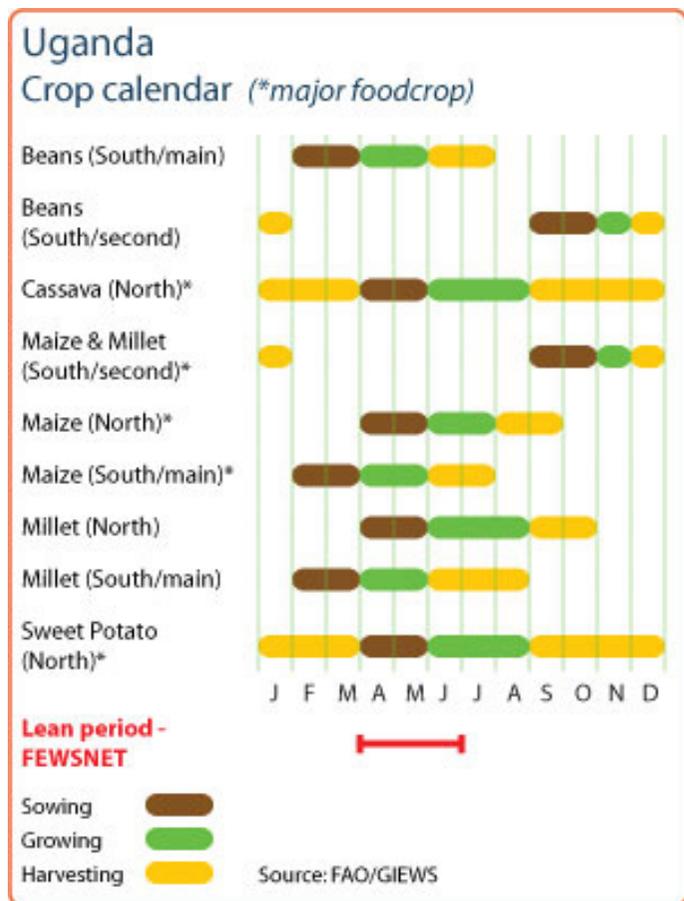
It is well known that Uganda produces enough food to feed its population, however the distribution and access to that food is a problem. Agriculture employs 57% of women nationwide (UDHS, 2011), however this does not ensure that they are food secure. A study in rural eastern Uganda found that women "are not engaging in small-scale agriculture at a level that allows sufficient food security or income generation

## Quick facts (UDHS, 2011)

- 36% of women have vitamin A deficiency
- 23 % of women are anemic
- 12% of women are underweight
- 19% of women are overweight or obese

to create sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families". (McKenna, 2014)

In a recent field visit to Soroti and Katakwi districts, the impact of drought and climate change on food security was evident. Some farmers indicated that they do not expect to have a harvest at all due to the lack of rainfall. In addition to no money for school or hospital fees, many farmers said that they would have to limit food intake to perhaps one meal a day, instead of two, to cope with the lack of food. This effect is particularly pronounced for women, as some have identified that food prioritization favours men in times of food stress.



While this is problematic for all women, those of childbearing age are particularly vulnerable due to the increased nutrient requirements associated with pregnancy and childbirth. In fact the FAO identified that “vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers usually follow the same diet as the rest of the family, irrespective of their physiological status which would require a better diet in terms of quality and quantity.” (FAO, 2010) Furthermore, consumption of animal food products was low among pregnant women in many parts of the country due to the financial cost and lack of knowledge about their importance during pregnancy. (FAO, 2010)

## CONCLUSION

While these indicators suggest that there is substantial room for growth and development in the area of nutrition, there are many institutions and organizations that are working to improve the nutrition status of women. From the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries, civil society organizations, research organizations and global non-governmental organizations. With coordination and cooperation, targeted interventions. ... *to be continued.*

*... Uganda produces enough food to feed its population, however ...*

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