



# **Culture, Religion and Food Security for Indian Women: A Social Perspective**

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Food security is a state of having a source of access to enough quantity of affordable and nutritious food. Food and food related practices stem from the social construction of gendered roles and responsibilities that assigns the liability of feeding the family to a feminine quality and responsibility. The gendered stereotype of women as primary nurturers, caregivers for children and family members is a notion deeply entrenched in the patriarchal ideologies of society. India being one such society, the onus of ‘providing’ for the family’s food needs is viewed as a woman’s liability. Family food security exists when all its members, always, have access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Social institutions such as ‘family’ and ‘religion’ have been the drivers for determining food related practices and food security in the family.

The ideologies of gender stratification, gender roles and religious ideologies has further created a sense of greater liability ingrained in the psyche of almost every Indian woman. This in turn leads the woman to feel and think that she is respon-

sible for the food needs and wellbeing of her family. This is largely constructed around women's identity, leaving women, in many instances solely responsible for food needs of the family. Providing for the family's food needs has remained in the imagination of society as the sole responsibility of women and is therefore closely connected to the everyday lives of women. As wives and mothers, women are assigned with the duty of feeding the family and are viewed as exclusively responsible in defeating hunger in the family. In doing so they become victims of hunger themselves. The fact that women are held responsible for nutritional requirements that must fulfill the needs of their families is a burden that has fallen upon the shoulders of women. This therefore is a serious anomaly that needs to be corrected by concerned social workers, development practitioners and by women themselves. Important documents among many others, such as India's Food Security Act of 2013 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 2014 (CEDAW) ensures 'equal right to food' for women, however little progress has been made in this effort.

## **Food and Indian Women**

This article stems from field observations of a survey on 'Women and Food Security', carried out in the lesser developed urban areas of Chennai city. The Coping Strategies Index (CSI) a tool based on collecting data on a single question: 'What do you do when you do not have enough food, and do not have money to buy food?' (Maxwell, Daniel G 1996) was used. The use of other participatory techniques such as focus group discussion (FGDs) and observations were used to gather information. The method goes beyond measuring merely caloric consumption but specifically observes the vulnerability elements such as access to food, cultural and religious practices and gendered

patterns of food consumption. The study gained deep insights into the daily lives of the lesser privileged women. It further found that food insecurity among the women in the city points to a challenge that leads to higher levels of vulnerability of the family in terms of a poor quality of life. This study therefore suggests some strategic interventions that can mitigate the vulnerability element of food insecurity among women.

Culture and religion to a large extent shape a family's diet, food needs, food distribution patterns, child feeding practices and even food preparation techniques. In a patriarchal society such as India, a food related belief is that the woman eats last or the leftovers after the man and sons of the house have eaten. Beliefs such as regular fasting for the wellbeing of the family on the woman is yet another practice that deters women's psychological and physical wellbeing. Such practices tend to make the woman believe that she is virtuous, moral and worthy. These are deep-rooted and internalized socio-cultural and religious beliefs that cannot be erased easily. Several such practices have had a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of women. Challenging such beliefs is a task at hand to be tactfully addressed by those concerned in upholding gender justice, faith formation and value-based education.

Studies on maternal health and child health provide a glimpse of the status of food and nutrition security of women, but finds that there is an absolute dearth of social security cover of any sort for younger widows, homeless women, women whose husbands have been reportedly missing or labelled as terrorist, unwed mothers, abandoned women, separated or divorced women, never-married women, disabled and mentally ill women who are undoubtedly the most vulnerable in terms of food and nutrition (Mander, 2016; Dand, 2016).

It is a well-known fact that poor women all over the world, are left hungry most of the times. The fact that women are responsible for food provision that must fulfill the needs of children and family members, falls as a greater burden on the shoulders of women in the family. It is therefore important to look at food and femininity from a socio-cultural, religious and gendered reality. Women who are in poverty situations, are denied access to important resources such as credit, land and inheritance. Their hard work in the form of farm and home labour goes unrewarded and unrecognized. Their health and nutritional needs are not crucial for development, they are deprived of to education and support services, and their participation in decision-making at home and in the community are not included or otherwise is minimal. Caught in the cycle they are not able change the deplorable situation that they find themselves in. (Kariuki J. G. 2013).

India has nearly forty percent of the world's under-nourished population (FAO, 2012). With one-third of its children malnourished, one-third of its women undernourished, half of its women anaemic, India growth trajectory cannot be termed 'impressive'. In many other social indices particularly related to women's nutritional status, like low birthweight of infants, maternal mortality and morbidity, India has performed poorly. As per Sample Registration System (SRS) data from 2011- 2013, India has a Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) of 167 per 100,000 births compared to 14 in developed states (Press Information Bureau, 2015). MMR is an important indicator of women's health and nutrition status and has been a priority area for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Reproductive health and women's food and nutritional security have been low priority areas in India, in terms of public spending as well as social perception.

The lack of recognition of women's indirect contribution to the growth of an economy by way of their reproductive and home-care roles as workers can be attributed as one of the main causes in leaving women and their families poorer and hungrier. The work at home of raising children, care of the sick and elderly, cattle grazing, fetching fuel, fodder and water have all been the main contention in recognizing women's work. Food security particularly for women is a recent addition to the dimension of right to food. An aspect that needs recognition is that women and girls naturally require specific nutritional requirements because of their biological needs. Young girls during their puberty stage, young mothers during pregnancy and lactation stage will necessarily require specific food that enable them to be stronger and healthier women. This in turn needs to be recognized as a basic requirement for national well-being and economic growth.

## **Recommendations for Long-Term Change**

As per the observations made in the survey, merely providing food grains through the Public Distribution System or organised livelihood opportunities for rural women do not sufficiently empower women in the context of access to food. Deeper discriminatory practices against women that are social, religious and cultural in nature, need to be simultaneously addressed. If 'right to food' is an intrinsic right to human dignity, there has to be more inclusive strategies which ensure the dignity and worth of woman. Governments and institutions will have to work on understanding the deep-rooted connections with women and food. Such approaches to food security are referred to as gender-transformative approaches in the realm of food security.

1. One such deep-rooted practice that calls for attention is the aspect of gender equality in food security. That women need access to food in equal measure as other family members needs to be squarely addressed through strategic gender interests. Breaching the barriers of discrimination is a hard task. Social institutions such as religion and family can be long term drivers of change to bring about food security in the family.
2. Working towards breaking the gender biases of work and the onus of 'feeding the family' purely as the woman's prerogative is a step towards creating an 'enabling environment' for the wellbeing of women. The creation of an 'enabling environment' has been emphasized in India's 'Policy for Women's Empowerment, 2001'. It states that the gender disparity manifests itself in various forms, the most obvious being the trend of continuously declining female ratio in the population in the last few decades.
3. Social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels are some of the other manifestations. Discrimination against girl children, adolescent girls and women persists in parts of the country. The institutions of family and faith can play a major role in creating fundamental reforms in beliefs systems in the family thereby mitigating such discriminatory practices.
4. Women in most developing societies face challenges in three critical stages viz, infancy, childhood, adolescent and reproductive phase. Practitioners must pay focused attention in meeting the nutritional needs of women in all stages of her life cycle. These needs should be marked as priority before embarking on empowering women in other aspects of empowerment.
5. Household discrimination in nutritional matters for adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women must be mitigated though special efforts in changing attitudes and

mind-sets of men and even women. The ideological and cultural belief that the woman eats last or the leftovers after the man and sons of the house is a belief that cannot be erased easily. The belief that the girl child will one day leave the home to another and that she need not be educated or given priority leaves the woman less healthy perpetuating ill-health and a diseased society.

6. Infrastructural needs such as drinking water and sufficient sanitation also requires special attention. Sewage disposal, toilet facilities and sanitation within accessible reach of the households especially in rural and urban slums need attention.

In conclusion for solutions to work, values and meanings attached to roles and identities of women and men, and the likely challenges in enabling and legitimizing women's roles and work need recognition. Women (and men) are not unified, homogenous categories; gender relations are embedded within a complex web of social relations. In the case of India, gender relations intersect not only with wider relations of caste, ethnicity, and class but equally with age and stage in the life cycle, to shape the vulnerabilities confronted by and opportunities available to differently positioned women and men (Rao et al 2017).

Alongside ensuring adequate, nutritious food as a right, one is also challenging, renegotiating, and transforming previously unequal gender relationships. Gender justice in relation to food, femininity and family wellbeing, then, is about wider notions of social transformation based on principles of equality and well-being that stem from cultural and religious identities. Most importantly institutions of family and faith can be the long-term drivers of social change.