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Exploring the Linkage between Women’s Status and Household Food Security in Bhutan

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Abstract

Despite the wide range of literature supporting the positive linkage between women empowerment and food security, one fails to find its examination in social contexts where females historically enjoyed equality or even favouritism in few cases like maternal inheritance and polyandry. Therefore, this study was conducted in the Kingdom of Bhutan, a landlocked Himalayan country which remained isolated from the world until the 1960s. Literature recognises the prevalence of matrilineal succession and polyandry during the 20th century in Bhutan, with its vestiges still remaining in few nomadic ethnic groups.

In this regard, both quantitative and qualitative survey methods were employed with the objectives of (i) investigating women’s participation level in crucial domestic decision-making processes of Bhutanese households and (ii) identifying the effect of the level of female involvement in domestic decision-making on households’ dietary diversity.

The analyses are based on data collected from 214 randomly selected households living in two central western regions of Bhutan. Employing a recently suggested methodology, women’s participation in domestic decision-making is measured and used to estimate its effects on two dietary diversity indicators, i.e. Food Variety Score and Household Dietary Diversity Score.

Descriptive analyses and qualitative interviews reveal that women do not lack any significant participation in domestic decision-making. Besides, the estimations indicate that the relationship between women empowerment and dietary diversity is non-linear. It is estimated that in low levels, increase in female participation in domestic decision-making is associated with positive outcomes. Preliminary analyses indicate that moving towards (perfect) gender equal decision-making regarding household livelihoods positively affects dietary diversity. Thus, this study mainly contributes to filling the gap in gender literature regarding the analyses in social contexts similar to Bhutan where literature supports the presence of polyandry and matrilineal succession. Furthermore, household per capita food expenditure, diversity in agricultural production and the quality of soil are found to be robust determinants of households’ dietary diversity.

Keywords: Bhutan, dietary diversity, domestic decision-making, gender equality