

GENDER INEQUITIES AND FOOD SECURITY

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Abstract

The world is having enough food to feed the people, still many of people world wide remain undernourished. The reason for that is due to non-accessibility of food, poverty, lack of supply, increase in prices etc. The women plays vital role in production of food products, animal husbandry, milking of animals, etc still they remains food insecure due to gender inequities and inequality. In many types of animal productions women have a major role in processing of milk products and are also responsible for their marketing. In times of crisis, women suffer from food insecurity at greater rates as compared to men. The long prevailing hunger and malnutrition is a problem that affects millions of people globally, the majority of who are women and girls. Every man, woman and child has the right to adequate food but in so many cases women and girls are less represented as compared to man due to denial of basic human rights.

Key Words: - Women, Human Right, Malnutrition, Right to Food.

INTRODUCTION

In order to reach full potential of growth for a person it is important to have good nutritious food. However, poor nutrition has a great negative impact on women as compared to men. This is because it impacts not only their own health, but also to the health of their children. The children of malnourished women have poor physical and mental growth, less immune system, high risk of disease and infection that likely to die in childhood only.

Women are increasingly important in production of food crops or as farmers however it is very limited by the obstacle they face in access of land, financial aspects, etc. Women and girls face many inequality and discrimination. The discrimination they face not only exposes women to material deprivation, it also makes it more difficult for them to fulfill their vital roles in food production, preparation, processing, distribution, and marketing activities.²⁷ Challenging the constraints face by women which must be treated as a key component in the fight against malnutrition and hunger. Biologically, women are more likely to be malnourished, especially if they're menstruating, pregnant, or lactating. During these times, women are in need of micro nutrients like iron, calcium, protein, folic acid in order to make up for the losses during menstruation and meet the extra demands during pregnancy and lactation. Along with these micro nutrients women also need an increased calorie intake during their pregnancy and lactation periods. If malnourished mother gives birth to a baby then there are chances that such baby will take birth with low birth weights (LBW). LBW is one of the primary and prime factors to decide whether the child will live or die before his/her fifth birthday.

Women's own food security and nutrition needs – and often those of their daughters – are being neglected at the household level, where discriminatory social and cultural norms prevail.²⁸ For example, if we consider the economic growth of India, we can see the graph of it going towards the positive side i.e. the economy is growing, however despite of that many women and girls stay deprived of food and nutrition as compared to men and boys due to male chauvinism prevailing in the society.

[27] Gender equality and Food Security: Women's empowerment as a tool against hunger by FAO, 2013

[28] Gender and Food Security: An Overview, 2015

FOOD SECURITY

Food security is based on three essential pillars i.e. food availability, food access and food utilisation. Every individual disregard of gender, caste and religion has the right to access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs. The term food security is defined by FAO, as per it “Food security is a situation that exists when all people at all times have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”.²⁹

This definition points the following dimension of food security:³⁰

- **Food availability:** The availability of sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality, supplied through domestic production or imports (including food aid).
- **Food access:** Access by individuals to adequate resources (entitlements) for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Entitlements are defined as the set of all commodity bundles over which a person can establish command given the legal, political, economic and social arrangements of the community in which they live (including traditional rights such as access to common resources).
- **Utilization:** Utilization of food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met. This brings out the importance of non-food inputs in food security.
- **Stability:** To be food secure, a population, household or individual must have access to adequate food at all times. They should not risk losing access to food as a consequence of sudden shocks (e.g. an economic or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity). The concept of stability can therefore refer to both the availability and access dimensions of food security.

Due to gender inequities the components of food security as above mentioned are also badly affect. The overall availability of food is mainly dependant on women as women are the key players in the sector of farming. The role of women in food production within agriculture is even greater. In many societies women supply most of the labour needed to produce food crops and often control the use or sale of food produce grown on plots they manage.³¹ Women farmers can be more effective as compared to men in selecting improved varieties for local cultivation. Women’s unequal access to land, livestock, labour, education, extension, financial services, and technology has led to a significant gender yield gap, on average 20 to 30 percent lower than men’s fields, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Women are the key to food security but due to gender injustice occurring in the male dominant society they still remain deprived of proper food with proper nutrition.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ACHIEVING ZERO HUNGER GOALS

At the Sustainable Development summit held on 25th September, 2015, UN member states adopted the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. There are total 17 global goals set by the United Nations Development Programme, which are known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each goal has its separate list of targets to achieve and Zero Hunger is one of the Sustainable Development Goals. There are two targets under zero hunger goals which mainly focus on women and they are:

- By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons ;
- By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.

Through these goals it can be derived that by the end of 2030, United Nations Development Programme aims at removing malnutrition from member countries of the United Nations by majorly aiming the children, women and the elderly. Also it aims at increasing the aids in the form of land, knowledge, financial services which in turn will help in doubling the agricultural productivity and eventually the income generated from it.

RIGHT TO FOOD: AN EQUAL RIGHT FOR ALL

The right to adequate food means that every man, woman and child must have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food at all times to live active and healthy life with human dignity. According to Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 25(1), “everyone has the right to a standard of living

[²⁹]FAO, The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2001

[³⁰] FAO Agricultural and Development Economics Division

[³¹] Gender and Food Security, Module-I

adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, and housing.”³² Under International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) Article 11, the States Parties; recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family which includes adequate food, clothing and housing.³³ In the para 2 of the said article, the States Parties to the Covenant recognize the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger and list measures to be taken individually and through international cooperation in order to bring hunger to an end.³⁴ The general concept of adequate food can be broken down into several elements: the food supply should be adequate, which means that the types of foodstuffs commonly available (nationally, in local markets and, ultimately, at the household level) should be culturally acceptable (fit in with the prevailing food or dietary culture); the available supply should cover overall nutritional needs in terms of quantity (energy) and quality (it should provide all the essential nutrients, including micronutrients such as vitamins and iodine); and, last but not least, food should be safe (free of toxic elements and contaminants) and of good quality (in terms of, for example, taste and texture).³⁵ Poverty denies access to basic rights and women and girls are most affected³⁶.

From above it is clear that every men, women and children has the right to adequate food without any discrimination. Women and girls prepare most of house hold meals and grow much food. Globally, nearly one third of employed women work in agricultural sector and produces agricultural produces. When times are tough, women and girls may be the first to eat less, even as they work harder to secure food for their households. For pregnant and lactating women, inadequate food and poor nutrition imposes a risk of anemia, a leading cause of death during childbirth.³⁷ But women and girls still remain food insecure though they are the key to food security as they produce major part of our agricultural sector through doing labour work and selecting the crops to grow in a particular season. Indigenous women for an instance may experience multiple forms of discrimination based on gender and ethnicity. Talking about the allocation of household resources gender discrimination may result in an increased incidence of malnutrition among women and girls. Hence they deprive from the basic human right i.e. Right to Food.

WOMEN'S MALNUTRITION: A SERIOUS PROBLEM

Women are more likely to suffer from hunger or nutritional deficiencies as compared to men. The reason for that is lack of education, poverty, gender inequities, low social status of women, etc. If women are underweighted or suffer from hunger or undernourished that directly affect their reproductive system and that ultimately lead to increase in the rates of illness and mortality. Such women when become pregnant either end up to miscarriage or give birth to premature infant which needs intensive care.

During the time of pregnancy, the body goes through many hormonal and physical changes and body needs more nutritious food as compared to the nutritious food taken before because the body is engaged in the development of foetus and the breastfeeding process post-delivery. Adolescent girls are more likely to be malnourished the reason for that is such girls are growing faster than any time after their first year of life. They mainly need protein, iron, vitamins, and other micronutrients to support the adolescent growth and meet the body's increased demand for iron during menstruation. If adolescents become pregnant, they run into a greater risk of various complications since they may not have finished growing. Pregnant adolescents who are underweight are likely to experience so many complications while giving birth to baby. After giving birth to baby also while feeding they need nutritious food so as to fulfil all the needs of newly born baby.

Now if we understand malnutrition then it is a deficiency of a particular Vitamin, protein, nutrition which has a particular effect on human body if there is a dearth of it. Considering deficiency of Vitamins in particular if a woman gives birth to a baby and if that woman has had been having deficiency of vitamins then such women place their infants in very high risk as the baby child had been receiving all nutrients form its mother while growing in the womb. Following are the different Vitamin deficiencies occurring and affect the mother and the child in the following manner:

- **Vitamin A** deficiency is the leading cause of preventable blindness in children and increases the risk of disease and death from severe infections. In pregnant women VAD causes night blindness and may increase the risk of maternal mortality.³⁸ Many women who breastfeed become vitamin A deficient

[³²] Article 25(1) of UDHR

[³³]Article 11 of ICESCR

[³⁴] Ibid

[³⁵] FAO, The Human right to adequate food and freedom from Hunger

[³⁶] Ms. Amishi D. Patel & Dr. Bhavesh H. Bharad, " Indian approach towards right to life with reference to water and sanitation, Gap-Gyan, volume II , Issue II , ISSN : 2581-5830

[³⁷] <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-2-zero-hunger> visited on 08.05.2020

[³⁸] Micronutrient deficiencies by WHO

because the vitamin A they consume is prioritized to breast milk over their own body's need. It is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of pregnant women in lower-income countries are vitamin A deficient.³⁹

- **Vitamin B12** is an essential vitamin which plays an important role in one's body as it produces Red Blood Cells. During pregnancy low level of Vitamin B12 may increase the likelihood of neural tube defects.
- **Vitamin C** generally occurs naturally in various fruits and vegetables. It is important for bones, skin, and connective tissues. It also helps the body to absorb iron and boost the immune system. During pregnancy Vitamin C may help in reducing complications like maternal anemia, pre-eclampsia. Vitamin C deficiency during pregnancy may lead to serious health effects on the brain of the child.
- **Vitamin D** helps the body to absorb calcium which is useful for our bones. For mothers and their newly born babies this vitamin is very important. It plays an important role in metabolism of bone. It also reduces the risk of low birth weight and preterm birth. During pregnancy, Vitamin D deficiency may lead to bone fragility, poor postnatal growth, low birth weight.
- **Anemia and Iron Deficiency:** - With a view to developing a baby in mother's womb it is necessary that the amount of blood in mother's body greatly increases. To increase blood in one's body it is essential to have food that is having iron the most, so the pregnant women should consume enough iron during pregnancy; if not consumed it is quiet easy for her to become anemic. Anemia during pregnancy increases the risk of mother's death during or after the birth of baby.

Hence it can be deduced that Vitamins and other micronutrients hold major importance for women, esp. for pregnant women and adolescent girls with the deficiency of which they can have severe consequences.

NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT, 2013

Under National Food Security Act, 2013 certain provisions were made which mainly focuses on women, children and girls. The National Food Security Act, 2013 was notified with an object to provide food and nutritional security by assuring access to adequate quality and quantity of food at cheap price to people to live life with dignity. This act has special focus on women and girls. Under this Act some provisions were made to provide meal to pregnant and lactating mothers, such mother will also be entitled to get maternity benefits of not less than Rs. 6,000/-. Children up to the age of 14 years will be entitled to nutritious meals as per the prescribed nutritional standards. In case of non-supply of entitled food grains or meals, the beneficiaries will receive food security allowance.

The Act also contains provisions for setting up of grievance redressal mechanism at the District and State levels. Pregnant women and lactating mothers and children in the age group of 6 months to 14 years will be entitled to meals as per prescribed nutritional norms under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Mid-Day Meal (MDM) schemes. The government has also introduced Weekly Iron Folic Acid Supplementation Programme (WIFS). This programme covers the adolescent girls who studies in Govt. Schools in class 6 to 12. Under this programme weekly dose of folic acid is provided to the beneficiaries under the teacher's supervision. It will go in long run prevention of Anemia and control of mild anemia.⁴⁰

The government has also taken various measures to ensure adequate availability of nutrition to children in the age group of 6-36 months, wherein the children between the stated age group are provided ration to fill the gap between the Recommended Dietary Allowances and Average Dietary Intake. Alongside emphasis is also given on counselling mothers of the infants for their proper upbringing and young child feeding practices. Through this initiative the girls of the age between 6-36 months will also be able to benefit from this scheme hence helping the girls to get proper nutritious food.

CONCLUSION

From this it is concluded that good nutritious food is important for all but women still remain a step behind to have sufficient and nutritious food as compared to men to live active and healthy life and the reason for that is gender bias. Men and women may have different skills and knowledge but men should not under-estimate the role of women in the sector of agriculture as they are the key to food security as they contribute more in the production of food to feed the people. Women may face more constraints but men need to support them and encourage them leaving aside the discrimination based on gender. The government also tries to minimize the

[³⁹] Bailey, West Jr., and Black, 2015

[⁴⁰] National Health Mission, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, GOI

question of hunger by introducing various schemes that mainly focuses on women and girls and through such schemes women of all the age shall be able to avail nutritious food and can end hunger and achieve food security without any discrimination. We as a responsible citizen should understand the importance of women and their contribution in the society and should not discriminate them, instead encourage them so that they can progress in their field and can walk hand in hand with the men of the society.

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