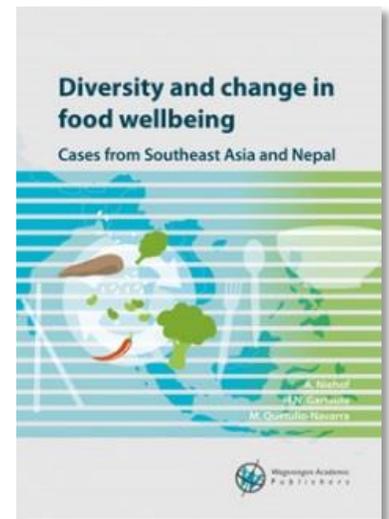




Gender and food and nutrition security in Southeast Asia and Nepal: A book alert
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The book *Diversity and change in food wellbeing: Cases from Southeast Asia and Nepal*, by A. Niehof, H.N. Gartaula and M. Quetulio-Navarra (eds), was published by Wageningen Academic Publishers in April 2018. It presents the results of a series of studies carried out in the last seven years in Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Nepal with the financial and technical support of the Neys-Van Hoogstraten Foundation in The Hague, the Netherlands. The book is an edited volume of the different chapters which contain important information on gender and food and nutrition for gender-and-development researchers and practitioners. It can be freely downloaded at: <https://www.wageningenacademic.com/> Below, I shall first present a brief overview of the conceptual framework for the studies and then highlight some of the significant findings.



Food wellbeing and gender

The conceptual framework of the book rests on the two pillars of food and nutrition security and food sovereignty. Both are deemed essential for achieving food wellbeing.

Food and nutrition security feature prominently in the international development discourse. Access to sufficient and nutritious food is considered a fundamental human right. It has been incorporated in the current Sustainable Development Goals, and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington DC publishes annual reports on the global situation regarding the food and nutrition situation of countries, regions, and vulnerable groups. Several UN agencies (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF) monitor food and nutrition security worldwide and implement programs to address critical cases.

For food security the FAO (2013) definition is commonly used. It describes food security as a condition wherein all people having access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The safety of food is understood as the food being free from harmful chemicals and microbiological contamination. As a subset of food security, nutrition security is about actual food consumption and utilisation. Food security at household level does not necessarily imply that all household members are nutrition secure. Age- and gender-related intra-household inequalities may affect individual health status, which will have an impact on food utilisation, and may obstruct the access to nutritious food of individual household members like women and children. Evidence of a gender gap in nutrition has been documented for South Asia (DeRose *et al.*, 2000).

Yaro (2004) distinguished three main approaches to food security: the food availability approach, the livelihood and entitlement approach, and the food sovereignty approach. Although the livelihood and entitlement approach is a dominant approach in the book, the food sovereignty approach is inextricably linked to it. Based on a human rights' perspective, the food sovereignty approach highlights the role and right of people to define their own food and agricultural system to achieve self-sufficiency and sustainable food security. Though originally defined as the right to food self-reliance of nations, the approach was extended to all actors involved in the food chain, including family farms and consumers (Agarwal, 2014). The application of the food sovereignty concept to consumers and their rights to and control over food, is also relevant in view of the proliferation of urban life styles in Southeast Asia and the increasing availability of affordable, and sometimes aggressively marketed (unhealthy) fast foods. The gender blindness of the concept – as if food preferences, rights and practices are unaffected by gender differences and inequalities – has been criticised by Agarwal (2014) and Park *et al.* (2015).

Gender is a crosscutting variable in the conceptual framework of the book and features in all studies to a greater or lesser extent. Universally, women play a dominant role in household-based food and nutrition practices (Allen and Sachs, 2012). Key practices are those of food procurement (food crop production, buying, borrowing and exchanging food, receiving food gifts, gathering of wild foods), food processing and storage, food preparation; food consumption and hygiene, and food care of minors (cf. Niehof, 2016). The division of labour in almost all of these practices is gendered, with women being assigned a primary responsibility for many of them. To perform their

responsibilities women need access to resources, which may be curtailed by their lack of control and by gender-biased power structures and policies. Additionally, culturally underpinned discriminatory practices in the intra-household distribution of food may favour men over women and boys over girls.

Highlights using a gender lens

Two chapters highlight the role of wild or semi-domesticated foods, including mushrooms, in the food system in the mountainous area of the Cordilleras in the Philippines¹. As could be expected, women are traditionally involved in the storage and preparation of the foods. In the case of mushrooms, when there is a surplus women are also the ones who sell it at the roadside. Men play an important role in gathering wild foods when they combine it with attending to their swidden farms in the mountains. In gathering such foods, the action radius of women is smaller than that of men; women gather closer to home.

Chapter 5² focuses on indigenous Tengger families in the Mount Bromo area of East Java, Indonesia. The main source of livelihood is horticulture, but tourism is a source of income as well. Men and women work together in the fields. A striking finding of this study is that the nutritional status of the mothers is significantly lower – as measured by the degree of meeting recommended dietary allowances levels – than that of the other family members. A possible explanation is the serving order, whereby mothers serve their children and husband first and they themselves last. At the same time, the mothers said to be well-nourished, thus showing a discrepancy between objective measurement of nutritional status and subjective experience.

The study described in Chapter 8³, relates intra-household food allocation to the health and wellbeing of women in a poor and remote area in Nepal. Distinctive differences were found between the three groups included in the study: the Buddhist Lama, the Hindu Chhetri, and the Hindu Dalit families. Overall food allocation was more equal and flexible among the Buddhist women than among the Hindu women, and among the latter the Dalit women were worst off. Even though the numbers were small, the same order appears in the results regarding nutritional status (measured by body mass index) and self-reported health. In this case, especially the Dalit women were conscious of their deprivation and complained about it. The rigid serving order led to women and adolescent girls eating last, and sometimes there was little left. No exceptions were made for pregnant women or women who had just delivered, neither for working adolescent girls who contributed to the household income. The pattern found among the Hindu families, the Dalit families in particular, reflects the gender gap in nutrition that DeRose *et al.* (2000) documented for South Asia.

The study about overweight of schoolchildren in the city of Bogor in Indonesia⁴ yielded a finding that is disturbing from a gender perspective. It is about the role of parental characteristics in the overweight of children. The children of better educated and working mothers had worse eating habits and were more often overweight than those of non-working mothers. Working mothers were pressed for time to cook properly but they could provide their children with pocket money to buy street foods and snacks, which were widely available in the school environment. Overweight children received significantly more pocket money than non-overweight children.

Two Philippine studies describe the results of a food intervention.⁵ The study on the program of backyard vegetables gardening shows that although the mothers of schoolchildren were well aware of the nutritional importance of vegetables, it did not result in their children consuming sufficient vegetables. The dietary diversity scores hardly changed for the better as a consequence of the intervention. Apart from other problems, the study revealed the difficult position of the mothers. The program implementers and nutrition extension personnel stressed the mothers' responsibility for their children's food intake by urging them to take up or expand vegetables gardening. This was framed as a mothers' or women's concern. They were expected to do the work, sometimes assisted by their husband or children, whereas they had little time to do so. In poor families, mothers would try to find paid work and could not afford to spend much time on an activity like vegetables gardening that yielded no cash income. The Mindanao study also describes an intervention that was primarily targeted at women, but the holistic approach of the homestead food production program worked out well in this case. The women were technically supported not only at growing food crops and rearing chickens, but also at marketing surplus production and organizing themselves in a cooperative. They enhanced their capabilities and generated additional income of which they controlled the allocation. In the program, the women were approached as managers and decision makers, not just as workers.

Allen and Sachs (2012) distinguished three domains of the intersection between gender and food. Even though the book primarily addresses only one of them, i.e. the socio-cultural domain of women's unpaid food work, the findings highlighted reveal the multifaceted ways in which gender relates to food and nutrition outcomes. For this reason, the book is an important source of information for researchers and practitioners in the field.

Notes

¹ Chapter 3, B.T. Gayao, D.T. Meldoz & G.S. Backian, *Indigenous knowledge and household food security: The role of root and tuber crops among indigenous peoples in the Northern Philippines*; Chapter 4, D.C.M. Licayao, *Gathering practices and actual use of wild edible mushrooms among ethnic groups in the Cordilleras, Philippines*.

² Chapter 5, D. Hastuti, *Household food security, food care, child nutrition, and wellbeing of ethnic Tengger families in East Java, Indonesia*.

³ Chapter 8, D.S. Madjdian, *Gender, intra-household food allocation and social change in two Himalayan communities in Nepal*.

⁴ Chapter 9, K.R. Ekawidyani, I. Karimah, B. Setiawan & A. Khomsan, *Parents' characteristics, food habits, and physical activities of overweight schoolchildren in Bogor City, Indonesia*.

⁵ Chapter 11, J.B. Dorado, R.V. Viajar, G.P. Azaña, G.S. Caraig & M.V. Capanzana, *Does backyard vegetable gardening enhance perceived household food security and dietary diversity? A case study in the Philippines*; Chapter 12, M.F.D. Reario, P.J. Pacheco, E. Lafuente & A. Talukder, *Developing homestead food production in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines: Does mode of implementation matter?*

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