

# Femininity and Feeding the Family in India: Adapting SDGs and the Social Work Agenda for Women and Food Security

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the gendered nature of practices that relate to food access and food provision predominantly within the socio-cultural context of the Indian rural household. Such food practices stem from the social construction of gender roles and responsibilities that assigns the liability of feeding the family to a feminine quality and responsibility. It deliberates on the food security act of 2013 and suggests that in addressing the core vulnerability of women in accessing food, the issue of addressing economic risks should be coupled with addressing social risks in order to transform the lives of women and restore human dignity. Challenging structural causes imbedded in cultural practices that are a result of social injustices and disempowerment of women need to be carefully addressed. The conscious application of a 'gender sensitive' approach can emerge as a powerful practice tool to accomplish the SDGs, particularly goals that focus on zero hunger and gender equality. It suggests that integrating the mission of SDGs with that of the global agenda of social work will go a long way in mitigating the issue of gender discrimination. It will be an opportunity to influence appropriate gender development policies, provide suitable training possibilities and practice methods which social workers and social work educators can envisage. Eliminating gender stereotypes and misogynistic beliefs/practices in food practices should hopefully lead to a healthy and holistic development for women.

## METHODOLOGY

The article stems from an action research study funded by the University Grants Commission, New Delhi titled 'Creating sustainable livelihoods for rural women' and executed in a rural district in the State

of Tamil Nadu, South India. The study uses ethnographic data based on field observations and participatory techniques such as; semi-structured interviews, transect walks, focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews which enabled to gain deeper insights into the day-to-day lived experiences of women residing in the villages. A systematic review of published literature through books, journals and online sources served as secondary data to corroborate facts elicited from ground realities.

Furthermore, social work interventions and networking strategies were implemented to address broader challenges experienced by rural women. The findings of the study found that merely creating livelihoods for rural women did not sufficiently empower women and other discriminatory practices against women that are social and cultural in nature need to be simultaneously addressed. One such deep rooted practice that needs the attention of development planners and practitioners is the aspect of food and food security for women.

## FOOD AND FEMINITY

Food is the first among many basic human needs, and it is for this reason that 'the human right to food is recognized in several instruments under international law' (UN 1999). Food security 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. Specifically, Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes, 'the fundamental right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition' (FAO 2009).

From time immemorial, almost in every society, food related practices are an important part of daily life which in turn is a rich reflection of its culture. Such food practices have been an aid to understand gender relations in a given social context, knowledge in cooking, food preservation, and the construction of identities in and by communities. Traditionally a woman's role is not

consciously acknowledged. Women’s regular involvement in day to-day practices points out that construction and maintenance of culture is gender specific. This is also true in terms of women’s relationship with food. Feminist studies show that examining this aspect of women’s work clarify the character and significance of women’s household activities (De Vault, 1991). An interesting approach for those interested in upholding the ‘human rights’ aspect in development practice is to understand the unequal relationship in the domain of the household and to investigate aspects of access to food, food preparation and consumption practices.

Gender stereotypes of assigning women as primary nurturers and care-givers of children and family members have their roots in primeval practices that are patriarchal in nature, typical of developing societies. Ideologies of biological determinism, gender stratification and sex roles, fanned by religious and cultural practices, have led to the construction of food liability as a woman’s activity. This is largely constructed around women’s identity, leaving them, in many instances solely responsible for food needs of the family. The onus of ‘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 solely responsible in defeating hunger in the family and in doing so become victims of hunger themselves. The fact that women are made responsible for nutritional requirements that must fulfill the needs of their family is a burden that has conveniently fallen on women and is therefore a problem to be solved by women for women.

The report of the Asian Development Bank on gender equity and food security portends that women’s empowerment is a tool to fight against hunger. Figure 1 presents the cycle of discrimination that make women vulnerable to discrimination. It further states that worldwide, there are strong regional differences in the extent of discrimination against women and girls; however, within Asia and the Pacific, South Asia lags in eliminating such discrimination and in ensuring that women can participate, on an equal footing with men, in decision making (Asian Development Bank 2013).

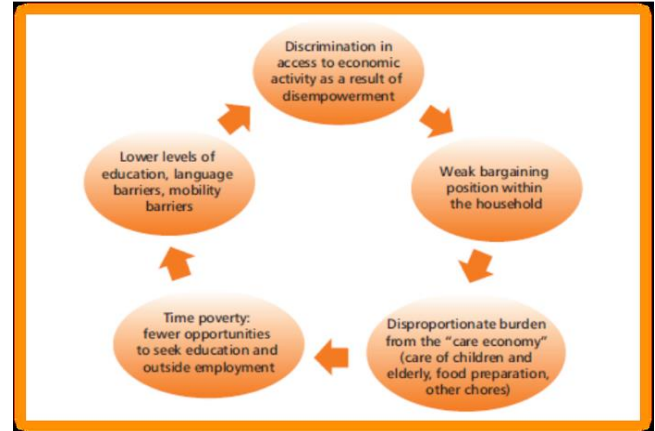


Figure 1: Cycle of Discrimination  
Source: (Asian Development Bank 2013)

The right to food cannot be denied as it is considered as a basic human need. Therefore, all efforts that work towards survival needs can be channelized through interventions such as provisions for distribution of food and food grains through the public distribution systems, food for work programmes, etc. These efforts serve as provisions that are short term and immediate but will not suffice for sustaining development and eradicating discrimination against women. Hence, what is essential is, to work towards establishing strategic interests for women. Such strategic interventions are long term interventions that are sustainable in nature and that ultimately bring change in areas of deep-rooted discriminatory practices.

An important aspect to discuss is the notion of food security and sovereignty which is a vital part in ensuring women’s access to food and their food choices. Identifying food sovereignty at the individual, household, community and national levels can be practically achieved through establishing local, regional, national and international networks, cooperation and other strategies that are crucial in accomplishing Goal 5. Education, awareness building, gender sensitivity, social, economic, cognitive, legal and political empowerment approaches etc., for men and women are powerful interventions that can achieve access to food, food choices and food practices on a long-term basis.

## THE INDIAN REALITY

India’s development policies, especially in the last two decades, have recognized the need for women

specific initiatives. However, the situation in India still seems to be grim as compared to other developing nations. India has nearly forty percent of the world's under-nourished population (FAO 2012) Indian policy makers, have refocused attention on the links between poverty and hunger, recognizing freedom from hunger as a basic human right. They have acknowledged the role of women in ensuring food security at the household level. The National Food Security Act (NFSA) (India, MLJ 2013) formalizes this recognition by legitimizing the most senior woman in the household as its "head" for purposes of securing food entitlements. It has put on its agenda the need to better understand the linkages between the recognition of women in food security policies, changing gender relations, and well-being outcomes in terms of actual food and nutrition security (Rao, Pradhan, Roy 2017).

Household food preparation in India takes up most of the woman's time even though the quality and nutritional content of what is being prepared is a deeper issue that calls for attention. Traditional practices prescribe, that women eat last, after all the male members and children have been fed. Often women from marginalized sections are left with no food after the family has eaten; in most cases families are large. When a crisis hits, women are generally the first to sacrifice their food, to protect the food consumption of their families. Such sacrifices further intersect with class and caste and perpetuate further inequalities. The pressure to perform such food femininities are a major challenge for women in India. Food provision is central to the idea of good mothering, so if women fail to fulfil this cultural, gender biased requirement they are termed as failing at femininity too. Such gender-based discrimination in food practices has led to physically and mentally weakening women that have eventually disempowered women in society.

In India, girls are less likely to survive infancy than boys, and if they do, parents invest less in their education. Women are far less likely to work outside the home and have their own bank accounts than men. Many report that there exists very little decision-making power over their own lives (Coffey, D 2017). A phone survey conducted in 2016 by Social Attitudes Research for India (SARI) among women in two Indian states (Delhi and Uttar Pradesh) found that one in three adults in Delhi, and six in ten adults in Uttar Pradesh lived in households where men eat first. Women from poor backgrounds go hungry most of the times which directly leads to their

poor health conditions which in turn make them more vulnerable to diseases and ill-health. Empowering men, women and children to be agents of social change in this malady will go a long way in yielding positive results in deconstructing the gendered food practices. The bar diagram (Nitya Rao, 2017) ram below indicates the unhealthy practice of feeding the males first in the household.

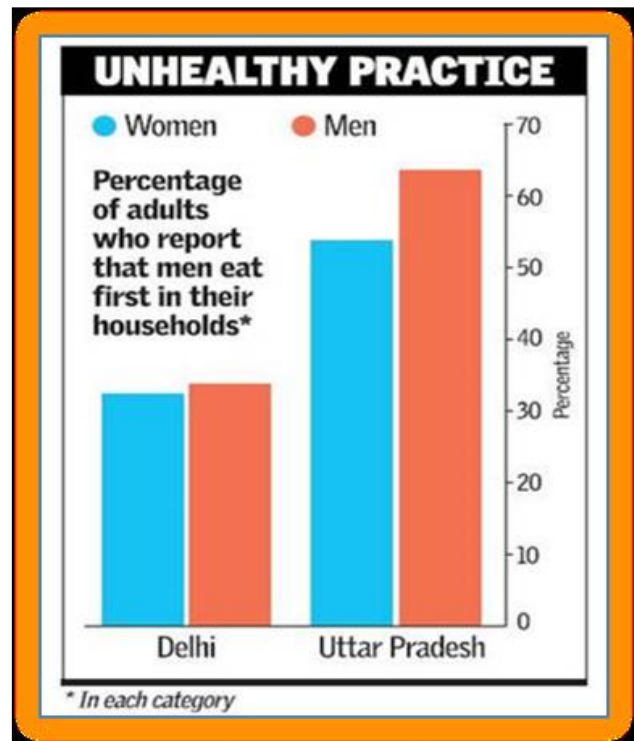


Figure 2: Family eating practices  
Source: Social Attitudes Research for India (SARI)

It is therefore imperative to look at food and femininity from a constructed reality that is social, cultural, political and religious in form and nature. Enabling women gain access to food needs and relieve them of the responsibility of providing for the family requires specific interventions that respond to both their practical needs (immediate/short term) and strategic (long term) interests (Moser 1993). The two terms 'practical needs' and 'strategic interests' were developed in a framework for a gendered approach to development planning focusing on women development.

Women in India as in most developing countries, face societal challenges in three critical stages when it comes to food deprivation, viz, infancy, childhood, adolescence and in their reproductive phase. Social work practitioners should assess the urgency and enormity of

the problem and pay focused attention in working out strategies to fulfil the nutritional needs of women in all stages of the life cycle. These needs should be marked as priority before embarking on empowering women in other aspects of empowerment. Household discrimination in nutritional matters for adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women must be mitigated through special efforts in changing attitudes and mind-sets of men and even women.

In a patriarchal society such as India, the cultural belief that the woman eats last or the leftovers after the man and sons of the house have eaten is a belief that cannot be erased easily and has resulted in gender-role internalization (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) 2009; Mukherjee 2009). If women are less powerful than men, it translates into a weaker access to food (Patel 2012). Therefore, one's capacity to access food depends on power to produce, purchase and provide (Shiladitya Chatterjee, 2010).

With one-third of its children malnourished, one-third of its women undernourished, half of its women anemic, India's hyped growth trajectory cannot be impressive. In many other social indices particularly related to women's nutritional status, such as low-birth-weight of infants, maternal mortality and morbidity, India has performed poorly. As per Sample Registration System (SRS) data from 2011-13, India has a Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) of 167 per 100,000 births compared to 14 in developed States (Press Information Bureau, 2015). The MMR is an important indicator of women's health and nutrition status and has been a priority area for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India. But 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. Indian women, particularly rural women from deprived sections such as women from Dalit and tribal communities are those who experience the worst consequences of poverty and are further denied access to other resources such as credit land and inheritance. In such cases household labor is invisible, health care and nutritional needs go ignored. Most women and girls suffer anemia, nutritional deficiencies, pregnancy problems, low weight etc. Furthermore, the cultural belief that the girl child consumes lesser food than the male and that one day she will leave her parental home to another after her marriage leaves the woman more vulnerable and disenfranchised.

Gender differentials and misogynistic belief at home, at work, in society and in polity are strongly embedded in the Indian psyche. Beliefs that women are subordinate, lesser capable, impure or weak as well as related gender stereotypes, religious norms and patriarchal structures that control family and the work sphere have denied women's right to food and their access to food. An important aspect that evokes additional recognition is the fact that women and girls have specific nutritional requirements owing to biological needs. Young girls during their puberty stage, young mothers during pregnancy and lactation stage will necessarily require specific food intake that enable them to be stronger and healthier as women. This in turn needs to be acknowledged as a basic right for women. Securing women's human rights is a key strategy in assuring food security for all. In its report titled, 'Gender Equality and Food Security: Women's Empowerment as a Tool against Hunger', it observes that there is a strong correlation between a higher level of gender equality and lower level of child mortality (Asian Development Bank 2013).

India's investments in the social welfare sector in comparison with its South Asian counterparts remain lower than those in many countries of Sub-Saharan Africa (Deaton & Dreze 2009). There is a dearth of social security cover of any sort for younger widows, homeless women, women whose husbands have been reportedly missing or labeled as terrorists, 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). 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 poor and hungry and thus, leaving the country impoverished. The unrecognized work at home of raising children, care for the sick and elderly, cattle grazing, fetching fuel, fodder and water have all been main contentions in the lack of recognizing women's work. (Sample Registration System, 2015).

In the year 2013, India brought into operation 'The National Food Security Act' 2013 (also Right to Food Act) as an Act of the Parliament of India which aims to provide subsidized food grains to approximately two thirds of India's 1.2 billion people. It also provides for a State Food Commission with responsibility to monitor

the implementation of the law in ensuring food security and universal access to food for all. In ensuring food security and access to all, it is hoped that women, particularly those from the marginalized sections, will stand to benefit the maximum; as this Act should in more significant and meaningful ways be able to ensure eradication or at least to a greater extent mitigate the food burden that weighs heavily on women. In the first instance the Act ensures food security for the poorest section of the population and secondly, it seeks to constrain the increasing food inflation. Thirdly it partially meets the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals.

### **INTEGRATING SDGS, THE GLOBAL AGENDA AND GENDER SENSITIVE SOCIAL WORK**

Working towards breaking gender bias and eliminating the onus of ‘feeding the family’, as the woman’s prerogative is the first step towards creating an ‘enabling environment’ for women. Creating an ‘enabling environment’ has been emphasized in India’s ‘Policy for Women’s Empowerment 2001’, stating that gender disparity manifests itself in various forms, the most tangible being the declining female population ratio over the last few decades. Stereotyping and violence at domestic and societal levels are some of the deeper manifestations of discrimination against women. Deconstructing societal mentality towards such practices against girl children, adolescent girls and women that persist in several parts of India is a revolutionary act that social workers and development practitioners will have to persist in their practice efforts.

The extension of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) that evolved into the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030) proved the incomplete task in achieving gender equality. To counter the major social set-back for women and their access to food, there have been several other efforts carried out in terms of legal and institutional measures, both at international and national levels. The 2030 Agenda that lists seventeen SDGs for global action is spread over the next fifteen years to accomplish the set targets. It is envisaged to be people-centered goals and focusses critical areas like global prosperity, peace and partnership. Eradicating poverty, promoting health, education, food security and nutrition continues to be its biggest challenge. (UN 2015: 4-5). These priorities are as much also reflected in the commitments of the Global Agenda for Social Work. In

the context of India, a perfect synergy exists between National Food Security Act, the Sustainable Development Goals and the profession of Social Work practice.

For solutions to work, values and meanings attached to roles and identities, and the likely challenges in enabling and legitimizing 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’. Alongside ensuring adequate, nutritious food as a right, one is also challenging, renegotiating, and transforming previously unequal gender relationships. While strengthening women’s entitlements, the question of why providing food and unpaid care are the exclusive responsibilities of women need to be addressed. Are these always in line with women’s capacities, choices, and aspirations? Gender justice, then, is about wider notions of social transformation based on principles of equality and well-being. Such approaches to food security are referred to as gender transformative approaches in the realm of food security. (Rao, Pradhan, Roy 2017).

Gender-just and transformative approaches to food security involve a recognition of men and women as equal citizens and partners in society, with equal rights and entitlements to a good quality life, especially a life free from hunger and malnutrition. Such approaches are multidimensional and involve not just access to adequate food, but ‘decent work’ conditions and good quality services to support the lives and livelihoods of both women and men. Rather than exclusively targeting women and overburdening them with the responsibility for household food security, policy approaches need to enhance reciprocity and sharing between men and women in households and communities. They need to recognize women’s contributions to both the productive and reproductive economies, help reduce the drudgery of their work through innovative technologies and infrastructure, and redistribute responsibilities between social institutions, from the household to the state. Discriminatory markets for both labor and products must be regulated.

The Global Agenda focuses on ensuring human rights and positions Social work as a profession that contributes towards the transformation of societies. The

major associations of Social work such as the IFSW and IASSW in fact propagate the same goals. Promoting social and economic equality, upholding the dignity and work of the individual, promoting sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development, promoting well-being through sustainable human relationships and a commitment to ensuring an appropriate environment for practice and education are perceived in the key proponents of the Global Agenda.

The Global Agenda's commitments are aligned with the SDGs call of the 2030 Agenda to transform the world to a more just, equitable and inclusive community that meets the needs of vulnerable populations. The conscious application of a 'gender sensitive' practice approach in social work can complement the SDGs and emerge as suitable means in the accomplishment of the SDGs, and in this case, Goal No.5 that focuses on gender equality. The SDGs and the Global Agenda in Social Work are undoubtedly complementary instruments that lend themselves to enhance the practices of social work. It is therefore essential for social work practitioners to link these two instruments appropriately and to consciously use a gender aware practice approach towards bringing about meaningful and positive outcomes in the accomplishment of the SDGs. Including a critical approach in practice, social workers should be able to question and analyse the gendered forces that are unjust and discriminate against women. Social workers should be able to question and analyse societal practices from a position of opposition to what undermines, disenfranchises, deprives and oppresses people (Bell, Hafford- Letchfield 2015: 123). The Global Agenda for Social Work further advocates that social workers are practitioners who engage in radical struggles for social change. Social workers are competent to be agents of social transformation. They are to ensure that interventions are implemented for outcomes that are sustainable in nature. This approach then should obviously include women who are a major group among the disadvantaged.

To understand the implications of gender sensitive social work practice, (Lena Dominelli 2002) states, that feminist social work is a method of social work practice that accounts for women's experiences as the starting point of its analysis and by concentrating on the association between a woman's position in society and her individual dilemma, responds to her specific

needs, creates equal relations in 'client'–worker interactions and addresses structural inequalities that impede her full and free development. Identifying the implications for social work educators and practitioners is crucial and calls for further discussion.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE**

Social work scholars have the responsibility of formulating teaching and learning methodologies that focus on integrating gender awareness in the social work curriculum and field practice, engage in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research and collaborations that lead to building new theories/models and facilitating access to new knowledge by writing and publishing grassroots work on women's empowerment. It will concern social work scholars to promote academic and feminist activism alongside research endeavours. Additionally, scholars may take efforts to bring together researchers and practitioners and deliberate on common concerns and further research agendas on gender issues by presenting evidence of facts and figures about women's lived experiences. Thereby producing scientific knowledge and the development of skills in order to be able to challenge societal barriers from a strong position of scientific knowledge. For social workers to be trained, the first step would be to unlearn learned behaviours for all genders and deconstruct the given reality. Critical thinking and analytical skills on ideological constructs that govern gendered practices and those that disempower women need to be prioritized in training. Practitioners need to be convinced that such ideologies inhibit women's full and free development.

As discussed earlier, working towards achieving practical and strategic gender interests will pave way for bringing about concerted action towards ensuring women's liberation and in dismantling them from their sole responsibility of food provision. The Global Agenda recognizes that the full range of human rights are available to only a minority of the world's population and that unjust poorly regulated economic systems, are the main causes for poverty and growing inequality. It is in this context that social workers may wish to pay heed to the need of working towards breaking barriers that block women's empowerment processes in food and food security.

Gender sensitive practice serves as a conduit for formulating appropriate models, planning policies, prioritizing research agendas and promoting feminist activism. Social work has the moral obligation to broaden the understanding of women's development and inform social workers about the global nature of experiences among women and serve as a conduit for formulating appropriate models, planning policies, prioritizing research agendas and promoting feminist activism. Social Work educators have the added responsibility to produce knowledge that influence policy planners and the society at large to change structural processes that hinder women's development irrespective of the geographical locations that they are from, highlighting the need for international practice. If Social Work is concerned with deprivation then the most obvious client group is the numerous poor: among them those belonging to exploited and oppressed communities, among them those who are afflicted by physical, social or mental disability, those affected by disasters. All these categories that Social work would address will necessarily have to include women and girls from such disadvantaged and powerless positions.

If the right to food is an intrinsic right to human dignity, pervasive structures must be dismantled; more inclusive strategies which ensure the dignity and worth of women are important to bring about change. Some long-term strategies like establishing women's groups/collectives, conducting cross cultural research studies that enhance understanding of women's lived experiences, establish referral networks, hotline numbers, medical services, support groups, Counselling etc. are spaces for successful social work practice. A major long-term strategy in practice is influencing policy decisions by using experiences of women, strengthening media, networking with concerned ministries, establishing networks and partnerships.

Governments and institutions will have to work on understanding the deep-rooted connections with women and food. The two aspects that need deeper understanding are the inter-connectedness with women's responsibility in fulfilling the food needs of the family and the very basic right that women and girls need specific nutritional requirements because of their physiology. With these inherent trends the urgency is for the profession to establish effective working relationships with other professionals, which identify gendered policy agendas that complement social work agendas, sharing

ideas and professional values that ultimately move towards human development and well-being.

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