Gender Aspects of Urban Food Security and Nutrition: The Critical Role of Urban Food Environments

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Eliminating structural gender inequalities and unleashing the potential of women will play a fundamental role in improving the food security and nutrition of households in urban and peri-urban areas. This article applies a gender lens to the analysis of the "food environment" to identify the main challenges to achieving this goal, and how national and municipal policy action can address them.

Shifts in consumption patterns from traditional foods to highly-processed foods (often high in dietary energy, saturated fat, sugars and salt and low in nutritional value) is happening fastest in the urban areas of low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). This is causing serious increases in overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases. Urban food insecurity, undernutrition, micro-nutrient deficiencies and obesity coexist, complicating policy choices towards healthier diets.

As in rural areas, women in urban areas have to manage their time between several paid and unpaid tasks: earning income as workers and/or entrepreneurs; acting as care givers; and managing household food choices and resources. Gender plays an important role in food security, and there is ample evidence of bias against women in urban areas. At the same time, improving women's status and gender equality positively influences nutritional status for women and their families.

The FAO SOFA 2010-11[2] showed that closing the gender gap in access to productive resources and bridging the male-female yield gap could reduce the number of undernourished people by as much as 100-150 million (out of an estimated 925 million undernourished people at that time).

While such calculation has not been done in an urban context, our analysis of existing relevant data and literature confirms that there is ample scope for leveraging women's potential for food security and nutrition in the urban areas.

Clues from the literature review

The focus on gender in literature related to urban issues has often been on urban planning, in terms of safety, housing, transport, employment, access to education and services, etc. Very rarely have these aspects been linked to food security and nutrition. The food environment framework offers a unique opportunity to do so.

The urban food environment plays an important role in shaping diets, and could potentially inform a policy-making framework to improve food security and nutrition that includes action by local authorities. As illustrated in Figure 1, food environments are made up of external and personal

Food market. Photo by Markus Winkler on Unsplash

The food environment

'The food environment is the interface that mediates people's food acquisition and consumption within the wider food system. It encompasses external dimensions such as the availability, prices, vendor and product properties, and promotional information; and personal dimensions such as the accessibility, affordability, convenience and desirability of food sources and products.'
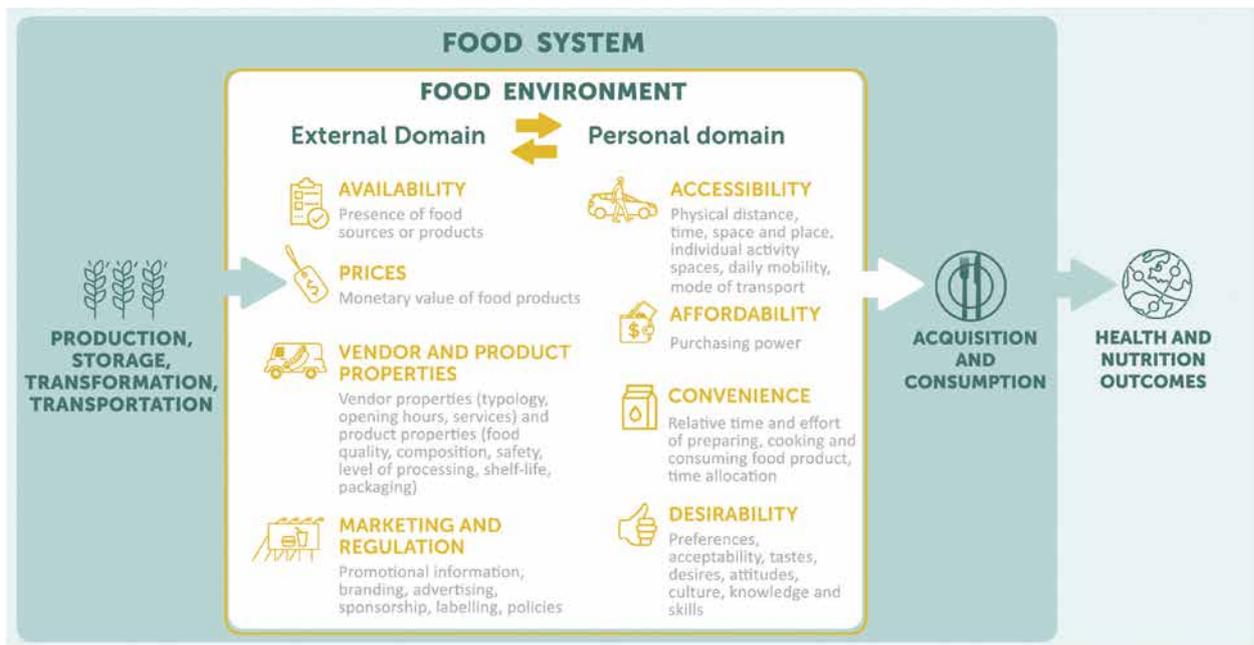
Turner et al. (2018)[1]

Figure 1: Conceptual framework depicting the food environment as the interface within the wider food system, with key dimensions mapped to external and personal domains. Source: Turner et al (2018)[1]. Reproduced under creative commons non-commercial license

dimensions[1]. While it is necessary to understand the policy entry points to improve urban food security and nutrition in *both* dimensions, this article takes the "personal dimension" as an entry point for gender-sensitive analysis and policy action, because it allows investigation of individual-level aspects that shape food acquisition and consumption.

Below, we consider gender issues across the four pillars of the personal dimension of food environments: accessibility, affordability, convenience and desirability.

Accessibility includes physical distance to food outlets, time, space and place, daily mobility and mode of transport. Evidence shows that that most transport systems are biased towards the travel needs of men. Such gender-blind transport planning results in the need for women to make multiple stops for a range of different reasons (e.g. work, childcare, food) - so-called "trip chaining" which places heavy cost and time burdens on women[3]. Zoning and land use planning that separate residential areas from employment locations also have an impact on women's mobility[4]. Women tend to rely more heavily on public transport than men; a UN-HABITAT study of nine cities in developing countries found that 11.6 per cent of households headed by men had cars, compared to only 1.62 per cent of woman-headed households[5]. Women's mobility can also be restricted by laws, customs, or urban violence, which limit their possibility to travel for work or food and frequent public spaces, including food markets.

The evidence demonstrates the inter-linkages between the areas of gender, transportation, city planning and food. Efficient transport systems that can reduce the time between home and work, and planning city food outlets that supply nutritious, diverse food on the routes that women take in their daily lives, can be helpful to increase the time they can dedicate to food purchasing and cooking at home.

Affordability refers to individual purchasing power. While the prevailing conception is that women and men in urban areas have greater access to economic opportunities, services and infrastructure than those in rural areas, data indicate that women may not benefit from these opportunities equally to men, especially in lower income countries and in poor areas of large cities[3]. Women in cities may also face structural disadvantages that impact their own and their families' food security and nutritional status. For instance:

- unless it is decent, employment does not necessarily lead to women's economic empowerment[3] and thus increased ability to afford nutritious, diverse and sufficient food;
- women's limited mobility (see above) can restrict their options for labour force participation and in turn their purchasing power;
- women (in urban and rural areas) are more likely than men to be engaged in informal employment, which adversely affects their career prospects and income regularity and security;
- women face gender discrimination in property rights, constraining their economic independence and denying them an alternative income from rentals[6];
- social grants and other social protection programmes that are not designed in a gender-responsive way are a missed opportunity to improve women's ability to purchase food.

Convenience concerns the relative time and effort of preparing, cooking and consuming food products. While women increasingly engage in paid work besides unpaid domestic and care work, this does not result in the more equal distribution of domestic responsibilities between women and men of the same household[3,4]. As a result,

women bear the burden of both the productive and reproductive responsibilities, with impact on their opportunities for education and the type of employment they can pursue. The greater demand for convenience, prepared or processed food in cities is often associated with the increased participation of women in the workforce[7]. However, policy actions for improving food security and nutrition cannot consider reducing female employment as a linear solution to the above-mentioned problems.

Enabling the purchase of nutritious food in cities means ensuring that women have decent income generating opportunities. Labour/work place policies can make a difference[8], such as:

- policies that aim at the creation of decent employment and social protection; workplace policies that promote work-life balance (flexitime, teleworking, etc.);
- provision of quality and affordable care services; and
- interventions promoting the equal sharing of domestic and care work, including food purchasing and preparation responsibilities, between women and men.

Used in combination, such measures could improve both women's economic autonomy and household food security and nutrition.

Desirability refers to individual preferences, acceptability, attitudes, culture and knowledge. From a gender perspective, 'gender identities shape what foods are desirable and considered culturally appropriate'[6] for women and men. One key cultural facet that applies in both urban and rural contexts is that the sharing or distribution of food among family members is influenced by gender norms, roles and relations, with direct implications for individuals' food security and nutritional status.

The above illustrates that integrating a gender perspective in the food environment analysis can be a useful way of organising the knowledge about gender issues, and of guiding local and urban authorities to shape policy and regulatory frameworks. Such frameworks either provide services directly (e.g. public transport, publicly supported school meals) or through incentives and regulation of private sector activity (zoning, permits etc.). In this way, they can remove gender-related obstacles to healthier diets for all.

Concluding observations and recommendations

- **Dimensions of gender inequality:** There is a need to study the dimensions of gender inequality in terms of lack of equal opportunities among women and men and to quantify the overall effects of providing equal opportunities for women and men in urban contexts on food security and better nutrition. This will be a powerful informed advocacy tool.
- **Gender transformative approaches:** Unequal social structures that perpetuate gender inequality negatively impact on urban food security and nutrition. This calls for the need to apply gender transformative approaches in urban food system development, and challenge and

change the underlying causes of gender inequalities rooted in discriminatory social and gender norms, and unequal social and power relations.

- **Integration:** Using the food environment conceptual framework to understand how gender impacts on urban food security and nutrition shows the interlinkages among different policy areas (transport, land use planning, social services, etc.), and points towards the need for integrative policy frameworks.
- **Multi-level coordination:** Municipal/local policies and programmes targeting or integrating gender issues should be coordinated with national policies and programmes (on food and nutrition, transportation, land-use planning, urban planning, etc) for greater efficiency.
- **Impact evaluation and LMIC:** Interventions with a food environment focus have not been widely evaluated. This is especially true when it comes to gender dimensions, and a lot of evidence is anecdotal and/or based on individual case studies describing initiatives. Food environments have been studied more in the context of high-income countries. Much work is needed to understand food environments and their gender dimensions in LMIC especially in urban areas of different sizes (small cities and rural towns, medium size and megacities.

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