

## Gender bias in the food insecurity experience of Ethiopian adolescents

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### Abstract

Food insecurity is a pressing public health concern in many developing countries. Despite widespread interest in the sociocultural determinants of food insecurity, little is known about whether youths living in food insecure households experience food insecurity. The buffering hypothesis reviewed here assumes that, to the extent possible, adult members of households will buffer younger household members from the ill effects of food insecurity. A variant of the buffering hypothesis argues that only certain members of the households will enjoy the benefits of buffering. We hypothesize that within the context of Ethiopia, where girls have historically experienced discrimination, buffering is preferentially aimed at boys, especially as the household experiences greater levels of food stress. These hypotheses are tested using data from a population-based study of 2084 adolescents living in southwestern Ethiopia. Results indicate that boys and girls were equally likely to be living in severely food insecure households. Despite no differences in their households' food insecurity status, girls were more likely than boys to report being food insecure themselves. This gender difference was the largest in severely food insecure households. This same pattern was observed when comparing male–female sibling pairs living in the same household. These results are among the first to show that household level measures of food insecurity predict adolescent experiences of food insecurity, and that in the Ethiopian socio-cultural context, the relationship between household level food insecurity and adolescent food insecurity varies by gender. We also show that adolescent food insecurity is strongly associated with measures of general health and well-being.

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### Introduction

Insecure access to sufficient and culturally appropriate foods at all times by all people is a persistent

and, in some places, increasing public health threat (FAO, 2004). Although it is often assumed that the household food insecurity status represents the experience of individuals within the household, studies—primarily from Asia—show that this frequently is not true (Haddad, Pena, Nishida, Quisumbing, & Slack, 1996; Messer, 1997). Many studies focus on within-household discrimination against young children and women with some data suggesting that young children are buffered from

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food insecurity by adults (Leonard, 1991; Messer, 1997). There have been far fewer attempts to link food insecurity at the household level to adolescents' experience of food insecurity. This is especially true for individuals in sub-Saharan Africa (Haddad et al., 1996). Adolescence is an energetically demanding period of the life course and one in which individuals are expected to make a series of key transitions into adulthood. Many of these key transitions are also affected by nutritional status. Insecure access to food may influence school attendance and achievement, reproductive decisions, migration strategies, employment options, and overall health and well-being (ACC/SCN, 2002; Gillespie, 2006). There is also a need to assess whether youths'<sup>2</sup> experience of food insecurity is gendered, as insecure access to adequate foods may generate health disparities. Issues linking gender, youth, and food insecurity are especially salient in the context of sub-Saharan African.

In this paper we examine the relationship between household and individual level reports of food insecurity and health status among adolescent boys and girls in southwestern Ethiopia. We address the following questions: (1) Does household level food insecurity predict individual level reports of food insecurity as experienced by adolescents? (2) Is the association between adolescent food insecurity and household level food insecurity the same for boys and girls? and (3) Does adolescents' experience of food insecurity predict self-reported health status?

### *Background*

There is a long history in public health nutrition and anthropology of examining differences in the food insecurity status of individuals within households. However, research on food insecurity has been beset by serious methodological shortcomings due to insufficient or poorly measured dietary data. For instance, studies of intra-household discrimination often rely on proxy reports, usually made by the mother, of the dietary intake and nutritional status of other household members. Although proxy reports for individuals, like other methods, can be powerful methods for detecting biases in food distribution (Ferro-Luzzi, 2002), they are only meaningful when presented along with an indicator of energy requirement for each household member

for whom a report is given (Haddad et al., 1996). Unequal consumption may reflect differential food insecurity but, alternatively, it could reflect differential activity patterns or nutrient requirements.

Measurement issues also plague dietary assessment studies of intra-household discrimination among populations that share meals from a common pot (Dop, Milan, Milan, & N'Diaye, 1994), which is widespread in many East African settings, including Ethiopia. While direct observation can be used as an alternative to proxy reports of those eating from a common pot (Gittelsohn, Shankar, Pokhrel, & West, 1994), direct observation, like proxy reports, may not provide an accurate assessment of dietary intake for adolescents who typically take more of their meals outside the household. Finally, the use of anthropometric measures to identify adolescent food insecurity resulting from intra-household discrimination is hampered by the lack of an agreed upon reference population and the need for sensitive information on maturational stage (Woodruff & Duffield, 2002). Indeed, in a review of 11 studies of nutritional status of adolescence in developing countries, the authors concluded that "nutritional [anthropometric] measures alone should not be used as indicators of well-being" (Kurz & Johnson-Welch, 1994, p.25). Collectively these methodological issues make it difficult to assess the extent to which youths experience food insecurity, and in particular they make it difficult to identify biases in the allocation of resources within the household that adversely impact on adolescent members.

An alternative measurement strategy that overcomes some of these shortcomings is to measure the experience of food insecurity itself, rather than direct dietary intake or other proxy measures of intake that are time consuming, burdensome to the respondent, or prohibitively costly to collect (Kennedy, 2002). The experience of food insecurity is a proxy indicator of dietary intake, and it is more closely linked to the phenomenon of interest, not having sufficient food, than alternative methods. For example, measures of wealth and assets are often used as proxies for food insecurity but such proxies rely on a number of untested assumptions linking household measures to individual dietary intake (Webb et al., 2006). Recent studies have asked respondents directly about their experience with food insecurity. These studies use food insecurity scales which capture several dimensions of food insecurity including worry over the adequacy of the food supply, concern about the

<sup>2</sup>Throughout the paper we use the terms youths and adolescents interchangeably.

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