

# Women as an Active Agent of Food Security- Issues and Challenges

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## **Abstract**

Achieving food security and eliminating hunger and poverty within 2030 as aimed in Sustainable Development Goals(SDGs) necessitates the active role of women, which constitutes 48.41% (Census,2022) of the total population of India. The role of this active agent of society is undermined by prevailing gender discrimination and inequalities. In this backdrop, the present study is designed as follows-

**Purpose:** (i) To analyse the critical role of women in achieving food security  
(ii) To identify the constraints of gender equality and  
(iii) To generate priority interventions for gender equality and women empowerment.

**Methodology:** In this secondary analysis of cross-sectional data, we used data from different international and national reports like NFHS, Agricultural Census Reports, reports of FAO and UNDP etc. The critical role of women is analysed with the help of available descriptive statistics.

**Results:** The existing 16.3% of undernourished people in India (Global Food Insecurity Index,2022) invariably necessitates empowering women with equal rights and opportunities as men. There is a need for proactive interventions to minimize the 48% empowerment deficit (Women Empowerment Index) and 44% (GGPI) gender gap in the country.

**Limitations:** The women groups considered in different research and reports vary in age groups, which limits the comparison of data.

**Originality:** The constraints women face in attaining food security are based on their functions as producers, consumers and distributors of the food chain, expected to provide a basis for further research in this regard.

**Keywords:** Rights, Food Security, Women Empowerment, Gender

## **1. Introduction**

Women are important agents for promoting sustainable food production, enhancing household food security and protecting the environment (UN , 2019). It is important to empower women economically on the one hand and secure their nutritional well-being on the other. Even though there is progress in economic empowerment in many parts of the developing world, women continue to face insult to their nutritional status and gender inequalities in food security, health and nutrition are pervasive, within households and even among the wealthy( Brown et al.,2021). Worldwide, the gender gap in food security continues to rise. In 2021, 31.9% of women in the world were moderately or severely food insecure, compared to 27.6% of men. In 2019, nearly one in three women aged 15-49 years (571 million ) were

affected by anemia (FAO, 2021). Malnutrition in mothers, especially those who are pregnant or breastfeeding can set up a cycle of deprivation that increases the likelihood of low birth weight, child mortality, serious disease, poor classroom performance and low work productivity.

Women and girls represent half of the world's population and half its potential. However, gender inequality persists everywhere and stagnates social progress. On average, women in the labour market still earn 23 percent less than men globally and women spend about three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. There has been progress over the last decades, but the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. In India, women constitute 48.41% of the total population. Census 2011 shows the child sex ratio among children of 0-6 years to be 918 girls for every 1000 boys in India. In the Global Gender Gap Report, 2023, India has been ranked 127 out of 146 countries of the world, a slight improvement of 1.4 percentage points compared to the 2022 report. The existing gender inequality has an adverse impact on the food security and nutritional status of women. The 2023 Global Hunger Index gives India a rank of 111 out of 125 countries. This indicates a hunger severity level of "serious" for the country. Among men and women, Indian women are generally vulnerable to poor nutrition, especially during pregnancy and lactation. NFHS-5 data says that 57% of women in the reproductive age group in India are anemic. Under-five mortality, neo-natal mortality rate and infant mortality rate are 42, 25 and 35 in 1000 live births respectively. It indicates a dismal picture of the food and nutritional status of women in the country. Women as active agents of society play the role of producer, and consumer and overall responsibility of maintaining the food security of the households. However, the role of this active agent of society is undermined by prevailing gender discrimination and inequalities. There is a need of research and policy initiatives to ensure the food and nutrition security of women by empowering them to enjoy the equal opportunities as men.

## 2. Objectives

- (a) To analyse the critical role of women in achieving food security
- (b) To identify the constraints of gender equality and
- (c) To generate priority interventions for gender equality and women empowerment.

## 3. Methodology

In this secondary analysis of cross-sectional data, we used data from different international and national reports like NFHS, Agricultural Census Reports, reports of FAO and UNDP etc. The critical role of women is analysed with the help of available descriptive statistics.

## 4. Result & Discussion

### 4.1. Women's food security and its implications

Food and nutrition security is accomplished when enough food (quality, amount, safety, and sociocultural acceptability) is always available and accessible for all people to live healthy and happy lives. Thus there are four dimensions of food security- food availability, accessibility, utilization and stability. Women play an important role in achieving all these dimensions of food security as the food producer, consumer and distributor.

The food and nutritional security of women has greater implications. The existing food and nutritional insecurity among women and children require considerable attention from researchers and from government and policymakers to generate adequate accessibility and utilization of food. Benton (2015) states, "Access to food determines health and influences national security and patterns of human development". The improved food and nutrition status of women not only benefits them but also contributes substantially to the country's economic growth (World Bank, 2012). Women play a key role in achieving household food security and nutrition with active participation in production and food processing. On average 43 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries is comprised of women Labourers (FAO, 2011). It thus influences household accessibility of sufficient quality food. Women also contribute to household food security and overall human development by taking care of household members in general and younger children in particular. The women in the reproductive age group need special attention to food and nutrition as it has a substantial impact on child growth and development. It is established in the available literature that women are deprived of human rights including education, knowledge, employment and basic facilities that are essential for their socio-economic empowerment and thereby improve their food and nutritional status as well as of their children.

#### **4.2. Women in agri-food production**

Women's productive and reproductive roles put them at the center of food security more than any other group. This is true in India where, both as farmers and as home managers, women determine the feeding habits, dietary patterns, and nutritional and food security status of their household. The role of women in agriculture and their situation in rural areas depends on their geographic region, social class, age and ethnicity.

With growing urban migration by men, the agriculture sector is being managed by women. Women contribute to agriculture through multiple roles as cultivators, entrepreneurs, and laborers. About 60–80% of the food produced in India can be attributed to the efforts of rural women. As per the 2011 census, approximately 33.7% of rural males migrate in search of employment and better economic opportunities. The increasing migration of rural men has led to the feminization of the agricultural sector, with the participation of women in agriculture and allied activities becoming more significant. Women in rural areas play a crucial role in the subsistence of their communities, though this role is not always acknowledged. They take care of domestic chores, such as collecting water and firewood, they do agricultural and livestock tasks and also sell any surplus from their harvests at local markets. What is more, they look after the care and education of their families. Women also play a key role in animal husbandry, fishing and forestry, although their work receives less acknowledgment and their activities in these sectors generally prove less profitable than for men.

#### **4.3. Women's Poor Accessibility to ensure food security**

Economic access to available food is the second pillar of food and nutrition security. Cultural, historical, and sociological issues continue to impede women's access to important services and resources. The literature on innovations that address the productive needs of poor female farmers is relatively limited, is typically confined to one key resource (such as land), and does not consider the interactions among other resources. The information on women's accessibility to land and other resources is essential to formulate any policy initiatives for food and nutrition security.

**1. Access to land:** Women are in a disadvantageous position in both statutory and customary land tenure systems, resulting in weak property and contractual rights to land, water and other natural resources. According to the latest agricultural statistics, about 73.2% of women in rural India work in agriculture,

but only 12% of women own farmland. On the otherhand NFHS data shows that the proportion of women land owners(either single or joint ownership) in the age group of 15-49 years has increased from 28.3% in 2015 to just 31.7% in 2019-21. The existing legislation although protects women's property rights, lack of legal knowledge and weak implementation limit women's ability to exercise these rights.

2. **Low levels of investment in human capital:** Low levels of human capital constrain poor rural women in their multiple roles as agricultural producers, workers, mothers and caregivers. Poor health and nutrition are important constraints to women's agricultural productivity. In India investment in women's health and nutrition, both at the level of public and private stakeholders is limited
3. **Access to innovation and technologies:** Due to illiteracy and a lack of understanding, many women, particularly in the food and nutrition fields, have limited access to research and innovation benefits. In addition, traditional research and development systems typically do not consult female farmers and end-users, and many improved varieties do not consider women's needs, preferences, and resources, including women's distinct nutritional needs for micro-nutrient fortified crops.
4. **Credit and financial services:** India's growth in account ownership has been helped by various digital innovations and government-sponsored schemes aimed at financial inclusion. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has proven to be a game changer, not only for including a higher proportion of the population in formal banking channels but also for reducing the gender gap in account ownership. Yet, credit use by women is low. The Global Findex 2021 data shows that the share of adults in developing countries that borrowed formally in the year before the survey was only around 23 % and for India it was only 13 %. The share of women borrowers in India is lower still at 10 %, as compared to 15% of men. Moreover, according to a 2022 IFC report, approximately 90 % of women entrepreneurs in India have not borrowed from a formal financial institution (World Bank,2022). The collateral requirements, high transaction costs, limited education and mobility, social and cultural barriers and the nature of women's businesses limit women's ability to obtain credit(Klapper and Arora,2022). Social norms may also prohibit women from receiving information from outside lenders, which would be important if the information is not fully transmitted from husband to wife.
5. **Access to Market:** Women continue to face multiple barriers to market access, which are often seen as the domain of men. It can make market accessibility a challenging task for women to sustainable living. It can be more difficult for women, or other marginalized groups, to gain a deep understanding of what markets are, how they operate, what buyers are looking for and how to establish win-win market relationships. In many cases, simple adjustments to activities are needed to become more sustainable and profitable. In other cases, however, more complex interventions may be necessary, for example, to respond to changing agricultural patterns related to climate change. In addition, female farmers face many gender-specific barriers to accessing markets. Mode of transportation may be culturally inappropriate for women. Time burdens also constrain women from seeking the best prices for their output.

## 5. Women empowerment for gender equality and food security

The existing 16.3% of undernourished people in India (Global Food Insecurity Index,2022) invariably necessitates empowering women with equal rights and opportunities as men. There is a need for proactive interventions to minimize the 48% empowerment deficit (Women Empowerment Index) and 44% (GGPI) gender gap in the country. Economic, social and political empowerment of women is indispensable not

only for their sovereign rights to control assets and land but also to increase their self-confidence. This is because empowered women having access to productive and financial resources, can produce 50% of the world's food and to lead to food security by expanding agricultural productivity from 2.4% to 4% (FAO,2011). Empowered women become more effective farmers, more productive food producers and better income managers. It results in greater individual control of income and better decision-making power in the household. Women empowerment affects food security and nutrition through different channels –

- Women empowerment through education reduces the fertility rate. It results in low growth of population and lower demand for food and a higher probability of food security.
- Empowering women through an adequate supply of agricultural inputs and proper training and technical knowledge triggers yield abundance and a higher supply of foods that strengthen the status of food security.
- With advanced knowledge, education and income empowerment, women gain knowledge on healthy food preparation and consumption. This, consequently, reduces the risk of contracting diet-related diseases among household members.
- The empowerment of women through property and inheritance laws and making them owners of land encourages their production initiatives and skills.
- The facilities of lending to women entrepreneurs working in agriculture and making financial services more accessible to rural women encourage them to play the active role as productive agents.
- The facilities of access to roads, transportation, water, information technology services, greater mobility and market information, especially for rural women, empower them economically and socially and thereby reduce the gender gap and increase food security status.
- The training for gender-specific production with fortified and diverse food crops empowers women producers to produce an adequate quantity of quality products. It helps to reduce micro-nutrient deficiency in the diet.

## 6. Conclusion

The constraints that women face in attaining food security are based on their functions as producers, consumers and distributors of the food chain, expected to provide a basis for further research in this regard. It is time to update the global understanding of food security and gender inequality. The local actors including women's organizations in crisis-affected communities need to get the flexible funding and support desperately needed to protect women and girls from hunger-associated gender-based violence and protection risks. Gender equality and food security by 2030 require urgent action to eliminate the many root causes of discrimination that become obstacles to the empowerment of women.

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