

# Socio-cultural Influences on Nutritional Status of Women and its effects on their Health and Well-being: Evidence from District Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

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## Abstract

The nutritional status of women in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas like District Faisalabad in Punjab, is deeply affected by socio-cultural factors, impacting their overall health and well-being. This study examines the socio-cultural determinants of nutrition among women in Faisalabad and evaluates how these factors influence their physical and mental health outcomes. Key factors considered include societal norms, traditional gender roles, economic constraints, family dynamics, and dietary practices. Findings reveal that cultural beliefs and gender biases limit women's access to nutritious food and healthcare resources, leading to high rates of malnutrition, anemia, and related health complications. Restricted mobility, limited decision-making power, and lack of education further exacerbate these issues, perpetuating a cycle of poor health outcomes and lower quality of life among women. This research underscores the urgent need for culturally sensitive interventions and public health strategies that empower women, address nutritional inequalities, and promote awareness to enhance the well-being of women in Faisalabad and similar socio-cultural settings across Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural, Nutritional Status, Women, Well-being, Health

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## Introduction

According to Blossner and Onis (2005), malnutrition might mean either too much or too little nutrients. Malnutrition can be caused by various things. Usually, these cause people to eat poorly or get really sick. People from economically disadvantaged, marginalized, and underprivileged social groups are the ones most likely to suffer from malnutrition, according to studies. One group cannot ensure that its members get enough of certain nutrients because of resource constraints. As a result, their children miss out on healthy growth and development opportunities and suffer from a host of ailments brought on by a deficiency in vital nutrients. Conversely, there are those who have a tendency to eat too much. Because they eat more calories than their bodies need, they are overweight and suffer from additional health issues. They also suffer from malnutrition, which is defined as taking in more calories than the body needs.

Many people's nutritional status is negatively impacted by environmental diseases (Blossner & Onis, 2005). That is to say, when environmental issues, such as air, land, water, and noise pollution, impact national health, it also significantly impacts nutritional status. The delicate ecological balance is upset when the population rises. One of the essential components of reducing food production is this. The folks are facing difficulties in acquiring their recommended two square meals per day. So, they're experiencing a kind of malnutrition known as under-nutrition. Malnutrition is a serious problem in India, yet it disproportionately affects women and children. It is believed that this is one of the main obstacles that communities and the country face when trying to advance. Every community and region should implement a plan to make sure everyone gets enough to eat every day, but especially kids and women (Blossner & Onis, 2005).

### 1.1 Causes of Malnutrition

The various causes of malnutrition have been stated as follows:

#### Poverty

To be poor is to be materially and resourcefully short-changed. There are trifectas of poverty: social, economic, and political. To be completely poor is to have no means at all to meet the most fundamental of human needs, including those for nutrition, clothes, and housing. A variety of manifestations of poverty exist, each of which is subject to change throughout time and space. A lot of people want it gone because

it's different. Presumably, malnutrition is a problem that people face when they live in poverty. Problems meeting dietary needs arise when people's lives are severely disrupted by poverty. Findings from these studies show that people living in poverty face a lot of difficulties every day. Malnutrition is thus inextricably linked to poverty (Hayes, 2020).

### **Unawareness and Backwardness**

People are overwhelmed by ignorance and backwardness in both rural areas and urban slums. The majority of the time, they don't know anything about a lot of things that could really improve their life. When these circumstances have a significant impact, people tend to neglect getting the nutrients they need, which can lead to malnutrition. The fact that some people don't know which nutrients are crucial and how often they should consume them is a big issue. Despite this, most people are aware that getting enough food to eat every day is crucial to their health and productivity. When they are unable to pay for the food on their own, they rely on others, like religious institutions, social workers, non-governmental groups, and so on. People living in poverty and backwardness can benefit from these. A lack of knowledge and development largely causes malnutrition (Hayes (2020).

### **Poor Hygiene and Lack of Sanitation**

A lack of sanitation and proper personal hygiene practices is also considered a major contributor to undernourishment. Individuals from low-income and marginalized areas often do not have adequate housing, according to studies. Put simply, there is a specific demographic that struggles with homelessness on a regular basis. People are less likely to pay attention to what they eat and their nutrition when they are living in areas with inadequate public services. There is a serious issue because, in some situations, they do not even have the tools to cook healthy meals at home. It is difficult for them to receive a balanced diet when they are not living in a clean environment. Hence, inadequate sanitation and bad personal hygiene are major contributors to undernourishment.

### **Low Production and Profitability**

Much of rural India is engaged in agriculture or some other form of agriculture, and over 70% of the population lives in rural areas. According to the studies, there are months when farmers' productivity and profitability are high and months of the year when they are low. When these rates are low, people have a harder time affording the necessary food and may go without meals altogether. The farmers and their families suffer from malnutrition as a result. One square meal a day is all that farmers and their families can get in some Indian states like Maharashtra. Thus, the issue of starvation significantly impacts their life. Malnutrition results from low productivity and profitability (Jacob and Ganguli, 2016).

### **Health Problems and Illnesses**

A number of health issues and diseases are thought to be significant contributors to malnutrition. In general, people pay less attention to what they eat and drink when they are sick or injured. Most of the time, people have to stick to a set diet and cut out certain foods because of health issues and illnesses. Sometimes they get weak and pallid. It is clear from their outward look that they have been unwell, which has led to malnutrition. Malnutrition is a result of their health problems and illnesses. Malnutrition becomes a major issue when people prioritize their health over paying attention to their food and nutrition. Thus, health issues and diseases are also considered to be major contributors to malnutrition.

### **Gender Inequality**

Some rural families value male offspring more highly than female ones, and the arrival of a girl child is oftentimes not honored. The primary rationale for this is that these people tend to believe that having sons is a great investment in the future success of the family and the community. In contrast, women are a drain on resources since they are constant complainers and provide zero return on investment. In terms of diet, girls are likewise subject to prejudice. The male offspring are given elaborate and nutritious meals, while the females are given more basic fare. Clearly, sweets are enjoyed by all. Only boys were allowed to eat sweets as children, whereas girls were forbidden to eat them. Girls and women in rural areas are more likely to suffer from malnutrition, and gender inequality is a major contributor to this problem. They are a neglected, oppressed, and economically disadvantaged group (Jacob and Ganguli, 2016).

### **Rituals and Practices**

People adhere to specific rituals and customs regardless of whether they live in an urban or rural area, according to the research. These are adhered to because of one's religious convictions. People are sometimes obligated to fast, which means they don't drink water either. Fasting is often practiced for one day, although it can also be observed for multiple days, such as seven or nine. People suffer from malnutrition when they adhere strictly to rituals and procedures without caring about their food and nutrition. They experience adverse effects on their health and health issues as a result. Consequently, it is plausible to conclude that certain religious observances contribute significantly to undernourishment (Degefa et al., 2022).

### **Illiteracy and Unemployment**

The universal desire to improve one's professional standing is shared by people of all walks of life and demographics. A high-quality education can improve their job prospects, which in turn can lead to greater job options, allowing them to better manage their living situations. They feel overwhelmed and their health takes a turn for the worse when they face obstacles in achieving their professional goals and limited finances. Lack of education and employment makes it hard for people to meet their nutritional needs. Reason number one is that they don't know what they need and, number two, they don't have the means to promote health and eradicate malnutrition. People suffering from hunger have no idea how to treat it because they cannot read or write. Conversely, when people are out of work, they don't have the means to buy food that's both healthful and nutritious. Illiteracy and unemployment are major contributors to malnutrition (Hayes, 2020).

## **Deprived Health Services**

Health services are highly valued for their crucial role in developing optimal health and well-being. Medical and health care facilities are necessary for helping people who are sick or injured, or for addressing issues like starvation. Medical centres in remote locations are often in a weaker condition. Thus, in order to access adequate healthcare, people living in rural areas must relocate to urban centres. However, in many regions, people do not have access to adequate health care because of a lack of finances, making it impossible for them to settle in urban areas. One of the essential issues that leads to obstacles in promoting good health and well-being and giving solutions to the problem of malnutrition is poorly funded health services (Ugwu et al., 2025)

## **Deprived Living Conditions**

The elimination of malnutrition and the promotion of health and wellbeing can only be achieved if individuals and communities have access to adequate resources, facilities, tools, equipment, and civic amenities. In contrast, the proper maintenance of one's living conditions is hindered by a lack of resources, infrastructure, and comforts. It is difficult to put into action the steps that are necessary to eradicate malnutrition when people are living in impoverished situations. Traditional cooking methods in rural communities sometimes involve the use of mud stoves. In contrast, electric stoves are commonly used by people living in metropolitan areas. Even though clay stoves can cook food, they aren't as convenient as electric or gas stoves for making meals on a regular basis. People living in poverty often resort to skipping meals as a means to avoid the hassle of cooking again. This is just one of many crucial elements to consider while analyzing this population. As a result, they struggle to meet their dietary needs. It follows that living in poverty also leads to an untreatable level of malnutrition (Reid, 2003).

### **1.2 Consequences of Malnutrition**

The consequences of malnutrition have been stated as follows:

#### **High Mortality Rate**

One of the most significant outcomes of malnutrition is an increase in the death rate. Problems with improving health and well-being arise when people do not get enough of certain nutrients. According to the data, the death rate has been steadily rising, with the greatest increases seen in the youngest demographics. Specifically, the mortality rate is the rate of death. It is a way to quantify the overall mortality rate in a population as a whole as a result of a specific cause. It is more usual to present the national death rate broken down by age group and gender for each given cause (Jacob & Ganguli, 2016). There is a disproportionately high rate of death among children from low-income, minority, and disadvantaged backgrounds. The death rate is significantly higher for children younger than five years old. A lack of proper nutrition can lead to illness and, ultimately, death, and this is true not only for children but for adults as well. Consequently, a high death rate is a crucial outcome of malnutrition.

#### **Low Weight at Birth**

Someone is considered to have a low birth weight if they were under five pounds or eight ounces when they were born. Babies with a low birth rate can be perfectly healthy in some circumstances, but in others, they may face health issues and require medical attention. One major cause of low birth weight is premature birth, which occurs before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Another prevalent cause is growth restriction. Here, intrauterine growth restriction is the main culprit. This happens when the placenta is unhealthy, the mother is sick, or the baby is born with a condition that prevents proper development while in the womb. Malnutrition is another major reason babies are born with a low weight. Children born to moms who are malnourished themselves are more likely to be born into a starving world. Pregnant women must, therefore, give careful consideration to their nutrition and food. This is one way they may help end the epidemic of malnutrition (Padhani et al., 2022)

#### **Damage to the Mucosal Membrane**

Just as skin covers the outside of the body, mucous membranes cover the insides that are exposed to air. To aid in keeping the membranes moist, mucous glands abound in mucous membranes. Tube, middle ear, nasal passageways, lips, and mouth are all examples of mucous membranes (Hayes, 2020). People put themselves at risk of mucosal membrane injury when they neglect their nutrition and eating habits. For instance, it is common for people to have dry skin and mucous membranes when they fast and do not consume any water at all. Mucosal membranes are vulnerable to injury when people are undernourished. This demonstrates that one of the inevitable outcomes of malnutrition is harm to the mucosal membrane.

#### **Weak Immune System**

The immune system is compromised by malnutrition. A compromised immune system makes a person more susceptible to infections than the average person. Improving one's general health is one of the many benefits of eating healthily. Doctors and other medical professionals often advise patients with compromised immune systems to eat plenty of fresh produce. The provision of an abundance of nutrients is guaranteed by them. Even if people don't eat a lot of veggies and fruits, they can still have a healthy diet by eating lean proteins like meat, eggs, and fish. Getting enough of the right nutrients in one's diet is crucial for preventing and treating malnutrition and building a strong immune system. This proves without a reasonable doubt that a lack of nutrients weakens the immune system, and that resolving this issue requires consuming enough of these nutrients (Calder et al., 2020)

#### **Increases Risk of Infections and Infectious Diseases**

Diseases and health issues manifest when people's bodies do not receive enough nutrition. Anaemia, for instance, is a disorder that develops when the body does not get enough iron. However, a variety of additional health issues and diseases may manifest in the people as a

result of a deficiency in other nutrients as well. Skin conditions including redness, flakiness, and pigmentation can be brought on by a protein deficiency, for instance. In contrast, vitamin and mineral deficiencies can lead to a variety of health problems, including but not limited to: stomach ache, lowered immunity, diarrhea, irregular heartbeat, lack of appetite, and so on. Minerals and vitamins are essential for human health, and everyone needs to get their daily recommended dose. Minerals and vitamins are important for maintaining good health, and foods like fish and cod liver oil are good sources. People of all ages, socioeconomic statuses, and ethnicities are susceptible to the aforementioned infections, health issues, and infectious diseases. In light of this, it is imperative that all individuals consistently attend to eating a balanced and nutritious diet. Regular attention to acquiring essential nutrition and diet reduces the incidence of infections and infectious diseases, which is a direct result of malnutrition (Nasir et al., 2006).

### **Reduction in Abilities**

It goes without saying that a healthy diet is essential for productive work and play. A well-rounded diet should include all the nutrients your body needs. The body gets energy and the ability to do things organizedly from the nutrients—carbohydrates, lipids, proteins, vitamins, minerals, and water. However, when people are malnourished, they don't get enough of the nutrients that their bodies need, which can make them less capable. In order to promote physical and mental well-being, a healthy diet is crucial. Consequently, a decline in capabilities is considered an inevitable outcome of malnutrition (Gheonea et al., 2023)

### **Reduction in Energy Levels**

There is widespread agreement that people require energy to appropriately perform their daily chores and activities. This energy comes from eating well, therefore people should be sure to pay close attention to their nutrition and food on a daily basis if they want to get enough of it. They may have trouble getting enough to eat if they are living in poverty or are members of economically disadvantaged groups. Due to the physically demanding nature of their work, however, they must ensure they consume enough of these nutrients every day. They won't have as much energy if they don't get the right food and nutrients. People will also experience weariness and lethargy. In the process of carrying out duties and responsibilities, these are considered to be significant hurdles. An major result of malnutrition is a decrease in energy levels, which can be mentioned as one of the effects (Hayes, 2020).

### **Experiencing Psychological Problems**

Anger, tension, worry, despair, and trauma are some of the mental health issues that people face, and these are the ones that contribute to their malnutrition. Few people pay attention to what they eat and drink when they're dealing with issues like these. Some people may even cut back on their food intake or even miss meals altogether. As a result of these issues, widespread starvation could occur. Even Nevertheless, there are situations in which they have no bearing on nutritional needs. To illustrate the point, people are more inclined to eat healthily when they are under stress from their jobs. Since they are cognizant of the fact that addressing the issue of malnutrition and acquiring the necessary energy is crucial to their employment performance and focus. Therefore, it's unclear whether psychological disorders induce malnutrition (Ali & Lindstorm, 2006).

### **Seclusion and Loneliness**

The terms "seclusion" and "loneliness" describe how people feel when they are all by themselves and whether or not they are happy or sad. Anxieties is another name for the miserable condition people go through when they live alone and feel cut off from society. In the long run, this issue hurts their mental health and general disposition. Physical and emotional health are both negatively impacted when people experience prolonged feelings of isolation. Isolation and loneliness make people care less about what they eat. Studies have shown that people are more likely to follow a healthy eating plan when they are dining with loved ones. Even when they're with other people, people who are struggling with mental health issues like stress, sadness, trauma, or rage may still feel lonely. Individuals suffering from these issues often report feeling isolated and lonely, which may contribute to their malnutrition (Young et al., 2006).

### **Chronic Pain**

People who suffer from malnutrition sometimes also deal with persistent physical pain. Any number of bodily areas, including muscles, joints, the stomach, and even headaches, could feel this kind of discomfort. The degree to which people are uncomfortable is directly proportional to the intensity of the pain. Therefore, persistent pain causes starvation and vice versa. It is critical that people with chronic pain seek medical attention without delay. A person with chronic pain may confide in loved ones so that they can offer emotional and practical support. Medical professionals are consulted by family members when they are unaware. People should pay close attention to what they eat and drink if it's because of malnutrition. For the simple reason that people's health and happiness take a hit when they deal with severe chronic pain. Hence, in order to increase health and wellbeing and reduce the issue of malnutrition, individuals must guarantee that they pay sufficient attention to nutrition and diet (Khan & Kremer, 2009).

## **1.3 Ways of Eliminating Malnutrition**

Making sure one does not experience the issue of malnutrition is essential for promoting excellent health and wellbeing. People that are goal-oriented improve their living conditions in general and get everything done in a methodical fashion, which is essential for effective growth and development. Accordingly, they need to give their nutrition and food a lot of attention if they want to accomplish things in their personal and professional lives. Each person should be sure to eat four meals a day: breakfast, lunch, an evening snack, and dinner. In order to lessen or eliminate malnutrition altogether, it is essential to pay close attention to one's food and nutrition. The evolution of food systems is also an issue that must be addressed by all nations, regions, and communities. If the agriculture sector is serious about increasing its production and

profitability, it must implement cutting-edge, scientific, and innovative technologies. According to Jafar et al. (2006), these methods are crucial for eradicating malnutrition. Construction of hospitals and other health care facilities in remote regions is another crucial step toward ending malnutrition. It is essential to use cutting-edge techniques in hospitals and other health care institutions. It is the responsibility of medical professionals and health advocates to educate the public on the need of a balanced diet and the elimination of malnutrition. Teachers also stress the importance of a healthy diet and nutrition in the classroom. It is important to educate kids on the relationship between what they eat and their health, specifically what foods are good for them and those that are bad for them. Further, they need to know the pros and cons of eating nutritious food compared to bad diet. Because they represent the nation's future, elementary school students need to learn about the significance of a healthy diet and the consequences of malnutrition from an early age. This can be achieved by including a unit on nutrition in the curriculum. So, it's safe to say that schools and other health care facilities play a crucial role in educating the public about the causes and solutions to malnutrition.

#### 1.4 Eating or dietary Practices

A person's health is greatly affected by their eating habits. An inadequate and unhealthy diet, particularly among women of childbearing age, has led to nutrient deficiencies, which are particularly problematic during pregnancy and lactation in Nepal, where 35% of women are anaemic and 18% are malnourished. This situation endangers women's physical, emotional, and social health. Also contributing to women's undernourishment include factors related to reproductive biology, poverty, illiteracy, social and cultural norms, and inequalities within households. Micronutrient deficits are more likely to occur in women whose diets are low in fruits, vegetables, and foods sourced from animals. According to Demissie et al. (2003), mothers who consume low-carbohydrate and protein diets are more likely to experience severe malnutrition and have a higher chance of child mortality.

A population's nutritional state is a barometer of its general health. Both the health of women and their children depend on their nutritional status, therefore ensuring that women get enough to eat is crucial. Both the mother and her unborn child are at increased risk for health problems associated with poor nutrition. The potential danger it poses to women's health calls for constant vigilance over their food consumption and nutritional status, particularly in nations with limited resources such as Nepal, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Even if they only eat meat and poultry once or twice a month, women in low-income countries typically eat vegetables three or four times a week. Almost no women consumed milk on a daily basis, and even fewer consumed both milk and meat. Their diet is lacking in essential nutrients, especially during pregnancy, and they don't use iodized salt or eat enough cereal (Branca et al., 2015).

#### Conclusions

Pregnancy outcomes and the health of subsequent generations are impacted by the nutritional state of reproductive-age women, which in turn affects their own health in the pre-pregnancy period. e.g, anemia affects almost 468 million women or 30% of the global female population. The proportion is highest in Africa, ranging from 48–57%, and Southeast Asia, with 182 million pregnant women affected. About 12.8% of the total number of fatalities caused by postpartum hemorrhage in Asia are attributable to anaemia. Recent research has revealed that anemia, factor for half of all maternal deaths, is responsible for around 20% of these fatalities. (see Figure 1).

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