

Refereed article

Free School Meals and the Reproduction of Inequalities: Caste and Gender in Food Production for Delhi's Slum Schools

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Summary

The Indian Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) – one of the largest school meal programmes in the world, currently reaching over 115 million children – was introduced in 1995 nationally with a twofold aim: enhancing school enrolment and retention as well as improving nutrition levels among poor children. According to the guidelines of the programme and a Supreme Court order, moreover, the scheme was intended to create employment opportunities especially for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, namely women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other minorities. This article focuses on employment practices and labour regimes in the food production processes of the scheme, asking: To what extent are inequalities reduced or reproduced in the production of school lunches? In the rural context, where predominantly local women work in school-level kitchens, large numbers of them face caste-based discrimination and underpayment. While issues of caste distinction and underpayment are by no means absent in urban areas, where the food is produced in centralised kitchens, this case study, which focuses on the urban context of Delhi, reveals that gender inequality is the prevailing feature here. Further, I found no particular effort to employ people from disadvantaged castes in the kitchen of Bhojan Foundation. At this non-governmental organisation, which provides food to approximately 130,000 children in 260 schools across Delhi, the bulk of the work in the semi-automated kitchen is done by men, while women (about 50 per cent of whom are Dalits) are engaged almost exclusively for the poorly remunerated distribution of the food. Generally, at Bhojan Foundation all women are counted as 'unskilled' workers and receive much lower wages than men. The article examines the underlying mechanisms of institutional management that create little scope for challenging inequalities, but rather foster gender stereotypes regarding 'male' and 'female' work and thereby contribute to reproducing gender and caste inequalities within wider society.

Keywords: Mid Day Meal Scheme, inequality, gender, caste, food production

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