

Stories of CHANGE

Nurturing Connections in Cote d'Ivoire

At the start of the rainy season in northeastern Cote d'Ivoire, laughter mingled with the thunder of a sudden downpour as residents recalled their experiences with the Nurturing Connections women's empowerment sessions. 'We were dividing up the cashews into men's and women's piles, and one pile just kept growing: at the end, we had 16 for women and 6 for men!' As his wife chuckled beside him, the Boudi village chief explained this activity, in which each cashew represents a household task, and participants sort them depending on whether men or women normally undertake it. The striking comparison renders visible an often unseen gender divide in workloads, perhaps sparking soul-searching, as it did for the chief: 'I was surprised to see that; I wanted them to be more equal. So now I've started to collect wood while at the fields or to help light the fire while my wife is out getting water.' Seated nearby, his neighbor Patrice agreed, 'Sometimes I go and search for wood or wash the child when my wife is too busy.' His grinning wife Briska jumped in to confirm, 'It's true! And I like having his help!'

She was not alone: nearly 500 people participated in such activities across Cote d'Ivoire, and many found them to be a catalyst for household changes. Nurturing Connections, developed by HKI in Bangladesh, was based on Stepping Stones, a training package that used interactive games and skits to discuss gender-based vulnerability related to HIV. Nurturing Connections uses this framework to address gender inequities related to household nutrition.

The CHANGE project also included training for women on improved agricultural practices



Gender Empowerment, Nutrition, and Agriculture

Consensus has grown over past decades around the importance of women's empowerment and gender equality, beyond their intrinsic value, in reducing poverty and malnutrition, particularly among children. Women with higher social status enjoy greater access to resources and social services, more free time, and higher self-esteem. They are thus typically better nourished, healthier, and more able to care for their children's needs. Indeed, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) research has found that gender equality would reduce the number of underweight children in sub-Saharan Africa by 1.7 million.¹

When women are disempowered, they may, for example, find it difficult to access the money to purchase iron-rich foods, such as meat and eggs, that are essential components of a good diet during pregnancy and a child's first 1000 days of life. Shouldering a heavy workload around the home, they may not have time to follow proper hygiene and breastfeeding practices, such as exclusively breastfeeding babies up to 6 months of age (UNICEF estimates exclusive breastfeeding rates in Cote d'Ivoire to be as low as 12.1%). Lacking decision-making power within a household, they may not be able to ensure equitable food sharing or to seek healthcare for a sick child—or for themselves. With lower literacy levels, rural women may be cut off from information about optimal health, nutrition, and hygiene practices. Such processes are cyclical: better-nourished girls miss fewer days of school to illness and pay more attention in class, growing up to become more economically productive and empowered.

Empowerment is also essential within agriculture: an FAO study showed

Members of Parliament¹



Secondary School Attendance²



Average annual income, Boudi Village³



Gender-related Statistics from Cote d'Ivoire
Sources: 1: UNDP; 2: UNICEF; 3: HKI Formative Research

that Africa's agricultural productivity could rise by 20% if women had equal access to land, seeds, and fertilizer. In Cote d'Ivoire, women comprise the majority of the agricultural workforce but have poorer access to the means of production. For example, some customs do not permit Ivoirian women to own land; a widow or divorcée can thus be easily dispossessed of her land. Even while married, she may be unable to invest in long-term land improvements, such as trees and high-quality fencing. Ivoirian women often manage their own plots—but may only be able to tend them after they have already spent time working their husbands' fields. Devoting less time to these plots can then

lower their productivity and limit marketing opportunities. Men are more likely to be responsible for cash crops, such as cashew, coffee, and cacao, and to control the resulting revenues—even though an increase in a woman's income has a ten-times larger effect on children's nutrition and health than a similar increase in a man's income!²

Evaluations of past HKI nutrition-sensitive agriculture programs have shown positive impacts on women's nutrition, asset ownership, and economic empowerment. With the Global Affairs Canada-funded CHANGE project, HKI sought to support women to become equal players within their communities more broadly—and to also engage

1. Smith, LC, U Ramakrishnan, A Ndiaye, L Haddad, R Martorell. 2003. 'The Importance of Women's Status for Child Nutrition in Developing Countries' IFPRI Research Report 131.

2. FAO. 'The Female Face of Farming.' <http://www.fao.org/gender/infographic/en/>



Participants engaging in "Nurturing Connections" activities near Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire



'Now my husband has started to fetch water in the morning or asking my son to do so; as a result, my mornings are less busy and there is greater peace in the household.' - Nurturing Connections participant, Dinaudi village

men, whose low involvement in childcare may negatively impact children's nutrition and wellbeing. CHANGE thus adopted a 'gender transformative' approach that encouraged communities to alter existing power imbalances that place women at a disadvantage. Through a partnership with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), HKI revised Nurturing Connections for use in the diverse contexts of West Africa and rigorously evaluated its impact. Nurturing Connections' four-month weekly curriculum begins with communication and relationship-building skills. Participants then work together to recognize gender norms and assumptions that impact their own lives, particularly within the domains of agriculture and nutrition. For example, cross-gender roleplaying of how 'good' girls and boys behave leads participants to notice how gender norms are transmitted across generations. After a month spent exploring the power dynamics operating in their households and communities, participants consider ways to work collaboratively to change personal behaviors and community norms. The pilot curriculum proved

impactful, even after only a few weeks. As a man from Dinoudi village explained mid-implementation as he bounced his son on his knee, 'The activities reminded me that when there is a problem, you need to understand the perspective of the other person before speaking... Now, when we have a problem in the family, we feel we can sit down together to discuss and resolve it together.' Saliman, a woman from Dinaudi, was similarly impressed by roleplays exploring how gender norms are transmitted during childhood. 'Before, when I was cooking, I would often call my daughter to help. My son would stay and study. Now, my husband and I both recognize that our daughter needs to study, too: when I need help cooking, I ask [my husband], instead!'

While such personal testimonies were encouraging, HKI and ICRW were not content to rely on them alone as a measure of success. Instead, ICRW undertook a randomized control trial, using a longitudinal survey of perceptions and practices related to gender, nutrition, and agriculture. This represented the

first rigorous evaluation of a gender-transformative approach within a nutrition-sensitive agriculture project and showed encouraging results: there were significant impacts of NC implementation on women's roles in decision-making and joint decision making between men and women on several key topics, such as livestock rearing and children's nutrition. These quantitative reports were supported by in-depth interviews with participants. As one man explained, "With the arrival of Nurturing Connections, we get along. We no longer hide anything related to money, so we [share what we have] to buy eggs for the children."

Using the impact evaluation results and participants' feedback, HKI further refined the Nurturing Connections curriculum, which has now also been applied in Senegal and Mali. Of course, there remain challenges to ensure gender equity within the household and broader society. However, if the question, 'Can you come to my village next?' from a neighbouring village chief upon seeing Nurturing Connections in action in Cote d'Ivoire is any indication, the first steps are going in the right direction.



What is Enhanced Homestead Food Production?

- A communal garden or 'village model farm' is established in each village, including infrastructure such as a well.
- On this garden, women learn improved gardening and animal husbandry practices.
- Interactive nutrition education improves their understanding of the causes of malnutrition, including low dietary diversity and poor sanitation, and potential solutions.
- Women are encouraged to establish their own gardens and apply improved infant and young child feeding and hygiene practices.
- Women's empowerment activities support more equitable intra-household decision-making and workload and resource sharing.
- With more varied agricultural products, potentially greater earnings from selling surplus production, and new knowledge, participants are better able to feed their children and families diverse diets rich in micronutrients, combatting malnutrition and improving child health and growth.

FIGHTING MALNUTRITION AT ITS ROOTS.

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