

SUSTAINABLE NUTRITIONAL HEALTH AND THE CONSUMER RIGHTS OF YOUTH: LEGAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND POLICY PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Nutrition is a key factor in affecting the physical and mental health, and future capabilities of youth. The right to sustainable nutrition should be acknowledged as a fundamental component of human rights, particularly for young consumers, in the modern world when environmental difficulties and changes in lifestyle are major concerns. This essay examines the relationship between sustainable growth, consumer rights, and a healthy diet, emphasizing the role of young people as both crucial and vulnerable actors. It looks at how young people's health and quality of life are threatened by bad dietary choices that are exacerbated by economic and environmental variables. It concludes with policy recommendations and a call to action for a comprehensive strategy that incorporates public awareness, legal protection, green innovation, and youth empowerment to secure a sustainable future. This paper explores the important relationship between nutritional health and the consumer rights of youth in India. The right to enough nutrition is crucial for ensuring the right to life, health, and growth for young people. The need of legal and policy mechanisms to defend the rights of young people is increasing as they are the primary focus of aggressive marketing for harmful processed foods. The study examines court rulings, consumer protection laws, and national and international legislation that impact young consumers' nutritional rights. It also identifies weaknesses and offers solutions for enhancing the preservation and advancement of young people's nutritional health within a sustainable development framework. This essay examines the institutional, legal, and policy frameworks that regulate nutritional health in India and assesses the role that consumer rights play in preserving the nutritional well-being of youth. It explores the intricate connection between young consumer rights and nutritional health, emphasizing the growing importance of sustainable food practices and quality-of-life-improving regulations. With rising worries about malnutrition, diseases related to lifestyle, and the aggressive marketing of unhealthy food to young people, exploring legal and institutional strategies becomes essential.

Keywords: Nutritional health, sustainable consumption, youth, quality of life, food rights, consumer protection, public policy

Introduction

The importance of nutrition in promoting sustainable human growth is becoming more widely acknowledged. It is particularly important for youth, who are classified by the UN as those between the ages of 15 and 24. This generation is both a vulnerable and a strong component of society. Their diet has a direct impact on how they develop physically, emotionally, and cognitively. However, there is a complicated nutritional dilemma facing today's youth. Unhealthy eating habits have been established globally as a result of factors like urbanization, rising inequality, globalization of food systems, and aggressive marketing of unhealthy foods. In urban and affluent areas, increased obesity and lifestyle-related disorders like diabetes are becoming serious concerns, while undernutrition and vitamin deficiencies are still common in many underdeveloped countries. Lack of knowledge about healthy foods and sedentary lifestyles exacerbate these health problems..¹

The important connection between sustainable development, consumer rights, and nutritional health is examined in this essay. It emphasizes how enabling youth to make knowledgeable

dietary decisions is both a human rights concern and a public health imperative. In addition to providing wholesome food, sustainable nutrition also takes into account the economic and environmental factors that affect food production and availability.²

India, a country with a sizable youth population, suffers from both undernutrition and obesity. The right to nutritional health, which is connected to the right to life under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, needs to be seen from a sustainable and rights-based perspective. Stronger legal safeguards, innovative policy, and educational initiatives are desperately needed to guarantee that youth are not just protected but also empowered.³As global food systems change in the face of issues like digital food marketing and climate change, it is crucial to provide young people with safe, nourishing, and sustainable meals in order to support their personal wellbeing as well as more general developmental objectives. Healthy eating is crucial for young people's, a twin burden of malnutrition is created by the coexistence of increased levels of undernutrition, overweight, and obesity. The widespread impact of digital marketing and commodification further exacerbates these problems.

Research Methodology

This study uses a legal research method and adopted analytical approaches to examine the impact of food laws in India. The research aims to understand the current legal situation, find weaknesses, and suggest changes for better enforcement of these laws. The study mainly relies on qualitative methods and includes a review of laws, court cases, and examination of legal commentaries, reports from food safety authorities, and academic articles from socio-legal journals. The study examines judicial reasoning to evaluate the legal acceptability and challenges in enforcing food laws in India.

Conceptual Framework

Nutritional health means consuming food that meets the body's needs to help maintain good health and avoid sickness. So, the type of food you eat in relation to what your body requires is known as nutritional health. Young people have greater dietary needs due to their rapid growth and mental development. However, concerning trends are evident in both urban and rural areas, including high rates of anaemia, stunted growth, and increased childhood obesity, according to data from NFHS-5 (2020–21). Young people alter their typical Indian eating patterns by eating less and eating less time at meals because they desire to be clever and slim. But because of their appetites, they end up choosing processed and packaged foods, which can lead to health issues. Young people are particularly vulnerable to low awareness, hunger, and inaccurate dietary advice. This risk is increased by elements such as economic disparity, junk food marketing on the internet, and lax enforcement of regulations.⁴

Linking these concepts demonstrates that maintaining young people's nutritional health is an issue of collective rights, governance, and justice in addition to individual or family concerns. Policy reforms, legal safeguards, and organizational accountability are all necessary to maintain these rights.

Nutritional Challenges Among Youth

Numerous nutrition-related issues that are influenced by social, economic, and cultural variables affect young people worldwide. Youth still lack access to a balanced diet despite progress because of things like inadequate nutrition education, excessive junk food marketing, a lack of healthy food options, and lax enforcement of food laws. Without enough regulation, online platforms frequently encourage harmful eating patterns.⁵Globally, about one-third of adolescents suffer from malnutrition. This encompasses both undernutrition, which is the deficiency of vital

calories and minerals such as iron, zinc, iodine, and vitamin A, and overnutrition, as sedentary lifestyles and the pervasiveness of processed, unhealthy meals are linked to increased obesity rates.⁶ Youth food choices are also influenced by peer pressure, cultural values, emotional well-being, and body image issues. With influencer marketing and targeted advertisements glamorizing fast food and sugary snacks, the rise of digital media has made matters worse. Eating habits are shaped by these trends in ways that are difficult to regulate by conventional rules. Integrated legal, educational, and policy-based solutions that encourage healthier, better-informed choices are needed to address this challenge.

Legal Framework and Consumer Protection in Nutritional Health

The food landscape of today is complicated, with processed meals, international supply chains, aggressive marketing, and consumption driven by lifestyle choices dominating. There is an urgent need for a robust legislative framework as dietary patterns change and the prevalence of nutrition-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), especially in children and young people, increases. Because it is both a constitutional need and a human rights commitment, protecting nutritional health must transcend policy. To maintain a society that is healthier and more nutritionally secure, laws are essential in controlling food labeling, advertising, institutional accountability, and consumer protection.

Nutrition is an international problem that transcends national boundaries. International organizations have created legal and regulatory instruments to safeguard public health and uphold nutritional rights, particularly for children and young people, in response to escalating issues including hunger, undernutrition, and diet-related diseases. Everybody has the right to a standard of living sufficient for their health and well-being, which includes access to food, according to Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). Although youth aren't mentioned expressly, the focus on "family" and "health and well-being" suggests a responsibility to safeguard children's and adolescents' dietary needs. It provides a moral and legal basis for national and international initiatives to guarantee that young people have access to enough food that is safe and nourishing.

This position is reinforced by the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Article 12 guarantees the best possible level of physical and mental health, which is closely related to juvenile nutrition, whereas Article 11 defines the right to enough food. Because healthy eating promotes both physical and mental development in developing teens, this Covenant is a potent instrument for advocacy and legal action.

The UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection (2015) uphold global norms for guaranteeing children and other vulnerable populations have access to wholesome, safe food. V.C. focuses equitable access to nutritious meals; V.D. calls for science-based nutritional guidelines for dangerous products and additives; and V.B. stresses food safety, especially in schools. In Section V.H., sustainable, locally sourced foods are promoted, while Section V.G. supports nutrition education and protects against deceptive advertisements. In particular, Section V.K. acknowledges children and young people as susceptible customers and advocates for additional safeguards against malnutrition and deceptive advertising. These principles help countries create inclusive, rights-based food and consumer protection laws.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) acknowledges children as having rights and requires states to protect their health, including their diet. Every child's right to the best possible health, including access to wholesome food, is upheld by Article 24(1). According to Article 24(2)(c), states must use primary healthcare services to provide food and clean water in order to combat sickness and malnutrition. The right to a quality of living that permits complete

development is emphasized in Article 27, which requires states to help families meet the nutritional needs of their children through food distribution programs, welfare programs, and subsidies.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promote advancements in national development, equity, and health, are intimately related to the nutritional health of young people. In order to eradicate hunger and malnutrition, particularly among school-age children, SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) advocates for school meals, vitamin supplements, and fortified foods. A healthier lifestyle, fewer preventable deaths from non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and access to basic health and nutrition services are the main objectives of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). Since malnutrition has an impact on learning, SDG 4 (Quality Education) encourages integrated school nutrition initiatives. In order to ensure that underprivileged youth have equitable access to wholesome food, SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) supports inclusive nutrition programs including community kitchens and school meals. SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) promotes front-of-pack labeling, less consumption of highly processed foods, sustainable diets, and ethical food marketing. SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) asks for international cooperation to assist youth-focused nutrition initiatives, enhance accountability, and fortify data systems. These SDGs, taken together, offer a solid basis for legislative and policy action, seeing youth nutrition as an issue of social justice, education, health, and human rights.

The dietary requirements of today's youth cannot be satisfied by public health initiatives alone. It is crucial to have an effective legal system founded on rights-based principles, constitutional obligations, and international commitments. Food safety, advertising, product standards, and the availability of appropriate nutrition education must all be governed by law. Policies that safeguard vulnerable children, promote sustainable food systems, and guarantee accountability must be given top priority by governments. We cannot ensure that every young person, regardless of circumstances, grows up healthy, fed, and equipped to make educated food choices in an increasingly complex food world without strong legislative support.

National Legal Framework: India has a clear duty to protect nutritional rights as a signatory to important international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption). As a result, India has put in place legal protections, oversight frameworks, and channels for redress in areas like trade, food, education, and health.

In the Indian Constitution although "nutrition" is not specifically mentioned as a fundamental right, it is implicitly supported by a number of articles. The Supreme Court has construed the right to life, which is guaranteed by Article 21, to include the right to live with dignity, which includes having access to enough nourishing food. The Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSPs) further support this, particularly Articles 39(e) and (f), which emphasize the need of ensuring children grow healthily, and Article 47, which instructs the state to enhance public health and nutrition. The government is authorized by Articles 15(3) and 15(4) to establish targeted nutrition programs for underprivileged populations, such as mothers and children. When read in conjunction with Article 21, Article 45 (early childhood care) and Article 21A (right to education) support school nutrition initiatives like the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. When taken as a whole, they represent the goal of a welfare state that is dedicated to guaranteeing that all citizens, particularly those who are most in need, have access to a healthy diet and a life of dignity.⁷

The Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA), which created the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), is the main piece of legislation pertaining to food safety and nutrition in India. The FSSAI is in charge of establishing dietary guidelines, controlling food labeling, stopping adulteration, and guaranteeing food safety throughout the supply chain. According to the Act, food safety encompasses both nutritional value and physical safety, which are essential for kids, teens, and expectant mothers. Operators of food businesses are required by Section 26 to make sure food satisfies safety regulations prior to sale, and Sections 49 to 69 outline penalties for violations, including fines and imprisonment.

The Act requires packaged foods to clearly display their calories, fats, carbohydrates, and trans fats. Although they are not yet mandated, FSSAI has the power to implement front-of-pack warning labels. Youth awareness is the goal of educational initiatives like Eat Right Campus and Eat Right School.⁸ Despite being in line with international norms like the SDGs and WHO guidelines, the Act has problems such inadequate lab space, lax enforcement, and poor public awareness, particularly in rural areas.

In India, safeguarding consumer safety and nutritional health is primarily accomplished by the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006. It requires responsibility, safety regulations, and food labeling. Nonetheless, better coordination, public awareness, and implementation are required. It can support the constitutional right to life and the nutritional rights of young people in conjunction with other legislation. Adulteration of food is a major concern. The Prevention of Food Adulteration (PFA) Rules, 2011 was challenged by the petitioners in *Swami Achyutanand Tirth & Ors. v Union of India* AIR 2016 SC 3626, the petitioner claimed that several permitted additives and artificial flavors were in violation of Article 21 since they presented health hazards without adequate scientific proof. Citing economic factors and dependence on international standards, the government supported the regulations. Although the Supreme Court maintained the regulations, it placed restrictions on chemicals that would endanger public health.

Strict sanctions are outlined by the FSSA. While deceptive advertising or selling unhealthy food can result in fines of ₹10 lakhs, selling or creating subpar food can result in fines of up to ₹5 lakhs. In the case of *M/S A.K. Sarkar & Co. & Anr. v The State of West Bengal & Ors.*, [2024] 3 S.C.R. 356 : 2024 INSC 186 mislabeling resulted in a punishment of ₹50,000 and three months in jail. Under Section 52 of the FSSA, the seller in *Manik Hiru Jhangiani v. State of Madhya Pradesh* Cr. App. No. 10611 of 2015 was fined ₹3 lakhs for selling unbranded, non-compliant food. These incidents demonstrate how important enforcement is to maintaining food safety and safeguarding the health of consumers.

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, which gave preference to children, pregnant women, and teenage girls, made it permissible for over two-thirds of India's population to have access to subsidized food. Upholding the right to a dignified life under Article 21 supports programs such as MDMS and ICDS. However, quality control and efficient execution continue to be major Challenges.

The Consumer Protection Act of 2019 addresses deceptive food advertising, inferior products, and online food transactions, thereby expanding the rights of consumers. It gives customers the ability to confront misleading food marketing, particularly young people. The rule also requires e-commerce sites like Big Basket, Swiggy, and Zomato to make disclosures, guaranteeing food safety, labeling, and supplier transparency. The Eat Right India movement, which advocates for making educated food choices and opposing the promotion of unhealthy foods, is one of the projects that the Act supports.⁹

The Right to Education Act of 2009 mandates that children up to the age of 14 get midday meals, despite its primary focus on education. By recognizing school meals as a legal right under Article 21 in *PUCL v. Union of India* (2001), the Supreme Court strengthened the connection between nutrition, health, and education.¹⁰ The 2015 Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act requires that children in institutional care be fed wholesome, safe food. It supports other laws by guaranteeing that children in challenging situations also have access to food safety and nutritional rights. To fully realize the Act's promise, regular inspections, improved agency collaboration, and child involvement in food decisions are essential.

Even with robust legislation India still issues with youth nutrition, including unequal access to food, deceptive advertising, lax enforcement, and low knowledge. In order to address these, organized legal, educational, and financial initiatives are needed.

Youth nutrition is being revolutionized by artificial intelligence (AI), which provides individualized dietary advice, monitors behavior, and encourages sustainable, better options. AI also improves food output and cuts down on waste. Strict laws are necessary to address ethical issues like data privacy and deceptive food marketing, though, to guarantee AI prioritizes health over profit.

Results and Discussion

This study shows that although India has a strong legal and policy framework for consumer protection and food safety, the enforcement of nutritional rights, particularly for children and young people, is still lacking. Despite the Supreme Court's interpretation that the right to adequate nutrition is covered by Article 21, the majority of government actions are still policy-based and not legally enforceable. Laws such as the FSSA, 2006, and the CPA, 2019 do not directly regulate high-fat, high-sugar, and high-salt (HFSS) food access in schools or youth-targeted food marketing. Programs like the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and POSHAN Abhiyaan encounter difficulties with execution, oversight, legal support, and state-by-state uniformity.

In the famous *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India & Ors*, (AIR 2003 SC 2363), the Supreme Court ordered the establishment of welfare programs including the Public Distribution System (PDS), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and Mid-Day Meal (MDM) and established the right to food as enforceable under Article 21. As a result, a rights-based approach to nutrition and food was established.

In *M/S Nestle India Limited vs Union Of India* (2016) 13 SCC 746, commonly known as the Maggi noodles case, the Bombay High Court examined issues related to food safety, corporate responsibility, and consumer rights. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) had banned Maggi noodles due to dangerous levels of lead and misleading claims about monosodium glutamate (MSG). Although the ban was later lifted because of flaws in the testing process, the case highlighted the need for stronger regulations and the accountability of food manufacturers, particularly when their products are aimed at children. It raised awareness about the long-term health risks of ultra-processed food and strengthened the case for accurate labeling and honest advertising.

The judiciary has also played a role in regulating false advertisements, especially those targeting young people. In *Tata Press Limited vs Mahanagar Telephone-Nigam Limited* 1995 SCC (5) 139, the Supreme Court recognized commercial advertising as a form of free speech under Article 19(1)(a) but stated it is subject to reasonable limits. Though not directly related to food products, this decision has influenced later interpretations of regulations regarding false nutritional claims, misleading packaging, and endorsements of unhealthy foods by celebrities. Similarly, in *Poonam Verma vs Ashwin Patel & Ors* 1996 SCC (4) 332, the Court discussed the

concepts of duty of care and negligence, ideas that now apply to food business operators and sellers of nutritional supplements or packaged food for minors. In several rulings, courts have overseen the implementation of nutrition-related schemes and held the state accountable for failures. In *Laxmi Mandal vs Deen Dayal Harinagar Hospital & Ors.*[2010] SCC OnLine Del 2234, the Delhi High Court found that failing to provide maternal and infant nutrition violated the right to health under Article 21. Likewise, in *Swaraj Abhiyan v. Union of India* AIR 2016 SUPREME COURT 2929, the Supreme Court addressed food insecurity during droughts and criticized the inadequate delivery of food programs. It pointed out the closure of schools as a barrier to children's access to mid-day meals, affecting both their nutritional health and educational progress. Courts have also dealt with deceptive food advertising and hazardous food settings. The Supreme Court connected child nutrition to education and dignity in *Environmental & Consumer Protection Foundation v. Union of India* [2012] INSC 584 Forum, ordering schools to provide hygienic food, clean water, and sanitation.

The courts have, however, encouraged the implementation of current laws, but they frequently refrain from advocating for additional legislation or sanctions. These orders' influence is nevertheless limited by a lack of public knowledge and inadequate enforcement measures, particularly in rural areas. There is an urgent need for stronger institutions, consistent regulation, and legal reforms to make these judicial principles a reality in order to adequately safeguard the nutritional rights of India's youth.

Recommendations

Stronger food labeling regulations, prohibitions on child-targeted junk food advertisements, and nutrition instruction in schools are all necessary to promote kid nutritional health as a sustainable consumer right. Advocacy for digital nutrition, local food systems, and student-led audits must be supported since young people are vulnerable consumers. Accountability can be improved via a National Youth Nutrition Commission, more stringent advertising laws, and a nutrition ombudsman. Young people are better equipped to demand their rights and make educated decisions when they have access to safe, wholesome, and sustainable food.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a concerted effort involving stricter legislation, inclusive policies, and responsible technology use is needed to ensure the nutritional health of young people. Young people are empowered to live with dignity and to be educated to make effective decisions when nutrition is acknowledged as a consumer right. India can produce a more fair and healthy generation through improved community involvement, education, and enforcement. For the country's kids, access to sustainable, wholesome, and safe food must be viewed as a constitutional duty rather than merely a policy goal. Governments, educational institutions, families, the food industry, and civic society must work together to accomplish this. Building a just and health-focused future requires investing in local, sustainable agriculture, enforcing stronger regulations on deceptive food marketing, and including youth in the development of food systems.

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