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India: Improving Gender Equity as a Pathway to Improved Food Security

Mahatma Gandhi once said: “As long as women do not have the same rights in law as men, as long as the birth of a girl does not receive the same welcome as that of a boy, so long we should know that India is suffering from partial paralysis. Suppression of women is inconsistent with principles of ahimsa (non-violence)” (Gopal). However, the treatment of women in modern-day India is anything but non-violent: In fact, many Indian women are continually suppressed both physically and legally. India, a country poised to become the world’s most populous nation by the year 2025, houses a culture scarred by historically high gender inequities (Asokan). India’s problems do not end at gender inequity, however: The country is also home to sixty-one million malnourished children, a statistic that may likely rise if India is unable to improve national food security (Hoffman). In addition to these two debilitating national issues, India is also suffering from escalating gender-based violence, a disturbing problem that recently gained global attention when a young woman from New Delhi died due to complications following a brutal rape (Mahr).

While these three separate issues may at first appear to be unrelated, they are all directly interconnected. Gender inequity, specifically in rural agrarian communities, correlates to weak food security, thereby prolonging the interminably destructive chain of malnourishment. Women in these communities do not have access to land rights, which forces them to become dependent on men for land security (Crowley). Many of these women work in the agricultural sector, but their labor is often considered unofficial and is therefore undocumented, allowing workplaces to pay women below minimum wage (Dashora). The lack of access to property ownership or substantial income forces women in rural communities to stay subservient to men, who have complete and total control over household income (Sharma). Malnourished children, particularly girls, then grow up to fill the subordinate positions laid out for them by society, continuing the malicious and redundant cycle of gender inequity and weak food security.

As urbanization and modernization continue to accelerate in India, the mistreatment of women has become more pronounced (Chandrashekar and Vij). The combination of a deeply patriarchal society and modern technology, such as sex-selective abortion, has resulted in a dramatically skewed gender ratio of 914 girls for every 1000 boys (Asokan). Reported violence against women has also skyrocketed, with the number of reported rapes rising 50 percent between the years 2001 and 2011 (Denyer). India’s problem with violence against women was recently thrust onto the global stage when a young physiotherapy student was violently gang-raped in New Delhi and later died of inflicted injuries (Mahr). However, violence against women is not just prevalent in urban India, but also in rural India, where the combination of women’s low social status, the stigma attached to families who attempt to take cases of violence to court, and the corruption present in the legal system leads to numerous unrecorded crimes (Denyer).

If India were able to elevate the status of women, both food security and gender inequity--including the cycle of violence against women--would be improved; the country would then be able to establish itself as a "democratic and economic superpower" (Mahr). Improving gender equity and national food security in India requires intervention on two levels: First, through legislation delineating equal rights, such as land rights, for women, and secondly, through local organizations focused on enforcing such legislation at the community level, specifically in rural communities, which make up the bulk of India’s population.

India, with a population of over 1.2 billion people, is one of the most densely populated countries in the world (“South Asia”). While the country’s urbanization rates continue to accelerate, roughly 74 percent of households in India remain in rural environments (Gulati). However, with 43 percent of the rural

population living below the poverty line, malnutrition, especially among women and girls, remains a formidable problem in these areas (Gulati). An increased risk of malnutrition amongst women and girls living in rural areas can be traced back to the gender inequity found in India: Because women are viewed as less valuable than men, they are more likely to receive inadequate nutrition, putting them at a higher risk of death by disease or famine (Hoffman). This occurrence has a greater impact on poor households, where the risk of severe malnutrition among girls is heightened: In fact, the most common cause of death among girls ages five or younger is malnutrition (Ramachandran). If these statistics are to be lowered and India's food security strengthened, then the disparity between genders must be dissolved, particularly in rural agrarian communities.

Rural Indian villages are primarily agricultural societies made up of families of around five to six people (Gulati). Most crops grown in these villages are low-yielding variations produced for the family's use (Jhunjhunwala, Narasimhan, and Ramachandran). Women participate in all sectors of agricultural production, contributing 50-60 percent of agricultural labor (Hoffman). Although women constitute much of the farm labor in rural India, they are commonly listed as "contributing family workers," meaning that their work often goes unpaid and unacknowledged (Ramachandran). In the agricultural sector of India's work force, women's wage rates are at least 20-30 percent lower than men's, largely because of their invisibility in the workforce (Ramachandran). The fact that women are underpaid and underappreciated for their agricultural labor is not surprising in a country such as India, where women have been historically marginalized in society. However, it has been estimated that if women were given equal opportunity in agriculture, crop outputs could increase by as much as 2.5-4 percent, food security would be strengthened, and malnutrition rates, specifically among women and girls, would decrease ("Gender and Land Tenure").

The first step towards empowering women in agricultural societies is to provide them with equal property and inheritance rights. With some exceptions, the Hindu and Islamic systems of law in India have denied women equal inheritance rights to property, largely because of the patriarchal customs enforced by the religiously conservative culture (Ramachandran). State-level tenure laws, which predominately favor male succession, control women's inheritance rights to agricultural lands (Ramachandran). When women are allowed to claim inheritance to land, it is usually to only a fraction of the land and oftentimes includes joint ownership with their sons or other male family members (Ramachandran). Even in areas where women do have legal rights to land ownership, there are still barriers, such as local custom and lack of legal consultation, that impede women from gaining access to these rights (Quisumbing, *et al.*). If these restrictions were dissolved, India would be able to establish gender equity in the agricultural sector.

In an agriculturally-dominated culture such as India, land ownership is not merely about having control over a section of property. Land ownership is directly connected to power and status, especially in agricultural communities (Crowley). Having a secure claim to land would increase a woman's political and social status, along with strengthening her sense of empowerment, confidence, and dignity (Crowley). In small rural villages, people who do not have a claim to land or who rely on others for land access hold little to no power in their community (Nichols, Palmer, and Munro-Faure). While it is clear that equal land rights in agrarian societies would improve gender equity and give women more influence in their communities, there is also evidence to suggest that it would lead to stronger food security and improved nutrition. In fact, the United Nations, in partnership with the Rural Development Institute, stated in a recent survey that if rural women were allowed equal access to resources, total agrarian output in developing countries, such as India, could rise as much as 2.5-4 percent, which could lead to 100 million to 150 million fewer hungry people globally ("Gender and Land Tenure").

Studies have found that while men tend to spend household income on personal expenditures, women tend to spend income on health care and food for the children and family (Quisumbing, *et al.*). In patriarchal societies such as India, however, men are usually in charge of distributing household income.

In rural agricultural communities, women (due to their lower societal standing) do not have the opportunity to earn or control any substantial form of income. However, if they had legal ownership over a section of land and control over whatever crops that land produced, then they would also have control over the income accumulated during crop production. It has been found that when a woman has access to land, even to a small plot or home garden, her children are more likely to receive adequate nutrition (Ramachandran). Whether or not a woman holds land has a strong effect not only on her children's nutrition, but also on their education: A survey published by the United Nations and the Rural Development Institute states that children of women who hold a title to land are more likely to receive at least a middle school education by the age of sixteen ("Gender and Land Tenure"). Land ownership would allow women the ability to invest whatever income they garner in food, healthcare, and education for their family, improving both the nutrition of their family and the state of national food security in India (Ramachandran).

If women in rural communities had secure land rights, then gender equity would improve and the escalating violence against women would decrease. Gender equity would also lead to more productive agriculture production, and, by association, to stronger food security in India. The first step towards establishing equal rights, specifically equal land rights, for women is for the government to pass legislation promoting strong property rights for women and to strengthen legislation already in place (Crowley). When creating new legislation, the government should focus on the three channels through which women are most likely to acquire land: Legislation related to land inheritance, government land distribution programs, and the land market ("Land and livelihoods"). Laws governing land inheritance vary across the country, depending on the state constitution ("Land and livelihoods"). This patchwork of inheritance laws causes legislation to be varied and complex; but under any circumstances, if the national government were to create new legislation changing the traditionally patriarchal pattern of land inheritance, rural women would have a better chance of inheriting land ("Land and livelihoods"). Although most of the land in India is privately owned, there is still land in India available for distribution from the government ("Land and livelihoods"). Men have routinely received the majority of this land because they are listed as the heads of households ("Land and livelihoods"). However, if state governments adopted legislation requiring distributed land to be either jointly titled between husband and wife or listed in the name of a single woman, then more rural women would have the opportunity to own property.

When considering legislation aimed at increasing women's property rights, one of the most significant channels to land ownership that must be addressed is the land market. The "land market" refers to the privately owned land bought and sold in India. Around 86 percent of India's rural land is privately owned, making the land market a prime source from which women could acquire land ("Land and livelihoods"). Currently, rural women lack the financial assets, legal rights, and social influence necessary to compete in the land market ("Land and livelihoods"). To combat this deterrent, new legislation should focus on implementing a co-ownership system that would give women shared control over marital property, increasing their ownership rights and improving their standing in both their families and communities ("Land and livelihoods").

Much of the legislation necessary to give women property rights is already in place; however, there is little to no enforcement of this legislation ("Land and livelihoods"). Many village officials lack both the resources and motivation required to implement such legislation, leaving many rural women without rights. The application of such laws, however, could be easily developed with the aid of local programs concentrated on advocating for women's land rights.

Programs focused on empowering and educating rural women and their communities could be exceptionally helpful with the enforcement of legislation concerning equal property rights. One such organization that aims to improve gender inequity and empower women through socio-political awareness

is Swadhina, a Registered Charitable Organization established in 1986 that currently has over 1260 members (Mukherjee and Gupta). Swadhina is active in fifty two village units throughout India, primarily targeting rural women (Mukherjee and Gupta). Swadhina's various programs focus on empowering and educating women regarding their legal rights through awareness trainings, local women's groups, and readily available legal consultation (Mukherjee and Gupta). At the end of a program, Swadhina hands over the functional and organizational work to the local women's groups, thus promoting self-reliance and independent sustainability in the village (Mukherjee and Gupta). A Swadhina program that worked to promote the legal empowerment of women, Women's Access to Land (WA), was recently sponsored by the International Land Coalition (ILC) in the West Midnapore district of West Bengal, India ("ILC Project Brief").

The goals of this program were to improve women's legal awareness, educate and train women to be leaders in their community, and raise awareness for women's land rights ("ILC Project Brief"). The first phase consisted of an awareness program focused on educating women over land rights, building or restructuring local women's committees, and providing women with leadership training ("ILC Project Brief"). Participation throughout this phase was remarkable: 505 women participated in one of the one-day village meetings, 114 women partook in the Socio-legal Leadership Trainings, and 354 women took part in a Signature Camp, a camp designed to teach illiterate rural women how to sign their names ("ILC Project Brief"). The second phase of the program involved local-level public meetings over property rights and the empowerment of women, led by female committee members and local authorities ("ILC Project Brief"). The second phase included a state-level advocacy meeting over the legal issues concerning property rights, violations of women's rights, and the relevance and importance of including women in agriculture ("ILC Project Brief"). During this phase five new village-level women's committees were created, fifty-four grass-roots female leaders of local women's committees participated in a three-day training of socio-legal leadership, and a District-level women and law advisory group was formed ("ILC Project Brief").

Women's Access to Land (WA) did not reach out solely to women; the program sought to educate the whole community over women's land rights and the benefits that come with gender equity ("ILC Project Brief"). After all, a society cannot change unless all members of the society understand why it is crucial to do so. Participants from the program noted the benefit that the program had not just on women, but also on men: While men were hesitant to contribute at the beginning of the grassroots meetings, by the end of the program, men were enthusiastically participating ("ILC Project Brief"). Many participants cited the Earth Festivals as an extremely effective way to involve the whole community in the celebration of women's involvement in agriculture ("ILC Project Brief"). The three-day long Earth Festivals were large public occasions that were organized by both men and women ("ILC Project Brief"). The Festivals, which successfully engaged the entire community, played a key role in involving men in the promotion of gender equity and the contribution of women in agriculture ("ILC Project Brief"). The International Land Coalition found the project to be successful, reporting that the state level workshop established a "first step" towards change in women's land rights issues ("ILC Project Brief").

One of the most beneficial opportunities offered to women through Women's Access to Land (WA) was the access to legal and social support: Women were given the chance to learn more about their specific property rights and how they could take advantage of them ("ILC Project Brief"). Women also participated in community groups that sought to educate and empower local women to utilize what property rights they were given, knowledge that they were then able to apply to everyday life ("ILC Project Brief"). The program also did a wonderful job involving and educating the community as a whole: Once men were educated over the benefits that gender equity would bring to agriculture, they were more likely to participate. By the end of the program, an inclusive awareness strategy had been put into place, local women's groups were strengthened, and women's socio-legal leadership skills had been enriched with the help of leadership trainings ("ILC Project Brief").

Of course, it is possible that the success of such programs may be impeded by several major barriers. First of all, to be successful, programs such as Women's Access to Land (WA) must first reach out to women in rural communities. However, due to the gender stereotypes present in rural India, women are often confined to the private sphere of the household ("ILC Briefing"). To combat this deterrent and involve women in the community, organizations must focus on connecting with women at the local level. Because many women, especially the poor, are often illiterate and have received very little education, information regarding legal rights should be translated into a local dialect and communicated in non-legalistic terms ("ILC Briefing"). Organizations such as Swadhina have also observed that in rural areas, concepts such as gender equity and gender justice are not familiar or well understood ("ILC Briefing"). Laws and policies referring to gender equity may be in place, but authorities have yet to translate such legislation into action. To overcome this obstacle, awareness needs to take place on all levels of government. National-level laws and policies that protect gender equity must be enforced at the highest level, which would then put pressure on the local authorities to follow suit.

If programs such as Women's Access to Land were established in all rural agrarian communities, women would be more likely to take advantage of the property rights available to them, and communities would be more likely to accept the adjustment of gender roles in their society. Pressure to enforce gender equity in agriculture must come from multiple sectors of the community: From the local and national governments, from programs such as Women's Access to Land (WA), and from the men and women involved in local support groups. For this kind of pressure to be effective, organizations such as Swadhina must reach out to the most influential leaders in the community and inform them of the importance of gender equity in agriculture. Once prominent public figures in each community accept gender equity as a gateway to improved agriculture, they can encourage and pressure the more stubborn citizens to accept the changes in gender relations. When all members of a community understand the benefit that the dissolution of gender inequity would bring to the agricultural sector of India, then the first step towards gender equity nationwide will have been taken.

To attempt to repair gender equity in a culture with a deep history of gender discrimination can seem to be a daunting, almost overwhelming task. However, with factors such as climate change and overpopulation threatening to decrease India's food production by 30 percent, it becomes absolutely imperative that the country utilizes all resources that would provide a benefit to food security, women included (Hoffman). Once men and women achieve equality in the agriculture sector, they can work together to use climate change adaptation measures, such as hybrid plant breeds that would produce high-yielding crops, to strengthen India's national food security (Hoffman). The development of a more equality-minded society could be accelerated with the help of programs such as Women's Access to Land (WA), which could be initiated in rural communities to support and educate women attempting to take advantage of their property rights. Property ownership would give rural women the ability to support themselves and their families in a secure way while women-focused community groups would show women how to use their land and money to decrease the chances of malnutrition and increase community food security. If this system were established in the majority of rural Indian communities, food security would be strengthened and India would be on the way towards gender equity. Giving rural women equal land rights would be a significant step forward for India, providing the seed from which the country could begin to develop as a strong, secure, and tolerant global powerhouse.

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