

IN brief

Gender and Food Security

Persistent hunger and malnutrition is a problem affecting millions of people globally, the majority of whom are women and girls. Food and nutrition insecurity is a political, economic and environmental issue, but, most importantly, it is a gender justice issue; stark gender inequalities are both a cause and an outcome of unjust food access, consumption and production. While there is now a growing recognition in policy that women's role is essential to food and nutrition security, such policies tend to focus on increasing women's productive and economic capacity. This is only a partial solution, failing to address the entrenched gender inequalities that prevent many women and girls from living a fulfilled life, free from hunger, poverty and discrimination.

This *In Brief* argues that tackling gender injustice and truly empowering women is not only a fundamental prerequisite for improving food and nutrition security. It needs to be seen as a goal in its own right. *In Brief* sets out a preliminary vision for gender-just food and nutrition security, which

puts the right to food and gender justice at the centre of all interventions. Two case studies, produced collaboratively with food security actors, provide inspiring examples of gender-transformative interventions in India and among Maya Chorti communities.



Gender and Food Security: An Overview

Why is food and nutrition security a gender and rights issue? How can we better achieve nourishing food for all?



Right to Food in Gujarat: Local Organising Contributing to National Change

How has activism by local women's groups helped achieve gender-aware food security legislation at the national level?



Maya Chorti People: Tackling Food Insecurity with a Gender-just Approach

What does a gender-just and ecologically sound approach to food security look like in practice? What can others learn?

Gender and Food Security: An Overview

Alyson Brody



Rural woman showing rice donated by the Government of Japan to the Government of Nepal and distributed by the Nepal Food Corporation (NFC) in Gamgadi, Mugu district, Nepal

Photographer: Basudha Gurung

“Gender-just food and nutrition security means a world without hunger, where women, men, girls and boys have equal access to nutritious, healthy food, and access to the means to produce, sell and purchase food. It is a world where the right to food for all is realised.”

Why is food security a gender justice issue?

There is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone. Yet estimates indicate that between 2012 and 2014 at least 805 million people experienced extreme, chronic malnourishment – at least 60 per cent being women and girls (Food and Agricultural Organization 2014; World Food Programme 2009). Evidence shows a strong correlation between gender inequality and food and nutrition insecurity. 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. For example, despite rapid economic growth in India, many women and girls still lack food and nutrition security as a direct result of their lower status than men and boys.

Despite constituting the majority of food producers in the world, women have limited access to local and global markets. They are also the most disadvantaged by the inequitable global economic processes that govern food systems and the increasing volatility of food prices. This is compounded by women and girls’ often limited access to productive resources, education and decision-making power, by the ‘normalised’ burden of unpaid work – including care work – and by the endemic problems of gender-based violence (GBV), and HIV and AIDS.

Is the ‘food security’ approach securing food for all?

The ‘food security’ approach is the most prevalent way of addressing hunger and malnutrition, with the FAO definition the most widely accepted:

‘Food security at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.’ – FAO 1996

Underpinning this understanding of food and nutrition security are the four ‘pillars’ of food **availability**, **access**, **utilisation** and **stability**. It is argued that food security for all will be achieved when these pillars are adequately realised. Yet such frameworks are rarely sufficiently gender-aware to ensure that food security will in fact be universal.

For example, the current policy preoccupation with increasing the **availability** of food is through short-term strategies of providing food assistance and longer-term strategies of boosting food supplies through intensive agricultural production. Policymakers increasingly include women by investing in small-scale women farmers and promoting rural women producers as an ‘untapped’ resource for driving economic growth. Policymakers are also recognising the need to address women’s unequal access to productive resources such as land and water.

These are extremely welcome steps. However, they do not go far enough and risk ‘instrumentalising’ women, valuing them only as a means to greater efficiency. They fail to recognise that economic empowerment is only part of the solution. Unless they address the root causes of gender inequality, there is a danger that current approaches will exacerbate the often unpaid, unrecognised work many women already do. The cycles of gender discrimination are likely to continue, perpetuating gender injustice, poverty and food insecurity.

Women and girls often eat the least and eat after male members of the family. Therefore, tackling people’s **access** to food and nutrition requires a more politically engaged approach, which challenges the gender dimensions of poverty and addresses gender-inequitable power relations and norms, including within the household.

The **utilisation** pillar – the extent to which food is meeting nutritional needs – is important, given that the majority of undernourished people in the world are women and girls. However, the high-level policy focus on agricultural production fails to link up with the need to achieve nutritional outcomes at the individual and household level.

Inequitable, unsustainable food systems are fuelling food and nutrition insecurity, creating increasing reliance on imported food at ever inflated prices and reducing local capacity to produce adequate, appropriate, nutritious food. Climate change, conflict and other crises are compounding factors which impact the **stability** of food production, distribution and consumption, with often disproportionate impacts on women and girls. For example, women often act as ‘shock absorbers’ in times of crisis, restricting their own food intake so that others can eat.

Explicitly missing from the food security definition and the ‘four pillars’ are issues of gender inequality, human rights and the right to food, along with GBV, women’s unpaid care responsibilities, and HIV and AIDS. This means that the most prevalent way of framing food security is apolitical, leading to insufficient policy responses and a failure to both transform gender inequalities and realise the right to food for all people.

What needs to change to ensure gender-just food security?

A re-framing of food security is needed. There is an urgent need for more collaborative work towards a shared global vision of gender-just food security which has at its heart gender justice and the inalienable right to food, already formalised through international frameworks (see the box below for a ‘preliminary vision’).

What would gender-just food and nutrition security look like? A preliminary vision

Gender-just food and nutrition security means a world without hunger, where women, men, girls and boys have equal access to nutritious, healthy food, and access to the means to produce, sell and purchase food. It is a world where the right to food for all is realised. Importantly it is a world free of gender-based violence, where the roles, responsibilities, opportunities and choices available to women and men – including unpaid caregiving and food provision – are not predetermined at birth but can, where possible, be developed in line with individual capacities and aspirations. Finally it is a world where countries are equipped to produce enough food for their own populations through environmentally sound processes, while also being able to participate in (gender-) equitable global and regional food trading systems.

Achievement of this vision means putting *all* people’s rights, needs and realities at the centre of food and nutrition security interventions. It means ensuring that policy and programme responses to hunger and malnutrition not only promote women’s access to productive resources but contribute to gender-just social and economic transformation as both a means to food and nutrition security and as an end-goal. A good example is Oxfam’s Women’s Economic Leadership initiative. The production of participating women farmers has increased, but they have also acquired more decision-making power and their confidence and skills have grown through working in women’s agricultural collectives.

As part of this re-framing process it is also vital to address the inequitable, environmentally unsustainable food and economic systems that are contributing to global hunger and malnutrition – and to create greater policy coherence between gender, agriculture, trade, nutrition, health and other relevant areas.

Resources and time are needed to put the principles underpinning the vision into practice. However, there are already many inspiring examples at local, national and regional level that offer opportunities for learning, adapting and scaling up, such as the following two *In Brief* case studies.

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Right to Food in Gujarat: Local Organising Contributing to National Change

Sejal Dand and Georgina Aboud



Public hearing and right to food demonstration in Gujarat, 2014

Photographer: ANANDI

“The ration card in women’s names will not only give food grains but will also bring recognition of our contribution in the family, community and the state. We will be heard.” – Kesliben, from Devgadhi Baria

India is one of the most food-insecure countries in the world, yet until recently the government’s provision of food was seen as welfare rather than a right for all its citizens. In 2001 this perspective began to change after a petition to the Supreme Court of India argued that the country’s excessive food stocks should be used to protect people from hunger by expanding and strengthening the public food distribution system. This was the start of the Right to Food Campaign.¹ This case study examines one part of India’s right to food story: the journey of two Gujarat-based women’s groups –ANANDI and Devgadhi Mahila Sanghathan (DMS)² – as they organise at local level and successfully advocate for gender-aware food security legislation, up to the national level.

Food insecurity: a gendered issue

Although Gujarat is part of a fast-growing national economy, it has a high prevalence of hunger and malnutrition, much like the rest of India. For example, in Gujarat 51.7 per cent of children suffer from stunting, and 69.7 per cent are anaemic (International Institute for Population Sciences et al. 2007). For DMS, which consists of tribal women,³ food security is a priority. Their loss of control over forests, diminishing lands and lack of decent employment has led to widespread hunger in the tribal regions.

The food provisioning schemes do little to mitigate this: poorly resourced, unevenly implemented and lacking transparency, accountability or community engagement. Many women, and usually the poorest such as single and widowed women, are often wholly excluded. This is partly because women fail to be recognised as household heads; without this status, they are unable to gain access to the allocated food provisions. Tribal women have limited involvement in decisions relating to the public food programmes, despite being responsible for producing, processing and preparing food in the household. In fact, due to blatant discrimination, tribal women are often deterred from engaging with the implementing public officials.

Politicising hunger through participatory research

To start critical reflection on reasons for the community’s hunger, in 2004 ANANDI and DMS conducted a large-scale participatory mapping of food insecurity and experiences of food schemes with women in tribal communities. The results were shocking: 74 per cent of households reported being food-insecure for more than six months of the year. The results were a revelation for the wider community too. Through these participatory dialogues women explored the root causes of hunger and the food discrimination that they faced as women and came to better understand the Gujarat state’s failure to protect their right to food.

This process also led the tribal women to seek information about their food scheme entitlements, with ANANDI providing information on the Supreme Court orders on the right to food.⁴ Women who were not literate memorised their entitlements and confronted uncooperative service providers. Women’s collectives at the village level began to monitor the implementation of the food schemes, challenging those who prevented scheme implementation; as a result, they succeeded in raising the quality of the services.

1 The Right to Food Campaign is an informal network in India of over 500 organisations and networks which fought to secure innovative, irreversible and universal entitlements to food.

2 ANANDI, a feminist collective, started work with women on food insecurity issues in 1995 in the tribal region of Gujarat. This work led to the formation of federated women’s self-help groups at the village level called the Devgadhi Mahila Sanghathan (DMS). ANANDI and DMS now work together organising around issues of drinking water, access to forests, decent work and wages, violence against women and food security, thereby setting the agenda for development in the area.

“After working from dawn to dusk, if I have to put my children to bed hungry, it is not I who has failed my children; it is the government and the society that have failed me. We ask for food not as charity but as a right.” – Lila Nayak, DMS

Scaling up the campaign: from local to Gujarat state level

DMS and ANANDI members organised the first public hearings on the right to food in Gujarat to share the results of the mapping with government officials, communities and civil society organisations. Written documentation was accompanied by tribal women’s oral testimonies and songs, narrating their experiences of hunger. Combining local modes of expression with more formal approaches gave the women greater voice and more confidence to expose the apathy, corruption and poor targeting of the schemes to a much wider audience, and to demand accountability from the Gujarat state.

The public hearings and community actions on asserting the right to food spread to other parts of Gujarat and led to the formation of a broader regional network of community-based organisations and NGOs – Anna Suraksha Adhikar Abhiyan, Gujarat (ASAA). Between 2004 and 2008 ASAA held nearly 70 public hearings highlighting the extent of hunger in Gujarat and violations of the Supreme Court orders. The media regularly covered these events, and the findings of the public hearings fed into the High Court of Gujarat’s monitoring of the food schemes.

Demanding gender-just policies

DMS campaigned for the recognition of women as rights holders, as the public hearings had further highlighted specific discriminations faced by women. Under the allocation system, the public food distribution entitlements could only be accessed through a ration card. This was in the name of the household head, which was assumed to be the adult male. DMS campaigned for a universal public distribution system, and for ration cards to be issued in women’s names. This campaign highlighted women’s contribution to household food security, in the form of both paid and unpaid work, and brought visibility to female-headed households.

This sustained campaign led to greater transparency in entitlements, with the Gujarat government issuing 50,000 new ration cards in the tribal districts, regularising the distribution of grains as well as advertising entitlements. The Gujarat government reluctantly issued an order that ration cards could be issued in women’s names. While an important step, the ration card could only be issued with consent from a father or husband.

National campaign demanding legislation on food security

Recognising the need to build political will to promote food security for all, DMS and ANANDI joined the national Right to Food Campaign. The demand was for a comprehensive Food Security Act that dealt with equitable access to land, water and forests, decent work and wages and universal food provisioning by the State through nutrition schemes for infants, children, adolescents and households. DMS played its role in advocating to policymakers, elected representatives and public officials for a gender-just Food Security Act. It saw its women members leave their tiny hamlets in the tribal regions to demonstrate on the streets of Delhi, showing their long and significant journey from being ‘beneficiaries’ of the food programmes to setting the agenda.

A key outcome of this protracted struggle – from the local to the national level – is the passing of the National Food Security Act in 2013. The legislation focuses on the public provisioning of food by universalising maternity entitlements and nutrition schemes for infants and children. It will also provide subsidised food grains to 75 per cent of rural populations. Significantly the act paves the way for recognising women as the head of the household and requires the ration card to be issued in the name of the oldest female household member. As Kesliben, an older woman health activist in Devgadhi Baria, says, ‘The ration card in women’s names will not only give food grains but will also bring recognition of our contribution in the family, community and the state. We will be heard.’

Next steps

As the Act is rolled out, ANANDI and DMS are back to mobilising at the village level to ensure its implementation: ensuring the public food distribution system includes the poorest, including poor women, and that it is backed by adequate investment. Since the Food Security Act only addresses food entitlements, ANANDI and DMS are also currently campaigning to secure women farmers’ rights to productive resources, social protection and public services to assist in sustainable food security in the region.

Women’s groups such as ANANDI and DMS are powerful examples in demonstrating the importance and power of local organising, and show women’s active role in achieving gender-just national change towards the right to food for all.

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3 The scheduled tribes are one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups in India. This is partly due to their isolation, both geographically and culturally, from the mainstream population.

4 After the initial petition in 2001, the Supreme Court of India passed a series of orders recognising the right to food as a right to life, and asked for implementation through the expansion of the food schemes. Activists used these orders to organise around in their demand for the right to food for all.

Maya Chorti People: Tackling Food Insecurity with a Gender-just Approach

Georgina Aboud and Marcela Ballara with Guadalupe Torres



Maya Chorti women in a 'reflection circle' group

Photographer: Guadalupe Torres

"If I could, I would tell women that it is not the time to hide in the corner anymore. It is time to stand up and speak for ourselves because we are capable ...of being mothers or field workers, of doing anything we set our minds to."

– Rosario Lemus, programme participant

In the dry border municipalities of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, the Forests and Water Program⁵ works with the food-insecure Maya Chorti population. The aim of the programme is to develop ecologically sustainable climate-resilient ways to grow food and to offer women and men income-generating opportunities. It is unique in its holistic and gender-just approach to food and nutrition security.

Challenges in the Maya Chorti context

The Maya Chorti are dependent on subsistence farming, yet its precarious nature alongside an increasingly unpredictable climate is leading to food shortages and malnutrition. In some areas 60 per cent of infant mortality is being attributed to acute malnutrition.

This, combined with rising unemployment in rural areas, means that many men migrate to nearby towns to find work and send home remittances to boost household income. The Maya Chorti women are left at home, shouldering many of the productive and reproductive responsibilities with limited access to resources. They undertake some gardening activities but usually are confined to a set of prescribed roles, which mainly take place in the home. As a result women are often left feeling quite isolated, and opportunities to participate in community life, learn, gain new skills and diversify their livelihoods are extremely limited.

Perfecta Martinez says that prior to the programme women's 'only job was to help our husbands.... And work in the kitchen'. Lucas, another participant in the programme, notes how women were denied a voice in challenging and changing the patriarchal structures which establish these norms, as women 'did not have opportunities for themselves... or the freedom to go out. They didn't attend meetings.'

⁵ The Forests and Water Program is an initiative funded by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Understanding the importance of family

While the programme is committed to equal participation between men and women, women's initial lack of participation in agricultural activities and general engagement with the programme was symptomatic of these entrenched norms and broader gender inequities. With this in mind, the holistic approach adopted by the Forests and Water Program first focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of socio-cultural relationships and household power relations. Gender analysis showed the cultural as well as practical importance of family for the survival of both Maya Chorti women and men.⁶ Only by genuinely transforming household gender relations can greater food security be achieved.

Strategies for improving food security and challenging unjust gender relations

Women reflecting together to change gender norms

Entrenched gender norms are approached in a sensitive way, with strategies looking at changing family dynamics and increasing women's voice and participation while simultaneously promoting agro-ecological approaches to farming. Strategies include 'reflection circles', which enable women for the first time to share their feelings and experiences of health, nutrition, sexuality and violence and challenge their sense of isolation. This is complemented by leadership and self-esteem workshops. Through group visits to home gardens and exchange tours, Maya Chorti women are learning and becoming inspired by other peasants in the region.

Challenging gender roles while implementing agro-ecological agriculture

To strengthen women's theoretical and practical learning, a special shade coffee project has been implemented in Quequesque under an environmentally sustainable agro-forestry model. This coffee can then be sold for additional household income. This strategy also addresses unequal power relations within the household by inviting partners to join the women in their farming activities as a means of recognition and support for the work they are doing.

For Rosario Lemus, a participant, these strategies have brought about profound and welcome changes in her family life and in herself: 'If I could, I would tell women that this is not the time to hide in the corner anymore. It is time to stand up and speak for ourselves because we are capable ... of being mothers or field workers, of doing anything we set our minds to.'

Gardening for diverse diets and nutritious food

Amongst the Maya Chorti, malnutrition remains a critical issue; however, the home gardens part of the programme encourages and supports women to play a more active and equal role in growing nutritious food. Through new skills, expertise and greater self-esteem, Maya Chorti women have flourishing home gardens that grow up to 10 different types of vegetables and herbs, including radish, cabbage, aubergine, onion, carrot, tomato, lettuce, coriander and parsley, which provide diverse nutritious food, an aid in the battle against malnutrition.

Diversifying livelihood strategies

Changes within household dynamics have also encouraged women to diversify their livelihood strategies and sell their excess produce from their family gardens as well as the special shade coffee from their agro-forestry plots. For Perfecta Martinez this is invaluable in contributing to her household expenditure: 'I grow my own crops, and it means I am empowered. I can't see myself not working because it is a help for me in so many ways. Now people come to buy my products and congratulate me, and I can earn some money to buy little things for my household.'

Adopting leadership roles

Becoming more visible and vocal has also motivated Maya Chorti women to adopt more leadership roles to shape future food security policies. Through her newfound confidence Maria has become a representative at the decision-making level of the Municipality Women Mechanism (OMM), an office which promotes gender awareness and the participation of women in plans, programmes and projects in the local municipality. Maria's role ensures that the often under-represented needs of the Maya Chorti women are heard with regards to food security projects, including requests for corn mills and more water storage tanks to assist in crop irrigation.

Lessons

The success of the Forests and Water Program, which has recently gained funding for a third phase, hinges on the programme's adoption of a holistic approach which sees food and nutrition security as inextricably connected to a broader set of gender-justice issues, and a deep understanding of the Maya Chorti context.

Thus the programme demonstrates that food security and gender equality, alongside sound ecological practices, cannot be put in siloes and addressed separately. It is only by approaching these issues in a holistic way that sustained change towards gender-just food security can prevail.

The success of the programme can also be attributed to its commitment to truly understanding the community's traditional structures and how these impact food security. By acknowledging that change is a slow process, these structures are being sensitively challenged by the communities themselves, allowing new traditions and freedoms to begin to break through. Gender equality does not happen overnight, but the Maya Chorti population have begun building its foundations.

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⁶ In the Chorti language 'family' is *mactak*, in which *tak* comes from *takar*, which means help, assistance, to work together.

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Also available in the *Cutting Edge Pack on Gender and Food Security*:

Gender and Food Security overview report, outlining the main issues, showcasing effective and promising existing strategies, and suggesting rights-based, gender-just and environmentally sustainable approaches. <http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/bridge-publications/cutting-edge-packs/gender-and-food-security>



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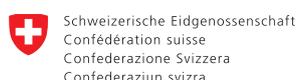
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