

# Food Security and Women Empowerment

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## ABSTRACT

No one can ignore the pivotal role of women for the attainment of food security, health and nutrition of their children, families and the whole community. To achieve the inclusive growth in general and one of the major targets of international agenda as 'Food Security and Hunger Eradication' in particular, gender inequality seems to be a major barrier. Food security has three components as availability, accessibility and absorption of food. Availability and accessibility of food does not always ensure requisite absorption or nutrition. The objective of this research paper is to discuss the need of women empowerment for the adequate absorption of the available food. Further, it analyses the food and nutrition security issue with socio-economic position of the women in India. Lastly, it examines some major government initiated social protection programs and it's effectiveness to uplift the position of women for maintaining food security in India.

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## 1. Introduction

In this contemporary world, global attention has been paid to achieve one of the important targets of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) as 'Food Security and Hunger Eradication'. As no one can ignore the pivotal role of women for attainment of food security, health and nutrition of their children, families and the whole community. Thus, it simply articulates the need to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment for food and nutrition security.

Food security has three components as availability, accessibility and absorption of food. Availability and accessibility of food does not always ensure requisite absorption or nutrition. The role of women for making better choices for the nutritional outcomes of their families or in other sense for requisite absorption of food is very important. Empowerment of women in terms of their education and nutritional status helps them to take right decision for strengthening their children's health. Therefore, women empowerment should be placed on the top priority list for achievement of food security targets.

## 2. Need of the Study

In reality, women and children are considered as the most deprived sections among all social groups. Women has to suffer a lot due to the socio-economic discrimination in terms of low wages, lesser available opportunities, low affordability due to lesser income and lower participation in household decisions. This low status of women is further reflected in poor nutrition and health outcomes in their children. The disempowerment of women in terms of their rights and socio-economic status undermines their ability to attain food and nutritional security.

Indian society is male-dominated and known for its patriarchal culture. According to the reports of National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS, 2015-16), the literacy rate of women aged 15-49 years in India is only 68.4 percent. In India, most of the women workforce worked in the informal sector with substandard employment conditions. The low literacy rate and lesser available employment opportunities creates an obstacle

to utilise the full potential of women and girls to achieve zero hunger.

This study will help to know how the empowerment of women in terms of access to education, nutritional status and decision making will increase the utilisation or adequate absorption of food.

## 3. Objective

The objective of this research paper is to enquire the need of women empowerment for the adequate absorption of the available food. Further, it analyses the food and nutrition security issue with socio-economic position of the women in India. Lastly, it examines some major government initiated social protection programs and it's effectiveness to uplift the position of women for maintaining food security in India.

## 4. Data and Methodology

This paper is primarily based on the secondary data collected through different sources like internet, newspaper, various publications, journals, various reports of National Family and Health Surveys (NFHS) and reports of National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) etc.

## 5. Women Empowerment for Food Security

Women holds a central place to take a right decision regarding nutritional status of their children and the whole family. Empowerment of women needs education, skills and confidence to make healthy choices for themselves and their families. Empowerment helps women in following ways:

- Understands the need of health and nutrition education and choose the best nutritious and healthy diet.
- Take good care of antenatal care and proper immunisation of children.
- Do not hesitate to take advice and support of health workers.
- Raise voice for themselves and can take good decisions about their children and family.
- Actively participate in household decision-making

- Increase their access and control over income and other resources.
- Helps women to strongly support the girl child over the family preferences.

Thus, advancement in women’s well-being in terms of good education, nutrition and decision-making level would definitely impact the food security in general and children’s health in particular in a very positive way.

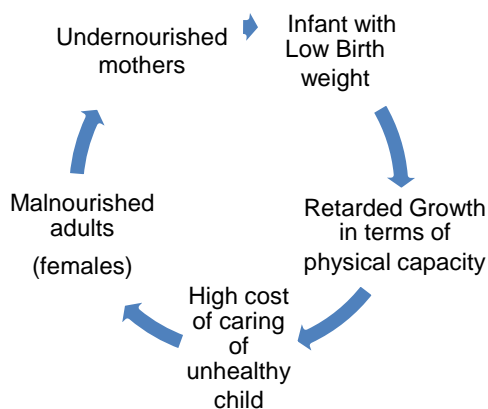
**6. Food Security and Status of Women in India**

India is the world’s second most populous country and one of the largest economy, but the access to adequate nutritious food for about one fourth of population is still a great concern. Earlier there was only one form of malnutrition prevalent in India. However, in recent years India is facing with the double burden of malnutrition- under-nutrition and over-nutrition. As a result, on the one hand, there is prevalence of women with anemia and low Body Mass Index (BMI), and on the other hand, there are growing evidences of obesity or over-nutrition among women.

Children’s malnutrition is determined by the caring capacity of mothers which includes antenatal care, care of the new born and proper immunisation etc. The adverse effects of inadequate nutrition actually passes from the undernourished mothers to their low birth-weight babies. The educational and nutritional standard of the mothers directly and their decision-making power indirectly responsible for the malnutrition among their children.

There is a vicious cycle of Malnourishment, which is clear from the following chart:

**7. Vicious Cycle of Malnourishment**



Under-nourishment in mothers actually poses threat to their children as it causes malnutrition among them and poses many challenges:

- 1) Weaken women’s ability to survive child birth

- 2) Makes them more prone to infections and low immunity as
  - a. Malnutrition in early childhood especially under-5 restricts their physical development, undermining educational outcomes etc.
  - b. Malnourished children are at high risk of disease

To have a clear picture about the role of mothers in children’s nutrition, firstly we will discuss the nutritional status of children Under-5. The nutritional status among children is measured through three main indicators: Stunting (height-for-age), underweight (weight-for-age) andwasting(weight-for height). The reports of National Family Health Survey-3 (NFHS, 2005-06) and National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS, 2015-16) have highlighted the results for proportion of malnutrition in terms of Stunting, Underweight and Wasting among Under-5 children as below:

**Table 1**  
**Prevalence of Malnutrition among Under-5 Children in India**  
**(in percentage)**

	NFHS-3	NFHS -4
<b>Stunting</b>	48.0	38.4
<b>Underweight</b>	42.5	35.7
<b>Wasting</b>	19.8	21.0

Source: National Family and Health Survey (NFHS), 2005-06 and 2015-16

From the above table 1, it is clear that although the prevalence of malnutrition has reduced in 2015-16 for the proportion of stunting and underweight among children under-5, but same has increased for wasting among children under-5. As proportion of children for stunting has reduced to 38.4 percent in 2015-16 as against 48.0 percent children in 2005-06. Similarly the proportion of children for underweight has reduced to 35.7 percent in 2015-16 as compared to 42.5 percent children in 2005-06. Whereas the proportion of children for wasting has increased to 21 percent were in 2015-16 against 19.8 percent children in 2005-06.

From socio-economic point of view, prevalence of malnutrition among infant is examined through women’ education, nutritional status and their decision-making power in household and society.

➤ **Women’s Education and Prevalence of Malnutrition**

Women play an important role for providing nutrition to their infants. Educated women are like an asset for the society and a well-educated mother definitely helps to reduce the malnutrition among children. Education helps the women to harness the power and utilize their potential and capabilities to the maximum.

**Table 2 Prevalence of Malnutrition and Anaemia among Under-5 Children by Mother’s Education in India (2015-16)**  
**(in percentage)**

Mother’s Education	Stunting	Underweight	Wasting	Anaemia
<b>No Schooling</b>	51	47	23	65
<b>&lt;5 years of education</b>	45	42	22	60
<b>5-7 years of education</b>	40	38	22	59
<b>8-9 years of education</b>	36	33	21	57
<b>10-11 years of education</b>	30	29	20	55
<b>12 or more years of education</b>	24	22	19	52

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2015-16

The above table 2 tells clearly that the status of mother’s education has impact on the proportion of under-5 children who are stunted, underweight and wasted. The women with lowest education have the highest chances of proportion of malnutrition among children below 5 as compared to the women with high levels of education. But its effects are more prominent for the proportion of stunting and underweight children than for wasting among children under-5. As for wasting, there is only slight difference from the uneducated mother to the mother having 12 or more years of education. In case of anaemia among children under-5, the illiterate women have more proportion of anaemic children as compared to the women having more 12 or more years of education.

➤ **Women’s Nutritional Status and Prevalence of Malnutrition**

The nutritional status of the children is actually caused by food intake, health status and parental health care. While playing the role as a mother, sister or wife women have to sacrifice or forego their own wishes and needs for their children

and other members of family. This causes inadequate availability of nutritious food items especially for women and girls in the family for the sake of male members.

The dual burden of malnutrition, which includes both over- and under-nutrition is becoming more prominent and poses a new challenge for India. According to the reports of NFHS-4 (2015-16) from 2005-2016, prevalence of low (< 18.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) body mass index (BMI) in Indian women decreased from 36 percent to 23 percent and from 34 percent to 20 percent among Indian men. However, during the same period, the prevalence of overweight/obesity (BMI > 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) increased from 13 percent to 21 percent among women and from 9 percent to 19 percent among men. The inadequate nutrition which is passed by the mother to their children actually restricts the physical development of a child and consequently leads to their poor educational and economic condition. This kind of vicious cycle created by the worst nutritional condition of mother and passed on to their infant and further accentuated throughout the life of infant in terms of their poor educational and nutrition status, actually not easy to break.

**Table 3**  
**Prevalence of Malnutrition among Under-5 Children by Mother’s Nutritional Status in India (2015-16)**  
**(in percentage)**

Mother’s Nutritional Status	Stunting	Underweight	Wasting
Underweight (BMI<18.5kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	46	48	27
Normal (BMI<18.5-24.9 kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	38	34	20
Overweight (BMI>=25.0 kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	27	22	14

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2015-16

It is quite evident from table 3 that the proportion of children born to the women with low BMI are more likely to be stunted, wasted, and underweighted as compared to the proportion of children born to the women with normal or high BMI.

Anaemia in women is due to lack of nutritional deficiencies and of micronutrients. This further reflected in children’s health status.

**Table 4**  
**Prevalence of Anaemia among Under-5 Children by Mother’s Nutritional Status in India (2015-16)**  
**(in percentage)**

Mother’s Nutritional Status	Anemia
Not Anemic	51
Mildly Anemic	62
Moderately Anemic	71
Severely Anemic	76

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2015-16

From the above table 4, it is evident that the mothers with severe anaemia will have more chances of having anaemic children compared to the mothers having no anaemia.

relatives. For urban areas, these figures are 29.7 %, 10.4 % and 12.2 % respectively. This is really a great cause of concern and responsible for malnutrition among women and children.

➤ **Decision Making Power of Women and Prevalence of Malnutrition**

Wage disparity among men and women in urban as well as in rural areas made their impact on the decision-making power of women in household. As per Labour Bureau reports in India, the wage disparity between the wages of men and women is more acute in rural areas than in urban areas. Further according to National Family Health Survey–III (2005-06) in the rural sector married women can take only 26% decisions regarding obtaining health care for herself and 7.6% in case of purchasing major household items. 10% decisions are taken by females in respect of visiting their family or

**8. Policy Initiatives**

The Government of India has undertaken several food security policies to meet the global and SDG targets. Some of the major policy initiatives take by the government are as follows:

- In 2013, Government of India has passed the National Food Security Act (NFSA) by incorporating three schemes as Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS), Mid-Day Meal (MDM) and Public Distribution System (PDS) under one umbrella. Under these schemes food was intended to be a part of children and women especially pregnant women’s

diet. But under prevailing gender norms, it is generally shared with the male members of family. This further creates hurdles to achieve the target rate.

- In 2018, POSHAN Abhiyan earlier known as National Nutrition Mission (NNM) was initiated by Government of India mainly to tackle the problems of malnutrition. It's major target was to improve child survival by reducing the rate of stunting from 38.4 percent in 2017 to 25 percent in 2022. This mission is further backed by the strategy prepared by Niti-Aayog named as National Nutrition Strategy especially to meet the target of 'Kuposhan Mukh Bharat' by 2022.
- Also, the government has implemented a nationwide comprehensive programme mainly to address the problem of anaemia among mother and children named as 'Anaemia Mukh Bharat' (AMB).

Despite all these efforts, it is true that India is home to one of the most undernourished populations in the world.

## 9. Conclusion

One of the major components of food security system is to reduce under-nutrition among the large section of population and to raise the nutritional level of masses. For adequate welfare delivery and to make food and nutrition accessible to all, it is important that women are empowered. However, to ensure women empowerment government has to design all food security policies through protecting women's employment rights, safeguarding and increasing their access and control over income and resources and enhancing their understanding of good nutrition through education and skill based knowledge.

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