

NUTRITION AND GENDER IN ASIA: FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

Undernutrition in Asia

Asia, particularly South Asia, is characterized by some of the highest levels of undernutrition in the world, including calorie deficits, as well as deficiencies of essential micronutrients. Table I describes the magnitude of the undernutrition burden in Asia; there are a staggering **92.7 million¹** stunted children in Southeast Asia and South-Central Asia. With almost half of the country's preschoolers suffering from undernutrition, India currently has the highest proportion of malnourished children in the world, followed by Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Nepal. In Southeast Asia, a large proportion of Vietnamese and Indonesian children also suffer from undernutrition.



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Table I. The Burden of Child Undernutrition in Asia

Country	Stunting (%)	Underweight (%)	Severe wasting (%)
South-Central Asia (includes India)	40.7	33.1	5.7
Southeast Asia	34.3	20.7	3.6
East Africa	50.0	28.0	3.6
Southern Africa	30.2	11.4	2.7
Central America	23.1	6.2	0.6

Source: Black et al. 2008.

¹ R.E. Black, L.H. Allen, Z.A. Bhutta, L.E. Caulfield, M. de Oni, M. Ezzati, C. Mathers, and J. Rivera, for the Maternal and Child Undernutrition Study Group. 2008. Maternal and child undernutrition: Global and regional exposures and health consequences. *Lancet* 371: 243–6. All nutritional status indicators are calculated using WHO 2006 standards. *Stunting* is the prevalence of height-for-age < -2 SD from the reference median, *underweight* is weight-for-age < -2 SD from the reference median, and *severe wasting* is the prevalence of weight-for-height < -3 SD from the reference median.

Progress in reducing undernutrition in the region has been slow, even in vibrant economies like India's. Some countries, such as Vietnam, have experienced large reductions in the past, but the reduction rates are slowing down, thus raising questions about the most effective and sustainable strategies for reducing undernutrition.

While undernutrition in Asia, as in other regions, stems from a series of interrelated factors rooted in poverty—including a lack of access to food, healthcare, safe water, and sanitation services, and inadequate child feeding/caring practices—there is a well-recognized gender dimension to the persistence of undernutrition and poverty in Asia. Gender inequality, social discrimination, and a lack of education—combined with the lack of access of poor households and communities to human, financial, social, natural, and physical capital—lead to a vicious cycle in which gender, undernutrition, and poverty reinforce each other. Addressing the problem of gender inequality is an important objective in its own right, one that is crucial to reducing undernutrition in Asia.

Gender and Nutrition in South Asia

What underlies the high child undernutrition rates in South Asia? Empirical research conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and others shows that the low status of women in South Asian countries, compared to other countries and regions of similar economic development, is partly responsible for low birth weight and the excessively high levels of childhood undernutrition in the region.² The low social status of women deprives them of the ability and the resources needed to make decisions regarding their children's health, nutrition, and education, and prevents them from accessing the services they need to protect their own health, nutrition, and survival. The poor nutritional and social status of women means that poverty and undernutrition become "inheritable," whereby chronically malnourished, small mothers lacking access to adequate prenatal, delivery, and postnatal care are at increased risk of delivering undernourished babies, who, in turn, are at greater risk of poor growth and development, suffer higher rates of infection, and face a greater probability of death from the synergistic effects of infection and undernutrition.

In order to address the intergenerational transmission of poverty and poor nutrition, it is essential to rapidly reduce undernutrition rates among the most vulnerable segments of the population—infants, children, women of reproductive age, and adolescent girls. Strategies for doing so should be evidence-based and should also ensure that the most salient determinants of poor nutrition—including gender, poverty, and social inclusion—are fully addressed. Concerted attention is also required to expand the scale, improve the targeting, and strengthen the implementation of existing programs and policies. In addition, it is crucial to build analytical and monitoring capacity and ensure that programs and policies are effectively pro-poor and pro-nutrition.

IFPRI's Research Program on Nutrition and Gender in Asia

Given the longstanding history of gender discrimination, particularly in South Asia, nutrition programs and policies need to focus on improving women's status. IFPRI research has shown that women's control over assets—such as their own human capital (education as well as health and nutrition) and social capital (connections to others), as well as financial assets, land, water, their houses, and communications technologies—increases their status and bargaining power within the household. The Nutrition and Gender Research Program will therefore join forces with IFPRI's program on Strengthening Women's Assets to identify effective ways of strengthening women's control over these critical assets and to improve the understanding of how assets contribute to status and the welfare of women and their children.

Program and policy research can help determine **what** to do to reduce undernutrition as well as **how** to achieve sustained reductions; specific research is needed on effective policy and program approaches that can deliver evidence-based nutrition interventions at scale, as well as on how to address the gender-related determinants of undernutrition in Asia. Therefore, IFPRI's New Delhi Office and the Food Consumption and Nutrition Division are developing a joint research program on nutrition and gender in Asia in collaboration with IFPRI's Gender Task Force and the Development Strategy and Governance Division. The

² P. Svedberg. 2007. Child Undernutrition in India and China. *IFPRI 2020 Focus Brief on the World's Poor and Hungry People*. Washington DC: IFPRI. (www.ifpri.org/2020Chinaconference/pdf/beijingbrief_Svedberg.pdf).

Nutrition and Gender Research Program aims to answer critical questions such as

1. What individual, household, community, and institutional factors contribute to the tremendous variability in undernutrition that is seen within countries? How does gender inequality contribute to this variability?
2. What programmatic actions can address gender and intra-household constraints related to poverty and nutrition?
3. What is the long-term impact of improving women's assets on women's status, household poverty, nutrition, and diet quality?
4. How can program and policy structures be used to address gender inequity and effectively deliver nutrition interventions to women and children at scale and in a cost-effective and sustainable way?

The Program proposes to answer these and other policy-relevant questions on nutrition and gender through the use of rigorous empirical research in combination with rich ethnographic research, operational research, and institutional assessments (see Box 1 for a list of ongoing projects). IFPRI's vast experience and strength in program evaluation will be invaluable in designing action research to examine the impact of innovative strategies to address nutrition and gender linkages and outcomes.

Partnerships, Dissemination, and Capacity Strengthening

The Nutrition and Gender Research Program is highly committed to developing strong local, regional, and global partnerships for research and capacity strengthening; program researchers work with local collaborators and a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, academic institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and development partners (see Box 2 for a list of current

Box 1. Current and Planned Research Projects

India

- Analyzing regional- and state-level variability in direct and indirect determinants of undernutrition (ongoing)
- Assessing the feasibility and impact of innovative approaches to strengthening the implementation quality and coverage of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program (proposed)

Bangladesh

- Assessing the feasibility of integrating nutrition actions into BRAC's Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) program (ongoing)
- Evaluating the long-term impacts of women-focused development interventions on women's empowerment, poverty, nutrition, and diet quality (ongoing)
- Evaluating the impact of collective action on women's ability to accumulate assets and improve individual and household well-being (ongoing)

Vietnam

- Strengthening the capacity of the provincial health system to address infant and young child nutrition (ongoing)

Box 2. Partnerships

- Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) (Bangladesh)
- Chronic Poverty Research Centre (Bangladesh)
- Data Analysis and Technical Assistance, Ltd. (DATA) (Bangladesh)
- International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) (Bangladesh)
- Public Health Foundation of India (India)
- UNICEF (India)
- Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (India)
- Aga Khan Foundation for Development (India)
- Save the Children (Vietnam)
- National Institute of Nutrition (Vietnam)

partners). In addition, the Program disseminates and shares research results through multiple channels, including peer-reviewed publications, policy briefs, and media channels.

Anticipated Impacts

This research program will generate a knowledge and evidence base that can be used in multiple regions to help reduce gender inequity and undernutrition among women and children. Through a focused and strategic research agenda that will generate international public goods, and through close links to policymakers and development partners, the Program expects to have a substantial impact on policies and programs to reduce undernutrition in the region.

For More Information About

- IFPRI's Nutrition and Gender Research Program, contact **Dr. Purnima Menon**, Research Fellow, Food Consumption and Nutrition Division & New Delhi Office (p.menon@cgiar.org)

- IFPRI's Gender Task Force and research on Strengthening Women's Assets, contact Senior Research Fellow **Dr. Ruth Meinzen-Dick** (r.meinzen-dick@cgiar.org) or Senior Research Fellow **Dr. Agnes Quisumbing** (a.quisumbing@cgiar.org)
- IFPRI's work on Governance and Gender, contact Senior Research Fellow **Dr. Regina Birner** (r.birner@cgiar.org)
- IFPRI's Food Consumption and Nutrition Division, contact Division Director **Dr. Marie Ruel** (m.ruel@cgiar.org)
- IFPRI's work in Asia, contact IFPRI's Director in Asia, **Dr. Ashok Gulati** (a.gulati@cgiar.org).



IFPRI HEADQUARTERS

International Food Policy Research Institute
2033 K Street, NW • Washington, DC 20006-1002 USA

Tel: +1-202-862-5600 • Skype: IFPRIhomeoffice
Fax: +1-202-467-4439 • E-mail: ifpri@cgiar.org

www.ifpri.org

IFPRI-NEW DELHI

International Food Policy Research Institute
CG Block, NASC Complex, PUSA
New Delhi 110 012 India

Tel: +91 11.2584.6565 / 6566 / 6567
Fax: +91 11.2584.8008
E-mail: ifpri-NewDelhi@cgiar.org