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GENDER INEQUALITY AND FOOD SECURITY POLICY RESPONSES

by Mary Caesar

Key Points

- Gender inequality and the legacy of racial discrimination operate alongside poverty and economic inequality to shape the household food security experience in low-income areas in South African cities.
- In Cape Town, male-headed households are more likely to be food secure than female-headed households, although both experience high levels of severe food insecurity.
- National food security policy and local government do not recognize the systemic nature of gender inequality and food insecurity; a gap that needs to be addressed.

Introduction

The South African Constitution states that “everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water” (Government of South Africa 1996, Section 17 (1) (b)) and that “the state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of each of these rights” (Section 27 (2)). South Africa’s food and nutrition policy recognizes the right to food, and government’s obligation to fulfil that right. While women are included in this approach, with social security benefits a major feature, the food and nutrition policy does not address the structural or systemic manner in which gender inequality shapes food insecurity. In an early assessment of the application of socio-economic rights including the right to food, Brand (2003) argued that the South African government has interpreted that right to mean ensuring that the poorest and the most hungry have access to food or the means to procure food. To date, however, there has been no judicial review of the government’s interpretation of the right to food. As McLaren et al (2015: 22) note “there remains work to be done therefore to define exactly what ‘reasonable legislative and other measures’ would be in relation to the right to food, as well as what measures taken by the state could be considered as preventing access to this right.”

Gender inequality shapes urban food security. Female-headed households are more likely to be food insecure than male-headed households (Caesar and Riley 2018, Reddy and Moletsane 2011, Taylor and Chagunda 2015). Gender inequality also informs the livelihood strategies of women in cities, especially in relation to food procurement (Bowden et al 2018, Button 2016). Households in urban informal settlements are more at risk of food insecurity than those in urban formal and rural areas (Battersby 2011, Ndobbo 2013, Sekhampu 2017). Research on household food security in Cape Town



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conducted by the Hungry Cities Partnership (HCP) found a strong correlation between, poverty, economic inequality, and household food insecurity (Crush et al 2018).

Findings

The Integrated Food Security Strategy for South Africa (IFSS), the first national food security policy, prioritized those most hungry, those most vulnerable to hunger, and the poor in general (Government of SA 2002, May and Timaeus 2015, McLaren et al 2015). This approach was incorporated in the 2014 National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security (NPFNS) (Government of SA 2014). The NPFNS recognizes the right to food and adopts this broad definition of food security: “access to and control over the physical, social and economic means to ensure sufficient, safe and nutritious food at all times, for all South Africans, in order to meet the dietary requirements for a healthy life” (Government of SA 2014: 8).

Despite the expansive definition of food security, only two major themes, poverty and agriculture, run through the five pillars of the NPFNS. The first two pillars focus on (1) the “availability of improved nutritional safety nets”, for example, “government run and supported nutrition and feeding programs, emergency food relief” and (2) “improved nutrition education”, for example, “nutrition services to assist households and communities monitoring nutritional indices” and provisions related to consumer literacy (Ibid.:7). The other pillars relate to food production and the agricultural sector. Not only does the NPFNS maintain a focus on poverty, like the IFSS it fails to deal with the systemic nature of gender inequality.

South Africa’s legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, and gender hierarchies are largely manifested in economic disparities along racial and gender lines (Cheru 2001, Taylor and Chagunda 2015). The institutionalized racism of apartheid meant that economic opportunities and the distribution of private and public goods were predicated along racial and gender lines. Complex race-based hierarchies placed Whites above Coloureds followed by Indians and then Black Africans.¹ Women were subordinate to men leaving Black African women inferior to Black African men, White women, and White men. While the post-1994 political regime ushered in a constitutional democracy, women’s

full enjoyment of the right to equality remains a work in progress (Government of SA 2015).

Unemployment rates have consistently been higher for women than for men. In 2004, for example, 27% of females and 20% of males were unemployed. Although male unemployment increased to 23% in 2013, it was still lower than female unemployment at 28%. In 2011, 45% of the labour force was female and 75% of those were Black, 11% Coloured, and 11% White. While the majority of working women are therefore Black, they are predominantly employed in low-paid, non-managerial positions (Ackermann and Velelo 2013). In the City of Cape Town, the formal economy is service-driven with the finance and insurance industries playing a dominant role. This kind of labour market requires skilled labour, which is both gendered and racialized in favour of men and Whites. Many Black women are forced to find employment in the informal economy (City of Cape Town 2015).

Household responsibilities are highly gendered in Cape Town households with men viewed as breadwinners and decision-makers while women are homemakers and nurturers (Shefer et al 2008). Women spend almost twice the amount of time as men on household work, while men spend more time participating in the labour market and more time looking for work. Women, in contrast, spend more time on unpaid care work in the home with fewer opportunities for paid employment (Floro and Komatsu 2011).

The data for this analysis comes from a sub-set of 384 households extracted from the HCP household survey of Cape Town. All of the households are located in the low-income area of Browns Farms in Philippi on the Cape Flats. At the time of the 2011 Census, Philippi’s total population was 200,603 in 64,411 households, while the Browns Farms population was 71,518 in 24,507 households. Just over half (50.5%) were female, and 49.5% were male. Ninety-eight percent of the population was Black African and 87% were isiXhosa-speaking. In Philippi as a whole, 39% of households were female-headed.

Unemployment levels are very high in the Browns Farms area but have a marked gender bias. According to the survey results, 48% of male household heads and only 21% of female household heads were in full-time employment. Conversely, 16% of male heads versus 28% of female heads were unemployed and looking for work. More male than female heads had part-time or casual employment (26% versus 19%). Given the well-established positive correlation

¹ This brief employs the racial categories used by Statistics South Africa

between cash income from wage work and food security, these gendered employment patterns provide male-headed households with the distinct advantage of an increased chance of being food secure.

Figure 1 compares the food-security status of households by the employment status and gender of the household head. Clearly, having a head in full-time employment or self-employment does not make households food secure. Most (almost 80%) of male and female heads in full-time employment are in food-insecure households. If the household head is in part-time employment or unemployed, there is a greater chance of being food insecure. In this scenario, female-headed households are more likely to be food insecure.

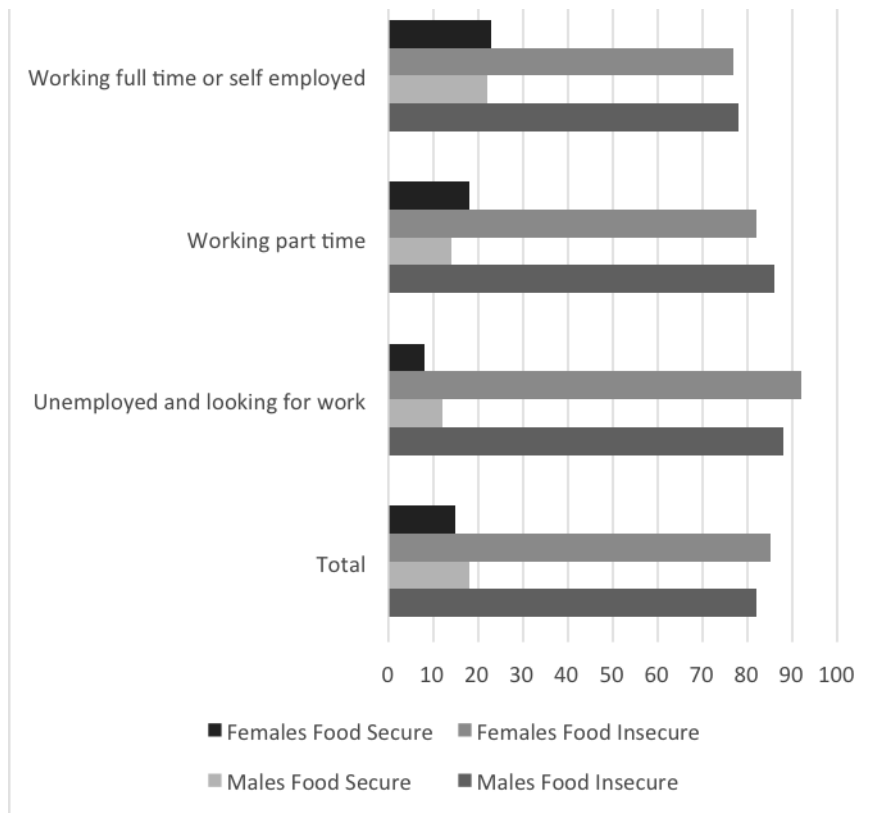
In the survey, the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) and Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP) scale were used to compare levels of household food insecurity in Philippi (Coates et al 2007). The mean HFIAS score among male-headed households was 10.8 out of a possible 27 (with a standard deviation of 6.78) and among female-headed households was 11.0 (with a standard deviation of 6.54). While female-headed households were more food insecure on average, the difference with male-headed was not large. Similarly, 63% of male-headed and

64% of female-headed households classified as severely food insecure on the HFIAP scale. However, more male-headed households (14%) were completely food secure than female-headed households (5%), suggesting that households with male heads still had a better chance of being totally food secure.

The gender differences in household food security prevalence between male- and female-headed households in Philippi are thus extremely small. One reason for this is that poverty is the main driver of food insecurity in Cape Town. Most households are extremely poor and the vast majority are food insecure, irrespective of the sex of the household head. Another possible reason for the narrow gap is that female-headed households benefit more from the government's social grant system, a form of cash income, compensating for the lack of employment/wage-related income. The current form of the child support grant, i.e. a small cash amount paid for children under the age of 16 years to their primary care giver, was introduced in 1997 (Patel and Hochfeld 2011).

Of the 14.6 million South Africans receiving social assistance in 2011, over 10.1 million received the child support grant. Although the primary goal of this grant is poverty reduction, various researchers have assessed the link between

FIGURE 1: Work Status of Female and Male Household Heads and Food Security Status



the child support grant and the food security of recipient households and the subgroup of the children. In terms of its main goal, the grant has reduced poverty, and the following positive outcomes for grant recipient households have been identified: improvement in nutritional intake, increased school enrolment, improved capacity of mothers to look for work, better access to credit, and higher expenditure on food (Agüero et al 2007, d’Agostino et al 2018, Coetzee 2013, Owusu-Addo et al 2018).

The survey asked five questions related to food-related tasks in the household: who is normally engaged in buying food, preparing meals, allocating food, growing food, and doing none of these tasks (Table 1). Multiple responses were permitted for each household member. One household member might be involved in more than one task and multiple household members might spend time on one task.

Women are generally more involved in all the food-related tasks. More female than male household heads are involved in buying food, preparing it, and allocating it. Twenty per cent of male household heads play no role in food-related tasks, compared to only 2% of female heads. Gender differences between men and women are most pronounced when it comes to other adults preparing and allocating food in the household. Only 22% and 15% of men prepare and allocate food, respectively, compared to 62% and 39% of women. The gender gap is also significant when comparing males and females who undertake no food-related tasks: 63% of males and 34% of females. While most young people aged 10-18 years of age are not involved in any of these tasks, preparing food is still more of an activity for females (15%) than males (10%).

Policy Implications

The survey findings provide insights into the extreme vulnerability of households to food insecurity of households in Philippi, Cape Town. While the findings are specific to one low-income area of Cape Town, the area is by no means unique and it is likely that many other low-income urban neighbourhoods would exhibit a similar profile. Given this assumption, there are various policy implications of more general relevance.

Achieving a sustainable, just food system

The primary driving force of food insecurity is high unemployment and pervasive poverty, which affects virtually all households. While male-headed households have a greater chance of being food secure, most low-income households are severely food insecure. Government social grants do provide a buffer to female-headed households to mitigate food insecurity, but it does not transform the food system into a sustainable, just system. As Patel and Hochfeld (2011) ask of the child support grant, “It buys food but does it change gender relations?”

Acknowledge structural gender inequality and food insecurity

A food policy approach prioritizing the most hungry and most economically vulnerable to food insecurity has resulted in improvements in the welfare of the poorest South Africans (May and Timaeus 2015). This approach addresses the food security needs of specific groups of women, for example, female farmers, rural women, lactating women or those with high-risk pregnancies, elderly women, and households with female heads. However, it ignores the systemic and structural factors that support unequal gender relations leaving women and their households vulnerable to food insecurity. An approach to food security and a sustainable food system should take account of the impact of

TABLE 1: Household Food-related Responsibilities of Women and Men

Household member	Gender	Buys food	Prepares food	Allocates food	Grows food	None of these activities	N
Head	Female	86.6	74.5	84.3	0.9	1.9	216
	Male	73.8	32.7	57.1	1.2	20.2	168
Other adults (aged >18)	Female	34.6	62.0	38.5	0.5	34.3	379
	Male	24.9	22.4	15.2	0.4	62.9	237
Children (aged 10-18)	Female	5.3	15.4	8.9	0	84.6	169
	Male	2.5	9.8	5.7	0	90.2	122

unequal gender relations, even in low-income households where poverty and economic inequality seem to be the dominant drivers. Struggles for economic inequality are not separate from racial and gender justice. Food policy responses should expand their approach to food security by incorporating the impacts of gender inequality.

Conduct a gender audit to inform food security policy

Cock (2016) proposes more qualitative studies to understand women's experiences and responses to food insecurity. Lewis (2015) examines the research that informs current food policy and urges that greater attention be paid to methodologies generating knowledge about gender and food insecurity. An amendment to the current food policy should begin with a gender audit of food policy and programmes. Such an audit could provide insights into the institutionalization of gender inequality, the content and impact of gender policies and programmes, and more importantly, make the food policy regime responsive to gendered experiences of food insecurity. In addition to the gender audit, collaboration with feminist and gender researchers could inform a food policy regime of the systemic nature of gender inequality and how to avoid gender-neutral or biased food policy.

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