THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NUTRITIONAL IMPROVEMENT

J. P. Greaves

Dr. J. P. Greaves is FAO Nutrition Adviser to UNICEF. In this article he points the role of women in maintaining the nutrition of the family and also the role of *balsevikas* (Children's Workers), *gram sevikas*, (Women Extention Workers) and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives. He also discusses the basic principles which are applicable throughout most of the rural and urban India with some modification in application to particular areas.

He is author of several papers and articles on different aspects of nutrition in the scientific and lay literature and co-author of a FAO Manual on Food and Nutrition Policy.

Who is the Indian of the Year ? Should it not be the unknown Indian Woman—the typical woman who has to work in the fields, or on a building site, and then go home and look after her family and make them something to eat ? Who has to go on and on doing this in quite desperate circumstances, with prices increasing and income static, if that—and who yet manages to retain a cheerful spirit and refuses to be broken ?

These unknown millions of Indian women undoubtedly have the most fearful struggle—day by day, month by month, year by year—to create and maintain some kind of home. They have an equally fearsome responsibility, for the future generation of Indian citizens is in their hands. Their role in improving the nutritional condition of their family is particularly important, for they are the family caterers. Much depends on their knowledge of what constitutes a "good buy" in nutritional terms, and of how foods are best prepared to conserve their nutritional value, and to reduce bacteriological and other hazards. The proper treatment of *Kesari dal* (lathyrus sativus), to avoid lathyrism is an example.

When it comes to the youngest members of the family, children between 6 and 18 months old, the role of the mother—perhaps the grandmother, too—is uniquely important in determining precisely what, and how much, food these children get. Before the child can feed himself from the family dish, he is totally dependent on what he is given. This is probably the most vulnerable age from a nutritional point of view, and the subject of feeding during this period deserves top priority in programmes of nutritional education for mothers.

Amongst the specific objectives of International Women's Year, it is particularly apt to consider the improvement of the rural woman's understanding of child care ; to provide training for her, as well as opportunities for her to use this training—within the home and outside—to improve the quality of rural life. In nutritional improvement, as in other spheres, training has another important dimension : women must be reached through women. The mere male is an unacceptable alternative.

Only a woman worker is able to relate to the mother in the village or the *busti*, is able to fully understand her problems and slowly win her confidence. Probably the most successful results can only be obtained by selection, from the village or *busti* itself, girls or women with some natural aptitude, and giving them a short simple and practical training. Provided with regular sympathetic supervision and opportunities for refresher training, they can be sent back as the front-line troops in the campaign. The magnitude and urgency of the task does have something of the sense of a battle. But there will be a need, too, to strengthen the army of *balsevikas* (children's workers), *gramsevikas* (women extension workers) and similar workers, to review training content and methods, to recruit reinforcements—and to ensure that those that are trained are used to the best advantage. If they are given the support they need to do their job properly, with opportunity for advancement and promotion, they will be able to see their role in the context of the total battle strategy, and will have the satisfaction and stimulation of knowing that they are embarked on a worthwhile career in an organisation that cares for them as much as for those whom they are supposed to help. This factor—too often unsatisfactory—stands against frustration, if not outright disillusion, bitterness and apathy. It is an appropriate objective in International Women's Year.

What of the message they carry to their sisters ? The ability of food to provide energy to the body is its most important attribute. It is commonly said that a person eats foods, not nutrients, and this is undeniably true, though many nutrition educators seem to forget it. Most, but not all, of the many chemical substances that compose food are nutrients, which nourish the body in various ways. Some of the nutrients—in terms of weight accounting for almost all the dry weight of the food—are used by the body to provide energy : these are the nutrients classified as proteins, fats and carbohydrates. Alcohol also provides energy, though this is sometimes overlooked. By and large, the body does not particularly care where the energy comes from. The amount of energy made available to the body by nutrients is usually measured in calories.

Those who preach wisdom in food habits must be familiar with the simple facts about nutrition; they certainly need to know and fully understand the fundamental concept of the need for energy, and be aware of the sorts of amounts of different foods that need to be eaten in order that sufficient energy is obtained. They also need to understand the kinds of food—and the amounts—that the average poor village mother can afford to provide her children. A good place to begin, when considering the content of training programmes for workers entrusted with imparting Nutrition Education to village women, is to identify what are the simplest and smallest number of messages these women need to comprehend. Then one can think of what it is these village level workers need to know—and to practice—in order to be able to communicate these messages effectively.

The subject of child care provides an eloquent example of the simple pattern that nutrition education can follow. The nutrition of a child cannot be divorced from other aspects of its environment. With a little guided insight, that environment can provide the kind of nutrition a child requires—and for this, there are just eight things a mother needs to know. These eight basic messages are applicable throughout most of rural and urban India, though they may need modification in their application to particular areas, according to local circumstances.

*First, the child should be breast fed as long as possible. Fortunately, this is traditional throughout rural India, but there are disturbing signs—especially in urban slums, that the tradition is weakening. This trend is pernicious. In terms of value for money, nothing beats human breast milk. Furthermore, and of major importance, it is clean.

*Second, semi-solid food should be introduced from the time the child is five to six months old. Breast milk by itself is not sufficient after this age—but that is no reason for stopping breast feeding.

*Third, young children should be fed five or six times a day. By the age of one year, a child should be eating the same sorts of cereal, pulses and green vegetables as the rest of the family—but in order to obtain sufficient amounts, he should be fed these solid foods three or four times a day, in addition to his diet of milk. Later, when his mother is unable to continue giving him breast milk, he should receive five or six meals per day. This is because with the usual type of food eaten in India, the concentration of energy in the diet is such that it is just not possible for the child to eat enough food at two or three meals. This is likely to be a very difficult message to get across, because of social factors, and the way of life of so many women—working all day in the fields, for example. Perhaps in such circumstances it would be appropriate to promote the idea of a day creche, looked after by some of the older women.

*Fourth, illness should not mean a suspension of feeding the child. Any simple generalisation runs the risk of being wrong on occasion, and this is one such. But the custom of cutting out solid foods whenever a child has fever or gets diarrhoea is so common in India, and generally so disastrous, that the observance of this rule will do good much more often than harm. Observance of the next rule is in any case a safeguard.

*Fifth, the available health services should be used. Women who are pregnant should visit the doctor at the nearest health centre, or the ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) and should also have a check-up after delivery. They should be taught the signs and symptoms of common diseases and their management in the home—and should know when to seek advice from the doctor or ANM.

*Sixth, children must be immunised against endemic diseases. Mothers must be persuaded of the long-term advantages of immunisation, despite the possibilities of immediate minor upsets.

*Seventh, the mother must keep herself, her children, and their surroundings clean, and drink clean water. Environmental hygiene in all its aspects is immensely important for good health and nutritional status. Messages relating to simple things like washing hands, burying excreta, not spitting, keeping kitchen utensils clean, covering food from flies, drinking only the safest available water, are essential.

*Eighth, there should be no more than two or three children, and these should be spaced two to three years apart. Parents should realise that if their children are properly cared for in these minimal ways, they are likely to be more alert and curious, and grow and survive much better than if they are not wisely tended. One of the needs for giving birth to many children is thereby removed, so that people should be more willing to limit the size of their families. Efforts should also be made to demonstrate that malnutrition and general ill-health are more common in families where children are too closely spaced—and to promote the idea of using family planning techniques to delay births. Nutritional education can thus reinforce the population control message.

These messages might sound remarkably simple, but they are vital. Properly communicated, properly understood and implemented, they can be pivotal. Because of their sheer numbers, if nothing else, the poor must get priority—and nutritional education for them must be simple and directed to their needs and circumstances. It must be simple enough, workable enough, for one ordinary woman to explain it to another. Whether they are themselves struggling to care for a family, or trying to help those in the struggle by providing new knowledge and understanding, women thus have a key role in the improvement of nutrition. Their work will have little glamour and much hardship. It will always be challenging, often tedious. But, however humble, it can make the difference between a full and a crippled life—between life and death itself.

(Courtesy : UNICEF)