In Washington DC last week at the House Hunger Caucus briefing, panelist, Cheryl Morden, Director of the North American Liaison Office of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), concluded that, in the global agriculture funding community's struggle to alleviate hunger and poverty, there is a "big pay-off in focusing on women," but " neglect them and you'll end up doing harm."

A farmer from the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya shows Danielle Nierenberg (left) her vertical farm. (Photo: Bernard Pollack)

Although women farmers produce more than half of the food grown in the world—and roughly 1.6 billion women depend on agriculture for their livelihoods—they are often not able to benefit from general agriculture funding because of the institutional and cultural barriers they face—including lack of access to land, lack of access to credit, and lack of access to education. Worldwide, women receive only about 5 percent of agriculture extension services and own about 2 percent of land worldwide.

But research has shown that when women's incomes are improved,and when they have better access to resources like education, infrastructure, credit, and health care, they tend to invest more in the nutrition, education, and health of their family, causing a ripple effect of benefits that can extend to the entire community.

In Kibera—sub-Saharan Africa's largest slum in Nairobi, Kenya, where anywhere from 700,000 to a million people live—women farmers, with training and seeds provided by the French NGO Solidarites, are growing vegetable farms in sacks filled with dirt. More than 1,000 women are growing food in this way and during the food crisis in Kenya during 2007 and 2008, when conflict in Nairobi prevented food from coming into the area, most residents did not go hungry because there were so many of these 'vertical farms.'

In Zambia, Veronica Sianchenga, a farmer living in Kabuyu Village, saw improvements in her family's quality of life when she began irrigating her farm with the "Mosi-o-Tunya" (Pump that Thunders), a pressure pump that she purchased from International Development Enterprises (IDE). In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the task of gathering water—in the driest parts of the continent this can require up to eight hours of labor per day — usually falls to women. Explaining that her children are eating healthier, with more vegetables in their diet, Mrs. Sianchenga adds that she is also enjoying increased independence. "Now we are not relying only on our husbands, because we are now able to do our own projects and to assist our husbands, to make our families look better, eat better, clothe better—even to have a house."

In Rwanda, the Farmers of the Future Initiative (FOFI) helps to empower young girls and other students by integrating school gardens and agriculture training into primary school curriculums. Over 60 percent of students in Rwanda will return to rural areas to farm for a living after graduating instead of going on to secondary school or university. While both young boys and girls benefit from the training, it is especially important for young girls to learn these skills, says Josephine Tuyishimire, so that they can avoid dependence on men for food and financial security. And so they can share what they learn.

By "passing these skills to future generations" –or the children that are often under their care— said Tuyishimire, women help to create future farmers who are prepared to feed themselves and similarly self-sufficient and empowered.

To learn more about women's important role in alleviating global hunger and poverty, see: Farming on the Urban Fringe, Building a Methane Fueled Fire, Women Entrepreneurs: Adding Value, Women Farmers Are Key to Halving Global Hunger by 2015, For Many Women, Improved Access to Water is About More than Having Something to Drink, and Reducing the Things They Carry.

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