



THEMATIC BRIEF



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GENDER DYNAMICS OF INTRA-HOUSEHOLD FOOD ACCESS AND CONSUMPTION IN UTTAR PRADESH

BACKGROUND

Every day, poor people in India must make difficult decisions on how to share their meagre food supplies among members of their households. Prevailing gender norms determine how food is allocated within households, often resulting in unequal food access and consumption. In India, it is almost universal that it's a women's role to cook and serve food in the household, but that they often eat last and least, irrespective of age or state of health.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) India supports the Government in strengthening the efficiency and

effectiveness of their national food safety nets, particularly the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Programme in schools, and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) for young children and pregnant and lactating women. WFP conducted this research to understand how gender norms affected food distribution within households and what could be recommended to the Government to address this issue.

The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on access to food was also examined.

METHODS

In early 2021, a quantitative assessment was conducted covering 1,049 households in three districts of Uttar Pradesh (Lucknow, Fatehpur, and Jaunpur). The survey explored community practices, knowledge, and perception around intra-household food distribution and consumption, the experience of food insecurity and the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on food availability and accessibility. Qualitative data from a 2019 preliminary study along with additional discussions in 2021 in the same area, was also utilized in the analysis.



OBJECTIVES:

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Map the intra-household pattern/behaviors of food distribution and consumption among the members (women, men, girls, and boys), and how it affects their food security and consumption;
- Assess the uptake of food from the Government's food-based safety nets and their impact on household food consumption, especially on women and children;
- Assess the impact of COVID-19 on intra-household food distribution and food security among vulnerable people and migrant households.

This brief summarizes the findings and recommendations for the gender dynamics of intra-household access to food, distribution, and consumption pattern.

KEY FINDINGS

Influence of gender norms on intrahousehold food distribution and consumption

- In nearly all households, adult men were responsible for bringing food home from the market and adult women were responsible for cooking and serving the food.
- Men and boys were given preference to eat first, except in female-headed households. Women, followed by adolescent girls, were the last to eat in most households.
- In households where there was not enough food for all, women had to sacrifice their share, following the social norm to feed others first within the household.

"She will give her share of food to children and husband. This kind of custom is still seen in most households. But she will prepare food for herself afterward" -- Anganwadi worker, Lucknow

KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS FEEDING AND EATING PRACTICES

- Around three-quarters of the respondents agreed that breastfeeding is necessary for child health and growth.
- A commonly followed norm was that adolescent girls and pregnant and lactating women should not consume sour and spice foods.
- About a third of the surveyed households still followed the norm that pregnant women should eat less, which restricts women's access to adequate food and nutrition during pregnancy.

"A [pregnant] woman will not be able to eat food because she already has a baby in her womb, so how will she eat properly?" – FGD4, Jaunpur

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY

- 22 percent of the households reported that women had to reduce their meal size or skip meals due to not having enough money to buy food.
- Women from poor urban households were more likely to be food insecure, mostly due to a greater dependency on market purchases to access their food. They were also more likely to be affected by the loss of livelihood or reduced incomes due to COVID-19.
 - Men were more likely to report loss of or reduced incomes, possibly as they were the only bread earners, and women were not working.

ACCESS TO FOOD-BASED SAFETY NETS

- Most households relied on market purchases to access their food, with little dependence on government schemes as the main source of food.
- However, in Fatehpur and Jaunpur, more than two-thirds of the households were receiving benefits from at least one government safety net programme, and mostly enrolled as Priority Households in the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS).
- Most of the households reported receiving TPDS rations as Government assistance during COVID-19. More than 80 percent of migrant households received food from TPDS while one-third also received cash assistance.
- Less than half of the school-going students were receiving benefits under the government's PM-POSHAN (former mid-day meals) programme.

HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY AND COPING

Around 10 percent of the surveyed households were found to be food insecure in terms of dietary diversity and food frequency and their ability to cope with shocks.

- In total, 14 percent of households headed by women were food insecure.
- Around half the households had to borrow money, mainly from friends, relatives, or local money lenders to meet their family needs. Loss of livelihoods and income during lockdown was the main reason for borrowing money.
- Nearly all households reported having food stocks, the highest being for Scheduled Caste households (mostly agrarian) and least among migrant households, likely because they are more transient and would not keep a lot of food or assets at home.
- On average most households reported eating two meals per day, with very few households consuming three or more meals.
- One in three households reported a decrease in food consumption over time as prices had increased.
- Key reasons for the decrease in consumption included lack of access to markets to buy food (mostly due to COVID fears) and lack of money to buy food.

EFFECT OF COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS ON PEOPLE'S LIVELIHOODS AND ACCESS TO FOOD

Compared to the pre-COVID situation, there was evidence of a decrease in the intensity of people's livelihood activities, but they did not seem to have declined.

- About a fifth of the households reported a decrease in food consumption owing to lack of access to markets or lack of money to buy food.
- About a third of the households reported a decrease in food consumption over the past one year. Such households were more among female-headed households.
- About half of migrant and female-headed households reported decline in incomes over the last one year.
- Men were more likely to report lost or reduced incomes, possibly as they were the only bread earners, and women were not working.

"We did not have money at that time, so we didn't waste a single grain of wheat. We even consumed that leftover ration which we used to give to our domestic animals." – FGD, Jaunpur

RECOMMENDATIONS

Intra-household food access and consumption

- **Increase awareness to address gender norms related to food consumption within households.** Awareness can be increased on various food and nutrition programmes, with a special focus on gender norms to improve the food security and nutrition of girls and women.
- **Social and behavior change communication (SBCC) needs to be conducted** to raise awareness on gender norms, particularly relating to food distribution within households and food consumption by women, girls and boys.
- **Ensure male participation in all awareness activities** and encourage them to ensure better nutrition of women and girls in their families.
- **Empower women and girls to raise their voice against any form of discrimination** by ensuring better education, providing equal opportunities and status within and outside the households.

Uptake of food from the food-based safety nets

- **Enhance focus on including eligible beneficiaries under the food safety net entitlements** to reduce any exclusion, particularly in urban areas where dependence on markets for food is high.
- **Measures need to be taken to expand the urban poor's access to the ICDS scheme.** Special drives could be undertaken to map slums and establish Anganwadi centres in such areas.
- **Enhanced monitoring of the scheme for adolescent girls** (Kishori Shakti Yojana) should be undertaken to ensure timely distribution of good quality THR to adolescent girls under the scheme.
- **Leverage Government schemes as platforms for advocacy**, especially for nutrition and health. Messages on gender equity in food distribution can be incorporated in community awareness messaging under PDS, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, and PM-POSHAN.

Impact of COVID-19 on intra-household food distribution and food security

- **Improve coverage of Government food-based safety nets.** The Government should include all eligible beneficiaries under food safety nets of TPDS and ICDS through a registration drive of vulnerable groups of urban poor, migrants and female-headed households.

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