

Aditi Rao
Cedar Falls High School
Cedar Falls, Iowa
India, Factor 15: Human Rights

India: Gender Inequality means Food Insecurity

In 1961, Dr. Norman Borlaug was tasked with preventing famine in newly formed India. Dr. Borlaug, and his Indian colleague Dr M.S. Swaminathan, swiftly accomplished this task by sparking the Green Revolution, a movement to make agriculture more efficient to sustain the world's growing population. India exemplifies how understanding and improving agriculture can save a nation; however, more than half-a-century after the Green Revolution, agricultural productivity has leveled off, and it seems India is once again in need of a revolution to increase food security for its billion plus citizens who are in increasingly dire food situations. India's national motto is *Satyameva Jayate*, or truth alone triumphs; the truths, no matter how uncomfortable, of the current state of agriculture in India must be acknowledged, as well as the causes for it in order for the nation to triumph over the hunger that plagues it.

1. Outlining India

To understand rural India's agriculture, the socio-cultural aspects of this area must be understood. Data pertinent to demographics, employment, education, and health, provide insights that would help advance food security in India.

India, with a population of 1.24 billion, is the second most populous nation in the world (The World Factbook). Two-thirds of households, typically made up of 5 members, live in rural India. The vast majority of households is headed by men and practice Hinduism. Agriculture, the largest source of employment in rural India, employing around 70% of the population, however, contributes to only 18.2% of the Gross Domestic Product. A startling 28% of rural households fall below the poverty line (National Family Health Survey-3). The National Family Health Survey's (NFHS-3) comprehensive statistics on education indicate a sharp decline from 70% to 51% in enrolment as children transition from primary to secondary school. This drop off is worse in rural India with much sharper gender disparities, with more than 12% fewer girls going to school than boys, thereby placing this already vulnerable population at a particular disadvantage. The disparities in education leads to large segments of the population being unable to access the full benefits of productive labor of a modern free nation.

Inadequate access to nutrition and health care further complicates this dire problem. A typical diet for a rural household is comprised of rice, leafy vegetables and beans, with few households regularly eating meats or eggs. This diet is clearly inadequate as 24% of men and 55% of women are anemic and an unacceptable 70% of children are anemic (NFHS-3). This is extended to chronically malnourished mothers who give birth to children who are stunted, a problem that continues all through childhood; childhood malnourishment at 42%, is among the highest in the world (Oxfam). A United Nations (UN) report showed that 75% of health care infrastructure is located in Urban India, even though only 27% of the population resides in these urban areas (Dasgupta). Lack of access to timely and good healthcare in rural India exacerbates the problems related to malnutrition. As with many other parameters, the disparities between urban and rural on one hand and male and female on the other hand continue to worsen with time, to the detriment of millions.

Taken together, the relative disadvantages of the rural population, and in particular, the persistent and growing gender disparities need to be urgently addressed in an effective manner to quell the growing threat of food insecurity.

2. Hindrances to Food Security

Food security in India is both furthered and damaged by a variety of factors. Among the most detrimental factors are shrinking land holding sizes and lack of mechanization, both leading to ineffective subsistence farming, disguised employment and lack of social mobility which enhance the status of poverty millions of Indians face, and broken farm-to-market chains which greatly limit the amount of food that can be eaten.

Indian farms are among the smallest in the world, and are continually shrinking. Over 65% of farms are considered marginal, being 1 hectare or less; a vast majority, 98%, are less than 3 hectares (Foster and Rosenzweig). Strict inheritance laws that require land holdings be divided among sons when the owner/father dies, unless the owner goes through a lengthy and expensive process to change this default, exacerbate this problem. Small farms don't lend themselves to mechanized, i.e., more productive, agriculture; only between 10-11% of Indian farms are mechanized, and only 40% of land is irrigated (Oxfam). The high productivity of modern agriculture is resource intensive (mechanization, high yielding varieties, irrigation, fertilizers); lack of this limits India's ability to achieve food security. There is no need for mechanization when you have fragmented lands, yet without mechanization, not enough food is being efficiently produced. As land holdings continue to shrink, farmers produce less on the small tracts of land they do own, a practice that not only limits productivity but which in due course also decimates land value and further compromises farmers.

Indian farms are diverse in the crops grown, mainly due to the varying geography in the nation. Paddy rice, wheat, vegetables, sugar cane, potatoes, and groundnuts, in that order, are the highest crop earners for Indian farmers (FAO). The size, lack of mechanization, and crops grown on farms all make subsistence farming the main method of farming on Indian soil. Subsistence farming is self-sufficiency farming, where food harvested is primarily used to feed a farmer and their family, rather than be sold. While no exact numbers are available, the vast majority of Indian farmers subscribe to subsistence farming (European Commission).

Approximately one-third of India's rural citizens live in poverty; meaning 1 in 3 Indians is not meeting a living wage (Rural Poverty Portal). The main causes for this are disguised unemployment and lack of social mobility mainly based on gender and caste.

Disguised unemployment "exists where part of the labor force is either left without work or is working in a redundant manner where worker productivity is essentially zero" (K. Dasgupta). Much of India's workforce does this form of repetitive, or even non-existent labor, in which someone expends energy to complete a task but earns little to no money for it because the work is non-productive. This allows for the country to claim a higher employment rate than is actually being represented through the earnings of workers or production. Examples of this include the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which ensures 100 days of employment to any rural laborer willing to do unskilled-labor. While ideally this would work researchers have found that often times people are simply given the money for employment without working if they give a share of the profits to a middleman (Sebastian). Disguised employment significantly reduces India's ability to help everyone make a living wage.

An inability to move between social classes also greatly hinders ensuring living wage in India. India has around 220 million "untouchables" or those who fall in the lowest level of the caste system. These individuals, though capable of work, due to an outdated, grossly unequal system are either not allowed to work, or get paid virtually nothing for doing the most menial of jobs. The caste system does not lend itself to mobility, despite affirmative action programs by the government, and those in lower castes are bound to poverty (Rao). Gender based discrimination also prohibits earning equal wages. Not only are women far less employed, but also earn far less for the work they do (NFHS-3). Women are not earning money for the work they do which puts around 50% of the country at a disadvantage for earning a living wage.

Yet the problem of social mobility comes down to education. Education is the greatest overall combater of poverty, and with more accessible education to all, reducing poverty by 40-60% (Ghosh). Again, as mentioned earlier, this disproportionately affects the girl child. One important impediment to educating girls is the lack of toilets, which causes many young girls to leave schooling when they begin menstruating. Simple improvements to school buildings and infrastructure can therefore have a transformational impact.

The factors most hindering access to food markets and adequate nutrition are broken farm-to-market supply chains and inefficient government subsidy schemes. Over 70% of post harvest losses are due to inadequate food storage (FAO). Due to a lack of refrigeration or other adequate storage facilities, farmers are forced to sell their yields immediately. But often, immediately is not when the consumer wants to purchase something; much food is discarded. With cold-chains, food would last longer, thus having more food to sell, and lowering the cost of food, making nutrition more accessible. In addition, the government ineffectively spends billions of dollars on food schemes meant to feed the poor. These food schemes give those living in slums and impoverished households more access to subsidized foods in the market. In theory this idea would work very well in helping the nourish India's impoverished, yet only 50% of those who are supposed to be told about the programs are notified. Furthermore, often these subsidized foods are stolen in a system that turns a blind eye to corruption; in the state of Bihar, 80% of the subsidized food was stolen (Luce).

3. Women and Achieving Food Security

Before delving into the issue of women in Indian agriculture, it should first be noted that the following suggestions are not an attack on India's culture. Women around the world, regardless of nation or religion, face a lifestyle with certain hardships never faced by men. The issue of sexism and genderism, like all oppressions, is greatly amplified by the crippling effects of poverty, putting India in its current position. Yet solving the issue of poverty cannot entirely erase sexism, making the issue a valid one to be looked at through a separate lens.

Women are the greatest underutilized resource in the world, and particularly so in patriarchal India. The vast improvements in global gender equality, while still falling short of attaining parity, has barely affected India! Gender biases persist and continue to hamper progress. Disparities in land ownership, earnings, education, nutrition, decision making and access to health care are all factors that exemplify gender inequality in India. As aptly observed Amitava Mukherjee, Senior Expert Economist at the UN, "Now, a Gendered Green Revolution is needed."

4. Effects of Gender Inequality

In a typical 5-member family, between 2 and 3 members are women. As discussed above, the combined inability to access land, poor nutrition and health status, and fewer opportunities for advancing their product and earning money for it, decimates the value of this workforce. This implies that a typical rural family where all members are farmers and producers, earns between 20 and 40% less than they should because the women are not earning the value they are worth, thus preventing this family from earning a living wage (FAO). Furthermore, this farming family would harvest less produce as well because, as stated by The Food and Agriculture Organization's *Women in Agriculture Report*, "female farmers are just as efficient as their male counterparts, but they have less land and use fewer inputs, so they produce less". The typical family suffers from gender inequality as women in the family either work less or earn less for their work, hurting the family's access to food security.

Though improved from years past, women in India face significant hardships. Only 43% of women in India are employed, in stark contrast to the 87% of men. Out of this small female workforce, nearly 60% of women are employed in the agriculture industry. The much more startling figure comes from the fact that only 67% of employed women earn money in comparison to 91% of employed men (NFHS-3). This

is mainly because thousands of women in the Indian workforce are exploited; they either work only to pay off debts, with all of their salary going towards that, or, as is often the case, their employers cover up true salaries and market value of their work to give them virtually nothing for their employment. In 2013, the gender wage gap showed women earned 24.8% less than men. This varied per state as women in Uttarakhand earned 9% less, while women in Bihar earned 63% less than men. (Varkkey). A prominent wage gap is troubling. These hardships make it very difficult for women in India, especially those in the agricultural industry, to be considered equal and fair earners in the economy.

Landownership also presents immense barriers to gender equality. In a legal sense women in India can own land, yet very few – only 11% – do, mainly due to inheritance laws, which favor males (FAO). The Hindu Succession Act requires land to be divided among the owner's sons, unless they specifically request their daughter get the land (World Bank). Inheritance laws show how women are severely hindered from even owning land, which is essential to being a productive farmer and to the overall stance of gender equality and human rights. These laws marginalize women and enforce an idea of patriarchy, which is troubling to the development of any nation.

5. Benefit of Achieving Gender Equality

The benefits of gender equality are clear on families. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) predicts that, “If women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30 percent”, the paper then went on to say, “This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 percent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 percent”. With a simple provision to inheritance laws which allowed daughters to have the same right to land as the sons, the state of Karnataka has already seen a 7% increase in farm productivity (Deininger). This immense increase in yield greatly helps the state of food security in India. Poverty rates would also drop when women are considered equal to men, thus getting paid a fairer amount for the work they do. As stated previously, only 67% of women are paid for their work; by increasing this figure by even slightly, poverty would be greatly reduced, as the typical family would take in additional salary. Reducing hunger and poverty are two of the most immensely beneficial byproducts of simply increasing gender equality, legally, socially, and ethically.

These are the direct benefits, but many other indirect benefits surely exist. Women, when given equality and empowerment in one field, often are able and likely to translate this into other aspects of their lives and thereby educate, nourish, and keep healthy (by being more compliant with vaccinations and improved sanitation) all of their children in a gender-neutral manner. When society becomes more equal, the overall status of all humans and productivity of the nation increases.

The attainment of gender equality will enable vulnerable populations to be in a far better position to participate and benefit from modern science, technology, finance, and medicine. This equality will also enable these vulnerable populations to be better prepared for ravages of weather, climate change and other unpredictable harms and volatility associated with globalization and demographic, and climatic trends.

6. Solutions to Gender Inequality

In order to fix gender inequality and improve food security and poverty, India must make legislative strides towards more equal laws. These laws must be intensive, because as stated by the FAO report, “Given existing inequities, it is not enough that policies be gender-neutral; overcoming the constraints faced by women requires much more”. The first major step to reducing gender inequality will be amending the Hindu Succession Act. Two Indian states of Karnataka and Maharashtra amended the law in 2006, but this only increased a women's chance of getting land by approximately 20% (Deininger). This would give women more access to land and allow more farming to happen.

While clearly important, legislative initiatives are limited. It must be ensured that local officials and people are educated about gender-neutral laws. Even when the laws are in place, many are unaware, and still act in accordance with older laws. Officials responsible for implementing land programs in India should, as suggested by the FAO, “actively educate both men and women regarding gender equity provisions, rather than treating the decision as a private matter between spouses.” Through reforming laws and educating the public, achieving gender equality is a very reachable goal.

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laws are implemented. India’s governance system, especially in villages, often depends on panchayats, a body made up village elders. Panchayats can either be a source of progress or hindrance to gender equality. They are the central link between the people and the government, and information is not passed on to the people about laws unless panchayats do so. Villagers reported over 50% of their government knowledge came from panchayats (Kaur). If panchayats work with the government to promote gender equality, the process will be far more effective.

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On a larger scale, programs like the FAO by the UN greatly promote gender equality, and make the research about this topic widely available. When information about human rights is democratized, citizens become mobilized to help the cause. Furthermore, UN organizations, like UN Women, can greatly help make the movement in India a more global one to benefit the lives of women everywhere, and thus better the world. Organizations like the World Bank can also help women through further implementing micro finance programs that help create women entrepreneurs in a system where economic benefits to women are not often given.

Attainment of gender equality will, by also reducing poverty and improving food insecurity, help achieve two Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, and promoting gender equality and empowering women. To do this, local Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) must be scaled up. In Bihar, one of the states with the worst disparities in gender, Adithi, an NGO, negotiates with landowners on behalf of women to get land for farming. They further educate women about productive agriculture and their own rights (Chowdry). Adithi shows how simple education can demonstrably change culture and improve fates for everyone in a village. Another program is the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), which “organizes women to achieve full employment and self-reliance” through microfinance, education, and employment services. SEWA has 110,000 from rural India, and is the largest women’s employment group in the nation. It is necessary to involve grassroots to inspire an understanding of feminism and the vast benefits it holds, while also creating a support network that empowers women in rural areas. Local programs that aim at giving women a voice in land ownership and education can help make gender equality a reality, bettering food security and reduce poverty in India (FAO).

The typical family must learn and implement equality in their daily living. They must be more willing to allow women to work, and to study. It is the duty of the family to nurture and foster equality, as the way children see gender roles often carries through in their future actions. In order to do this, female and male children must be treated the same way, with equal opportunities for mobility and success. Equality of genders is not against any pillar of the Indian culture, rather in stark contrast, a foundation for the ideal Indian society and leading by example is imperative. A young girl who sees her mother empowered and working will understand that her potential is limitless, and a young boy who sees his male role models treating women with dignity and respect will adapt these principles and live a life not confined and defined by patriarchy. Society has the innate capacity to shift towards gender equality, gradually increasing food production yields and reducing poverty.

None of the listed suggestions will cause immediate outcomes. Even if legislation is passed soon creating short-term statistical equality in some areas, it will take decades of individual education and

empowerment to make a cultural change. The lack of immediate results does not make this issue any less dire, but one that requires extra attentiveness and care to engender long lasting, meaningful results. No one, from the United Nations to the lone Indian cow-herder, should become dejected by the long fight or complacent of their actions, women cannot be given up on.

India is an immensely powerful nation. It hosts an enormous population, culture, and diversity, all of which allow it to be chaotic, but beautifully functional democracy. Yet this democratic dynamic has not yet reached its full potential, and it won't, until all people, regardless of sex, caste, and creed are able to participate equally in the Indian economy. By increasing human rights through gender equality, women will gain access to land and employment, thus increasing food yields, which increases food security, and by increasing income, which reduces poverty. These are two immense benefits of a movement that is sure to better any nation it impacts. Human rights are the new frontier of the food revolution, and we must rise to meet it to help our world feed, protect, and home each generation. We must all strive towards a "gendered Green Revolution".

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