

## **Eggs in Mid-Day Meals, Anganwadis Will Ensure Nutrition – and Gender Parity**

Provision of eggs will ensure that girls and boys eat nutritious food in equal amounts and in unison, thereby upending the patriarchal norm of women eating last and least in the household.

In an episode called “*aam ka batwaara*” (dividing the mango), Meena, a fictional character created by UNICEF in the 1990s, observed the unequal division of nutritious food in her household. It was Meena who climbed the tree and plucked the mango, but her mother gave a bigger portion to her younger brother Raju.

When Meena complained that her brother got more, her mother said casually, “*Ise to jyada milta hi hai* (he always gets more)”. Her grandmother added, “*Jaanti nahi, aisa toh hota hi hai* (don’t you know, this happens)”.

### **Unequal nutrition within households**

Household division of nutritious food continues to be gender-biased in India. There is consistent evidence that most girls and women eat last and least. A qualitative study in rural north Bihar found that boys and men of a household were always the first ones to eat, were more likely to get larger portions of foods like pulses, eggs and meats, and sweets, and were more likely to have their own separate plates.

On the other hand, girls and women always ate after the men, took leftover portions, and often shared plates with children or other women which entailed an overall lesser intake of food.

Similar findings have been reported in other survey research. The SARI survey and the India Human Development Survey found that between 40-60% of rural women reported that men eat food first in their households. The latest round of the National Family and Health Survey has found that nationally, men are more likely to consume milk, curd and fruits, and are less likely to abstain from eating meat, fish and eggs than women.

### **Gender-equal nutrition outside the household**

Given the persistent inequality of nutrition, interventions outside the household are as important as changing the gender-bias from within. The provision of hot cooked mid-day meals, nutritious food and take-home rations to children, students, teenage girls and pregnant women in government-run anganwadis and schools is a crucial element of nutritional support to girls and women across rural parts of India.

The food given in these programmes to girls and women is officially theirs, which they can eat without worry or guilt. They don’t have to necessarily perform productive and reproductive labour in exchange for food, a transaction that is deeply rooted in the gender division of labour and access to food within the household. Access and freedom to nutrition outside the household provided by government programmes are, by most measures, a concrete step towards gender equality.

### **Eggs and equality**

However, instead of strengthening the efforts to improve equal nutritional support to marginalised populations such as children, girls and women, some states of India, and most recently Chhatisgarh, are boiling over the controversy over the provision of eggs in anganwadis and mid-day meals.

The provision of hot nutritious meals in anganwadis and schools has many documented benefits. They reduce malnutrition, improve learning outcomes, challenge caste inequalities when kids sit together and eat, become an avenue for imparting hygiene education as kids wash their hands and provide valuable employment to vulnerable women.

There are several additional advantages of the inclusion of eggs in mid-day meals and anganwadis, as explained in a primer prepared by Professor Reetika Khera: they are nutritional superfoods, have a better shelf-life, are easy to monitor for corruption, are a source of rural employment, and are a favourite among rural children.

In addition, the provision of eggs through government programmes can serve as a significant check against household gender-bias in nutrition that is often stronger for occasional food items such as eggs, meat and sweets. Eggs can also be an excellent source of nutrition for pregnant and lactating women, many of whom are anaemic.

Finally, the provision of eggs in mid-day meals and anganwadis will ensure that girls and boys eat these nutritious food items in equal amounts and together, thereby upending the patriarchal norm of girls and women eating last and least in the household.

Patriarchal norms not only lead to less intake of food items like eggs by girls and women, but they also get combined with other forms of social and caste oppressions to keep eggs out of the reach of women.

In rural north Bihar, for instance, Brahminism has forced girls and women from socially marginalised communities to give up eggs and other locally available non-vegetarian foods as they are considered “impure”. This group of socioeconomically disadvantaged women can’t afford to have milk, pulses, fruits, or other forms of protein, and thus have a woefully inadequate intake of nutrition.

Indian girls and women are one of the most undernourished populations in the world: more than half Indian women aged 15-49 are anaemic and more than one third have body mass index below normal. Most of these undernourished girls and women live in populous states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra.

These are also states that do not provide eggs to children and women in the name of religious and caste sentiments. Not surprisingly, Tamil Nadu, a state that does far better in gender and health indicators than all these states, was the first one to provide eggs in schools.

The health and wellbeing of children, girls, and women in India cannot be improved if the governments and Indian society at large do not stop giving in to religious, casteist, and patriarchal dogmas. What healthier way than to start with the universal provision of the humble egg?

*Kanika Sharma is a researcher focusing on social inequalities in health in India*