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**Women and Food Security:  
A Comparison of South Asia and Southeast Asia**

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## Abstract

Women are a social group vulnerable to food insecurity despite being primary actors in the food chain. The problem of food insecurity among women is especially rampant in parts of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The drivers of this vulnerability range from economic to social, cultural, legal and psychological factors. Vulnerability to food insecurity has a definite effect on the health of women and children, as well as social and economic impacts in terms of fewer opportunities for education and greater instances of early marriages. A comparison of indicators used to assess vulnerabilities of women in the two regions shows that the overall situation in South Asia is worse than that in Southeast Asia. There is also a conspicuous difference in terms of the relative weight of the drivers behind this vulnerability. The primary securitising actors at the national, regional and international levels have to play an individual and collective role in rectifying the situation. It is equally mandatory for regional groupings such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to provide a sound systemic environment for individual countries to work towards achieving these objectives.

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## **Biography**

Arpita Mathur is Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, where she is involved in teaching graduate courses as well as training programmes.

She received her MA, MPhil and PhD in International Relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. Before joining RSIS, she was Associate Fellow with the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, India (2001–2008). She has also been a recipient of the Okita Memorial Fellowship and the Japan Foundation Fellowship.

Her research interests include Japan and East Asia, as well as food and water security in South Asia. She has contributed book chapters and published articles in peer-reviewed journals and working papers.

Food has been designated a basic human right and also forms an essential component of human security.<sup>1</sup> It is an issue which is of significance to Asia, which houses two-thirds of the world's poor and hungry.<sup>2</sup> The high proportion of people who are food insecure seems, on the face of it, inexplicable given that Asian countries rank among the top 10 rice producing areas of the world.<sup>3</sup> There is a need then to recognise that availability of food is only one factor affecting food security; other forces – social, economic, cultural – play a powerful role as well, and among these, gender inequality demands increasing attention.

A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report entitled *Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific 2010* notes that gender inequality – such as discrimination and neglect – is threatening the very survival of women in the Asia-Pacific region. Speaking at the global launch of the report in India, UNDP administrator Helen Clark stated that 'where we see progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) lagging the most is where the needs and status of women and girls are given low priority.'<sup>4</sup> Several indicators such as the Global Gender Gap Index also highlight female insecurity and vulnerability as a social group on various fronts.

In Asia, like elsewhere in the world, women are the primary actors in the food chain. The link between their vulnerability as a social group and their level of food security is thus a question worth analysing. This paper explores this relationship by comparing the cases of the women of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The paper begins by defining critical terms such as food security and vulnerability. It then goes on to delineate the drivers of food insecurity for women in the region, and the manifestations of and fallouts from such insecurity. Finally, it assesses policies designed to assuage the situation. The paper will draw conclusions from the data available on South Asia and Southeast Asia<sup>5</sup> and compare them in terms of the food insecurity of women, making it a 'society-focused' study of the food problem, rather

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<sup>1</sup> Food security has been earmarked as an essential pillar of human security by the *Human Development Report 1994* brought out by the UN. For more details, see: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 'Chapter 2: New Dimensions of Human Security', in *Human Development Report 1994* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 24–8, [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr\\_1994\\_en\\_chap2.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_1994_en_chap2.pdf). Also, according to article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, everyone has the right to 'adequate food ... (and) to be free from hunger'.

<sup>2</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), as cited in Michael Sheinkmann, 'Hunger in Asia and the Pacific Region' (presentation at the *Using Data in Evidence-based Decision-making: Launch of DevInfo Version 6.0 in Asia and the Pacific* event in Siem Reap, Cambodia, 2–5 February 2010), <http://www.unescap.org/Stat/di6launch/session4.1-WFP.pdf>. The FAO has identified the South Asian countries of Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Southeast Asian countries of Lao PDR, Cambodia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Timor-Leste as low income food deficit countries.

<sup>3</sup> These countries are India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. For the top 10 rice producing countries, see: Rice Trade, 'Major Rice Producing Countries' (Rice Trade, n.d.), <http://www.rice-trade.com/major-rice-producing-countries.html>

<sup>4</sup> Helen Clarke, 'Remarks at the 2010 Asia-Pacific Human Development Report Launch', 8 March 2010, <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2010/march/helen-clark-remarks-at-the-2010-asia-pacific-human-development-report-launch.en>

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this paper, South Asia includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives, while Southeast Asia includes Singapore, Malaysia, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Timor-Leste, the Philippines and Indonesia. Myanmar has been excluded from the discussion due to the lack of availability of several indicators.

than the so-called 'nature-focused' approach.<sup>6</sup> This paper argues that women are a vulnerable group in terms of food resource allocation within the household and society in general. It is, however, quite clear that the situation of women in Southeast Asia is relatively better than that in South Asia.

The task of understanding and evaluating women and their vulnerability with regard to their entitlement to food is fraught with complexities. This exercise strengthens and does not take away from the significance of integrating and contemplating the nature of the role gender plays in deprivation, exclusion, decision-making and power relations – all of which have an impact on the vulnerability of women as a social group when it comes to food insecurity. The most pressing contemporary need is the gradual dilution, minimisation and ultimate negation of factors alienating and depriving them of this.

### Key Concepts Defined

Before attempting to answer questions regarding women and food security in Asia, it is prudent to define the major terms involved. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), food security 'exists when all people at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.'<sup>7</sup> The key concepts thus include *access* (through purchases, exchange or own production), *availability* (in terms of quality and quantity) and *utilisation* (the body's capacity to absorb and use food consumed).<sup>8</sup> It is clear, therefore, that food security encompasses not just the quantity of food, but also access and utilisation, both of which play a noteworthy role in understanding the vulnerability of women.

Any study related to women has gender as a basis for evaluation. The twin concepts of power and gender – the relative deprivation of women; their lack of authority and decision-making powers; and their weak political, economic and social power all stand out in sharp

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<sup>6</sup> The 'nature-focused' approach focuses on natural sciences and engineering, relating the food problem to technical issues of different kinds. For more on this, read: Amartya Sen, 'The Food Problem: Theory and Policy', *Third World Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1982), p. 447.

<sup>7</sup> For this and other definitions of food security, see: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 'Food Security: Concepts and Measurement', in *Trade Reforms and Food Security: Conceptualizing the Linkages* (Rome: FAO, 2003), <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4671e/y4671e06.htm>. Household food security relates to the application of these concepts to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern. The definition of household food security is from Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), *Regional Strategies and Programme for Food Security in the SAARC Member States Final Report* (Bangkok and Kathmandu: FAO and SAARC Secretariat, August 2008), p. 1, <http://nepal.usaid.gov/downloads/all-downloads/category/12-food-security-library.html?download=71%3A%20saarc-regional-strategies-and-programme-for-food-security-in-the-saarc-member-states>

<sup>8</sup> For this and more, see Christian Romer Lovendal and Marco Knowles, 'Tomorrow's Hunger: A Framework for Analysing Vulnerability to Food Security', in Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis, Shabd S. Acharya and Benjamin Davis, *Food Security: Indicators, Measurement, and the Impact of Trade Openness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 63–4. Also see: Maren Egedorf et al., *Improving Food Security Monitoring and Vulnerability Assessment Capabilities* (USAID, January 2008), p. 9, [http://www.usaid.gov/ao/foodsec\\_report\\_eng.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/ao/foodsec_report_eng.pdf)

relief against the domination by males. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles and socially learned behaviours and expectations associated with males and females.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of vulnerability combines exposure to a threat with susceptibility or sensitivity to its adverse consequences.<sup>10</sup> Chambers defined vulnerability as ‘the exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty coping with them. Vulnerability thus has two sides: an external side of risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject, and an internal side which is defenceless, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss.’<sup>11</sup> Vulnerability of women to food insecurity could be perceived as the tendency towards lack of access, availability and utilisation of food because of social, cultural and economic factors, which makes it difficult for them to procure, use and consume this basic human requirement in order to lead a healthy life. It is pertinent to add a disclaimer here that the women under consideration in this paper are not a homogenous category. Nevertheless, the data do support the conclusion that women’s vulnerability to food insecurity is a problem that is prevalent, affecting a large proportion of women in South Asia and Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup>

### Food Security of Women in Asia

The contribution of women in the food cycle, from ‘farm to plate’, has been well chronicled and does not need reiteration here.<sup>13</sup> At a time when food security is arguably one of the most critical challenges facing the world, Asian women are a group facing a significant level of vulnerability to this basic essential. The problem is found to be particularly acute in rural parts of Asia especially in South Asian countries such as Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and parts of Southeast Asia as well. This quandary is endemic at two levels: at the family-unit level, women as deprived individual family members become subjects of concern; and at the societal level, the fallouts of this vulnerability of women to food insecurity pose

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<sup>9</sup> World Bank, *Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice*, World Bank Policy Research Report 21776 (New York: World Bank and Oxford University Press, January 2001), p. 34, [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2001/03/01/000094946\\_01020805393496/Rendered/PDF/multi\\_page.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2001/03/01/000094946_01020805393496/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Devereux, ‘Livelihood Insecurity and Social Protection: A Reemerging Issue in Rural Development’, *Development Policy Review* 19, no. 4 (2001), p. 508.

<sup>11</sup> R. Chambers, ‘Vulnerability, Coping and Policy?’, *IDS Bulletin* 20, no. 2 (1989), pp. 1–7, as cited in Hans G. Bohle, Thomas E. Downing and Michael J. Watts, ‘Climate Change and Social Vulnerability: Toward a Sociology and Geography of Food Insecurity’, *Global Environmental Change* 4, no. 1 (1994), p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> This is evident from the data on malnutrition among women and ownership rights as well as the gender-related development index (GDI) which encompasses the dimensions of life expectancy, adult literacy and income.

<sup>13</sup> Women are food producers, work on farms and grow crops. They participate in resource management, facilitating food access through purchase and distribution within the household which requires usage of time and income. Lastly, women are responsible for nutrition in a majority of homes, being decision-makers on what to buy and how to prepare the food, apart from being responsible for the collection of fuel. For this and more on women and food security, see: Pan American Health Organization, ‘Gender and Food Security’, Fact Sheet of the Program on Women, Health and Development (Washington, DC: Pan American Health Organization, n.d.), p. 1, <http://www.paho.org/english/ad/ge/foodsecurity.PDF>. Other insights are offered by: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), *Women: The Key to Food Security: Looking into the Household* (Washington, DC: IFPRI, n.d.), <http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pubs/ib/ib3.pdf> and Marilee Karl, ‘Inseparable: The Crucial Role of Women in Food Security Revisited’, *Women in Action* no. 1 (2009), pp. 8–22, [http://www.isiswomen.org/downloads/wia/wia-2009-i/1wia09\\_00aFeatures\\_karl.pdf](http://www.isiswomen.org/downloads/wia/wia-2009-i/1wia09_00aFeatures_karl.pdf)

challenges. The drivers are primarily economic in nature. Also significant are the patterns of social interactions, cultural beliefs and practices as well as psychological factors – these often do not coalesce to grant women the kind of place that they deserve in society, or at times even the dignity they deserve as human beings. What complicates the situation is the fact that Asia is extremely diverse in terms of religion, geography, cultural practices and levels of economic development. These are variables which have both a direct and an indirect bearing on gender biases within South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Martha C. Nussbaum's ideas on vital human capabilities intrinsic to every human being are useful for illustrating this point. Nussbaum has spoken eloquently in favour of social justice and built upon Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's conception of the same, which encompasses the gender issue. Sen has stressed the fact that even with a sufficient output of food, there may be people who are not able to gain access to that food. A persuasive case could be made that women fall into this group. While attempting to delineate what really constitutes a minimum level of capability, Nussbaum enumerates 10 factors or vital human capabilities embodying universal values, or basic human rights everyone should possess. Of these, the following have a direct connect with a woman's food security – life, bodily health, the ability to make informed decisions backed by education, self-respect, property rights on an equal basis with others and the ability to hold property (both land and movable goods).<sup>14</sup>

The linkages between these basic human capabilities and the vulnerabilities of women in South and Southeast Asia to food insecurity are manifold. Being primary procurers and distributors but not necessarily commensurate consumers of food exposes these women to a number of risks. The lack of adequate and nutritionally rich food directly affects their overall health (including their reproductive health). These problems trickle down to the extent that children born to such women are malnourished, underdeveloped and prone to diseases, aggravating these women's problems. They also face limitations in their ability to pursue self-enrichment through education or to engage in income-generating activities as much of their time is taken up by cooking and taking care of the family. In addition, they often lack sound legal support either due to unequal land ownership and property rights laws or ineffectiveness in the practice and implementation of existing laws. These women are not even aware of the kinds of risks and dangers posed by their own food insecurity, not just to their lives, but also to those of their families and the population at large. Presenting an example from South Asia, Nussbaum related the experience of women from the state of Andhra Pradesh (India) who were severely malnourished and living in an area without any access to clean water supplies, and who did not feel the need to protest or express anger about their plight since they knew no other way. This stemmed from the fact that until the time that the government introduced a programme to raise their awareness and

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<sup>14</sup> 'Life' refers to the ability to live a normal-length life, one without any possibility of premature death or such a reduction in the length of one's life that it is not worth living. 'Bodily health' refers to the ability to enjoy good health, including reproductive health, through access to adequate nourishment and shelter. The 'ability to use the senses to imagine, think and reason' in an informed way is cultivated by an adequate education, and this is not limited to literacy. 'Affiliation' refers to having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation, that is, being treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. 'Control over one's environment, both political and material' refers to having equal property rights and the ability to hold property (land and movable goods). For more details, see Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice', *Feminist Economics* 9, nos 2–3, January 2003, pp. 40–2.

consciousness about cleanliness and health, they did not feel dissatisfied with their situation.<sup>15</sup>

### **Drivers of 'Vulnerability' of Women in South and Southeast Asia**

As mentioned earlier, women have a critical role in food security. According to available data, Asian women spend much of their time as caretakers, undertaking tasks such as preparing meals, which takes up as much as an hour and 45 minutes of their time, and cleaning tasks, which takes up an average of another 45 minutes.<sup>16</sup> Men, on the contrary, tend to spend less time on housework; for example, in Cambodia and Pakistan, men devoted less than one hour to it.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, women remain biased against and deprived when it comes to the consumption of the food, thus affecting their health and well-being. Health encompasses an absence of disease or infirmity as well as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being.<sup>18</sup> The central variable of power relations, and the inherent biases within the power structure, which in turn brackets identities and practices within the gender system, is one of the major originators of this injustice.

A few common denominators emerge on women and their food insecurity in both regions, of which poverty, social systems, and cultural and psychological conditioning stand out. These issues become magnified in situations such as natural disasters (floods, drought and climate change in general). For instance, the load placed on women to provide adequate and nutritious food to all members of the family increases further during droughts, when resources are limited. They have to work harder to collect water and fuel for cooking, further affecting their health. Climate change will also affect women if agricultural production falls, adding to the emotional and psychological stress experienced by those women.<sup>19</sup>

Another significant variable at play is a legal one, that is, the domestic inheritance laws prevailing within the constituent countries of these regions. Unequal ownership rights could be manifested in two ways – one, in some countries, the law does not give women equal rights to property ownership, and two, at times, even if equal rights are provided for in the legislation, they are not effective in practice on the ground.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Symposium on Amartya Sen's Philosophy: 5 Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options', *Economics and Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2001), p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Statistics Division, *The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics* (New York: Department of Social and Economic Affairs of the UN, 2010), p. 101, [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/Worldswomen/WW\\_full%20report\\_color.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/Worldswomen/WW_full%20report_color.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Constitution, the definition of health is not merely restricted to absence of disease and infirmity. For details, see WHO, 'Constitution of the World Health Organization', signed on 22 July 1946, <http://apps.who.int/gb/bd/PDF/bd47/EN/constitution-en.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> For more on this, see this case study: Yianna Lambrou and Sibyl Nelson, *Farmers in a Changing Climate: Does Gender Matter? Food Security in Andhra Pradesh, India* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2010), <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1721e/i1721e00.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> It is not possible to deal extensively and comprehensively with this aspect here, as the complexity and diversity of the laws across the constituent countries of South and Southeast Asia would require a more lengthy discussion than the extent of this working paper allows.



## The Economic Aspect

Poverty is one of the most significant factors determining the food insecurity of women in South and Southeast Asia. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) acknowledges that 'in situations of poverty women have the least access to food, health, education, training and opportunities for employment and other needs.'<sup>21</sup> According to World Bank data, South Asia remains the poorest region in the world; those living in 'extreme poverty' (defined as those living below the USD1.25-a-day poverty line) stands at 42.5 per cent.<sup>22</sup> The figure for those considered 'vulnerable to or living in extreme poverty' (defined as those living below the USD2-a-day poverty line) is 75.6 per cent.<sup>23</sup>

Even in parts of the region exhibiting rapid economic growth, poverty levels are high. In India, for instance, an appalling 35.1 per cent of the population live in 'extreme poverty', according to 2004 numbers (Table 1). The statistics for other parts of South Asia are just as grim, with 36.3 per cent (2005) living in 'extreme poverty' in Bangladesh and 24.7 per cent (2003) in Nepal. Unlike the rest of Asia, where poverty declined, in 2005, there were about 550 million of the 'extremely poor' in South Asia and 978 million of the 'vulnerable poor'.<sup>24</sup> Sri Lanka was the exception, with only 4.8 per cent of the 'extremely poor', according to 2002 figures (Table 1). As conceded in a report by the FAO and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2008, 'Food security remains a major development challenge in SAARC countries because of the low purchasing power of the majority of the population.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Division for the Advancement of Women, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Full Text of the Convention in English*, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>

<sup>22</sup> Armin Bauer, Rana Hasan, Rhoda Magsombol et al., *The World Bank's New Poverty Data: Implications for the Asian Development Bank*, ADB Sustainable Development Working Paper Series, no. 2 (Manila: Asian Development Bank), p. 8, <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Presentations/New-Poverty-Estimates/Poverty-Data-Implications.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> FAO and SAARC, *Regional Strategies and Programme for Food Security*, p. 5.

Table 1: Poverty in Asia.

Region/Country	Proportion of Population below the Poverty Line (%)			
	USD1 (Purchasing Power Parity, PPP) a Day		National	
	1990	Latest Year	1990	Latest Year
<b>A: South Asia</b>				
Bangladesh	34.4	36.3 (2005)	51.6 (1991)	40.0 (2005)
Bhutan	–	–	–	23.2 (2007)
India	44.3	35.1 (2004)	36.0 (1993)	27.5 (2004)
Maldives	–	<2.0 (2004)	–	21.0 (2004)
Nepal	45.7	24.7 (2003)	42.0 (1995)	30.9 (2004)
Sri Lanka	3.8	4.8 (2002)	26.1 (1991)	22.7 (2002)
<b>B: Southeast Asia</b>				
Cambodia	32.5	18.5 (2004)	39.0 (1994)	34.7 (2004)
Indonesia	20.6	4.0 (2005)	15.1 (1990)	16.6 (2007)
Lao PDR	53.0	28.8 (2002)	45.0 (1993)	32.7 (2003)
Malaysia	<2.0	<2.0 (2004)	16.5 (1990)	5.1 (2002)
Myanmar	–	–	–	26.6 (2001)
Philippines	20.2	13.6 (2006)	33.0 (1997)	33.0 (2006)
Singapore	–	–	–	–
Thailand	10.2	<2.0 (2002)	18.0 (1990)	9.8 (2002)
Vietnam	50.8	8.4 (2004)	50.9 (1993)	19.5 (2004)

Source: Extracted from Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2008* (Manila: ADB, 2008), p. 62,

[http://www.adb.org/documents/books/key\\_indicators/2008/pdf/key-indicators-2008.pdf](http://www.adb.org/documents/books/key_indicators/2008/pdf/key-indicators-2008.pdf)

The situation is marginally better in Southeast Asia. Indonesia and Vietnam have succeeded in reducing 'extreme poverty', while Malaysia and Thailand have virtually eradicated this menace.<sup>26</sup> According to the World Bank, although the number of the 'extremely poor' has decreased, vulnerability to poverty is still a major problem. Parts of Southeast Asia including Lao PDR, Cambodia and the Philippines grapple with a situation where a considerable proportion of the population falls below the poverty line.<sup>27</sup> This quandary is revealed in a remark made by a Cambodian woman who stated that, 'While we do not have much food to eat, it still takes a long time to think of how we can use the available food to make sure no one is hungry after eating.'<sup>28</sup>

This facet of food insecurity cannot be overcome simply with an increase in food production. Poverty impacts the ability to access food at both the household/individual and the national levels. An example of this can be drawn from India in the 1990s: it was exporting 3–4x10<sup>6</sup> tons (t) of rice per year, even as 200 million Indians went hungry due to lack of purchasing

<sup>26</sup> Armin Bauer et al., *The World Bank's New Poverty Data*, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Refer to Table 1 for further details.

<sup>28</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB), 'Chapter 6: Women and Poverty in Cambodia', in *Participatory Poverty Assessment in Cambodia* (Manila: ADB, 2001), p. 39,

[http://www.adb.org/documents/books/participatory\\_poverty/chap6.pdf](http://www.adb.org/documents/books/participatory_poverty/chap6.pdf)

power.<sup>29</sup> Considering that the poor and food insecure spend 50 to 60 per cent of their income on food, the increase in prices of food, both globally and regionally, has only exacerbated the situation. The availability and adequate supply of food suffers with price rise due to fallouts such as export curbs and hoarding. Accessibility of food, or the possession of sufficient resources to obtain appropriate food for a nutritionally balanced diet, is affected, with particularly negative impacts on vulnerable groups such as the rural and urban poor, and women and children. Difficulties faced by women include insufficient quantities of food and the ability to maintain a nutritionally balanced diet.

The impact of poverty on the food security of women, both in South Asia and Southeast Asia, has to be studied in conjunction with other variables such as the preference for males and the social and cultural status of women.

### **The Socio-Cultural and Psychological Aspects: The Importance of Sex Preferences**

The problem of the preference for males is prevalent in many parts of Asia. One of the most significant measures related to the issue of sex preferences is that of 'missing women', a term coined by Sen to refer to gender bias in mortality. His work suggests that the preference for sons over daughters has led to some 100 million 'missing women' in South Asia, East Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. This is a result of a number of variables such as sex-selective abortion, girls and women experiencing poorer access to nutrition and healthcare, and the abandonment of female infants.<sup>30</sup> The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data in Table 2A clearly demonstrate the high level of son preference in South Asia with the exception of Sri Lanka.

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<sup>29</sup> Gurdev S. Khush, 'Plenary Lecture: Challenges for Meeting the Global Food and Nutrient Needs in the New Millennium', *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 60 (2001), p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> For more on missing women, see Amartya Sen, 'More than 100 Million Women Are Missing', *The New York Review of Books* 37, no. 20 (1990), <http://ucatlans.ucsc.edu/gender/Sen100M.html>

Table 2: Social institutions and gender index (SIGI).

Region/Country	SIGI Composite Index Value	Family Code Value	Son Preference Value	Ownership Value
<b>A: South Asia</b>				
Bhutan	0.162508	0.205125	0.75	0
India	0.318112	0.606553	0.75	0.522248
Sri Lanka	0.059141	0.234043	0	0.348742
Nepal	0.167225	0.367792	0.5	0.522248
Bangladesh	0.244648	0.58334	0.5	0.522248
Pakistan	0.283243	0.378214	0.75	0.522248
<b>B: Southeast Asia</b>				
Indonesia	0.127761	0.354055	0	0
Cambodia	0.0220188	0.14433	0	0
Lao PDR	0.0357687	0.320343	0	0.171512
Malaysia	0.321631	NA	0	0
Philippines	0.0078831	0.0405301	0	0.173506
Singapore	0.0152573	0.0997471	0	0
Thailand	0.010677	0.156489	0	0
Vietnam	0.0300619	0.032424	0	0
Timor-Leste	NA	NA	0.25	0.522248
<p><i>Notes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The SIGI draws on 12 social institution variables from the OECD Gender, Institutions and Development (GID) database. These are grouped into 5 categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Family code'. This refers to institutions that influence the decision-making power of women in households.</li> <li>'Physical integrity'. This comprises different indicators on violence against women.</li> <li>'Son preference'. This reflects the economic valuation of women, based on the variable of missing women, which measures gender bias in mortality due to sex selective abortions or insufficient care given to baby girls.</li> <li>'Civil liberties'. This captures the freedom of social participation of women.</li> <li>'Ownership rights'. This refers to access to land, bank loans and property other than land and to credit.</li> </ul> </li> <li>The index value 0 corresponds to no inequality and 1 to complete inequality. For countries in which no or only a minority of women are affected, the score is 0. At the other extreme, for countries in which all or a majority of women are affected, the score is 1.</li> </ul> <p>For more details on coding, see <a href="http://genderindex.org/content/social-institutions-variables">http://genderindex.org/content/social-institutions-variables</a>  For more on these values and further details, see <a href="http://genderindex.org/countries">http://genderindex.org/countries</a></p>				

Source: OECD Development Centre, *Social Institutions and Gender Index* (Paris: OECD Development Centre, n.d.), <http://my.genderindex.org/>

Preference for males at the household level has two implications. The first is a direct one as male members of the family have greater access to food – quantitatively and in terms of nutritional richness. As noted by Bina Agarwal, in the intra-family distribution of resources such as food in a household, women are expected to eat the least, to partake of the leftovers

and eat after all others have eaten.<sup>31</sup> An International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) study on the distribution of food consumption in rural households in Bangladesh clearly proved that adult women received a lesser portion of preferred food, while their consumption of animal and fish products were equal to that of preschool boys.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in Punjab (India), studies have found a sharp difference between the calorie intake of men and women, with women consuming about 1,000 calories fewer than men.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, the preference for sons sets off a vicious cycle of poverty. Families persist in having children until they reach the desired number of males, a fertility pattern which depletes the already limited resources in a family even further. It is unfortunate that women themselves become complicit in this and other practices that lead to their own food insecurity.

Male domination in society is more likely to occur in so-called classic patriarchal societies such as India and Pakistan, where sons 'are a woman's most critical resource'.<sup>34</sup> Such societies are characterised not just by the authority of the senior man over everyone in the family (including younger men), but also by the cyclical nature of women's power in the household, particularly in terms of the authority of older women over younger ones (especially daughters-in-law). In many ways, the deprivations and hardships that older women experience are passed on and also superseded by their control and authority over their daughters-in-law.<sup>35</sup> A simple superimposition of this framework on the issue of food security makes it evident that there is a high likelihood of women in such societies perpetuating customs and practices related to food – including the preference given to males or sons – being transferred across generations, leading to the same problems recurring in the next generation.

Southeast Asia fares relatively better when it comes to sex preferences.<sup>36</sup> The most recent OECD data do not show incidences of 'missing women' in the region (expressed through the data on son preference, see Table 2A), except in the case of Timor-Leste. According to the social institutions and gender index (SIGI), most South Asian countries exhibit consistent inequalities including Nepal, Bangladesh, with even greater inequalities seen in Bhutan, India and Pakistan. Southeast Asian countries, on the other hand, show no inequalities except in the case of Timor-Leste.<sup>37</sup> A comparison of the rankings by country for South Asia

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<sup>31</sup> Bina Agarwal, 'Gender, Inequality, Cooperation and Environmental Sustainability', as cited in Amitava Mukherjee, 'Eight Food Insecurities Faced by Women and Girl Children: Four Steps that Could Make a Difference, with Special Reference to South Asia (An Incomplete Draft)', Paper for *The Regional Conference on Child Poverty and Disparities at the Invitation of UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia*, Kathmandu, Nepal, 6–8 May 2009, p. 16, <http://www.unapcaem.org/publication/8FoodInsecu.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> IFPRI, *Women: The Key to Food Security*, n.d., p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Amitava Mukherjee, 'Eight Food Insecurities', 2009, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3 (1988), p. 280

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278–9.

<sup>36</sup> A relatively older study concluded that there are two schools of thought on sex preference in Southeast Asia, based on social and cultural factors such as those arising under the Confucian patriarchal system. According to this study, there is a general Oriental pattern of preference for sons in Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam, even as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand do not have such biases. Kua Wongboonsin and Vipana Prachuabmoh Ruffolo, 'Sex Preference for Children in Thailand and Some Other South-East Asian Countries', *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 10, no. 3 (1995), pp. 43–62, <http://www.un.org/Depts/escap/pop/journal/v10n3a3.htm>

<sup>37</sup> In terms of the exact measure on a scale of 0–1, whereby the value 0 showed no inequalities and 1, maximum inequality, most countries of South Asia are valued at 0.5 (Nepal, Bangladesh) and above (Bhutan, India,

(Table 2A) and Southeast Asia (Table 2B) lucidly brings out the fact that there is a relatively greater preference for males in South Asia.

Psychological aspects run along similar gender-biased lines, as demonstrated by the manner in which the distribution of roles in the collection, preparation and distribution of food takes place in both regions. The imprint of this son-biased psychology, as it were, is likely to be prominent in classically patriarchal societies such as India and other parts of South Asia. The vulnerability of women also arises out of what their, as Sen terms it, 'adaptive preferences',<sup>38</sup> along with their acceptance of the 'legitimacy of the unequal order'.<sup>39</sup> There is an overall tendency by these women to overlook their personal interests, thereby affecting their desires and satisfaction.<sup>40</sup>

As discussed earlier, women themselves can become an 'implicit accomplice' of the system, perpetuating existing socially constructed sex preferences even where they are detrimental to their own food security. The same has been noted in relation to the psychological aspects of the problem of sex preferences. Women typically define wellness through the prism of the welfare of the family, at the risk of ignoring their own health and welfare. An example of this attitude was observed in a study conducted in India whereby the mother deliberately ate less to enable men, especially the younger men, and the children in the household to eat better – a phenomenon which has been called 'maternal buffering'.<sup>41</sup> Although traditional patterns and emotional and psychological orientations are changing today, yet in 'the globally hegemonic pattern, care and attachment to young children is the business of women, especially mothers; while fathers as bread winners are expected to be emotionally distant'.<sup>42</sup>

## Manifestations and Fallouts

### *Impact on Health*

#### *Malnourishment and life expectancy indicators*

A number of indicators and measurements have been used to measure and quantify food insecurity. One indicator defines the food insecure as people consuming less than the nutritional target of 2,100 calories per day.<sup>43</sup> Malnourishment leads to problems such as greater vulnerability to diseases and lower levels of reproductive health, and could translate

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Pakistan at 0.75), whereas those of Southeast Asia are all pegged at value 0 except Timor-Leste which shows a marginally higher value of 0.25, which is still considerably lower than all its South Asian counterparts.

<sup>38</sup> The term describes women who do not desire some basic human good because they have long been habituated to its absence or told that it is not for such as them. For more details, see: Nussbaum, 'Symposium on Amartya Sen's Philosophy', p. 79.

<sup>39</sup> Miriam Teschl and Flavio Comim, 'Adaptive Preferences and Capabilities: Some Preliminary Conceptual Explorations', *Review of Social Economy* 63, no. 2 (2005), p. 234.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>41</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP), *Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security in Asia and the Pacific*, Theme Study 2009 (Bangkok: ESCAP, 2009), p. 32, [www.unescap.org/65/documents/Theme-Study/st-escap-2535.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/65/documents/Theme-Study/st-escap-2535.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender: Short Introductions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 82.

<sup>43</sup> As cited in: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 'US Department of Agriculture Releases Annual Global Food Security Assessment', *Global Food for Thought* (blog), 14 July 2010, <http://globalfoodforthought.typepad.com/global-food-for-thought/2010/07/usda-releases-annual-global-food-security-assessment.html>

into lower life expectancy at birth. The World Health Organization (WHO) data on body mass index (BMI) seen in Table 3 and the gender-related development index (GDI) which provides, among other variables, gender-segregated data on life expectancy at birth, seen in Table 4, could be used as two significant measures of the state of health of women.

Table 3: Malnutrition in women.

Region/Country (Year)	Prevalence (%)			
	BMI<17 kg/m <sup>2</sup>	BMI<18.5 kg/m <sup>2</sup>	BMI≥25 kg/m <sup>2</sup>	BMI≥30 kg/m <sup>2</sup>
<b>A: South Asia</b>				
India (2005–2006)	15.8	35.6	12.6	2.8
Nepal (2006)	–	24.4	8.6	0.9
Pakistan (1990–1994)	15.4	31.6	17.5	5.2
Sri Lanka (2006–2007)	6.4	16.2	31.2	7.2
<b>B: Southeast Asia</b>				
Indonesia (2001)	–	–	17.8	3.6
Lao PDR (2006)	4.3	14.5	14	3
Philippines (2003)	–	14.2	27.3	5.7
Singapore (2007–2008)	–	14.6	21.7	4.7
Thailand (year not available)	–	6.6	37.1	10.2
Timor-Leste (2003)	14.8	37.7	3.1	–
Vietnam (2000)	9.6	28.3	6.2	0.6

**Notes:**

- BMI is a simple index of weight-to-height commonly used to classify underweight, overweight and obesity in adults. It is defined as the weight in kilogrammes divided by the square of the height in metres (kg/m<sup>2</sup>).
  - BMI <16.0 kg/m<sup>2</sup> is associated with markedly increased risk of ill health, poor physical performance, lethargy and even death. This cut-off point is therefore a valid extreme limit.
  - BMI <17.0 kg/m<sup>2</sup> indicates moderate to severe thinness which is linked to clear-cut illnesses in adults, making it a reasonable value to choose as a cut-off point for moderate risk.
  - BMI <18.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup> indicates underweight. It is a reasonable value for use pending further comprehensive studies. The proportion of the population with a low BMI that is considered a public health problem is closely linked to the resources available for correcting the problem, the stability of the environment and government priorities. About 3–5 per cent of a healthy population have a BMI of less than 18.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup>.
  - BMI 18.5–24.9 kg/m<sup>2</sup> indicates normal weight.
  - BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m<sup>2</sup> indicates overweight.
  - BMI ≥ 30.0 kg/m<sup>2</sup> indicates obesity.

- Prevalence cut-off values which are of public health significance

Adult BMI <18.5 kg/m <sup>2</sup> (underweight)	5.9%	Low prevalence (Warning sign, monitoring required)
	10–19%	Medium prevalence (Poor situation)
	20–39%	High prevalence (Serious situation)
	≥40%	Very high prevalence (Critical situation)

Sources: For details on data interpretation, see World Health Organization (WHO), Nutrition Landscape Information System (NLIS) Country Profile Indicators Interpretation Guide (Geneva: WHO, 2010), [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241599955\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241599955_eng.pdf); for country-wise data, refer to World Health Organization (WHO), 'Nutrition Landscape Information System (NLIS) Country Profile', *Nutrition for Health and Development* (Geneva: Department for Nutrition and Health Development of the WHO, n.d.), <http://apps.who.int/nutrition/landscape/report.aspx?>

In South Asia, women in Sri Lanka and the Maldives have the highest life expectancy at birth, while those in India, Bhutan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal are in the relatively lower rungs (Table 4). A direct statement on the physical health of women is the available figures on the body mass index (BMI) of women from countries of South Asia (Table 3). These reveal that the majority of Sri Lankan women are normal to overweight. This stands in stark contrast to countries such as India, Pakistan and Nepal, where a majority of women are underweight, that is, they have a BMI of less than 18.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2004 in India found that, compared to boys, a higher percentage of girls (49 per cent) were underweight.<sup>44</sup> This high prevalence of underweight women and girls is considered a serious situation by WHO standards (see notes under Table 3). A less nutritious and diversified diet is also a result of lack of awareness and education. There is a need to educate families on the basics of a good diet, and this is even more critical where families have limited resources.

Table 4: Life expectancy at birth of women and adult literacy.

<b>Region/Country</b>	<b>Life Expectancy at Birth (Years)</b> (2007)	<b>Adult Literacy Rate (%)</b> Age 15 and above (1999–2007)
<b>A: South Asian Women</b>		
Sri Lanka	77.9	89.1
Maldives	72.7	97.1
India	64.9	54.5
Bhutan	67.6	38.7
Pakistan	66.5	39.6
Bangladesh	66.7	48.0
Nepal	66.9	43.6
<b>B: Southeast Asian Women</b>		
Singapore	82.6	91.6
Malaysia	76.6	89.6
Thailand	72.1	92.6
Philippines	73.9	93.7
Vietnam	76.1	86.9
Indonesia	72.5	88.8
Lao PDR	65.9	63.2
Cambodia	62.3	67.7
Timor-Leste	61.5	–

Source: 'Table J: Gender-related development index and its components' in United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2009: Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 181–4.

Southeast Asian dynamics on the malnourishment of women are as follows. The life expectancy of women is high in countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, and relatively lower in Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia. It should be noted, however, that except for Lao PDR, Cambodia and Timor-Leste, all the aforementioned Southeast Asian

<sup>44</sup> South Asia Regional Development Marketplace (DM) on Nutrition, 'Family and Community Approaches to Improve Infant and Young Child Nutrition: Overview of Nutrition in South Asia' (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2009), p. 1, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOUTHASIAEXT/Resources/223546-1171488994713/3455847-1232124140958/5748939-1234285802791/nutritionsouthasiafeb2009.pdf>



countries have higher life expectancy than their South Asian counterparts. Levels of malnourishment are most alarming in Timor-Leste, Vietnam and Lao PDR which not only have a high percentage of underweight women, but also have a section of women with a BMI of less than 17 kg/m<sup>2</sup>, indicative of moderate to severe thinness. The situation is especially serious in Timor-Leste, which has as many as 14.8 per cent women falling within this bracket. Other countries for which data is available such as Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand have a considerable number of women with normal weight.

### *Impact on maternal health and children*

Maternal and child health is one of the major indicators of the food security of women. Maternal health is an ensemble of a number of variables such as prenatal and postnatal care, health checkups and monitoring, etc. The level of malnourishment of women has a direct bearing on maternal health. A number of women suffer from health problems such as anaemia which prove disastrous to both their and the child's health. Anaemia among pregnant and lactating women, which mostly occur due to dietary reasons, is 13.4 per cent in Thailand and 87 per cent in India.<sup>45</sup>

Low birth weight of children is one of the basic indicators of lack of nourishment. According to UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), South Asia has the highest incidence of low birth weight due to factors such as poor diets and healthcare among women, pegged at 31 per cent of all infants born with a low birth-weight.<sup>46</sup> Within South Asia, India has the highest number of low-weight babies each year. The lack of nourishment experienced by mothers has an obvious negative domino effect on the health of children. The birth weight of these children could be used as a measure of this phenomenon. According to UNICEF statistics, almost all the countries of South Asia – India (28 per cent), Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives (22 per cent), Nepal (21 per cent) and Pakistan (19 per cent) – have a high incidence of low birth weight. The data from Southeast Asia shows that the situation is similar in the Philippines (20 per cent), Timor-Leste (12 per cent) and Cambodia (14 per cent), while other countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have lesser numbers of low birth-weight children.<sup>47</sup> The impact of this is life-long and has a significant impact on the human resource capital of the future. A negative fallout from this childhood nutritional deficiency, especially in the case of girls, is that the situation perpetuates itself – they grow up as smaller adult women and again risk having low birth-weight children.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> IFPRI, *Women, The Key to Food Security*.

<sup>46</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Nutrition Indicators: Low Birthweight', *Progress for Children: A Report Card on Nutrition*, no. 4 ( UNICEF, 2006), [http://www.unicef.org/progressforchildren/2006n4/index\\_lowbirthweight.html](http://www.unicef.org/progressforchildren/2006n4/index_lowbirthweight.html)

<sup>47</sup> United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), 'Low Birth weight Incidence by Country (2000–07)', *Childinfo*, January 2009, [http://www.childinfo.org/low\\_birthweight\\_profiles.php](http://www.childinfo.org/low_birthweight_profiles.php)

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence Haddad, 'Women's Status: Levels, Determinants, Consequences for Malnutrition, Interventions, and Policy', *Asian Development Review* 17, nos. 1, 2, p. 102.

## **Social and Economic Impact**

### *Less education, ability to pursue interests*

There are two significant social fallouts of the vulnerability of women as a group to food insecurity. One, sex preferences lead to the likelihood of women spending more time in activities such as preparing, procuring and distributing food. The result is that women tend to spend less time and attention on education or the pursuit of their own interests. This in turn limits and curtails their employment prospects and adds to the vicious cycle of poverty and its resultant limited food availability. A cursory glance at the adult literacy figures in South Asia and Southeast Asia clearly supports this. In South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan, less than half the women 15 years and above are literate. The exceptions are Sri Lanka and the Maldives, which have a high literacy rate of 89.1 and 97.1 per cent respectively. India is a borderline case with about 54.5 per cent literate adult women. In contrast, the majority of Southeast Asian women, with the exception of those in Lao PDR and Cambodia, are literate. Even in these two cases, the number of literate women is much higher than those in South Asia (Table 4). According to the *Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Report 2010*, South Asia was one of the regions identified as having one of the largest gaps in terms of secondary school enrolment of girls in relation to boys. In Southeast Asia, on the other hand, the reverse holds true. The same pertains to tertiary education. South Asia again lags behind with 76 girls per 100 boys enrolled in higher education, as opposed to Southeast Asia where more girls were in higher education, that is, 107 per 100 boys.<sup>49</sup>

Lack of education means lack of awareness on nutritional matters and childcare, which in turn impacts the well-being of children as well as all family members in general. It also tends to aggravate the tendency to have biases towards male members of the family or sex preferences, which in turn influences food distribution patterns within the household whereby women themselves contribute to food insecurity of their gender. Besides, it also inevitably means that these women, who have to ensure diversity so that food consumed is nutritionally balanced, are not necessarily competent to take an informed decision on the same. A study conducted by IFPRI from 1970 to 1995 concluded that among factors helping to reduce child malnutrition in the developing world, women's education accounted for 43 per cent of the decrease, improvements in women's status 12 per cent, and improvements in food availability 26 per cent.<sup>50</sup>

### *Early marriages – women treated as burden*

A combination of poverty and the lack of food with more mouths to feed tend to increase the tendency to marry off girls early. The Beijing Platform for Action has identified 'early marriage, including child marriage' as an area of concern. A number of factors drive child marriages, the main ones being poverty and socio-cultural factors emanating from gender discrimination. Poverty, however, is the dominant factor. As a UNICEF survey of about 100 countries points out, girls living in the poorest 20 per cent of households are more likely to

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<sup>49</sup> United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2010* (New York: United Nations, 2010), pp. 20–1, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG%20Report%202010%20En%20r15%20low%20res%2020100615%20-.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> IFPRI, *Women, The Key to Food Security*.

get married at an early age than others.<sup>51</sup> Poverty and a lack of resources impel families to marry off their girls early (before the age of 18). This option is perceived as one of the best in terms of one less mouth to feed with limited resources. Girls and women are considered an economic burden to be given away at the earliest through marriage.<sup>52</sup>

In assessing the magnitude of the problem, one has to tread carefully, with the underlying assumption that data on early marriages of girls and children are not readily available nor do they represent the absolute truth. It is worth noting that a number of such marriages are kept under wraps, not reported or misreported in terms of the age of the bride. The incidence of child marriages is clearly higher in the case of South Asia compared to Southeast Asia. According to UNICEF data on child marriages based on a study of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before they were 18 years old, India, Bangladesh and Nepal recorded more than 40 per cent of such marriages, while in the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand, the figure was around 20 per cent.<sup>53</sup> Vietnam and the Philippines have a smaller percentage of child marriages. It is no coincidence that this is largely the case – poverty is widespread in South Asia. The result can be quite devastating for these young women who are deprived not just of their childhood but also lack access to and opportunities for education and health. The overall impact of all these drivers and manifestations is an overall low quality of human resource capability as well as poverty.

### South Asia and Southeast Asia Compared

A comparison of all indicators noted above to assess the vulnerabilities of women as a social group in South Asia and Southeast Asia provides adequate evidence that the overall situation of women is worse in the former. There is also a conspicuous difference in terms of the relative weight of the drivers behind this vulnerability.

In scanning the drivers behind this vulnerability, it is observed that the South Asian region as a whole and its constituent units are all consistently mired in poverty, have high global hunger index (GHI) scores and have high levels of malnourishment among women. Poverty by itself remains one of the key factors curbing both the access to and the availability of food for the household as a whole and more specifically for women within it. Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan all show a high incidence of poverty, high GHI scores and, according to WHO figures, high levels of malnourishment. Of these, India and Pakistan also have a considerable number of women with a BMI of less than 17 kg/m<sup>2</sup> which indicates moderate to severe thinness, and is linked to problems such as illnesses (see notes under Table 3). The sole silver lining comes from Sri Lanka and the Maldives, which do not just fare well on all these indicators but also exhibit an overall higher HDI and GDI ranking (Table 6). Land ownership rights of South Asian women are also relatively weaker not just in practice, but

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<sup>51</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Child Protection from Violence, Exploitation and Abuse: Child Marriage' (UNICEF, c2010), [http://www.unicef.org/protection/index\\_earlymarriage.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_earlymarriage.html)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. (for more on child marriages).

<sup>53</sup> The breakdown, *in per cent*, is as follows: for South Asia (2000–2008) – Bangladesh (64), Nepal (51), India (47), Pakistan (24) and Sri Lanka (12); for Southeast Asia – Cambodia (23), Indonesia (24), Philippines (14), Singapore (NA), Thailand (20), Timor-Leste (NA), Vietnam (10). These statistics are from: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Statistical Table 9 Child Protection', in *The State of the World's Children, Special Edition* (UNICEF, 2009), pp. 40–3, [http://www.unicef.org/rightsite/sowc/pdfs/statistics/SOWC\\_Spec\\_Ed\\_CRC\\_TABLE%209.%20CHILD%20PROTECTION\\_EN\\_111309.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/rightsite/sowc/pdfs/statistics/SOWC_Spec_Ed_CRC_TABLE%209.%20CHILD%20PROTECTION_EN_111309.pdf)

also at times due to discriminatory laws.<sup>54</sup> The gravity of the situation in the region is also demonstrated by the low life expectancy in most parts of South Asia except Sri Lanka<sup>55</sup> and the Maldives. Exacerbating the situation is the low adult literacy rate in the region.

Table 5: Global hunger index (GHI) 2009.

Region/Country	Rank (2009)	1990	2009
<b>A: South Asia</b>			
India	65	31.7	23.9
Bangladesh	67	35.9	24.7
Pakistan	58	24.7	21.0
Nepal	55	27.6	19.8
Bhutan	–	–	–
Sri Lanka	35	21.1	13.7
Maldives	–	–	–
<b>B: Southeast Asia</b>			
Singapore	–	–	–
Malaysia	–	8.8	<5
Indonesia	38	19.7	14.8
Thailand	22	16.4	8.2
Vietnam	29	24.8	11.9
Philippines	34	19.0	13.2
Lao PDR	51	29.2	19.0
Cambodia	61	31.7	21.2
Timor-Leste	70	–	25.4
<i>Notes:</i>			
1. Countries with a 2009 GHI score of less than 5 are not included in the ranking. Differences in the group of countries with a GHI score of less than 5 are minimal.			
2. The GHI ranks countries on a 100-point scale, with 0 being the best score (no hunger) and 100 being the worst, though neither of these extremes is achieved in practice. Values less than 4.9 reflect low hunger, values between 5 and 9.9 reflect moderate hunger, values between 10 and 19.9 indicate a serious problem, values between 20 and 29.9 are alarming and values of 30 or higher are extremely alarming. For more details on the GHI, see page 8 the <i>2009 Global Hunger Index</i> report.			

Source: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), *The 2009 Global Hunger Index: The Challenge of Hunger: Focus on the Financial Crisis and Gender Inequality*, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> The case of Pakistan is an example. The right of women to inherit agricultural land, for instance, discriminates against women and allows limited rights of ownership for a woman. Women cannot gift nor obtain rights related to land ownership such as access to water and having their name on the revenue record. Even though Pakistan is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), equality of women cannot be realised because article 2 of the Constitution of Pakistan states that Islamic law provisions are supreme. Islamic law on inheritance provides for a smaller Quranic share for women. For more details, see: Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), *Summary Land Rights for Muslim Women: Review of Law and Policy* (Islamabad, Pakistan: SDPI, c2008), [http://www.sdpi.org/research\\_Programme/human\\_development/wlr/wlr\\_summary-law\\_and\\_Policy\\_final.pdf](http://www.sdpi.org/research_Programme/human_development/wlr/wlr_summary-law_and_Policy_final.pdf)

<sup>55</sup> Sri Lanka is now categorised as a ‘low-level food insecure country’. See FAO and SAARC, *Regional Strategies and Programme for Food Security*, p. 32.

Table 6: Human development index (HDI) and gender-related development index (GDI) in Asia.

Region/Country	HDI 2009	HDI Categorisation (refer to note 3 below)	GDI 2009	Ranking (HDI minus GDI Rank) (refer to note 1 below)
<b>A: South Asia</b>				
India	0.612	Medium human development (HD)	0.594	0
Bangladesh	0.543	Medium HD	0.536	0
Pakistan	0.572	Medium HD	0.532	-5
Nepal	0.553	Medium HD	0.545	2
Bhutan	0.619	Medium HD	0.605	-1
Sri Lanka	0.759	Medium HD	0.756	2
Maldives	0.771	Medium HD	0.767	1
<b>B: Southeast Asia</b>				
Singapore	0.944	Very High HD	NA	NA
Malaysia	0.829	High HD	0.823	0
Indonesia	0.734	Medium HD	0.726	-1
Thailand	0.783	Medium HD	0.782	1
Vietnam	0.725	Medium HD	0.723	3
Philippines	0.751	Medium HD	0.748	2
Lao PDR	0.619	Medium HD	0.614	1
Cambodia	0.593	Medium HD	0.588	0
Timor-Leste	0.489	Low HD	NA	NA
<p>Notes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. HDI minus GDI ranking –The HDI ranks used in this calculation are recalculated for the countries with a GDI value. A positive figure indicates that the GDI rank is higher than the HDI rank; a negative figure, the opposite.</li> <li>2. The HDI is calculated on the basis of three dimensions: long and healthy life (life expectancy at birth), knowledge (adult literacy rate and gross enrolment ratio) and a decent standard of living (gross domestic product, or GDP, per capita and purchasing power parity, or PPP, in USD). The GDI is calculated based on similar dimensions – female/male life expectancy at birth, female/male education index and female/male income index. It however takes into account inequality in achievement between men and women. The method used imposes a penalty for inequality – the GDI falls when achievement levels of both men and women go down or when disparities between their achievements increase. The greater the gender disparity in basic capabilities, the lower a country's GDI than its HDI. For more, see World Health Organization (WHO), Nutrition Landscape Information System (NLIS) Country Profile Indicators Interpretation Guide (Geneva: WHO, 2010), pp. 33–4, <a href="http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241599955_eng.pdf">http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241599955_eng.pdf</a></li> <li>3. All countries or areas included in the HDI are classified into one of four categories of achievement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 'Very High' human development (HDI value of 0.900).</li> <li>▪ 'High' human development (HDI value of 0.800–0.899).</li> <li>▪ 'Medium' human development (HDI 0.500–0.799).</li> <li>▪ 'Low' human development (HDI less than 0.500).</li> </ul> </li> </ol>				

Source: Table G, pp. 167–70 and Table J, pp. 181–4 from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2009: Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Southeast Asia has a relatively sounder situation compared to South Asia. Within Southeast Asia, though, there are wide disparities. Countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are clear winners. Statistics for malnourishment of women is not available for Malaysia, but its HDI and GDI figures, and the figures for life expectancy of women and poverty levels, point towards a positive situation. Thailand also, with its low poverty levels, medium GDI and fewer malnourished women, emerges a frontrunner.

In the middle of the spectrum lie the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Cambodia. The only common denominator between these countries and the well-off countries of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand is the lack of sex preference. No data was available on malnourishment among women in Cambodia and the Philippines. Other indicators, though, show that they are in the lower-middle portion of the spectrum, with high levels of poverty. There are signs that the situation in Cambodia is more serious – it also fares badly on the GHI and the GDI. Vietnam and Indonesia are slightly better off than Cambodia and the Philippines. Vietnam has more poverty than Indonesia, while Indonesia ranks lower in the GHI. In terms of the GDI, the two countries hold similar ranks, though Vietnam has a fairly high percentage of malnourished women.

Timor-Leste and Lao PDR, on the other hand, are clearly lagging behind on various indicators. There are clear alarm bells ringing for Timor-Leste which has a considerable percentage of women with BMI of less than 17 and 18 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. It also has the lowest GHI ranking. Poverty statistics from Timor-Leste are also grim, with 20 per cent of its population living below the USD1 level.<sup>56</sup> In contrast with the rest of the region, there is clear son preference in the country. As discussed earlier, sex preference tends to have a trickle-down effect on females, causing food insecurity. Lao PDR is another country in the region with a high percentage of poverty-stricken people, low GDI rankings, low life expectancy including female life expectancy, as well as a high number of malnourished women falling into the less than BMI 17 and 18 kg/m<sup>2</sup> category. Unlike Timor-Leste, however, Lao PDR does not exhibit any sex preference.

This mapping of the vulnerability of women allows for an understanding of the weight which could be assigned to the various drivers in each region. South Asia is clearly a cocktail of widespread poverty and various socio-cultural factors such as sex preferences and unequal rights over land in both the legal provisions and the implementation of the relevant laws. Within Southeast Asia, except for Timor-Leste, socio-cultural factors do not seem to have as much of an impact as poverty.

South Asian women suffer more than their Southeast Asian counterparts from malnourishment and low life expectancy. The overall female life expectancy of countries such as India, Bhutan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal is much lower than in Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia. The only exceptions here are Sri Lanka and, to a lesser extent, the Maldives (Table 4). A lower incidence of early marriages also prevails in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>56</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB), 'Millennium Development Goals, Timor Leste Progress towards the MDGs' (Manila: ADB, n.d.), <http://www.adb.org/Timor-Leste/MDGs.asp>

## Policy Responses

At the national level, there is a need for countries in South Asia and parts of Southeast Asia to ensure that there is a realisation and recognition of the fact that women are a vulnerable group when it comes to food insecurity. Most South Asian and Southeast Asian countries are signatories to and have ratified the CEDAW.<sup>57</sup>

Considering that the primary securitising actors at the national, regional and international levels are governments, the political elite and civil society, they all have to play both an individual and a collective role in rectifying the situation. Some of the actions they could initiate could include the following:

- Civil society groups such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play a key role in voicing concerns and problems faced in areas they cover and operate in.
- Governments can play their part most importantly by being responsive to these concerns through the formulation and the efficient and effective implementation of policies drawn up at the national, regional and international levels. The government and political elite also have to be involved in taking steps to, for instance, develop social security nets to cater to vulnerable groups such as women and encourage the spread of education.
- Information and education would be vital to increasing awareness on aspects such as proper food utilisation, adequate nutrition and childcare, sanitation and cleanliness. This is an area where NGOs could make a significant contribution by reaching out to women.
- Gender-sensitive governance could also be encouraged by involving women at the grassroots level in policymaking.
- Efforts at poverty reduction would directly ensure economic access to food.

Household-level change will inevitably happen if all these measures are taken at the national level. Unless governments and civil society groups are able to assuage the situation within their respective countries, it would be a waste of resources to keep drawing up policies and international charters which remain unimplemented and ineffective. Governments of countries need to identify and earmark the level of food insecurity of women so as to be able to undertake appropriate remedial measures. These would also be tailored to cater to the country-, state- or province-specific vulnerabilities, and the drivers of those vulnerabilities.

It is equally mandatory for the regional groupings operating in these two sub-regions of Asia to provide a sound systemic environs for individual countries to work towards achieving these objectives. The SAARC and ASEAN are two prominent groupings which could take up the issue. The SAARC Social Charter devotes a section to women, decrying discrimination

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<sup>57</sup> The CEDAW clearly states under article 5 that ‘States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women’.

arising out of prejudice and customary practices.<sup>58</sup> Health and gender issues are part of SAARC's proposed areas of cooperation even though gender and food security remain somewhat neglected.

Some positive steps towards food security by the SAARC include the establishment of the food bank, which seem to be also falling short of requirements.<sup>59</sup> The SAARC Regional Programme for Food Security was initiated in 2008 for 10 projects related to South Asian food security.<sup>60</sup> While these steps will certainly help bolster production, efficiency, technical development and capacity building, ensuring adequate food supply does not necessarily mean that everyone is food secure. For instance, the vulnerability of women as a group has to be recognised. However, while broad indicators are available, there is a lack of gender-specific ones to guide progress in addressing gender-related threats. The SAARC Colombo Statement on Food Security and its Declaration of 2008 also does not touch on this matter. As a regional organisation fraught with mutual suspicions and complexities, such functional cooperation on an issue so intrinsic and common in the region can foster closer relations. The FAO and SAARC, in their 2008 Regional Strategy on Food Security, specify the analysis and mapping of regional food insecurity and vulnerability as a significant element.<sup>61</sup> This goal has to be extended to identify specific vulnerable groups. The same document states that one of the challenges faced by the SAARC is 'ensuring responsive policy reforms, adequate strategic interventions and satisfactory programme implementation' – a clear indicator of the weakness of its implementation mechanism.<sup>62</sup>

ASEAN is replete with a number of declarations pertaining to several aspects of food security ranging from the ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework and the Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security in the ASEAN Region (2009–2013) to the ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Framework on Climate Change and Food Security, and the ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Work Plan 2007–2017. In many ways, it is therefore far ahead of the South Asian region in trying to identify and tackle these issues in a calibrated and organised fashion. It is encouraging to note that there is a distinct mention of the need to enhance programmes for targeted vulnerable groups – which in turn requires the identification of such vulnerable and food insecure groups.<sup>63</sup> Women need to be under the scanner as a category requiring additional attention. It would be particularly useful for the proposed ASEAN database to provide gender-segregated figures for health and other food security indicators. This could be critical to helping to empower and enable women to not just recognise but also effectively lessen the inherent vulnerabilities facing them.

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<sup>58</sup> South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), 'Social Charter of the SAARC', SAARC/SUMMIT.12/sc.29/27, ANNEX-V (2004),

[http://www.slmfa.gov.lk/saarc/images/charters/saarc\\_social\\_charter\\_2004.pdf](http://www.slmfa.gov.lk/saarc/images/charters/saarc_social_charter_2004.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> For more, see: "'SAARC Food Bank" Falling Short of Its Objectives', *The Financial Express*, 30 October 2010, [http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news\\_id=116114](http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news_id=116114)

<sup>60</sup> These projects do promise to make significant contributions in four key areas – increasing productivity, sustainability and income, pre- and post-harvest loss and reduction and value chain management and ensuring bio-security and agricultural trade and marketing for food security. See: FAO and SAARC, *Regional Strategies and Programme for Food Security*, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> This task is to be accomplished by the ASEAN member states as mentioned in the following: Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), 'Appendix 2: Matrix of Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security in the ASEAN Region 2009–2013 (SPA-FS)' (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2009), <http://www.aseansec.org/22340.pdf>



## **Conclusion**

This comparative survey of the vulnerability of women to food insecurity in the countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia reveals that the former does not just lag behind in terms of the magnitude of the threats facing them, but also in being more nationally and regionally disorganised and unprepared to cope with problems. Southeast Asia appears to have begun making inroads into understanding and working towards identifying and quantifying the extent of the problem, taking the small step towards attempting a solution. There is much South Asian countries can learn from their Southeast Asian counterparts. A bottom-up networked approach is needed to tackle the vulnerability of women as a social group when it comes to food insecurity. The battle has to be won at the household, societal and national levels, and this has to be complemented by a regional response.