Does involvement of women in BRAC influence sex bias in intra-household food distribution?

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Content

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess the sex preference in intra-household food distribution among school going siblings in a rural area of Bangladesh. The study also examines the effect of women's involvement in BRAC's rural development programme in reducing gender gaps in intra-household food allocation. The study was conducted in 14 villages of Matlab thana as one of the sub-studies of the BRAC-ICDDR,B joint research project. A total of 376 school-going siblings (188 brothers and 188 sisters) aged 10-14 years from BRAC member and non-member households were included in this study. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used for data collection. One of the villages was chosen for direct observation of food distribution behaviour of the food servers. The methodology also included six focus group discussions with mothers of the siblings in two selected villages; this helped to have further understanding of the issue. The survey found no significant sex bias in food distribution for 3 major daily meals. However, boys were given preference in distributing special foods such as meat, fish and milk products. Brothers consumed higher amount of special foods compared to their sisters ($p<0.001$). Direct observation of food distribution and focus group discussions indicated that preferential food distribution pattern favouring sons, which existed in the rural community irrespective of social classes. It was also found that food was more equitably distributed between sons and daughters within BRAC member households compared to non-member households.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Sex bias in intra-household food and other resource allocation in favour of males have been observed and documented in many countries. It has been shown in Bangladesh that there were absolute differences between the intakes of males and females except very young children (0-4 years), which smoothed out when male-female differences in body weight and physical activity were taken into account. It has, however, been argued that it was not only the access to food but health and medical care that results in sex differentials in survival and nutritional status. Although a number of studies were carried out to understand food allocation pattern within a household, it presents a methodological challenge particularly when seen in terms of the effect of a development programme to reduce this gap. The BRAC-ICDDR,B joint research project, which was initiated in Matlab in 1992 provided an opportunity to examine this.

Objectives

This study aimed to explore sex differential in intra-household food distribution among school going siblings in a rural area of Bangladesh and assess mother's knowledge and behavioural pattern with respect to intra-household food distribution. The study also aimed to examine the effect of women's involvement in BRAC's rural development programme on reducing gender gaps in food allocation within the household.

Methodology

The study was conducted in 14 villages of Matlab thana as one of the sub-studies under the BRAC-ICDDR,B joint research project. School-going brothers and sisters aged 10-14 years from eligible BRAC member and non-member households were investigated. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used for the purpose of data collection. A total of 376 siblings (188 sisters and 188 brothers) from 188 households were interviewed through a structured questionnaire. One of the villages was chosen for direct observation of major mealtime (lunch or dinner) behaviour. Six focus group discussions were also conducted with mothers in two villages to assess their knowledge and behaviour relating to intra-household food distribution.

Results

According to their perception on the adequacy of food intake during morning, noon and evening meals, the survey revealed that there was no sex bias in food distribution behaviour for brothers and sisters. The boy child was, however, given preference when distributing snacks and special foods such as meat, fish and milk products; a significantly greater number of brothers consumed more special foods compared to their sisters ($p<0.05$). When asked about their perception on adequacy of consuming special foods, 87.3% of the brothers and 38.4% of the sisters ($p<0.01$) perceived that the amount of special foods that they had consumed were adequate. This was found to be true for all socio-economic groups. Also, a higher proportion of brothers reported to consume more snacks than their sisters.

Food distribution pattern was also examined by direct observation. Direct observation of the major meal found that food was not equally distributed between brothers and sisters. Of 25 observations, brothers and sisters were equally served in 56% cases; in others, girls were given less. Among BRAC member households, food was distributed equally in 64% cases. On the other hand, unequal food distribution occurred more frequently non-member households (80%). Focus group discussions with mothers also confirmed existence of preferential food distribution favouring sons irrespective of social classes.

Conclusion

There was an indication of bias in favour of boys in intra-household food distribution. Food was, however, more equitably distributed between sons and daughters within BRAC member households, which suggests a positive impact of BRAC interventions. More rigorous research is needed to confirm the impact.

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, female children are disadvantaged within family in terms of providing food and care resulting in lower nutritional status and higher mortality (1). Patterns of food allocation within a household may compromise adequate nutrition of some family members. Because of maldistribution, availability of optimum food at the household level may not ensure equally adequate food for every household member. Among various reasons of the inequalities, sex bias is considered as a leading factor rooted in the culture of many traditional societies. Sex bias in intra-household food and other resource allocation in favour of males was observed and documented (2-6). Chen *et al.* showed that there were absolute differences between the intake of males and females except very young children (0-4 years), which smoothed out when male-female differences in body weight and physical activity were taken into account. They argued that it was not only the access to food but health and medical care that results in sex differentials in survival and nutritional status (7). In consequence, females remain nutritionally vulnerable during whole length of their life cycle. Moreover, when male and female children are not treated equally, it affects not only the physical growth of the females but also their psychological and mental development.

Although a number of studies were carried out to understand food allocation pattern within the household, it (7-10) presents quite a methodological challenge. Various methodologies were applied to gather data on preferential food allocation patterns between males and females within the household. In urban Guatemala, Engle and Nieves observed dietary patterns and mealtime behaviour, and used a method of direct weighing of foods for the main meal (8). Chen *et al.* in Bangladesh collected prospective data on anthropometry, morbidity and nutrient intake of the under-five children within a household (7). The methodology used in another study in rural Nepal was very simple and effective in exploring intra-household food allocation pattern between male and female family members focusing the mealtime behaviour of both food servers and consumers (9). Abdullah documented intra-household food distribution in a rural area of Bangladesh using direct weighing of foods of all household members eaten for 3 consecutive days in four different seasons (10). In addition to the other operational limitations, most of the methodologies used basically put emphasis on the quantity of food consumed, but to a large extent ignored the behavioural and cultural issues attached in relation to food distribution and

consumption. The Nepalese study was quite innovative which gathered data on both quantity of food consumed and the mealtime behaviour to assess the existing biases between males and females in intra-household food distribution. However, the methodology used was found very time consuming to gather the required data, which needed equally higher level of expertise in both qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis and interpretation.

This study is one of the in-depth sub-studies of the BRAC-ICDDR,B joint research project, which aimed to assess the independent and interactive effects of BRAC's rural development interventions on health and human well-being (11). Improved nutritional status was considered as one of the important components of human well-being. BRAC's rural development programme aims at socio-economic upliftment of the rural poor through organisational development, training, credit, income generation activities and social development programme. It is expected that participating in BRAC programme would not only improve socio-economic status of the village organisation (VO) members, it would also increase participation of women in household decision making and would enhance favourable attitude towards minimising gender discriminations. Traditionally women are in-charge of household food preparation and distribution. It was assumed that all the interactive activities of BRAC's Rural Development Programme (RDP) membership would influence women's behaviour which would in turn positively affect the behaviour regarding allocation of food and other household resources. Because of the complexity of the type of information needed to assess the behaviour in relation to food distribution, this study was undertaken combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques.

OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to assess sex differential in intra-household food distribution among school-going siblings in a rural area of Bangladesh and to assess mother's knowledge and behaviour with respect to intra-household food distribution. The study also examined the effect of women's involvement in BRAC's rural development programme on reducing gender gaps in intra-household food allocation.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The method used in the study is a modified version of the Nepalese study on intra-household food distribution conducted by Gittelsohn in 1991 (9). Gittelsohn applied both anthropology and nutritional science to obtain a wide range of data pertaining to intra-household food distribution behaviour. The study focused on food distribution and consumption of all the family members. However, the present study attempted to gather data from only the siblings aged between 10-14 years to make the data collection process quicker and simpler. Gittelsohn's methodology was thus modified to make it simple and a pilot study was conducted in Matlab to test the modified methodology. The aim of the pilot study was to test the feasibility and accuracy of the methods to obtain required information in a simpler and quicker manner. Based on the pilot study experiences some further modification of the methodology was done to improve its feasibility and accuracy (12).

Study design

The present study used both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. A structured questionnaire was used to obtain quantitative data on the type and frequency of food intake of the siblings during preceding 24 hours, order and time of food intake, food allocation pattern, and type and frequency of special foods and snacks intake. Direct mealtime observation of the same siblings and focus group discussions with the mothers were also done.

Study area and population

The study was conducted in the Matlab Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) area (13). The area was selected because of the availability of a field research station there. Moreover, a number of field research activities were undertaken in the same locality by the BRAC-ICDDR,B joint research project which helped in rapport building between the field researchers and the local community. A baseline survey in the study area was conducted in 1992 (13). Of the 60 villages covered in the baseline survey, 14 were randomly selected. The study population consisted of all the school-going siblings aged between 10-14 years. Based on the pilot study, children with the following criteria were considered eligible to participate in this study.

Age: Siblings aged between 10 and 14 years were considered to be included in the study. According to the Bangladesh RDA (recommended dietary allowance), differences in major nutritional requirements of male and female children of that age group is minimum considering their body size and activity levels (14).

School-going children: A pair of siblings (brother and sister) currently enrolled in a non-formal or formal school was considered eligible to participate in the study. The siblings were selected as they were going to the same school, had similar exposure in relation to school environment, knowledge and awareness. Moreover, it was assumed that school-going children of the similar age interval would be honest and smart enough in providing reliable information regarding the quality and adequacy of their food consumption including their perception about food distribution at home.

BRAC and non-BRAC: Households with at least one BRAC member and without any such member were selected separately, and thus were termed as BRAC and non-BRAC respectively. BRAC eligibility is defined as a household own less than 50 decimals of land and the principal earner sold manual labour at least 100 days over the last one year. It was assumed that, in addition to other credit-based programme inputs of BRAC, skill training, legal awareness and health education components would influence mother's knowledge and behaviour in relation to providing equal emphasis in caring sons and daughters, which would eventually reduce gender gaps in intra-household food distribution.

In 1995, a nutrition survey was carried out in 14 villages of Matlab thana which included a total of 2,076 households (13). Of these, 203 households were identified and included in this study based on availability of the eligible siblings and informed consent of the mothers to participate in the study. Of the 203 households, 63 were BRAC member and 140 were non-member household.

<u>Sample selection</u>

As the number of eligible households in the population was not too large it was decided to include all in the study. However, the number of households was slightly higher in the non-

member group. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select 125 out of 140 non-member households to make the number similar to the other population group. Finally, a total of 188 households, i.e., 63 BRAC member and 125 non-member households were included in this study. This resulted in a total of 188 pairs of siblings (188 brothers and 188 sisters).

Based on the level of previous interactions and rapport with the villagers, one village was selected from the survey area to conduct direct mealtime observation to record the behaviour related to food distribution and consumption of the food servers and consumers.

Two villages were selected to conduct focus group discussions (FGDs). One of the villages was chosen because food observation was done in the same village and the other village was the neighbouring one. Thirty-six mothers attended in different FGDs representing different social groups, such as, BRAC member and BRAC non-member household.

Data collection

Data were collected during October-December, 1996 through survey, observations and focus group discussions.

Survey

Questionnaire survey: A survey was done using structured questionnaire through school or household visits. Data were obtained on previous day's food intake of the siblings and on their socio economic background. They were asked to recall the previous day's food intake starting from morning to evening meals including meals taken outside home and snacks. Information obtained during the interview included: type and frequency of food items consumed, perception on whether the food was equitably distributed, whether they took any snacks, order of eating meals, and perception on amount of food items eaten. Order of food intake during each mealtime was quantified by giving quantitative scores, such as, 1 = eaten before; 0.50 = eaten together; 0.25 = eaten after and 0 = not eaten. It was assumed that a brother or a sister who had eaten before was given preference in terms of intra-household food distribution and thus received the highest score. The scores of perceived adequacy of intake of individual meals reported by each individual were: 1 = adequate, 0.50 = inadequate and 0 = not eaten. Data on special foods

were collected after questioning the respondents about their perception on the definition of special foods. Questions were also asked about what type of special foods were cooked in the preceding three days, who received more food and why. A list of food items, which were treated as special in the community was prepared beforehand by discussing with the adult men and women in the same area. The interview was done with each brother and sister separately on the same day and preferably at the same location, i.e. at home.

Mealtime observation

Qualitative information on food serving and consumption behaviour were collected through direct observation of one major meal using a checklist. The direct observation emphasised the serving behaviour of a food server. The mealtime norms and regulations in terms of food distribution and consumption were also observed. Direct observation of a major household meal such as lunch or diner was done to collect information on the behavioural aspects of food distribution, which were considered as the major meals in a rural Bangladesh community. Observation during lunch or dinner depended on two basic reasons: availability of siblings and consent of mothers. Attitude of the food server towards male and female children was observed and noted. Households were not informed exactly on the purpose of the visit because it was thought that it might alter the regular/usual mealtime behaviour. The researcher had built-up a friendly atmosphere with the mothers as well as with the children to facilitate data collection. Thus, the mothers did not hesitate to distribute food among the children in front of the researcher. The observer selected a place in the house from where the activities related to food distribution and consumption could be observed. The observer took notes on a checklist. Five different types of serving techniques such as, automatically served (AS), consumer asked and served (CA), self (consumer) served (SS), served on demand (SD) and not served on demand (NSD) were used during mealtime observation.

Focus group discussion (FGD)

Six FGDs were held with women (aged 22-45 years) belonging to eligible BRAC member, eligible non-member, and non-eligible non-member groups. The FGDs were conducted to have insights on mothers' opinion and behaviour regarding food distribution to male and female children. Each session, participated by 6 mothers, was continued for nearly an hour.

Definition of terms

Special food: Special food means that is cooked occasionally at home. Definition of a special food may differ from household to household depending on the economic condition. A list of special foods was prepared in consultation with the adult men and women. Food considered as special included sweet rice, rice cake and *shemai* (noodles cooked in milk and sugar). Big fish and meat cooked occasionally are also considered as special foods.

Snack: Snacks included light foods eaten during morning, afternoon and in the school, in addition to three regular meals. In the village context *muri* (puffed rice), biscuits, *chanachur, gur* (molases), *achar* (pickel) etc. are considered as snacks.

Automatically served: Where a food server served food without asking or without being requested by the consumer.

Server asked and served: Server asked the consumer if she/he needs a second serving.

Consumer asked and served: Where the food was served on a consumer's request.

Self-served: A consumer took food from the pot without server's help.

Not served when demanded: A consumer demanded more food that was ignored by the server.

RESULTS

The mean age of the siblings was 12 years (range: 10-14 years). All of them were enrolled in schools and were studying in grade three to four. The mean family size was 6.5. Of the 188 households, 20 (10.6%) were female headed.

Survey findings

The 24 hours food recall survey revealed that major food items consumed by the siblings were rice, pulses, fish and vegetables. Food items such as meat and egg were almost missing from their regular diet. Except for pulses, no sex difference was evident in terms of types of food items consumed. Overall frequency of pulse intake was higher among brothers (11%) than sisters (4%) ($p<0.01$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of respondents consuming different food items at least once a day by sex.

Food Items	Brother (n=188) % (n)	Sister (n=188) % (n)	p-value
Rice	97.3 (183)	96.3 (181)	0.769
Pulses	11.2 (21)	3.7 (7)	0.010
Fish	56.4 (106)	65.4 (123)	0.090
Vegetables	61.2 (115)	61.2 (115)	0.178
Fruits	8.0 (15)	6.9 (13)	0.844
Milk	5.3 (10)	3.7 (7)	0.619
Others	15.4 (29)	13.3 (25)	0.659

Table 2 shows mean score of the order of food intake by brothers and sisters. Brothers had higher mean score (0.63) compared to their sisters (0.57) for the order of morning meal intake ($p<0.10$). However, there was no difference in the mean scores between brothers and sisters for noon and evening meals ($p>0.10$).

Table 2. Mean score of the order of food intake.

Meal time	Mean score		p-value
	Brother	Sister	
Morning	0.63	0.57	0.09
Noon	0.58	0.60	0.50
Evening	0.53	0.53	0.89

Table 3 shows mean score of perceived adequacy of meal intake by brothers and sisters. There was no significant difference between brothers and sisters in terms of their perception on the adequacy of food intake during morning, noon and evening meals ($p>0.10$).

Table 3. Mean score of perceived adequacy of food intake.

Meal time	Mean score		p-value
	Brother	Sister	
Morning	0.93	0.93	1.00
Noon	0.97	0.94	0.18
Evening	0.93	0.95	0.22

However, some of the respondents reported that they had inadequate food intake. Table 4 shows the reasons of inadequate food intake. Some respondents reported more than one such reasons. Main reasons mentioned both by brothers and sisters were: not enough food was available at home, they did not like certain food items, mothers favoured sons during food shortage, food avoidance due to sickness, and hot temper in case of brothers. Sickness as a reasons of inadequate food intake was reported more frequently by sisters than brothers confirming the higher prevalence of perceived sickness among females than males. Interestingly, 'girls should get lesser amount' as a reason of inadequate food intake by sisters was mentioned by two brothers. None of the sisters reported the same reason for having inadequate food intake. The other reasons of inadequate food intake mentioned only by some sisters were: sisters favoured their brothers, brothers got angry if not given larger share and youngest brother should receive more attention (Table 4).

Table 4. Reasons for not getting adequate amount of regular food as stated by brothers and sisters.

Reasons	Brother (n =33)	Sisters (n =36)
	% (n)	% (n)
Food was not adequate	60.6 (20)	47.2 (17)
Did not like the food	24.2 (8)	14.0 (5)
Mother favoured son	6.1 (2)	14.0 (5)
Felt sick	3.0 (1)	22.2 (8)
Girls should get lesser amount	6.1 (2)	-
Sister favoured her brother	-	5.5 (2)
Brother get angry if not given larger share	-	8.3 (3)
Youngest brother should receive more attention	-	5.5 (2)

Special food: The survey results show that about 58% of the brothers and 61% of the sisters took some amount of special food during the preceding three days. No significant sex difference existed in special food consumption (p=0.53).

Table 5. Proportion of brothers and sisters received special food.

Sibling	Received special food		p-value
	Yes (%)	No (%)	
Brother	57.5	42.5	
Sister	60.6	39.4	0.53

The siblings were asked about their perceived adequacy of special food consumption. According to Table 6, 87.3% of the brothers and 38.4% of the sisters perceived that they consumed adequate amount of special foods. A similar pattern of distribution of brothers and sisters was found when the study population was categorised by BRAC membership status. In all social groups, significantly higher proportion of brothers compared to their sisters stated that the amount of special food consumed by them was adequate (p<0.001) (Table 6). Proportion of sisters who perceived to have consumed adequate special food was the highest in BRAC member households (40%).

Table 6. Distribution of siblings according to their perception on adequacy of special food intake.

Population type	Brothers (%)	Sisters (%)	p-value
BRAC member	92.9	40.0	0.00
BRAC non-member	84.1	37.4	0.00
All	87.3	38.4	0.00

Table 7 shows perception of the siblings on the reasons behind unequal distribution of special food items. The commonly stated reasons were that there was not enough food available at home and mothers generally favoured their sons during the distribution of any special food. Many sisters strongly mentioned that brothers used to get angry if they were not given a larger share of a special food item. It was not surprising to notice that the sisters recognised to accept lesser share of a special food compared to their brothers irrespective of the brothers' age.

Table 7. Reasons for not getting adequate amount of special food stated by brothers and sisters.

Reasons*	Brothers (n =14)	Sisters (n=76)
	% (n)	% (n)
Food available was not adequate	28.6 (4)	15.8 (12)
Mothers favoured sons	21.4 (3)	31.6 (24)
Brother got angry without large share	7.1 (1)	13.2 (10)
Sisters should got less food	-	36.8 (28)
Youngest brother gets more food	-	21.1 (16)
Other reasons	43.0 (6)	9.2 (7)

* Multiple answers were considered

The following statements made by the girls during interview support the above data. Some of the sisters mentioned:

"Brothers undertake hard labour, so they need more food."

A few other sisters stated:

"Brothers take more special food due to their higher physical demand."

They learned this from their mothers.

One girl mentioned:

"My *brother is a student of a high school, so he needs more food of good quality to keep up his learning capacity."*

Exceptionally, one girl stated:

"My mother give me adequate amount of special food because I would anyway go to father-in-law's house after marriage."

Snacks intake: The siblings were asked about their consumption of snacks in addition to the three major meals. *Muri* (puffed rice), bread, peanuts, *chanachure* (fried snacks), and fruits were reported to be the major snacks eaten by the siblings regularly. They usually consumed snacks at schools and/or at homes. There was a consistent numerical higher trend of snack consumption by brothers than sisters across the population groups, however, the differences were not statistically significant ($p>0.10$) (Table 8).

Table 8. Proportion of children taking snacks by household category and sex

Household category	Brothers	Sisters	p-value
BRAC member	82.5	76.2	0.48
BRAC non-member	80.0	73.0	0.60
All	81.4	73.9	0.20

In case of both brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers were the main sources of receiving money to buy snacks. Some also reported that elderly brothers, sisters and relatives were the money providers to buy snacks (Table 9).

Table 9. Sources of money for buying snacks

Source	Brothers	Sisters	p-value
	% (n)	% (n)	
Father	54 (63)	51 (48)	0.74
Mother	31 (36)	35 (33)	0.63
Bother	6 (7)	8 (7)	0.08
Sister	1 (1)	-	-
Relatives	4 (4)	2 (2)	0.69
Others	4 (5)	4 (4)	1.00

Direct mealtime observation

Direct mealtime observation was done to get an in-depth understanding on food distribution behaviour of both the food servers and consumers. The observation was done for 25 siblings in 25 households in one selected village. One major meal was observed for each pair of the siblings. Distribution pattern of one particular food item (i.e., curry) that was considered special for that day depending on the preference, quality and price of that food item as perceived by mothers was particularly observed.

Table 10 shows food serving patterns by household category and sex. For all 25 household, mothers were found to be the food servers. The staple food was rice, which was served with curry cooked with vegetables and fish and spices. The children were given rice and curry at a time. Usually the first serving of rice and curry was served spontaneously by a mother without having any observable gender discrimination, which was termed as automatically served. However, when any one of these siblings wanted more food as a second serving, boys were given preference. It was observed that frequency of self serving was higher among brothers than sisters suggesting that compared to their sisters brothers enjoy more freedom in self serving. On contrary, the girls had to request their mothers for a second serving more frequently than their brothers. It was also observed that the frequency of denial (not served when demanded) was higher in case of girls than boys which confirms the existence of gender bias in intra-household food distribution favouring male children (Table 10).

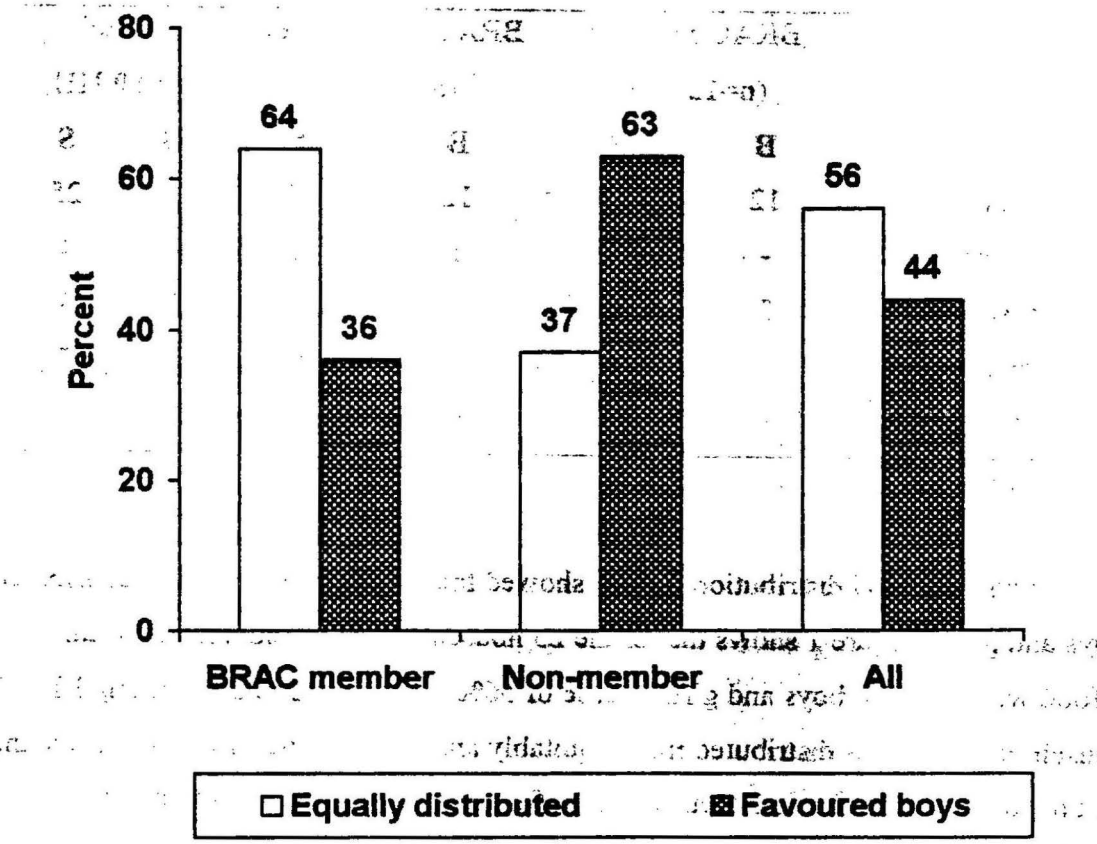
Table 10. Frequency of food serving patterns by membership status and sex.

Serving pattern	BRAC member (n=12 HH)		BRAC non-member (n=13 HH)		Total (n=50 HH)	
	B	S	B	S	B	S
Automatically served	12	12	12	13	24	25
Server asked and served	-	2	1	2	1	4
Self (consumer) served	2	1	5	2	7	3
Served when demanded	6	3	2	4	8	7
Not served when demanded	-	1	1	2	1	3

B= Brother, S = Sister

Mealtime observation of food distribution pattern showed that food was not equally distributed between boys and girls. Figure 1 shows that of the 25 households observed, almost equal amount of food was served to boys and girls in case of 56% of the households. Among BRAC member households, food was distributed more equitably among boys and girls (64%). On the other hand, unequal food distribution occurred more frequently in BRAC non-member households (80%).

Figure 1. Allocation of food to boys and girls at household level by BRAC membership status



Mothers' perception

Six FGDs were conducted in two villages to understand the food distribution behaviour of the mothers. A total of 36 mothers took part in the FGDs. Only six mothers had formal education. One mother was involved with BRAC programme as a *Shasthya shebika* (SS) and all others were engaged in household chores. The participants were asked to discuss about their role in intra-household food distribution, such as who are the preferable persons when a regular meal is served, if there was any difference between a son and a daughter in terms of food distribution and so on. Commonly, all the women agreed that they had been observing gender discrimination favouring males in food distribution from their very younghood. They had seen the same practice among their mothers, mother-in-laws, and sister-in-laws. As a results, their behaviour was influenced and the same thing was also practised by them. They also agreed that the similar

practice will possibly be transferred to their daughters. They also mentioned that if their husbands were outside home at mealtime it was their regular practice to preserve enough food for them. The first priority was to ensure adequate food for their husbands followed by sons without considering the total amount of food available for all household members. The intention was to keep good health of their husbands so that they could continue to work hard for living. However, the mothers recognised that such practice of preserving food for husbands deprived other household members, in most cases, herself and daughters from having adequate food during a particular mealtime.

The BRAC eligible member women strongly mentioned that they usually did not make any difference between a son and a daughter in terms of food distribution. According to them:
"Nowadays girls also work outside home, so we give equal food to sons and daughters."
Since BRAC women underwent different social awareness training and even in 18 promises of BRAC they learnt about equal treatment to boys and girls, they were perhaps aware about it. Nevertheless, the discussion revealed that they could not yet overcome the traditional values of giving preference to sons in terms of food distribution. During direct mealtime observations, it was found that compared to non-member households unequal food distribution occurred to a lesser extent in eligible BRAC member households. According to some BRAC eligible non-member women:
"Sons are the future security for the parents and they also help their father at work. So that they deserve more food."
They further added:
"The daughters are less demanding in terms of getting additional food."
One mother mentioned:
"If there is less food available at home and she has to choose between roti (bread) or bhat (rice) to be served then if the roti is served to a daughter usually she dose not complain. The rice has to be served to the son unless he refuses to eat".
It may be noted that rice is considered as having higher prestige than *roti* in the traditional rural communities of Bangladesh. The same situation regarding food distribution behaviour existed in non-member households. A few eligible and non-eligible non-member mothers stated:
"Daughters finish a meal without much demand, but sons do not eat unless they are offered

the best. Sons get larger share even if there is only one type of available vegetable (shak) in the meal."

Yet one mother gave a different opinion. She mentioned:

"The youngest of the house irrespective of sex usually gets the preference in terms of food distribution."

DISCUSSION

The women in Bangladesh are generally disadvantaged in terms of socio-economic status as well as work-related opportunities. Behaviour in relation to intra-household food distribution reflects such sex bias. This paper looked at the intra-household food distribution in Matlab thana, a rural area of Bangladesh. This study aimed to see the sex differences among school going siblings in terms of food distribution.

The survey revealed less differentiation in intra-household food distribution among brothers and sisters in regular meals. They reported to have adequate food during regular meals. In the rural culture of Bangladesh, girls generally do not disclose that they take inadequate food because of many social and cultural factors. FGDs revealed that mothers of all the socio-economic groups gave preference to sons in intra-household food distribution. The siblings took their meals together. It happened because most of them went to school at the same time and ate together at night. The sisters and mothers felt that if the boy took more food he would grow-up properly to help his father in outside work. Sex difference was found in case of special food and snacks intake. Special foods are cooked occasionally, such as in religious occasions, when relatives come to visit, and during the harvesting period. The amount of special food is usually limited in quantity. It was found that in the distribution of special food the mother gives preference to a son. This is well recognised both by brothers and sisters. Sisters from all socio-economic classes highlighted that a brother was the future security of the family, and they were willing to get lesser food compared to their brothers. Mealtime observations of food distribution behaviour and focus group discussions with the mothers also confirmed the above findings.

Meal observation also clearly showed that if the food cooked was not sufficient for all the household members, mothers served more food to husbands and sons. Mothers thought that it was one way to show respect to the males as they are the income earners. Usually a husband was

the most preferable person and male children had the next place in terms of receiving better quantity and quality of foods. It was found that if fish was cooked boys were given the bigger piece and larger number of fishes than their sisters. It was a very common scenario in almost all the observed households. The mothers stated that it was their cultural value, and they just followed it. However, the women of eligible BRAC member households argued that it was not true for all the household. Food distribution was found to be more equal among eligible BRAC member households compared to other types of households. It was because of BRAC's awareness training under human resources development programme. The children themselves were aware of sex discrimination in intra-household food distribution. Sometimes the sisters also argued in favour of the existing gender difference. The boys did not hesitate to disclose that at home they get larger share of food compared to their sisters. It was found that due to cultural norms and social values, mothers offered less food to their daughters.

Although it was expected that there would be no discrimination in BRAC member households, unequal food distribution occurred in BRAC eligible member households, BRAC eligible non-member households as well as non-eligible non-member households. Non-eligible households were relatively well-off than the other two groups. However, this economically better-off position did not make any difference in food distribution behaviour. This study confirmed the findings of another study where solvent families found to take more care of their sons rather than daughters because they would earn and maintain the family in future (15).

CONCLUSION

There was a sex bias in favour of boys in intra-household food distribution. The main reason behind this is rooted in the social values and cultural norms and participation of women in the economic activities. The society in Bangladesh put different values on boys and girls and certainly it is in favour of boys due to these interactive factors. Food was more equitably distributed between sons and daughters within BRAC member households compared to non-member eligible households. To eliminate sex discrimination in intra-household food distribution it is necessary to increase women's participation in economic activities, and gender awareness training focusing on dietary need and other nutritional issues should be made an integral part of all rural development and health interventions.

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