



FOOD SECURITY FOR EQUITABLE FUTURES

Project Newsletter



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PROJECT EVIDENCE SUBMITTED TO THE UK PARLIAMENT

In spring 2023, the UK Parliament's International Development Committee called for written evidence on whether aid money spent by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) on sexual and reproductive health programmes in Global Majority countries could be targeted more effectively. We responded, making four recommendations to the committee:

1. Efforts to improve sexual and reproductive health cannot be divorced from the broader context of precarity in which many people live.
2. Infertility remains a neglected but pressing public health issue in Global Majority countries—one which is being all too often ignored by FCDO funded sexual and reproductive health programmes.
3. Men (and often their families) are a very important part of reproductive decision-making, but they are frequently left out of sexual and reproductive health programmes.
4. The previous points highlight the need for a focus on reproductive justice, which includes the right to have a child, to not have a child, and to parent children with dignity in safe and healthy environments.

We drew on our previous research to make these recommendations, as well as on our recent fieldwork. The focus of our fieldwork was on food insecurity, yet many women we spoke to spoke about health concerns as well. For example, our participants explained that an inability to access “hygienic” living arrangements due to economic precarity can severely impact employment opportunities. One participant explained, although she kept herself clean, she was considered “unhygienic” and “unfit to be employed” as a domestic helper. Families in upper-class neighbourhoods actively looked for domestic help, but they were reluctant to employ women from our participant's settlement due to their perception of her living conditions.

An inability to access steady, well-paid work can put families at grave health risk and can aggravate gender inequalities. One participant said, despite knowing her eldest daughter (married at 14) was facing marital violence, she wanted her daughter to continue with the marriage rather than returning home. She explained, “I have more mouths to feed.” A 20-year-old married woman in a village shared how economic hardship in her family led her to take up domestic and care work at a very young age; ultimately she could not continue her education and so was married at age ~15. She narrated how the family's economic inability to access prenatal and neonatal healthcare contributed to her five miscarriages and the death of her 12-month-old infant.

Lacking food, adequate housing facilities, and resources to afford healthcare frequently exposed families in our research to seasonal diseases such as dengue, typhoid, jaundice, and malaria—serious illnesses which can result in chronic health conditions, miscarriage, foetal growth restriction, premature delivery, and even maternal and child mortality. The burden of health expenditures was often met through informal borrowing; in turn, this can reinforce precarity and put an extensive burden of paid and unpaid labour on children and women to ensure their family's survival. Instead of focusing narrowly on sexual and reproductive health, our evidence highlights the need for programmes which focus on reproductive justice. Reproductive justice provides a powerful roadmap for understanding and addressing the historical and structural roots of reproductive inequities, and it prioritises the needs of marginalised people, thereby redefining programme success.

INSIGHTS FROM FIELDWORK: A TRANSCRIBER'S POINT-OF-VIEW

REFLECTIONS: DRAWING THE PICTURE, ANSWER BY ANSWER BY NASHAT HAYATULLAH



I joined the Food Security for Equitable Futures team in June 2023 as a translator and transcriptionist. Transcribing interviews without having been present in the field is an entirely new experience for me. What I took from each interview could be different than a person who was present at the interview. Each interview created a new picture, with no two interviews being the same.

When I start working on an interview, I have no idea about the person, the situation or the location they are in. As a puzzle is made piece by piece, I understand the complete picture or scenario, answer by answer. What took me by surprise is that each interview is a shade different than the others; no two interviews had the same type of answers, even among people in the same household. Each person had something new to contribute.

Transcribing the interviews gave me a great opportunity to understand the participants--their resilience, their acceptance, their care and their will to continue ahead. The small but numerous sacrifices made by the parents so that their children can be happy; the adjustments by even very young children so that they don't inconvenience their families; the pure innocence of children whose answer never failed to bring a smile to my face; or the profound wisdom people shared in simple answers. In many instances, people's own problems did not hurt them as much as difficult times their loved ones faced.

Collecting data in an uncontrolled environment in which the participant may be reluctant, hesitant, or downright condescending about some topics is not an easy task. Many times the participant answered in a way which might have hurt the interviewer, yet they didn't let it affect the flow of the interview. Each interviewer had their own ways of approaching a question or topic. I found the interviewer plays a very large role; the way they talk with the participant or when required, prod the participant to talk more, affects the interview and data collected itself.

Transcribing the interviews has been a great learning experience for me. The food we eat shows so much about us as an individual and about our families. There's so much to know about almost all the major aspects of a person's life just from the food they ate or from where or how they cook it or how often they eat. Each interview was a testament to how intricately food is connected to people's lives.



WORK-IN-PROGRESS UPDATE

WHAT DO 'GOOD MOTHERS' EAT (AND WHAT DO THEY NOT)? BY CHARUMITA VASUDEV



I am leading a paper to study the food daily choices made by the women in families and households. We explore routine decisions like what to cook, how much to serve and to whom, who eats first, who eats last, whose food preferences are prioritised, etc. This is to understand not only the choices women make about everyone's food but also about when and what they themselves eat.

A dominant theme in interviews, especially with mothers, has been the socially created idea of 'sacrifice' and its association with 'good motherhood'. In times of scarcity, a number of women shared that they make an excuse for not eating so that the other members of the family could eat better. A disabled mother to a 7-year-old son when asked if she ever eats less than her hunger shared:

If I make an excuse, then that's different. Like I have a pain in my stomach ... pain in my throat, I don't feel like eating, pain in the head, I am going to sleep. You guys eat, I won't eat. By doing so, I have made excuses. So that these people eat, if there is a little, and if I don't eat...their stomach will be full. If I don't eat for a day, it doesn't matter, it happens many times.

(A, age 38)

My children are my jewellery If they become capable (saksham) then I don't have any problem. The days I had to see, I saw them. Now the time coming is only good.

(B, age 38)

We are also exploring how these daily choices are aspirational in nature – aiming to mould children into 'successful adults' who can later improve the social standing of the family and, amongst other things, provide old age support. A mother of two from Kanpur says:

While mothers sometimes rationalise and routinise these choices, we explore the difficult question: could these daily 'sacrifices' mean that mothers are disproportionately bearing the burden of food insecurity in families?



WORK-IN-PROGRESS UPDATE

UNDERSTANDING FOOD INSECURITY IN TRANSITIONING INDIA BY ANKITA RATHI



In India, food insecurity is reflective of an existing crisis of social reproduction. Social reproduction involves meeting people's care needs, including their food, housing, education, health, and socioemotional needs. There is a crisis unfolding in India where meeting these basic needs is increasingly unaffordable or even impossible for the vast majority of rural and urban labouring classes. Many struggle both to produce and to consume enough healthy food. Our fieldwork in two regionally diverse regions in India (Goa and Uttar Pradesh) reveals how households that rely on precarious labour for their survival commonly experience food insecurity and other forms of livelihood precarity.

This ongoing food crisis illustrates the broader structural crisis such households face, resulting in part from diverse economic transformations in the rural agricultural and urban industrial and service sectors. Interviews with a Muslim family in a village close to a rapidly urbanizing industrial city in Uttar Pradesh revealed some of the challenges families are facing.

The 80-year-old man in the house owns a small mobile fruit cart, frequently selling seasonal fruits in nearby villages. His son, who also resides with him in the village, shared how limited employment opportunities in the village forced him to engage in seasonal migration as a flexible, casualised factory worker. When asked about the ownership of land, and how the rapid sale of agricultural land for real estate plots has impacted their everyday lives, the older man shares:

'That is the problem! If we had our own land, we would have grown here everything'

'And when agriculture declined, so mazdoori (wage work) also declined. Man is earning something but is mostly unemployed. And those who is unemployed, will steal, loot. He is desperate. What will he do. He goes searching for work but doesn't find one. How long will he run? He will run for some days and then next day he will steal something and sell it off. He will steal and sell it'

'See Bad. Many bad things happened. Like we used to get food (refers as Saag Patta, which are green leafy vegetables) to eat, all that stopped. Used to go to the fields and would find some crops/vegetables, and now it is not, there so where will we search and get it.'

By addressing vital linkages between food insecurity and broader structural changes occurring in rural-urban India, my ongoing work in the project highlights how precariously labouring households across diverse geographies rely on credit, debt, and migration to cope with the crisis of social reproduction.



WORK-IN-PROGRESS UPDATE

WILL CHILDREN AGREE WITH OUR INTERPRETATION OF THEIR EXPERIENCES?

BY SWAYAMSHREE MISHRA

While writing a qualitative research paper rooted in empirical data, there is often a desire for the evidence to stand out authentically. This desire becomes even more pronounced when you have spent time with your participants, listened to their stories and observed them closely. As I have started gathering my thoughts for a paper on children's everyday meaning-making, I find myself surrounded by audio files and transcripts of interviews with children. I read and listen to their statements meticulously to not miss any aspect that needs focus and unpacking. Then I start thematising experiences into conceptual categories in order to look at recurrent themes and interconnections that may be telling something. While this can be an exciting exercise, analysing children's interviews has been challenging. Children express their thoughts in such varied and intelligent ways that there is always a significant potential for not comprehending them entirely. I often contemplate whether I might be attributing deeper meaning to a straightforward statement or, conversely, if I am overlooking something crucial by considering a word or a pause as unimportant. For instance, I am always intrigued when children select an uncommon word to portray something.



For example, Malti (name changed) used the word "**masti**" (to have fun) to describe her father's irresponsible behaviour of drinking and not earning during Covid. I felt that the word "masti" was Malti's way of not just condemning her father's actions but also subtly calling him out for being irresponsible and immature while her mother and siblings took on adult responsibilities--responsibilities that, in all probability, excluded "masti." I frequently wonder if Malti will like my interpretation of her experiences.

Masti ??



WORK-IN-PROGRESS UPDATE

FOOD INSECURITY IMPAIRS CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL SKILLS AND LIMITS SCHOOL COMPLETION

BY THOMAS ARGAW

Dr. Argaw is leading a study exploring the intricate relationship between food insecurity and children's socioemotional development, utilizing data from the Young Lives dataset for Ethiopia, India, and Peru. The research delves into how food insecurity matters for crucial aspects of emotional children's lives, including their life satisfaction, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and educational aspirations. Early findings show, across all three countries, food insecurity is associated with lower life satisfaction and reduced educational aspirations among children. The impact on self-efficacy and self-esteem is strongest in Ethiopia, and less pronounced in India and Peru. In a parallel study Dr. Argaw is also leading, preliminary results show food insecurity significantly hinders school completion in these countries.





EXPERT INTERVIEW SERIES



In the 7th episode of the Expert Interview Series, Dr. Swayamshree Mishra is in conversation with Professor R. Ramakumar, a Professor in the School of Development Studies at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai since 2013. He also serves as a non-ministerial Member of the State Planning Board, Government of Kerala.

In this interview, Professor Ramakumar talks about how he looks at food insecurity through interdisciplinary lens. He discusses his work on sufficiency of production in India, distribution of food, and how its linked with entitlements and the Public Distribution System (PDS).

We will be publishing the interview with Professor Ramakumar very soon. Watch out our [YouTube](#) channel for any updates.

You can watch the latest expert interview with Mr. Haldhar Mahto [here](#).

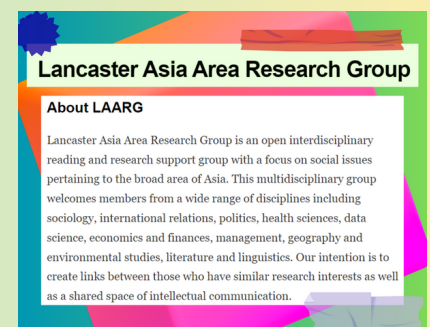
Our Expert Interview Series is available to view on [YouTube](#). Previous videos include discussions with Dr. Alula Pankhurst, Mr. V R Raman, Dr. Lam Van Phong, Dr. Vuong Ngoc Thuy and Dr. Eduardo Zegarra.

RECENT EVENTS

These were exciting and productive couple of months as our team member Dr. Swayamshree Mishra visited Lancaster University from IIT Kanpur, India. She has been busy giving a few talks and seminars in the UK.

Dr. Mishra presented a talk on ***'Food, education, and aspirations: An intra-household narrative analysis of the mid-day meal scheme in India'*** at the University of Oxford.

She also led an open discussion on the reading by Professor Janaki Abraham called ***'What will the neighbours say?: Legitimacy, Social Control and the Sociocultural Influence of Neighbourhoods in India'***. This event was organized by the [Lancaster Asia Area Research Group \(LAARG\)](#) at Lancaster University.



CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BRITISH SOCIETY FOR POPULATION STUDIES (BSPS)

By Charumita Vasudev and Swayamshree Mishra



We represented the team at the British Society for Population Studies annual conference this year at Keele University. The three-day event (11-13 September 2023) was packed with wonderful presentations, intriguing discussions, and illuminating plenary sessions. We found the sessions on family and uncertainty and those dealing with childhood migration particularly interesting and methodologically rich. The conference also featured captivating posters addressing topics such as climate change, migration, health outcomes and labor. Several of these posters showcased research from India, providing us with a platform to engage with fellow researchers and delve into discussions about methodological insights and challenges of working in a similar terrain.

Representing our team, Dr. Charumita Vasudev presented in a session on critical methodologies in demography. The session had six insightful papers that problematized the ideas of 'objectivity' in demographic knowledge creation. Key methodological issues raised across presentations included:

1. How to use more inclusive language for discussing beliefs about contraception;
2. The importance of recognizing researcher positionality;
3. The importance of understanding how respondents perceive the questions being asked;
4. The issues with self-reported measures dealing with sensitive topics;
5. More inclusive ways of researching childhood poverty.

Our presentation, entitled "Researching food insecurity – a praxis oriented qualitative approach", presented practical suggestions to overcome many of these problems. We used examples from our fieldwork to suggest how data collection and analysis could be made more inclusive and how efforts could be made to shift the power back to the participant. In doing so, we suggested that not only can we improve the quality of qualitative data collected, but also improve the quality of survey data--a form of data that has been the core of demography.

It was exciting and a great learning curve, listening to and interacting with people working in diverse parts of the world, especially in other parts of South and East Asia and learning from their experiences. What was especially notable was the interaction between early career researchers, likely in different stages of their master's or PhD program, and experienced demographers. This fostered a valuable exchange of field experiences, contributing to a healthy transfer of knowledge.

