

Women and household food safety in India – Some inferences from a nation-wide study

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ABSTRACT

It is the basic human right to have access to food that is not only nutritionally adequate but also safe to consume. Hence, food safety has become a public health priority globally. Since most food borne illnesses arise from home kitchens, ensuring household food safety is important. Throughout the world, women are considered principal guarantors of food safety at household level. A nation-wide study covering 28 states was carried out to assess food safety knowledge and practices among women in India. The quantitative data was collected by administering a questionnaire on 20,719 respondents and qualitative data was collected through 164 focus group discussions (FGDs).

The results indicated that in 95% of the households it is the women who cook and many (78%) cook food twice a day using solid fuels (76%) like wood and cow-dung cakes. Over 60% of the houses are so small that there are no separate kitchens. Only 33% have access to protected water. Most families (86%) store the left over cooked food in covered containers (99%) at room temperature (89%). Almost all the women (>90%) wash their hands before handling food. However, usage of soap for hand washing was not very common. Food borne disease outbreaks were reported in 13.2% households. About 69% families do not take any action even after encountering an outbreak. Only 21% of those who buy packed foods look for the symbols on food labels.

When the results were categorized into Practices, Awareness and Enabling Assets, it was observed that they were strong on practices despite scoring low on awareness because certain food safety measures are traditionally practiced even without the knowledge of scientific rationale behind them. Lack of enabling environment like potable water, safe cooking fuel and sanitation could be the reasons for their practices not matching awareness. FGDs reiterated these observations.

Women can hold the key to public health by ensuring household food safety provided they are empowered with enabling environment supported by sound awareness creation efforts.