Women are the guardians of food security for most families around the world. They are at the heart of just about everything the World Food Programme does. For more than 10 years now, we have been working solidly at every level – policy, practice and advocacy – to ensure that women not only have equal access to food, but that our food helps to empower them.

Recently we surveyed our operations to measure just how well we’re doing on reaching its eight Commitments to Women.

In 9 out of 10 of our nutrition projects we provide food specially designed to meet the vitamins and minerals needed by pregnant and lactating women.
That’s helping to reduce the number of women who die in pregnancy or labour because they suffered from iron-deficiency anaemia. Today, that number stands at 300 women every day.

It’s also vital to reducing physical and mental disabilities among their children as a result of deficiencies in iron, iodine and vitamin A. Ensuring they are well-nourished also reduces the chances that their children will weigh less than 2.5 kg, dramatically improving their chances of surviving the first days and months of life.

And as an added benefit, at least half of the women we help also learned about nutrition, health and childcare at our centres.

Forty-eight percent of the 17 million students WFP reached through its school feeding projects were girls. More than half of all the people that participated in food-for-training activities were women.

I don’t have to tell you all of the benefits that flow from educating women. But here is something which is only just emerging. Educated girls appear to be less likely to contract HIV, according to some recent studies in Africa. Yet another good reason to get girls in school.

We’re also working to give women more say in how food aid is used. In almost three quarters of our food for work projects, women make up at least half of the local food distribution committees that decide what will be built and who can participate. Often, that means that the committee agrees to build a well closer to the village, or a separate latrine for the local school so that girls can attend – items of direct benefit to women.
One area where we still struggle is in having women fairly represented on food distribution committees for emergency relief. Providing beneficiary women with some tips and techniques for leadership should help improve this.

We’ve recognised that when food is scarce, putting it in the hands of women can put them at risk. We have done what we can to minimise the risks to women, and have taken a particularly tough stand against sexual exploitation of our beneficiaries.

In Afghanistan WFP provides women and girls with non-formal education, literacy training and school feeding. In 2005, WFP helped 18,000 people – mostly women who head their households – to learn to read and write. The school feeding operation targets over 1.2 million school children to alleviate short-term hunger and encourage school attendance. Girls receive an additional take-home ration of vegetable oil as an incentive to encourage families to send girls to school.

In Uganda, WFP contributes to the Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes addressing special needs of women and girls who were abducted and forced to fight through education, vocational training and health programmes. In particular, formerly abducted children receive counselling, training and nutrition support. After the rehabilitation programme, the children are reintegrated back into their communities and supported for education or income generating activities. Special attention is paid to girl children who have been raped during their abduction in order to specially provide them with assistance.
These are just a few examples of the kinds of concrete ways WFP is putting women and girls first. Internally, we’ve created a gender unit, adopted a gender policy and incorporated gender issues into our corporate training to ensure that these practices become like second-nature. And we’re getting close. This year, for International Women’s Day, we’re focusing on men … and how to build our partnerships with them in a true spirit of equality and respect.