

RURAL WOMEN KEY TO SUSTAINABLE FOOD SECURITY

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Gender inequality both leads to and is a result of food insecurity. Due to unequal and subordinate gender roles, rural women face lack of access to and control over critical livelihood and productive resources. Further, her contributions to food security are undervalued and undermined by implicit and explicit forms of gender discrimination at the household, community, market, national and global levels.

Concern for food security is a fundamental human right issue. The persistence of hunger threatens both national societies and the stability of the international community. There is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone, but the number of people affected by hunger and malnutrition is still 'unacceptably high' (FAO, 2014), with disproportionate impacts on women and girls.

- Even though the hunger target of the Millennium Development Goal 1c (MDG 1c) – of halving the proportion of undernourished people globally by 2015 – is 'within reach', however, conservative estimates indicate that the overall number of people in the world experiencing extreme, chronic

malnourishment was at least 805 million between 2012 and 2014 (FAO, 2014). Further, these figures underestimate the true magnitude of hunger and malnutrition. In particular, they fail to reflect the micronutrient deficiency, or 'hidden hunger' (FAO, 2012) that affects 2 billion of the world's population, contributing to child stunting and increased rates of illness and death (IFPRI, Concern et. al. 2013).

- Describing malnutrition as India's silent emergency, the World Bank report says that the rate of malnutrition cases among children in India is almost five times more than in China, and twice than in Sub-Saharan Africa. The rural India witnesses more cases



of malnutrition among children less than 5 years of age as more cases of stunted, wasted and underweight children were reported from rural areas.

- According to UNICEF, malnutrition is more common in India than in Sub-Saharan Africa, and one in every three malnourished children in the world lives in India.
- The 2014 Global Hunger Index (GHI) ranked India at 55 among 76 emerging economies, but is still trailing behind countries like Thailand, China, Ghana, Iraq, Sri Lanka and Nepal. While no longer in the “alarming” category, India’s hunger status is still classified as “serious”.
- India ranked 114 out of 142 nations on World Economic Forum’s 2014 Gender Gap Index. India scored below average on parameters like economic participation, educational attainment and health and survival. India has performed poorly in removing gender-based disparities and slipped 13 spots from its last year’s ranking of 101.
- The 2014 Human Development Report introduced the Gender Development Index (GDI) which ranked India at 132 out of 148 countries.

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Worldwide, an estimated 60 per cent of undernourished people are women and girls. The goal of eradicating hunger and poverty will only be achieved if the voice of the silent majority of human kind is heard, and that voice belongs to women. Rural women play a key role in supporting their households and communities in achieving food security, generating income, and improving rural livelihoods and overall well-being. They contribute to agriculture, rural enterprises and ultimately to sustainable rural development. As such, they are seen as active players in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as post-2015 development agenda.

Food Security – A Basic Understanding

Food Security, at the individual, household, national, regional, and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical,

social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy and active life (FAO, 2001). Food security is a pre-condition for the full enjoyment of the right to food. The right to food is not simply a right to a minimum ration of calories, proteins and other specific nutrients, rather it is part of an overall goal of achieving right to development. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in 2002 defined, “The right to have regular, permanent and free access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.”

There is a correlation between the right to food and the enjoyment of other human rights, such as the right to: live life with dignity, an adequate standard of living, health, water, adequate housing, education and information, work, livelihood, social security, social welfare, property, freedom of association, freedom from worst form of labour like bonded and child labour etc.

The dimensions/ pillars of the food security are availability, accessibility, adequacy, utilization and stability. Discrimination in terms of food availability, accessibility, adequacy, utilization and stability is inextricably linked to the poverty, hunger and undernutrition.

- *Firstly*, food availability includes sufficient quantities of food either from domestic production or imports; within their reach or within reasonable proximity.
- *Secondly*, food accessibility includes economic as well as physical access. Economic access means individuals should be able to afford food for an adequate diet without compromising on any other basic needs, such as school fees, medicines, rent or any other social security benefits. Physical access means food should be accessible to all, including to the physically vulnerable, such as children, the sick, persons

with disabilities or the elderly, for whom it may be difficult to go out to get food.

- *Thirdly*, food adequacy means: satisfying dietary needs, taking into account the individual's age, living conditions, health, occupation, sex, etc; safe for human consumption and free from adverse substances; and culturally acceptable, for example, food containing alcohol that is religious or cultural taboo for the recipients or inconsistent with their eating habits would not be culturally acceptable.
- *Fourthly*, food utilization means meeting the specific dietary and nutritional needs, proper food processing and storage techniques, and adequate health and sanitation services.
- *Fifthly*, food stability includes adequate food storage capacities or other means of savings for times of crop failure or other emergencies.

Though all these elements allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the complex dimensions of food security, yet they lack a comprehensive gender analysis.

Gender Dimensions of Food Security

The role of rural women in maintaining all dimensions of food security is indispensable: as food *producers* dedicate their labour; agricultural *entrepreneurs* who invest their meager savings; *gatekeepers* who dedicate their own time, income and decision-making to maintain food and nutritional security of their households and communities; and *managers* of the stability of food supplies in times of economic hardship as well as sustainability for next generation.

Gender inequality both leads to and is a result of food insecurity. Rural women continue to struggle under the double burden of production and domestic responsibilities, which inevitably affects her access to livelihood resources and has an impact on power dynamics within households. Rural women are related to hunger in a direct way. They are often the first to suffer food and nutrition insecurity in the family. This has repercussions on their health, their productivity, their quality of life, and their survival.

- Her role is not fully recognized and largely unpaid in generating family earnings. She has

primary responsibility for maintaining the household and even performing drudgery tasks. She raise children, care aged and sick, grow and prepare food, provide on- and off-farm labour, manage family poultry and livestock, and collect water and fuel wood. Her work remains invisible in family enterprises.

- Rural women rarely own and/ control land, lack access to finance including credit, agricultural inputs and technology, training and extension services, and marketing services and their access to productive resources as well as decision-making tend to occur through the mediation of men.
- Women and men farmers have different roles related to crop production. Cultural definitions of 'men's' and 'women's' crops may be the outcome of gender inequalities in productive resources. Ghana, for instance, women view maize production as a productive, income-generating activity yet do not grow it because they lack the capital to purchase the required inputs or hire labour to plough the fields (FAO, IFAD, World Bank, 2008. *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*). Further, men have more control over the sale of cash crops while women are expected to look after the subsistence crops.
- Due to restrictions on mobility, she typically confronts a narrower range of labour markets than men, lower wage rates and harsh working conditions. Female hourly wage rates in agriculture vary from 50 per cent to 75 per cent of male rates, and are insufficient to overcome absolute poverty (12th Plan, Gol).
- Due to the low social status of women, their diet often lacks in both quality and quantity, thereby pushing girls more at risk of undernutrition than boys. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, which perpetuates this vicious cycle and its consequences transcend generations.
- The role of female children as unpaid contributors to household production is another labour phenomenon of agriculture and rural enterprises.

- Worldwide, women and girls are experiencing the impacts of food insecurity most acutely, with at least 60 per cent of malnourished people are women and girls (UN ECOSOC 2007; WFP 2009).
- The World Food Programme (WFP, 2009) reported that women are shouldering the heaviest burdens in the food crisis, as they are the first to sacrifice their food intake to ensure the nutrition of their children and male head of household when food is unavailable. Yet their own food security and nutrition needs – and often those of their daughters – are being neglected at the household level, where discriminatory socio-cultural norms consider them of lower status and less of a priority than men and boys.
- According to 2011 Census, the literacy rate of male is 82.14 per cent and female 65.46 per cent. Further, the literacy rate of women is 79.92 per cent in urban area and is 58.75 per cent in rural area.
- According to National Sample Survey, the workforce participation rate of females in rural sector was 26.1 in 2009-10 while that for males was 54.7. Further, data of the 68th round of the NSS released in 2013 indicate that in comparison to 59 per cent men, 75 per cent women in rural areas work in agriculture.
- The agricultural sector is instrumental in ensuring national food security. Agriculture continues to be the main source of livelihood for most people in India. A very large proportion of this work is done by women.
- Only few women own land in their right due to male bias in transfer of land by families, the state and in the functioning of markets (Agarwal, 1994, 2003). Also few women have financial resources for leasing in land on their own. On the one hand, women are major contributors of agricultural production, and increasingly so as more men than women have moved out of agriculture; and on the other hand, they have little access to the means of production.
- Women workers who are counted as “cultivators” in national statistics tend to be largely unpaid workers on family farms, In 2004-05, 36 per cent of women farmers overall, and 39 per cent among marginal landholding households, were so counted (NCEUS, 2008). According to CSO’s latest publication ‘Women and Men in India 2014’, 41.1 per cent of female main and marginal workers are agricultural labourers, while 24 per cent are cultivators.
- It is well known fact that small farms typify Indian agrarian economy and this predominance continues to increase. Agriculture Census 2005–06 reported the average size of an operational holding at only 1.23 hectare, with farms less than 2 hectares comprising 83 per cent of all holdings and 41 per cent of area. Also, 12 per cent of rural households are now female headed with even smaller holding, and the feminization of agriculture poses special problem (12th Plan document). In all developing countries, female-headed rural households are among the poorest of the poor.
- With the higher proportion of female labour as compared to male labour, we are witnessing ‘feminization of agriculture’. Further, they often work as unpaid family workers, are involved in subsistence farming and represent about 43 per cent of the agricultural labor force in developing countries and 30 per cent in India (FAO, 2010). Despite their dominance of the labour force, their labour is limited to less skilled jobs, such as sowing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting, that often fit well within the framework of domestic life and child-rearing.
- The anaemia situation has worsened over time for women, with 57.4 per cent women in rural areas suffered from anaemia during 2005-06 (NFHS-III, 2005-06).
- The “HUNGaMA” (Hunger and Malnutrition) Survey Report 2011 highlighted that 42 per cent of children are underweight and 58 per cent are stunted by the age of 24 months. The awareness among mothers about nutrition is low as 92 per cent mothers had never heard the word ‘malnutrition’. The rate of child underweight and stunting is proportional with mothers’ levels of education.

Steps for Improvement of Rural Women

The Government of India has taken various policies and programmes not only the improvement of women in rural area but also to ensure the active participation in the development process in the country. The Ministry of Rural Development is implementing various poverty alleviation programmes, having special components for women. Some of the major scheme are the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), now restructured as National Rural Livelihood Mission (Aajeevika) and the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY). The implementation of these programmes is monitored specifically with reference to rural women. Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) is being designed as a sub-component of the proposed National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). The objective is to achieve socio-economic and technical empowerment of the rural women farmers, predominantly small and marginal farmers.

The recently enacted National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 entitles food and nutritional security, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices. It also has special focus on nutritional support to women and children, as well as women empowerment. Pregnant women and lactating mothers during pregnancy and six months after the childbirth will also be entitled to maternity benefit of not less than Rs.6000. Children up to 14 years of age will be entitled to nutritious meals or take-home rations as per prescribed nutritional standards. The eldest woman who is not less than eighteen years of age, in every eligible household, shall be head of the household for the purpose of issue of ration cards. Where a household at any time does not have a woman or a woman of eighteen years of age or above, but has a female member below the age of eighteen years, then, the eldest male member of the household shall be the head of the household for the purpose of issue of ration card and the female member, on attaining the age of eighteen years, shall become the head of the household for such ration cards in place of such male member. In case of non-supply of entitled foodgrains or meals, the beneficiaries will receive a food security allowance. There are provisions

for reforms in the TPDS; setting up of grievance redressal mechanisms at district and state levels; separate provisions have been made for ensuring transparency and accountability etc.

Suggestions

Women play a critical and potentially transformative role in agricultural growth in developing countries. Empowerment is defined as a group's or individual's capacity to make effective choices, that is, to make choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcome. In other words, expanding the rights, resources, and capacity to make decisions and act independently in social, economic and political spheres. World Bank identified empowerment as "the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives."

There is a linkage between gender empowerment and food security. Women smallholders play a vital role in household and community food and nutrition security. Therefore, women smallholders as groups should be involved in agricultural growth to achieve food security.

Women are the ones who combine work in the fields and work at home to provide for the basic needs of the family. Women play an indispensable role in addressing this challenge of decreasing world hunger.

Women tend to be responsible for food production, processing, distribution and marketing outside the family as well as food preparation, childcare and looking after sick and dependents within the family and are more likely to be spent their labour, income and time on their children's education and health needs. Research has shown that a child's chances of survival increase by 20 per cent when the mother controls the household budget.

Enhancing women's access to and control over productive resources, particularly land, would have a huge impact on food security and economic growth. Establish legal and other mechanisms, as appropriate, that advance land reform, recognize and protect property, water, and user rights, to enhance access for the rural women to resources.

If women had the same access to productive resources as men, women could boost their yields by 20–30 per cent, raising the overall agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 per cent (FAO, 2011).

Ensure an enabling political, social, and economic environment designed to create the best conditions for the eradication of poverty and hunger, based on effective participation of women, which is most conducive to achieving sustainable food security for all.

Supporting self-help groups (SHGs), rural cooperatives, microfinance institutions (MFIs), various saving and credit associations, and the provision of financial intermediation services can empower women to compete in financial markets.

The magnitude of female malnutrition, particularly undernutrition, and its enormous social, economic, health, and developmental consequences demands strong actions. Actions need to focus on nutrients and energy intake, on disease prevention, and on strengthening the caring for women and adolescent girls, and helping women produce more food for themselves and their families. These direct actions together will complement and help the struggle for achieving long-term goals of gender equity and women's empowerment.

Research system must also seek the inputs of women as they have historically been the source of much traditional knowledge, innovations and skill in agriculture. While appreciating the efforts of the National Agricultural Research System (NARS) for bringing women in the fore front of agricultural research and development, therefore, forming Mahila Kisan Mandals in every village to educate women on different aspects of agriculture and related activities.

Promote investment to benefit small-scale food producers, especially women, and their organizations, in food security programmes; strengthen their capacity to design, implement and monitor these programmes.

Improve the collection, dissemination and use of gender-disaggregated data in agriculture, fisheries, forestry and rural development.

Conclusion

Climate change and environmental degradation increases women's time for labour intensive household tasks and decreases agricultural productivity. Rural women play a critical role in management of natural resource and local biodiversity. Therefore, we must recognize the critical contribution to food security that is made by women around the world. They have multiple roles and responsibilities in agriculture and the entire food chain. A combination of public policy, legal reforms, and implementation of existing laws and structural transformation of the gender biased division of labour will help in the recognizing the unpaid contribution of women, especially in a society with deeply entrenched in feudal customs and patriarchal norms. A composite measurement tool to increase understanding of the connections between women's empowerment, food security, and agricultural growth should be developed. One such tool is the Women's

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Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) – developed by IFPRI, the US Government's Feed the Future Initiative, the USAID and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative – which measures the empowerment, agency, and inclusion of women in the agriculture sector, and measures the roles and extent of women's engagement in the agriculture sector in five domains: decisions about agricultural production; access to and decision-making power over productive resources; control over use of income; leadership in the community; and time use. It also measures women's empowerment relative to men within their households. Thus, the gender dimensions of food security should be given importance in ensuring food and nutrition security for all, paving a way for an equitable, inclusive and sustainable path in the post-2015 development agenda.

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