




Women's Agricultural Work and Nutrition in South Asia: Policy Priorities

- **Recognition of Women as Farmers and Agricultural Workers**
- **Agriculture Policies and Programmes to be Gender-Sensitive**
- **Nutrition-specific behaviour change: Addressing and redistributing the care deficit**
- **Social protection and public investment: Reducing women's time burdens and expanding choices**

LANSA research has highlighted the linkage between women's agricultural work and nutrition in South Asia. Official statistics acknowledge that agriculture accounts for a majority of women workers in these countries. Many women who work in agriculture, however, are not counted, and many others' work is under-counted and often uncompensated. The division of agricultural activities is highly gendered and many of the tasks undertaken by women are not regarded as work by men and women, families and communities. For many rural South Asian women, global efforts for the recognition of women's contribution to the care economy, or for the greater visibility of women's reproductive labour, is a step too far. They struggle to have their contribution recognised in the productive sphere of the economy.

 Our research finds that women's agricultural work has a direct negative bearing on nutrition in South Asia through two pathways. Women who undertake crop-related activity are not compensated adequately for their energy expenditure; they also have less time and energy to look after their children. Further, LANSAs research across Indian regions found



evidence of a significant decline in women's BMI in the lean agricultural season when periods of intense work coincide with the dearth of food. In Pakistan, women who undertook crop-related agricultural work when pregnant had lower BMIs than others,

◆ Women are involved in various kinds of work – agriculture, poultry, livestock, fishery, etc. Here are women from Bogra District in Bangladesh, engaged in sericulture.

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and their children were more likely to be stunted. In Bangladesh, the introduction of a food crop led to improved infant feeding which resulted in a reduction in wasting. More significantly, LANSA research found that Bangladesh's success in achieving rapid reductions in child stunting was quite largely due to improvements in the health and well-being of rural women. Were the factors behind those improvements also associated with the recognition by women and their families of their contribution to household wellbeing?

Women who take part in farm work, particularly in highly seasonal but intensive activities such as cotton harvesting and paddy transplanting, do so under conditions of economic stress, in order to meet their families' basic needs, alongside fulfilling their gendered household obligations towards family production. For most rural women in South Asia, agricultural work signals a difficult trade-off with respect to the time and care they can provide for their children. What can be done to make the terms of this trade-off less severe?

Recognition of women as farmers and agricultural workers

Recognition of women's economic contribution in agriculture – in crop, livestock, fisheries and other farming systems – is an overarching condition for

protecting and promoting their rights, for helping them in improving their own health and the nutrition of their children, and for initiating pro-nutrition policy choices. The countries of the region are along different points on the path to the recognition of the rights of women agricultural workers.

- All women who take part in any agricultural activity should be recognised as agricultural workers/farmers (as defined in the Indian National Policy on Farmers, 2007), and recorded as such in official data.
- Recognition in law is a first step, but not enough. Measures to ensure that these rights are realised in practice are needed. Effective mechanisms to monitor progress are essential for ensuring implementation.
- Remove inequalities in women's right to own agricultural assets in law and in practice.
- Entitle women farmers/agricultural workers to equal and minimum wages, fair working conditions and maternity benefits.
- Explicit legal recognition of the rights of women farmers/agricultural workers should lead to the active pursuit of changes in all areas of policy,

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➦ Preparing the land for vegetable cultivation. A scene from Kabul province, Afghanistan.

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such as agriculture, health and nutrition, social protection and public investment priority, where women agricultural workers are stakeholders.

Agriculture policies and programmes to be gender-sensitive

Agricultural policies and programmes are often framed for the benefit of male farmers. Women agricultural workers, even when they are recognised as farmers, are peripheral to mainstream agricultural policies, despite the fact that they increasingly provide a large part of the low-paid labour, which sustains many agricultural activities. This is increasingly evident in the context of growing male out-migration from poor, rural communities.

- Governments must create mechanisms for ensuring that at least some element of public subsidy reach women agricultural workers and recognise their contributions (women's labour needs to be valued in calculating cost of cultivation and related support prices, and subsidies to crops such as cotton must entail wage support for workers)
- Agricultural extension services need to be progressively feminized and engage with women farmers/agricultural workers, specifically women-controlled crops and livestock.
- Asset transfer programmes, including land transfers, must prioritise women beneficiaries.
- Forums need to be created for consultation with women agricultural workers for major changes in policy which impact on their time.

Nutrition-specific behaviour change: Addressing and redistributing the care deficit

Nutrition-specific policies and programmes are increasingly premised on effecting behaviour change with respect to children's feeding and care. These programmes do not always take into account the existing burdens on women's time,



and the fact that much of the behaviour change advocated will have further implications for women's time.

- Behaviour change proposals need to take explicit measures to indicate their implications for women's time, and to build-in mechanisms for protecting women's time, keeping in mind local resource availability, material and human.
- Better support Lady Health Workers in Pakistan or ASHAs in India, to address specific issues confronting women agricultural workers, beyond reproductive health.
- Government services where they exist (such as Anganwadi in India) need to extend the provision of child care particularly in peak agricultural seasons (harvesting

↑ Women work long hours under harsh sunlight picking vegetables in Mirpurkhas district, Pakistan.
CSSR

“Agricultural policies and programmes are often framed for the benefit of male farmers; women agricultural workers, even when they are recognised as farmers, are peripheral to mainstream agricultural policies.”

and planting), when women's time is constrained. Countries that do not have local pre-school services need to prioritise establishing crèche services, which target women agricultural workers.

- Public provisioning of subsidised food to the poor, including food-based interventions for children (such as school meals), need to move beyond the provision of cereals, to include proteins and micro-nutrient rich foods.



women's choices with respect to the work-care trade-off, particularly with respect to seasonal variations.

- Other public investments need to be steered towards public goods and innovations, which will reduce rural women's drudgery through provision of clean energy, safe drinking water and time-saving technologies.

↑ In Kharaguda village, Koraput district, Odisha India, women work alongside men during the rice transplanting season.

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Social protection and public investment: Reducing women's time burdens and expanding choices

- Existing social protection programmes in South Asian countries (such as India's Public Distribution System, and Pakistan's Benazir Income Support Programme) need to pay attention to increasing

Further reading

LANSA film: Women in agriculture in South Asia: the nutrition connection (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egaUBGLNhgq>)

Video interview: Gender and Nutrition (<http://lansasouthasia.org/content/nitya-rao-lansa-gender-focal-point>)

Blogpost: Does Women's Work In Agriculture Help Or Hinder Nutrition In Pakistan? (<http://lansasouthasia.org/blog/does-women%E2%80%99s-work-agriculture-help-or-hinder-nutrition-pakistan>)

News article: What women do (<http://tns.thenews.com.pk/women/#.WVt034SGPIX>)

E-discussion report: LANSA 'Gender- Nutrition' E-Discussion On FAO's FSN Forum (<http://lansasouthasia.org/content/lansa-gender-nutrition-e-discussion-faos-fsn-forum>)

Credits

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