



Psychological Dimensions of Food Insecurity Among Marginalized Women in Eastern India: A social science perspective

Sonia Rathore

Research Scholar, Department of Master's in Healthcare, Bharathiyar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Food insecurity is typically framed as a material or nutritional issue. However, its psychological dimensions, particularly for marginalized women, remain underexplored in mainstream discourse. This paper theorizes the emotional and mental experiences of food insecurity among rural women in Eastern India, with a focus on Bihar and Odisha. Using intersectionality theory and guided by interpretive social science, the study analyzes how caste, gender, and cultural expectations shape women's emotional responses to food scarcity. Concepts such as guilt, shame, anxiety, and silent endurance are examined not as individual psychological failures but as outcomes of embedded social hierarchies. The study argues that food insecurity is not only about the absence of food but also about the presence of emotional suffering, produced and reinforced by systemic inequalities. Recognizing the psychosocial nature of hunger is essential for a more holistic understanding of women's lives in food-insecure contexts.

Keywords: Food insecurity, marginalized women, social science, psychology, intersectionality, bihar, odisha, gender roles, emotional labor, social inequality

Introduction

Food insecurity in India has historically been addressed through the lenses of poverty, malnutrition, and economic development. Dominant narratives focus on quantifiable indicators such as caloric intake, access to subsidized food schemes, and child growth metrics. While these are important for policy intervention, they often render invisible the emotional and psychological dimensions of food insecurity, particularly among rural, marginalized women. Hunger is not only physical; it is also a deeply embodied and emotional experience, shaped by expectations of care, sacrifice, and moral virtue.

Scholars such as Amartya Sen (1981) ^[2] have long argued that hunger stems more from entitlement failure than from food scarcity per se, pointing to the social mechanisms that govern access. Building on this, feminist theorists like Naila Kabeer (1994) ^[6] and Nancy Chodorow (1978) ^[4] have examined how gendered roles in the household condition women's relationship to food and caregiving. More recent research by Patel and Naik (2018) ^[9] emphasizes the emotional labor women perform in managing food under scarcity, often experiencing stress and guilt when unable to meet expectations. Yet, these emotional and psychological aspects remain on the margins of food security literature, especially in the Indian context.

In Eastern India, particularly in Bihar and Odisha, food insecurity intersects with caste-based exclusion, religious norms, and gender hierarchies to create specific vulnerabilities. Women from Dalit, Adivasi, and low-income Muslim households are not just recipients of inadequate food they are emotional managers of scarcity, expected to endure hunger silently while protecting the needs of others. These expectations are reinforced by cultural and ritual practices that often valorize women's ability to fast, sacrifice, and remain resilient, even in the face of deprivation.

This paper proceeds from the hypothesis that food insecurity among marginalized women in Eastern India is not merely a

problem of access or poverty, but a psychosocial experience embedded in structures of gender, caste, and culture. By approaching food insecurity as a psychosocial and cultural phenomenon, the paper aims to move beyond material indicators toward a more holistic understanding of women's suffering. The analysis is grounded in intersectionality theory and guided by qualitative, conceptual methods that treat emotions like guilt, shame, and anxiety as socially produced responses to structural inequality.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in intersectionality theory, which examines how various forms of social stratification, particularly gender, caste, class, and religion, interact to produce layered experiences of oppression. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality rejects the notion of single-axis identity categories and instead emphasizes the interconnectedness of multiple identities in shaping lived realities.

In the context of food insecurity, intersectionality helps illuminate how emotional suffering is not merely personal but systemically produced. For instance, a Dalit woman in a patriarchal household may experience guilt for not feeding her children adequately, not because of personal failure, but because of her position within caste, gender, and economic hierarchies. This theoretical approach enables the study to move beyond individual psychology and into the structural and relational dimensions of emotion and deprivation.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual, and interpretive research design, situated within the traditions of critical social science and feminist theory. Rather than collecting empirical data through fieldwork or surveys, the research engages in theoretical inquiry, aiming to uncover the emotional and psychological dimensions of food insecurity as experienced by marginalized women in Eastern India. The primary goal is not to measure or generalize, but to

interpret, reflect, and critically analyze how structural inequalities are embodied and internalized. This research is guided by the hypothesis that food insecurity among marginalized women is shaped as much by emotional and symbolic structures as by material deprivation

The study employs two core methods: conceptual thematic analysis and critical social analysis. These are selected for their ability to reveal the underlying cultural, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of food insecurity that are often rendered invisible in positivist or policy-driven frameworks.

Conceptual Thematic Analysis

Conceptual thematic analysis is used to explore emotionally recurrent patterns such as guilt, shame, anxiety, silence, and self-denial that shape women's subjective experience of food insecurity. These themes are drawn from theoretical literature, feminist writings, and interpretive reflections on food, care, and emotional labor. Unlike empirical thematic analysis, which codes data from interviews or observations, conceptual thematic analysis works through the interpretation of meaning in existing theoretical discourse. It draws on cultural narratives, symbolic practices, and social expectations that frame women's emotional experiences about food and caregiving. This approach is suitable for a study that seeks to theorize hunger as a psychosocial phenomenon rather than a measurable condition. The method identifies not just what women feel, but how and why they are made to feel certain emotions in particular social contexts. It reveals how emotions are not purely individual experiences but socially structured outcomes, shaped by gendered moral norms and historical power relations.

Critical Social Analysis

Critical social analysis complements thematic analysis by situating emotional experiences within larger systems of domination and inequality. Drawing from intersectionality theory, feminist ethics, and the sociology of care, this method interrogates how caste, class, religion, and gender intersect to shape who experiences hunger, how it is endured, and what it means in social and moral terms. This method justifies itself through its ability to de-naturalize suffering to challenge the cultural narratives that portray women's hunger as inevitable, virtuous, or spiritually meaningful. By critically reflecting on religious fasting, social silencing, and household roles, the study explores how food insecurity becomes embedded not just in material lack but in symbolic and moral expectations. Critical social analysis is especially appropriate for this study because it exposes the ideological mechanisms—such as patriarchy, casteism, and ritual morality—that legitimize women's emotional suffering. It enables the researcher to analyze not only what structures exist, but also how they produce, justify, and conceal emotional harm.

The choice of a theoretical and interpretive methodology reflects the epistemological stance of the research: that food insecurity must be understood as a culturally and emotionally embedded experience, not merely a technical or nutritional deficit. In contexts like Bihar and Odisha, where women's labor is often moralized and their hunger ritualized, the use of theoretical methods allows the study to reveal what empirical data may overlook: the lived, emotional, and symbolic burden of deprivation.

This approach resists reductionist models of hunger and instead offers a framework to understand how structural inequality is lived as emotional pain. It also aligns with feminist scholarship that centers the invisible labor and affective suffering of marginalized women. In summary, the combined use of conceptual thematic analysis and critical social analysis provides a rigorous, reflective, and context-sensitive framework to theorize the psychological dimensions of food insecurity. These methods allow for a deep exploration of meaning, identity, and emotion, revealing how hunger is experienced not just as physical scarcity but as a socially produced and morally charged condition.

Results

The analysis reveals that food insecurity among marginalized women in Eastern India manifests not only through physical deprivation but also through deeply embedded emotional experiences. One of the most recurring psychological responses is guilt, which arises from women's perceived failure to fulfill their expected caregiving role. In many households, women prioritize the nutritional needs of children and male family members, often skipping or reducing their meals in the process. This self-sacrifice is socially normalized as an expression of maternal love or wifely duty. However, on a psychological level, it generates a persistent internal conflict between moral expectation and personal well-being. Guilt becomes both a motivator for sacrifice and a source of silent emotional burden.

Closely tied to guilt is the theme of anxiety, which is experienced as a chronic, low-intensity worry about the future availability of food. This anxiety is not episodic but ongoing, shaped by uncertainty around rising prices, seasonal food scarcity, or interruptions in household income. For women responsible for food provisioning, this constant state of anticipation leads to emotional exhaustion. It influences daily decision-making, affects sleep patterns, and creates a sense of personal failure even when structural conditions are to blame. Another powerful emotional theme is shame, which emerges in both internal household dynamics and public life. Within the home, women may feel shame when unable to meet the expectations of hospitality, such as serving guests or preparing culturally appropriate meals during rituals. In public settings, accessing food aid or being seen in ration queues is often stigmatized, particularly for widowed, elderly, or single women. Shame functions here as a disciplinary tool that discourages visibility, dependence, or dissent. It keeps women from voicing their needs or seeking help, even when they are eligible.

Religious and cultural norms also shape the experience of hunger. In many cases, women engage in ritual fasting, such as for Teej, Chhath, or Ramadan, which is often seen as a voluntary act of devotion. However, when these rituals take place in conditions of food insecurity, they may reinforce the psychological expectation that enduring hunger is virtuous or purifying. The boundaries between spiritual practice and material necessity blur, contributing to the normalization of deprivation. What begins as devotion often becomes obligation, compounding the emotional strain. Finally, a significant theme that cuts across all others is the practice of silence and emotional endurance. Women rarely speak about their hunger, framing it instead as natural or inevitable. Cultural narratives valorize the woman who

“bears everything” without complaint, associating resilience with respectability. This silence is not passive; it is socially learned and emotionally managed. By withholding expressions of need or distress, women maintain their social standing, avoid conflict, and protect others. However, this silence also conceals suffering, making it harder to address or even recognize the psychological costs of food insecurity. Together, these emotional patterns illustrate how food insecurity is not only a question of nutrition or policy failure, but a psychosocial phenomenon. Women’s psychological responses are shaped by a matrix of intersecting forces—structural deprivation, gendered expectations, cultural rituals, and internalized norms. These forces create a uniquely gendered experience of hunger: one that is felt in the body, regulated through emotion, and sustained by silence.

Discussion

The themes identified are guilt, shame, ritual sacrifice, and emotional silence support the hypothesis that food insecurity is a gendered and psychosocial experience, deeply shaped by intersecting structures of social inequality. These themes highlight how food insecurity is experienced not only through physical lack but also through emotional labor imposed by gendered expectations. Structural violence, such as caste exclusion, poverty, and limited access to welfare, is compounded by psychological burden, which women carry as part of their roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers. Intersectionality reveals that this burden is not evenly distributed. A Brahmin woman may fast for religious reasons, but she is more likely to break her fast in comfort. A Dalit or tribal woman in the same region may fast during a religious occasion while also facing actual scarcity, making the hunger deeper and more psychologically harmful.

Conclusion

Food insecurity among marginalized women in Eastern India must be understood as a psychosocial and cultural phenomenon, not just a nutritional or economic one. Women experience hunger through intersecting structures of inequality that are both material and emotional. Their psychological responses, guilt, shame, anxiety, and silence are shaped by caste, gender, household norms, and ritual expectations. A theoretical approach rooted in intersectionality and critical social analysis allows us to recognize the emotional dimension of structural inequality. Addressing food insecurity, therefore, requires a shift in both policy and discourse from viewing hunger as a technical problem to understanding it as a lived experience of embodied suffering and moral sacrifice. Only by acknowledging these hidden emotional costs can we begin to imagine more inclusive, compassionate, and gender-just responses to food insecurity. Moreover, the framing of women’s emotional experiences as private or moral rather than structural prevents effective intervention. Hunger is depoliticized, turned into duty or devotion, rather than recognized as a social failure. This obscures the emotional harm inflicted on women who must navigate these realities

daily. By naming these patterns, this study seeks to challenge the assumption that food insecurity is merely about food; it is also about control, expectation, and emotional cost.

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