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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ajaz, N., & Zakir, W. (2019). Gender, Health and Household Food Security: Evidence from Rural Pakistan. *Pakistan Administrative Review*, 3(1), 27-34. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-62768-7>

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# Gender, Health and Household Food Security- Evidence from Rural Pakistan

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**Abstract.** The present study focuses on finding out gender differences with respect to food distribution within households. The study also intends to find out if there is any gender difference in health conditions among household members with reference to the availability of food. The study employs quantitative design. Purposive sampling technique of non- probability sampling was used. Household survey was conducted in tehsil Jatoi, district Muzaffargarh in the province of Punjab, Pakistan, to get the data using a questionnaire. The sample comprised of one hundred households, among which eleven were female headed households and rest eighty-nine were male headed households. The major findings of the study reveal that there is a significant gender difference with respect to food distribution within households. The study also shows that gender disparities are also there with respect to the health condition among men and women. The present study adds to the literature of gender and household food security, and it also puts forth some recommendations for the policy makers to take into account in order to fill the gender disparities with respect to food security. These recommendations include improving the health status of women, reforming institutions to improve the status of women, and designing “mainstream” gender sensitive projects.

**Key words:** Gender, Food Security, Household Food Security, Health and Food Security, Gender and Health.

**Reference:** Reference to this article should be made as: Ajaz, N., & Zakir, W. (2019). Gender, health and household food security- evidence from rural Pakistan. *Pakistan Administrative Review*, 3(1), 27-34.

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## 1. Introduction

Food security is one of the most critical variables for understanding the availability of food and nutritional status of individuals, households, communities, and even countries. Keeping in mind the scenario of rapid urbanization and increasing poverty level in south Asia, food security should have been a high research and policy agenda, however, the reality is different. The

negligence of policy makers regarding such an important issue like food security has posed a threat of what has been described as an “invisible crisis” of food security (see Crush & Frayne, 2010; Crush et. al., 2011; Swinnen & Squicciarini, 2012).

Food security refers to the condition where everyone has economic and physical access to enough of food, which is safe sufficient to meet their dietary requirements and preferences to lead a healthy and active life. It exists on international level, national level, and on household level as well (Nord et. al, 2002; Wilde & Peterman, 2006; Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009).

There are different types of food security, and those different types have different implications on people. For example, Battisti and Naylor (2009) discuss that food security analysts have defined two general types of food insecurity i.e. chronic food insecurity and transitory food insecurity. Chronic food insecurity is persistent and long term, and it occurs usually when people are unable to fulfill their minimum dietary requirements over a longer period of time. It may result from inadequate assets, restricted access to financial and productive resources, or it is simply due to long lasting periods of poverty. It can be controlled by introducing some long term measures to address poverty and to help giving adequate access to productive and financial resources to everybody (Battisti & Naylor, 2009).

Food security exists at global level, regional level, country level, community level, as well as at the “household level”; which the present study covers. Alderman and Garcia (1993) discuss household food security as a household is said to be food secure when all its members have access to sufficient quantity of food required to lead a healthy life, and there is no such risk of losing this access (also see Maxwell & Smith, 1992).

Household food security refers to applying the concept of food security and it’s all the four components on household level, thus analyzing the food distribution, access, utilization, and sustainability or vulnerability towards food shortage with reference to the individuals within household. Men, women, girls, and boys, each have their own unique role in ensuring food security, thus it would not be wrong to say that both national and household level of food security have gender implications, as men and women have complimentary and different roles and tasks in securing food and nutrition (see Maxwell, 1996; Bickel et.al., 2000).

Among the four components of food security, the present study focuses mainly on the food distribution component. As being an agricultural country, it is hard to believe that there can be shortage in food production in Pakistan. Agriculture accounts for around 21.2% of our GDP, and employs around 43% of labor force (Khushk & Smith, 1996). Moreover, Punjab is the most agricultural province of Pakistan, where wheat and cotton are enormously grown (Zuberi, 1989). Thus the basic issue, which most of the scholars think as basic, is that of unequal food distribution, which happens to be the focus of the present study. Thus the present study intends to analyze the gender differences in food distribution, and highlighting the food security concerns for women.

The major purpose of this research is to analyze the food distribution with gender lenses, thus highlighting the gaps in policies, as well as finding the implementation problems. The present study is based on two objectives - to assess the gender differences with respect to household food distribution and to compare the health issues of men and women with respect to food insecurity. The core question of the research is - is there any gender difference in health conditions and provision of health facilities among household members, and how does it relate to household food distribution?

## 2. Methodology

The present study is empirical in nature, comprising of quantitative design of research. It aims at developing the concepts of food security with reference to the food distribution and health conditions of men and women. In the study, a household refers to a single family unit comprising of a couple and their kids who usually reside and eat together. Their dependent parents may or may not be included in the household. The main source of data was primary and it is a case study of tehsil Jatoi, which is located in district Muzaffargarh lying on the bank of Chenab River in the Province of Punjab, Pakistan. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling technique. The sample of the study comprised of 100 households. As there were no exact population statistics available about the ratio of male to female headed households in tehsil Jatoi, Muzaffargarh, an effort was made to cover the maximum number of female headed households so that the analysis would be done on an equal, unbiased level. However, only eleven female headed households could be approached, so the comparison of male headed and female headed households was done by bringing their weightages to equal.

The significance behind choosing tehsil Jatoi for the present study was that it is the capital of district Muzaffargarh. District Muzaffargarh is one of the biggest producers of sugarcane, wheat and cotton crops<sup>3</sup>. Another major reason for selecting district Muzaffargarh for the case study was that there has been an increasing number of women issues reported from that area, which logically means that there would be something different in the minds of men and women in that area about the gender identities. The response of the survey was 100 percent and the data collected through questionnaire was coded and analyzed through SPSS in terms of percentage, frequencies, descriptive analysis, and mean score analysis.

This study was conducted after getting informed consent of all the respondents. The purpose of the study was explained and the respondents were assured that their identity would not be disclosed. General ethical principles such as respect towards participants of the study and sensitivity to their time constraints were also followed. Moreover, Plagiarism was strictly avoided as to appreciate the work of each of the author.

## 3. Results and Analysis

The findings of the study reveal that there is a significant gender difference in the households with reference to, health and food distribution. Below is the detailed description of the findings of the study; how do the findings meet the objectives, and how does it answer my research question.

Health is one of the basic indicators of food security which directly or indirectly reflects the food distribution mechanism among the household members. Thus, a person's health clearly shows that how nutritious and hygienic his/ her food is. Shindell et.al (2012) likewise discuss how food security is linked with the health conditions of the community and household, and how being healthy and consuming hygienic food positively affect the food security conditions.

In the present study, health of household members is also used as an indicator of food security, and the results are somewhat positive as the statistics of men and women who got sick and got treatment recently were almost equal. This means that the health and living of both men and women is considered equally important in the sample households. Bird and Rieker (1999) however discuss that it is not sufficient that the health of men and women is given equal importance; it should rather be fair and equitable. Women, because of their reproductive roles, face more health risks and concerns as compared to men, and thus their health should be given

more importance, and their sickness should be taken comparatively more serious as compared to that of men.

The only gender difference that could be seen with respect to health conditions in the present study was that the male members of households were more inclined towards visiting private hospitals and clinics when they got sick or injured, while females were taken to government hospitals and dispensaries. Bevan and Hood (2006) discuss that how many times a person gets treatment and medicines are not important, rather the quality of health care he/ she is provided and from where he/ she gets treatment matters a lot. Thus the gender difference is still there, but there can be different reasons and justifications for this as the difference is not so big. However, the quality matters. Another gender concern worth mentioning here is that of the respondents' inclination towards the quacks. Crook (1995) likewise discusses that the quacks are not only the physicians, but the concept of quacks also include the untrained and uncertified midwives and lady health workers etc. A lot of women trust on these kinds of quacks for their childbirth, which may prove harmful for them and their child. The study shows that more women than men visited quacks when they felt sick, which reflects the feeling of non-significance.

Besides using the food security indicators such as education, health and income, the study also included some direct questions related to food distribution within households in order to assess the food security conditions within households. Hyder et.al (2007) also in their study highlight the relationship between gender, cultural values and food security.

The findings of the study show that around 45% of the male headed households and 60% of the female headed households in the last month worried that they would not have enough of food to eat. Also, around 39% of the male headed households and around 47% of the female headed households or some member of their households could not eat the kind of food he/ she preferred because of lack of resources. Moreover, the results also reveal that around 33% of the male headed households and around 44% of the female headed households in the sample had to eat the kind of food they really disliked because of lesser resources. This shows that women headed households face more such concerns as compared to the male headed households.

However, the concern that the household or some member of their household had to eat a smaller meal than they required because there was not enough of food available in the household was found in 12% of the male headed households but none of the female headed household.

Furthermore, the statistics also show that 1% of the male headed households and 2% of the female headed households in the past month went a whole day and night without eating anything because there was no food in the house. This shows that the issue of food insecurity and shortage of food is double in the female headed households as compared to that in the male headed households.

Not only this, but the results also show that 1% of the male headed households and 40% of the female headed households serve food two times a day. This shows that women are poorest of the poor in the sample community. Where 77% of the male headed households serve food three times a day, only 60% of the female headed households serve food three times a day. This also perpetuates the findings of Chant (1997).

When it comes to the quality of food and what food items do they eat generally, the gender differences still prevail. The results of the study reveal that in the male headed households, all the food items e.g. beef, mutton, chicken, fish, vegetables, fruits, cereals and rice are cooked in various frequencies, while in the female headed households, only chicken, vegetables, cereals and rice are cooked in routine. Nord et.al (2005) also discuss that even if the quantity of food is same, and the number of times food is served is equal, the quality of food a man and a woman

consumes is still different. Women most of the times compromise the quality of food, for which there can be a number of reasons including shortage of resources, love and care, etc.

Watson and Caldwell (2005) discuss that while finding the element of food security through research, it doesn't simply come out that girls should not eat and boys should, but it is all about the presence and the "cultural politics" of food and eating. Likewise, in the present study, when it was asked that if there is one unit of food available in the household and there are many members to eat that, who will be given priority, in around 13% male headed households and 60% of the female headed households, it came out that their sons would be given priority. The reasons for that were different, including that they were in a growing age, they work outside whole day, it is natural that sons are more important, etc. This shows that it is not the men who directly marginalize women and put them in the "others" category, but it is also the women who have internalized and accepted their inferior position in the society.

Kropf et.al (2007) discuss that women have dietary requirements different from men because of their reproductive roles. They should include in their diet a lot of proteins and calcium etc. The present study reveals that only 27% of the respondents agreed that women have special dietary requirements, which shows that the "nature and nurture" roles of females are not really acknowledged by men as well as by the females themselves in the sample households.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In a nut shell, it can be articulated that the findings of the study prove that there is a significant gender difference in food distribution among household members in the households of tehsil Jatoi in district Muzaffargarh. The results also meet the objectives of the study i.e. assessing the gender differences with respect to the food distribution within households and to compare the health issues of men and women with respect to food insecurity. The study also answers the proposed questions like if there is some gender difference with respect to the food distribution among the household members or not, if is there any gender difference in health conditions among household members with reference to availability of food. In short, the findings of the present study reveal that there is a significant gender difference in food distribution among the members of the sample households.

The findings of the study also reveal that there is a significant gender difference in food distribution among the members of the sample households. This difference is so widely accepted like the gender ideologies, and is so deep rooted in the mindsets of people that they have started to think it as a natural thing. They think that it is natural that sons are dearer and more important, so serving them the food first is a natural thing.

The study also concludes that there is also a significant gender difference in health conditions among household members with reference to availability of food. Although this difference is not direct and visible enough, but when we understand that women, because of their reproductive and nurturing roles are more prone to health hazards, we tend to realize that giving men and women equal attention with respect to health care is not really fair. The ideal thing here would be providing equitable and good quality health care facilities to men and women, as per their needs and requirements, so that the physical vulnerability of men and women with respect to food security may unleash.

In a nut shell, it can be inferred from the study that household food security is not only about who gets food to eat and who doesn't get it, but it is also represented by the importance of health among the household members.

Thus the present study concludes while emphasizing Butler's (2011) theory of Gender performativity that the regulatory discourse or the repetitive actions performed and observed by people play a key role in shaping their gender roles and behaviors. Thus in terms internalization of male authority over female, and son preference starting from birth to health, etc., the regulatory discourse matters a lot. Thus the study empirically proves the notion that there is a significant gender difference in the household food security concerns and distribution of food among the household members in tehsil Jatoi, Muzaffargarh.

This research, like any other research in the field of social sciences, has some limitations like it did not cover the entire population of tehsil Jatoi in district Muzaffargarh, due to shortage of time and resources; at some stages the respondents got irritated because they considered the questions as personal; and a matter of their very household, and last but not the least, there was not much literature available throwing light on the gender aspect of household food security.

#### **4. Policy Recommendations**

In the light of the findings of the study, the research very humbly puts forth some policy recommendations for the policy makers to include in their agenda while making policies related to food security.

The findings of the research show that the need is of a triangular approach here to bridge the gender disparities. First of all, since the government has agreed to implement the public policy based on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the violations committed must be recorded and the government should be requested to take action against the violators. Secondly, there is a strong need to initiate talks with the male community and facilitate them in resolving the contradictions and misunderstandings about women rights. Thirdly, the need is to launch public awareness advocacy campaigns at national as well as provincial levels. Women should be encouraged to lead this advocacy campaign, so that it would also provide working women with a platform to develop their voice and make it heard. This is probably the only way to make our country a pro-women country. Here are some of the policy recommendations derived through the findings of the present research:

##### ***Improving the health status of women***

Good health of women contributes to food security in a way that it allows women to fulfill their reproductive roles as well as their productive roles more effectively. The specific health needs of women especially rural women should be identified and some large scale efforts including different gender sensitive policies, programs, and projects, etc. should be introduced such as:

1. Providing special foods to the pregnant and lactating women of poor and unprivileged households
2. Running community level campaigns to increase awareness regarding health and nutrition
3. Improving women's access to low cost yet good quality health facilities
4. Increasing awareness among women regarding preventing health care e.g. <sup>[1]</sup>immunizations, vaccinations and family planning, etc.
5. Strengthening health care mechanisms for pre- natal and post- natal maternal care
6. Encouraging female participation in health planning, health management and in health care related service delivery
7. Providing improved sanitation mechanisms and easy access to water supply

### ***Reforming Institutions to Improve Status of Women***

Another step that can be taken to improve the status of women with respect to their vulnerability is reforming our legal, cultural and social institutions to make them more pro-women. This would create an environment for women in which they would be able to realize their power and potential. Changes need to be made specifically in property rights laws, divorce laws, and the social entitlement programs benefitting women should be introduced.

### ***Designing “Mainstream” Gender Sensitive Projects***

Being pro-women doesn't mean being anti-men. The recommendation is to design the projects with a “mainstream” gender sensitive approach, so that the beneficiary women's productivity and livelihood is increased alongside men.

In short, the proposed triangular policy recommendations approach as well as the other recommendations, if taken into account while policy making related to gender and food security concerns would fill the gender gaps in food security.

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