

From Political Voice to Human Well-Being: Women's Empowerment, Public Service Delivery and the Global Hunger Burden

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Abstract

Despite decades of investment in food systems and agricultural productivity, hunger remains one of the most persistent and unevenly distributed development failures of our time. The central problem is rarely a shortage of food in aggregate; it is that hundreds of millions of households lack the institutional conditions and public infrastructure needed to convert available food into actual nutritional health. This study asks a question at the intersection of political economy and nutrition: does women's political empowerment shape the burden of hunger and through which observable public-service channels do that relationship operate?

The study draws on a large balanced cross-country panel spanning over 2000-2021. Hunger is measured through Disability-Adjusted Life Years from the Global Burden of Disease study, disaggregated into chronic hunger capturing protein-energy deficiency and hidden hunger capturing micronutrient deficiency, a measurement strategy that goes well beyond conventional food-availability indicators to capture the full mortality and morbidity burden of undernutrition. Women's political empowerment is operationalised through the Women's Political Empowerment Index, capturing civil liberties, political participation, and civic engagement across countries and over time. The empirical strategy is built in three layers. Two-way fixed effects with Driscoll-Kraay standard errors isolate within-country variation while accounting for cross-sectional dependence. Baron-Kenny mediation analysis with Sobel tests identifies which of five service-delivery channels carry the empowerment signal to hunger outcomes. Spatial Autoregressive and Spatial Durbin models test whether baseline estimates survive geographic interdependence and detect cross-border spillovers.

The findings are consistent and striking across all specifications. Women's political empowerment is robustly and negatively associated with DALYs lost to both chronic and hidden hunger. Drinking water emerges as the dominant transmission channel, followed by electricity and sanitation, while food supply measures yield negligible indirect effects directly challenging food-centric approaches to hunger policy.

The mechanism pattern is consistently stronger for hidden hunger than chronic hunger, reflecting micronutrient deficiency's deeper embeddedness in the service and disease environment. Spatial estimates further confirm a significant cross-border spillover for chronic hunger, indicating that women's political gains in one country generate measurable nutritional dividends in neighbouring countries. For governments, multilateral institutions and regional development bodies, the results make a clear and actionable case. Gender-inclusive governance reform and public infrastructure investment are not parallel agendas; they are a single integrated policy instrument for reducing hunger at scale.

Keywords: Women's political empowerment; Chronic hunger; Hidden hunger; DALYs; Service delivery; WASH