

# Eating Last and the Least: Analysing Gender in Global Hunger

Written by Arpita Wadhwa

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## Eating Last and the Least: Analysing Gender in Global Hunger

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ARPITA WADHWA, APR 8 2020

The state of under-nourishment, hunger, is a global issue. In today's world of fast-paced globalization, the production, distribution, consumption of food is largely a result of how states, corporations and international organizations interact with each other.[1] Moreover, gender plays an even more important role in deciding who gets to produce, distribute, and consume the food. Owing to this interconnectedness, this paper is an attempt to understand the gendered patterns of hunger that prevail in the nations of the global South. These countries have ranked the highest in the Global Hunger Index of 2019. Interestingly, the same countries also rank high in the Global Inequality Index. This paper argues that the coordination (or lack thereof) of the international action with the national, is a significant factor in the ever-increasing rates of global hunger for women. It will do so by first, establishing how the issue of hunger is gendered, and affects women disproportionately. Second, it will state the universality of the food system and emphasise on hunger as a prominent issue of food security in international relations. Third, the paper will elaborate of the concept of 'hunger trap', to highlight how the interactions of the international and the national result in women being 'trapped', and food deprived. Lastly, through a critical integration of gender into the concept of global hunger, the paper will suggest ways to ensure that the cooperation of international with the national in fighting against hunger isn't just gender- neutral, but rather gender-responsive.

### Hunger- A Gendered Issue

Access to food and water is really tilted first towards the men, then the children, and then the mother who is always the last to eat... That is really the tradition... women make sure the men eat first, and they are the ones to eat last.

Berhe Terwoldeberhan,  
*Plan International Australia*  
*Disaster Risk and Resilience Manager.*

The countries of the global South, especially South Asian countries, rank extremely high on the Global Inequality Index. These countries also rank significantly high on the Global Hunger Index. A critical analysis of this finding allows one to link gender inequality to hunger patterns in these nations. Higher gender inequality often manifesting itself in terms of lower pay and opportunities, leading to preventing women from getting access to food. Moreover, norms, too, play an important role in controlling the consumption patterns of women. Several studies show that one of the most prominent traditions, especially in the global South, is for the women to "eat the last, and the least".[2] When the norms are discriminatory, it is 'normal' for the discriminated to stay deprived of basic rights. In countries that have higher gender-inequality, the priority for every basic right is the privileged and hence, it can be seen that the norms of mentioned countries prioritise men even when it comes to food consumption. The statistics that follow regarding the same also highlight the chronic hunger of women in terms of malnourishment. Women (and girls) constitute of 60% of the world's undernourished.[3] Researches also show a direct relation between food insecurity and anaemia. High percentages of women are anaemic in chronically hungry parts of the world- 57.1% in Africa[4] and 48.2% in South and Southeast Asia.[5] The Food and Agriculture Organization has rightly argued, "More often than not, the face of malnutrition is female."

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The aforementioned statistics establish the prominence of gender in the issue of hunger. However, it is also important to understand that this issue doesn't operate in isolation at the level of States. Hunger is a global issue, and has deep correlations with how international relations operate among different States, and with international organizations.

## **Hunger- An International Relations Issue**

The demand for acquiring food, and to solve the issue of hunger has been one of the oldest problems that the institute of State has dealt with. However, because of the role of globalization in making markets interconnected and inter-dependent, food systems all over the world have become global- they follow the same pattern and face the same issues. International organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), World Health Organization (WHO), and many more, have a major role in influencing, shaping, and aiding the policies that are implemented at the national level. Such organizations can't solve hunger problems at the level of a State, but through data- driven qualitative and quantitative analysis, they release guidelines that determine how nations go about approaching issues related to food security and hunger.

Following from this, it can be concluded that the problem of hunger that different States are facing today, isn't as much representative of national failures, but of a global problem of food (in)security. The global food system produces patterns of production, consumption, and distribution that benefit some people more than the others.[6][7] The next section of the paper argues will bring out the inconsistencies that are produced during implementation of international guidelines at the national level. These inconsistencies are majorly due to absence of the incorporation of problems related to gender. However, it is worth mentioning that these guidelines aren't gender- discriminatory, but they aren't gender responsive enough either.

## **The National and the International- 'Hunger Trap' and the Discrepancies in Implementing International Guidelines at the National Level**

In the scholarly work, "The Hunger Trap: Women, Food, and Self-Determination," authors Christine Chinkin and Shelley Wright emphasis upon the existence of a 'Hunger Trap' in which encompasses the women of the world. This trap recognises two circles within- one which represents the 'public sphere', wherein international organizations, States, and multinational corporations interact. Within this circle, is another circle which is the 'private'- where the women live.[8]

Primarily dominated by men, the 'public' sphere is far away from the reach of the women who are in the 'private' sphere.[9] This suggests that the food policies that are created to solve the issue of hunger through the interconnectedness and constant interaction of international organizations, States, and multinational organizations, fail to penetrate into the women's sphere, furthering their deprivation, leading to more hunger for them. The circle representing the 'private sphere' is 'off-centre'- which means that some parts of the circle are closer to the outer circle than the other parts. This represents that some women are more far- off from the access to the public sphere than others. Women in the global South, due to higher gender- inequality, have much lesser say and access to food policies and programmes than the women in the global North.

This hunger trap can especially be observed in how programmes to reduce hunger operate at the national level.[10] These initiatives, inspired, funded, or influenced by the interaction of the State with international actors often fail to incorporate a gendered lens in their articulation of the policies. Through a critical analysis of the policies, the following section of the paper will analyse some key international guidelines in tandem with their implementation at the national level. This analysis will bring out the reasons that resulted in these food initiatives failing to have as huge of a positive impact in the lives of women as much as they did for men.

## **Analysing the Cooperation of the International and the National**

### *Food Grains Distribution Schemes*

To tackle the issue of hunger, several international organizations suggested the implementations of Public

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Distribution Systems (PDS) at national level.[11] The purpose of this initiative is to provide subsidised food grains to the people in the lowest rung of the society to prevent and cure their chronic hunger. However, on-ground researches from Zambia, Bangladesh, India, Sub-Saharan Africa, Malawi, etc., have shown little to no benefits for women. This is primarily because of intra-household allocation biases. The discriminatory norm in most societies follow the unsaid rule of women eating the last and the least.[12] Due to this, within a household, women get a disproportionate amount of food as the first priority are the men in the house, and then the children.

Although, given that such intra-household dynamics are difficult to counter through international (or even national) level policy implementations, the PDS has shown inconsistencies even at the level of a national policy. Evidences from India showed that more often than not, people in-charge of distributing grains register made-up quantities of grains and give much lesser than what they charge.[13] Such instances are far more common when it comes to women who go to get subsidised grains.

## *Cooked Meal Distribution Policies*

Another policy that is introduced all over the world in tandem with the suggestions and guidelines of the World Health Organization and the World Food Programme is the cooked meal distribution programme.[14] This policy aims at ensuring that cooked food is provided to the people to tackle chronic hunger. In many countries in Africa, Bangladesh, India, etc. cooked meal programmes are initiated especially in schools with the dual aim of increasing literacy as well as tackling hunger. [15] These initiatives are not only supported by the United Nations, but also other international organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, SNV (Netherlands Development Organization).[16] This is representative of the scale at which the issue of hunger is 'international'.

However, the implementation of this policy turns a blind eye to gender dynamics in countries, leading to gender-discrimination in the implementation of this policy. In some instances, girls were asked to serve cooked meals to the men in the classroom and eat whatever's left later.[17] Thus, in this case, too, they were forced to 'eat the least, and the last'.

## *Increase in Agricultural Role and Opportunities Women*

A huge percentage of the people belonging to the countries in consideration have heavy participation in agriculture. More than 60% of the people in Africa, and more than 50% of the people in South Asia are employed in the agricultural sector.[18] According to the World Food Programme, chronically hungry people could be reduced by up to 150 million if women participated in farms.[19] Organizations like Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Bank, as well as international conventions, such as Rio+ 20, and the World Economic Forum, have all suggested the same: investing in women farmers is one of the most effective strategies for reducing extreme poverty and hunger.[20] Thus, to fight the issue of hunger, multiple initiatives supported by the international organizations aim at increasing the participation of people in the same sector to make sure that they have access to money to buy and/or organize food for themselves.

However, due to the high gender inequality in these areas, women are given very low salaries for the same work than men get high salaries for. Moreover, the kind of work that women get to do is far more time consuming, less-paying, and low-skilled than the work that men get employed for. Gender inequality in labour markets, thus, creates 'sticky floors' for women, forcing them to work for lesser wages.[21] In the context of solution for hunger, this results in female led households to be incapable of accessing food resources, furthering their chronic hunger.

## *Role of Aid: Foreign Food Aid and Displacement Appropriation*

One of the major causes of increasing chronic hunger is also climate change.[22] The displacements that are caused due to climate change leave a lot of families deprived off of basic human necessities, including that of food. The role of aid in such situations becomes very important. A researcher, Bina Agarwal, studied and reported the patterns of aid provided during such displacements. Aid is usually provided in cash, she stated, and women's access to the cash economy (and market, in general) is largely dependent on their mediations of their male relatives.[23] This often

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restricts and restrains women from getting equal shares of money required to tackle their hunger.

Another form of aid that is often suggested and recommended for tackling hunger is of foreign aid. This refers to the direct intervention of an international actor in helping a State to solve an issue. Several researches on the aids provided to tackle the problem of hunger reveal multiple issues. The 2009 G9 Summit, for instance, promised \$22 billion for global food security, however, a huge part of this included funds that were already used.[24] Gender issues, and women, were never considered a priority for this initiative. It aimed to target staple grain productivity, rather than horticulture crops that could boost the livelihoods, food security and nutrition of smallholders, particularly (and especially) women.[25]

The above-mentioned arguments reveal that there are major discrepancies in that the international wants, and what happens at the national level. The failure of these policies to benefit women is primarily because the non-addressal of gender issues during the time of guideline formation. For these initiatives to be successful, gender- responsive policies are needed.

## **Towards a Gender Responsive Approach to Hunger**

While talking about the gendered issue of hunger, one might argue about the relevance of this issue in international relations. Hunger is a global issue, and gender plays a huge role in it however, it exists in different intensities and forms in different countries and hence, it can't be solved through the universalised lens of international relations. The answer to this can be found in Raymond F. Hopkins and Donald J. Puchala's research on "Perspectives on the International Relations of Food". They argue that even though some of the problems can be alleviated by changes within the countries, however, the success of what is done will depend on what is being done in other countries, and partly, upon international norms.[26]

In addition to this, the universality of this issue seems to be blurred because it affects different areas in different intensities, and that different times.[27] Moreover, to tackle the issue of gendered global hunger, it is important to ensure the coordination of national and international action. It can be done so by making them gender- responsive. The policies that exist aren't gender- discriminatory, as mentioned earlier, but they don't acknowledge gender discrimination, either. This makes room for unjust practices against women to occur. A gender- responsive approach to tackling hunger would mean a critical re-writing of the issue of hunger in itself. The Economist, Amartya Sen, proposed a new definition of hunger that goes away from the tradition 'decline of food', to including the concepts of entitlement and access.[28] This can be used in international relations' approach to the problem of gendered global hunger.

Following from this approach, hunger could be understood in terms of limited access and entitlement to the resource.[29] This will open room for studying whether women have the opportunity to demand for, and receive food for themselves. Getting access to gender- segregated data from organizations like ASEAN, SAARC, WHO, and the WFP, would also be useful in creation of guidelines at the international level, and their implementation at the national level.[30] The following is an example of a gender- responsive approach to tackling global hunger:

Reorienting the agricultural research system to be more gender responsive requires being more aware of the different needs and preferences of male and female farmers; the different roles that men and women play in the production and marketing process; differential access to and control of productive resources; differential constraints that female farmers may face in adopting new technologies, including time constraints owing to domestic responsibilities and nonmarket production; the representation of male and female scientists and extension agents in the agricultural research and extension systems, among others.[31]

The world has ample food surpluses, it isn't the case that there is no food for the chronically hungry women. However, due to obstacles that gender inequality's 'sticky floors'[32] create, the policies aimed at tackling hunger, and empowering people with resources to get access to food, don't reach women. A gender- sensitive and gender- responsive approach to these policies would, thus, ensure that the relations between the policies made at the international are harmonious with their implementation at the national level.

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discrimination has restrain women from breaking the 'glass ceiling'.

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