



Empowerment Is Key for Women's Nutrition Amid India's Urban Shift

Targeting women's empowerment programs based on different levels of urbanization can amplify their impact on nutrition

Study Overview

To study how women's empowerment impacts nutrition outcomes at different levels of urbanization, TCI researchers used "couples" data from India's National Family Health Survey to calculate dietary diversity scores and nutritional empowerment scores for men and women from more than 60,000 households. The researchers used satellite data on nighttime light to place each household on a continuum from rural to urban. Placing households on a continuum allowed researchers to capture the nature of urban growth in India, which is characterized not just by big cities, but also rapidly growing smaller towns linking urban and rural areas.

Background

Women's empowerment is believed to be an important path for improving nutrition in India, but the extent to which contextual factors like urbanization impact this pathway is not well understood. Roughly one-third of Indians live in urban areas today, and the World Bank estimates that 40% will live in cities by 2036. As urbanization brings changes that can improve nutrition outcomes, such as better access to markets, this rapid transformation has implications for India's efforts to combat malnutrition, including women's empowerment programs.

RESULTS

The researchers found a significant link between overall urbanization and dietary diversity. As urbanization levels doubled, the dietary diversity scores of both women and men increased by 7-8%. Women's empowerment was found to rise along with urbanization, and empowerment was associated with greater dietary diversity for women, though not for men. For every unit increase in the Women's Empowerment in Nutrition Index, women's dietary diversity improved by 0.19 food groups.

The researchers discovered that urbanization becomes more important than empowerment at higher income levels, possibly because women's empowerment is already high in cities, or because the role of empowerment is subsumed by the benefits of urbanization, like higher incomes.

However, urbanization was not found to be a significant driver of diet quality among lower-income households, whereas empowerment has a noteworthy impact. Researchers suggest that this shows that some components of empowerment, such as women's ability to make household purchasing decisions, can likely overcome economic constraints that develop from low levels of urbanization.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Focus efforts to improve women's nutritional empowerment on India's most impoverished populations while continuing to promote urban development.
- Ensure access to affordable, healthy foods in more urbanized regions of the country by investing in markets and supply chains.

Gupta S., Seth P., Vemireddy V., and Pingali P., Women's empowerment and intra-household diet diversity across the urban continuum: Evidence from India's DHS, *Food Policy* Vol. 128, October 2024.

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