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RETHINKING POLICY ON GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND WOMEN'S ISSUES

U.S. FARM BILL MAKES WOMEN AND CHILDREN FOOD INSECURE

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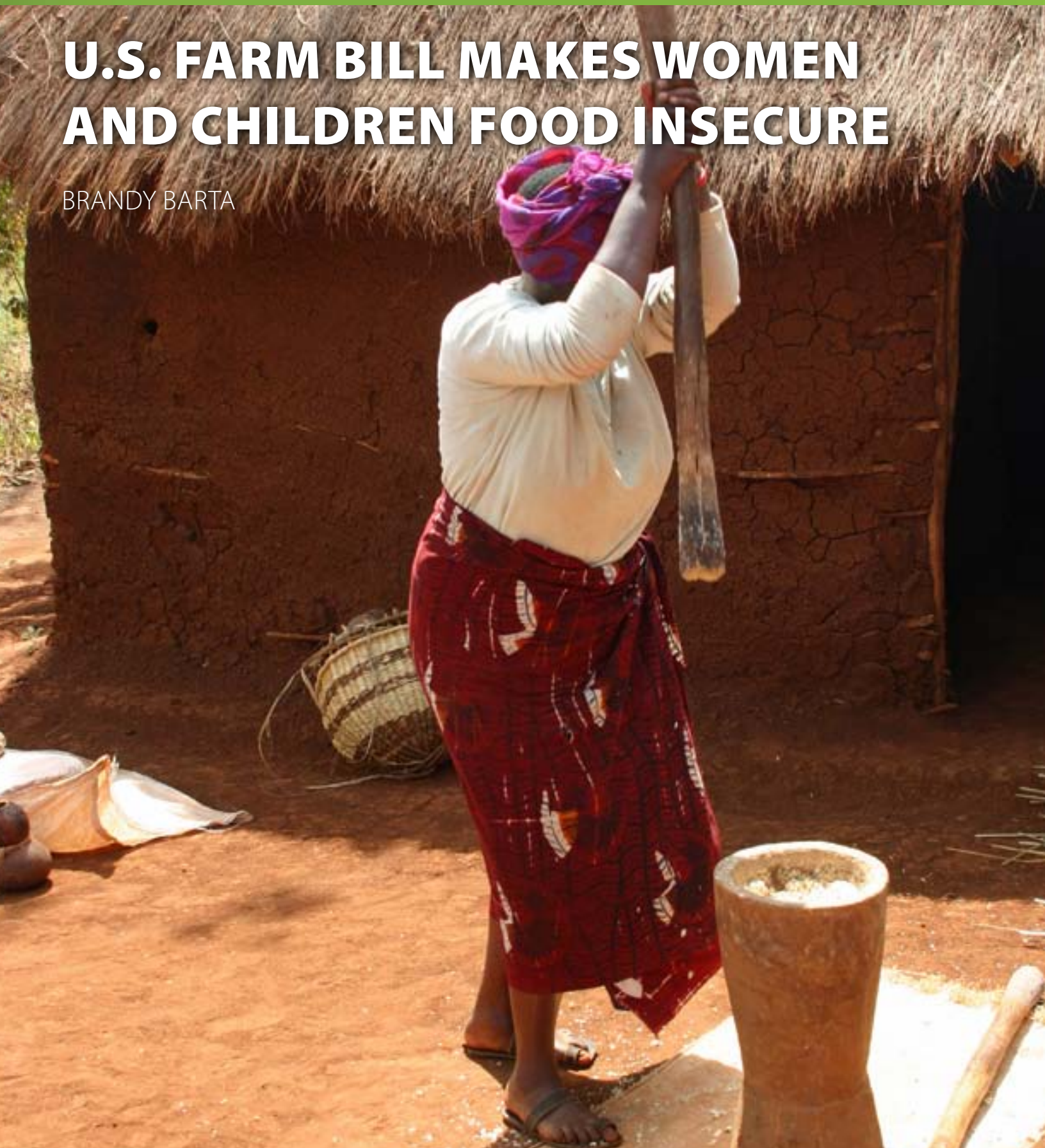

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In order to eliminate developing nations' dependence on international aid, sustainability of food production must be fostered. Sustainability can be fostered through elimination of trade barriers, development of infrastructure, and empowerment of women. Improving the self-sufficiency of developing nations can help to ensure the food security of their women and children.

THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, women and children disproportionally experience food insecurity. Women and children are more vulnerable to food insecurity due in part to discrimination in wages, access to natural resources, access to technology, access to training, and access to credit. Across all ages, females have disproportionally higher rates of malnutrition, poverty, illiteracy, and displacement. They work longer hours, earn less per hour, and are primarily responsible for household chores and child nutrition.[1] Generally, when women are food insecure their children are also food insecure. During pregnancy and after delivery, food insecure women can experience an increased incidence of anemia, postpartum obesity, and diabetes.[2, 3] In children, prenatal micronutrient deficiency, which is associated with food insecurity, can lead to increased incidences of neural tube defects, malaria, and prenatal mortality.[4] Women also have a disproportionate ability to influence their community's food security in a positive way since they produce about half of the world's supply of food. In most developing countries, women produce between 60 to 80 percent of the food supply on smallholder farms. Women are also more likely than men to reinvest in their families and communities.[5] These factors indicate that influencing female farmers could lead to wider reaching changes in sustainable food production and food security than influencing their male counterparts.

The U.S. Farm Bill, or the Food, Conservation and Energy Act (most recently authorized in 2008) is the main policy tool in the area of agriculture and food. First enacted in the 1930s to protect U.S. smallholder commodities farmers from the unfair power held by farm corporations,[6] the current act contains fifteen provisions on issues ranging from food stamps to agricultural land conservation. The Farm Bill also ensures national food security by guaranteeing that arable land is maintained and food production is not outsourced to other countries. Three sections of the bill negatively impact the food security of women and children in developing nations: Title I Farm Commodity Support, Title III Trade, and Title IX Energy.

Farm Commodity Support details federal spending to support the prices of grains, oil seeds, cotton, and dairy. It also created a sugar-for-ethanol program to sell rather than export excess nationally produced sugar, which led to a large corn surplus. Title III Trade governs the development of export markets and the distribution of in-kind food aid. Under the Food for Progress program, in-kind food aid is donated to developing nations who demonstrate development of market-oriented agricultural sectors, which usually means improvement in cash-crop infrastructure. Additionally, it funds international school food programs in the same qualifying countries. A pilot program was set up to regionally purchase commodities for famine prevention. Title IX Energy promotes the

development and expansion of the production of ethanol and biofuel.

CRITIQUE

Because of farm subsidies authorized in the bill, the U.S. has a large commodity surplus. For example, the U.S. produces 40 percent of the world's corn, about half of which is exported.[7] It and other surplus commodities are given as in-kind food aid or dumped on international markets, which depresses international prices. Since farmers cannot compete with the artificially low prices of U.S. commodities, international commodity farming is not an economically viable option in countries without similar price support—leaving developing nations and their smallholder female farmers dependent on international food aid.

The U.S. is also the world's largest donor of international food aid, providing about 50 percent of all food aid, and the only major donor that gives in-kind aid instead of cash. This in-kind aid is almost exclusively U.S.-grown crops, which are mandated to be shipped on U.S. vessels that charge high transport fees. It is not unusual for the price of transportation to equal the value of the food. This system fosters a dependency on food aid from the U.S., because there is no viable in-country market for these commodities and limited incentives to developing a market infrastructure for commodity farming.

Plant-based ethanol subsidies also negatively impact the food security of developing nations by diverting the demand for corn, and other food staples, from a food staple to a cash crop, thus drastically increasing their prices and making them too expensive for consumers. One-fifth of the overall rise in food prices can be attributed to the use of crops for fuel.[8] Studies by the World Bank have shown that when then price of all food staples increase by 1 percent, the caloric intake of the world's poor decreases by 0.5 percent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Farm Bill is vitally important for both the protection of U.S. smallholder farmers and national security; however, it has done to developing nations what large corporations did to U.S. smallholder farmers in the 1930s. Creating an unfair market where female smallholder farmers in developing nations cannot compete, it has also made those same countries dependent on the U.S. for food. It is time for a Farm Bill that protects smallholder farmers, ensures national food security, and extends those rights to developing nations. When it is re-authorized in 2012, these policy changes could increase the food security of developing nations:

- *Decrease Commodity Subsidies*

  Without artificially low-priced commodities coming in from the U.S., smallholder farmers would be better able to compete. Stimulation of fair trade and cash aid for expanding infrastructure capacity would give smallholder female farmers the opportunity to increase their ability to sustainably produce their own food.

- *Expand Regional Aid Purchases*

  Decreasing in-kind food aid were decreased and commodities were purchased in country, smallholder female farmers would have the opportunity to market their goods at a fair price, increasing their revenue and allowing them to purchase other healthy foods, improving the local economy through the development of trade. Only by increasing trade can developing nations enter the developed world. The U.S. would also reduce the amount spent on the aid because they would not have to pay the shipping fees of in-kind donations.

- *Reduce Ethanol Subsidies*

  Ethanol subsidies should be eased to alleviate pressure on the prices of food staples. Cash aid should also be given to developing nations to increase their infrastructure to compete in the new ethanol market.

- *Promote Gender Equity*

  Equitable leadership and power balances need to be established to provide for equal participation and inclusion of women. Through the leadership of women, economic resources will be more likely to be reinvested in families and communities. Making families the priority can help promote food security for women and children.

The food insecurity of the world's most vulnerable women and children will not be alleviated until their needs are put before those of business special interests. In 1948 the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living

adequate for the health and well-being of himself (herself) and his (her) family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services...."[9] It is time for the U.S. to fulfill its commitment to millennium goals and modify the Farm Bill to protect the world's most vulnerable women and children.

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NOTES

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