

How women use food to negotiate power in Pakistani and Indian households

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When it comes to healthy eating, policies and advice tend to focus on improving food knowledge and cooking skills. But food is more than just a source of pleasure and nutrition, it is also a medium for expressing [family relationships](#). Almost everything from the order of serving food, portion sizes, meal timings and types of food can act as an expression of [love, intimacy, distance or disdain](#).

The power imbalance between men and women ... when it comes to the household budget and cooking responsibilities plays a vital role in maintaining a healthy diet.

Those who do the cooking and serve food can communicate their authority or resistance through food – for example, by reducing the amount on a plate, or by altering serving and seating orders. Family members [can exact punishment](#) by not giving food when it is expected, or [not accepting food](#) when it is offered.

My new research has found that in order to encourage healthy eating, we need to understand the nuanced role that food plays in our relationships. For my [latest study](#), I spoke to 84 South Asian women of Indian and Pakistani background who live in Britain, India and Pakistan about the links between their access to resources and the way food is prepared and eaten in their households. There is some evidence [to suggest](#) that unhealthy diets among South Asian populations are contributing to health inequalities in the UK.

Healthy food choices

Although many women I spoke to were happily married, others found themselves trapped in loveless marriages with conflict. For them, food was one of the most potent mediums through which to express their anger and negotiate. One example came from a first-generation British Pakistani woman who knew fish was important for her children's health, yet she refused to cook and eat it at home:

"I go with whatever my husband wants ... but I don't like fish and don't cook it ... the look of it makes me nauseous."

In households where couples had harmonious relationships, women reported little dispute around food, and said the men were amicable when it came to healthy food choices such as daal, made of lentils. One British Pakistani woman, Nasreen, said she was happy to feed her children and husband healthy food at an ideal time:

"I cook his food separately. I'm trying to keep my husband off the curry, because he needs not to eat all the calories ... so if I make daal for him I make something else for the children. I eat whatever, their food or his food. The time they need to eat is too early for him ... so when he's ready for his dinner I'll prepare mine as well, and then we eat together."

Making food budgets go further

To get her husband to share some of the household responsibility, a Pakistani woman in the UK called Noorjahan encouraged him to do the food shopping. He agreed after eight years of argument. Noorjahan told me that she later regretted her decision as her husband spent too much money and bought non-essential and less healthy items. She tried to regain control of shopping but was unsuccessful.

Noorjahan then had to use her child benefits to top-up on fruit and vegetables and other essential items. Although she mostly cooked her husband's preferred choice of food, sometimes when she was angry she cooked what she wanted.

"He doesn't like daal but we argue about why I have to make his choice all the time. Last week, he did not like the food so ate out and paid with my money [child benefits]."

Out of fear that her husband would use more child benefit money on eating out, after several such incidents, Noorjahan decided to mostly cook food of her husband's choice.

Other women I interviewed said their husbands sometimes brought home food treats to show love, especially on pay day. One Gujarati woman in India said she felt cared for by her husband through his shopping: "He brings whatever I like to eat ... I don't have to tell him." In these households, women reported being able to amicably resolve any issues around healthy eating. Some women also said they had adopted healthy food choices on encouragement from their husbands.

Who gets to eat what?

In several households, women ate after feeding their husbands, in-laws and children and managed with whatever was left, often smaller pieces of meat, fewer vegetables and little or no milk or yoghurt. Some men insisted that women finish feeding the elders and children first, and couples then ate together – although women still prioritised husbands' portions. But in several other households, conflict meant that sometimes women were left with very little food. In response to these marital conflicts, women sometimes showed their resistance by altering the order they served food or portion sizes – for example, by giving bigger portions to grown up sons instead of their husbands.

My findings show that knowledge about food and healthy cooking alone is not enough to encourage healthy eating. The power imbalance between men and women within these South Asian families when it comes to the household budget and cooking responsibilities plays a vital role in maintaining a healthy diet.

Although this study focused on South Asian households, the [link between food and patriarchal value](#), and women's tactical use of food within the household, is also relevant to other cultures. This means that to encourage healthy eating, we need to engage with both men and women, as policy responses such as healthy cooking courses often delivered to and attended by women, may not lead to transformative changes if men refuse to eat what is cooked.

[Punita Chowbey](#) is a research fellow in the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing at Sheffield Hallam University. Her research focuses on gender inequalities, race/ethnicity, household economies, food and families and parenting among South Asians in the UK and South Asia.