



Gendered Time, Seasonality and Nutrition: Insights from two Indian districts

There has been considerable attention to women's work in nutritional studies, given women's central role in child-bearing, child-care and child-rearing. Similarly, employment data indicates women's high work-participation in agriculture – a phenomenon commonly known as the feminisation of agriculture, albeit as labourers and unpaid family workers, rather than independent cultivators. It is therefore surprising that there are relatively few studies that make the link between women's work in agriculture, their household and care responsibilities, and nutritional outcomes.

Methods

LANSA research in India was undertaken in 12 villages in two districts – Koraput (Odisha) and Wardha (Maharashtra) as part of the Farming System for Nutrition feasibility study. Apart from baseline anthropometric and diet surveys with 150 households in each district, detailed time use surveys and qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 households in each location.

Findings

LANSA research provides several interesting insights (see Figure 1) with relevance for both policy and practice:

1. **Gender matters:** Women across sites perform on average 56% of total work. While the Indian Time Use Survey (MoSPI, 1999) showed women spending half the time that men spend on System of National Accounts (productive) activities, this was 75-80% in our study, pointing to women's



significant contributions to agriculture and productive work more broadly.

2. **Context and location matter:** Women's (and men's) work in agriculture varies with the agro-ecological context, cropping pattern and availability of water. In Koraput (a rainfed paddy-growing area) planting season was

↑ Women's work in agricultural lands is labour-intensive. This is a scene from Wardha district, Maharashtra, India, where women are preparing land for vegetable cultivation..

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the most time-intensive for women, their work-day stretching to 13 hours. On the other hand, in Wardha (a cotton-growing region), harvest time was the busiest for women. However, both women and men work on average two hours more in Koraput than Wardha across seasons.

3. Social identity (caste/ethnicity) matters:

Despite generalised deprivation across the two sites, particular caste/ethnic groups are worse affected by time and work pressures compared to others. For instance, amongst the landless *Parojas* and the vegetable cultivators or *Malis*, women’s agricultural work burdens are on par with men during the planting and harvesting seasons. Child underweight and stunting are highest among these groups.

4. Seasonality of work and care cannot be ignored:

During the peak agricultural seasons, the time spent on productive work by women increases, and time for care-work shrinks by close to 30% in both sites.

As women undertake 95% of all unpaid care and domestic work, this has adverse consequences for child and maternal nutrition. While women are unable to feed the young child regularly when engaged in tasks such as cotton-picking (in Wardha), they lose appetite and have no desire to cook after a long day’s work.

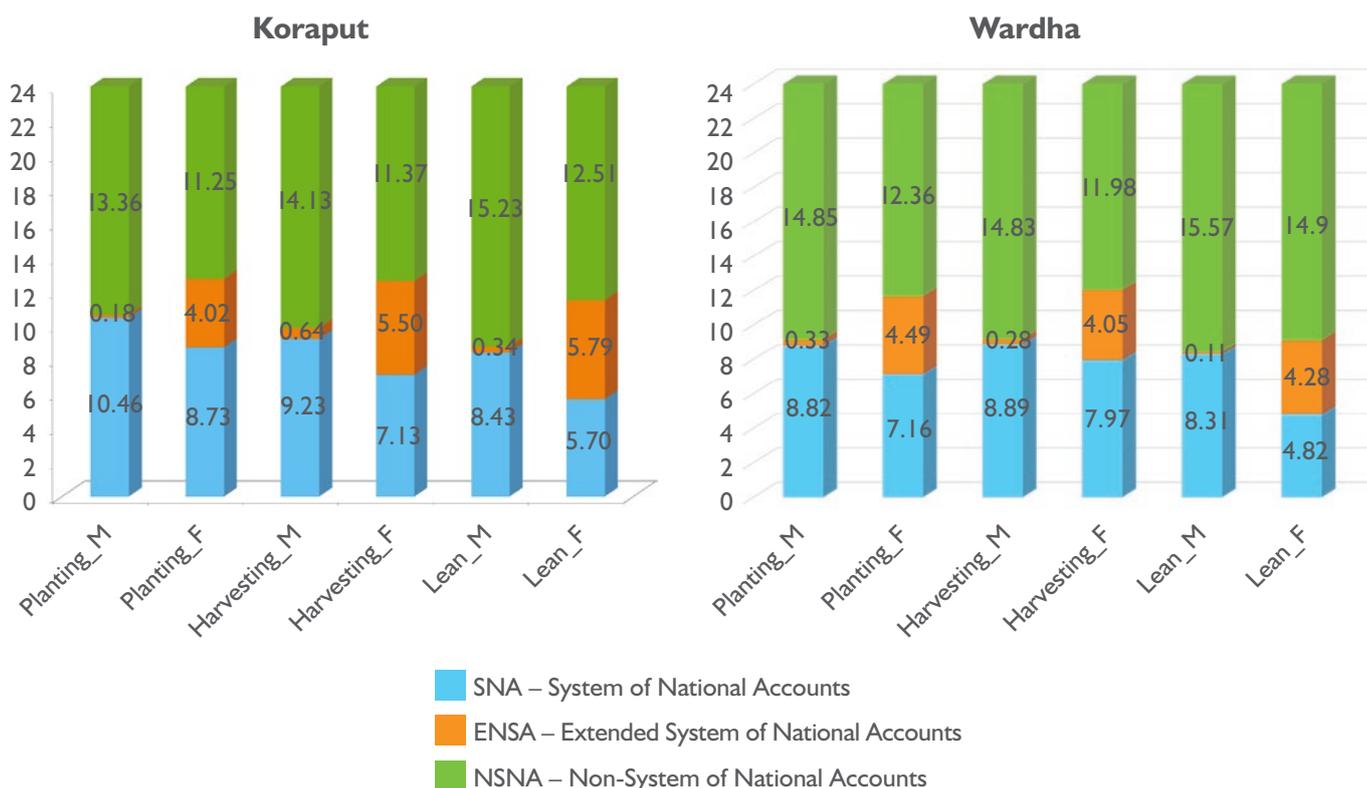
5. The constituents of domestic and care work:

Amongst the range of unpaid domestic and care tasks, cooking appears to be the most time-consuming and, if addressed, can free time for care. Men are able and willing to supervise and teach children, but cleaning, cooking and other household chores remain firmly in the woman’s domain.

6. Energy Stress: A rough estimation of energy intakes and expenditures highlight several interesting elements. First, a

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Figure 1 Average hours spent daily on SNA, ESNA and NSNA (male & female) by season





◀ Women are vulnerable to weight loss across different contexts in terms of their work burden and care-tasks. An elderly tribal woman from Odisha State in India sitting down to have a meagre meal.

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subsistence economy such as Koraput revealed higher levels of cereal adequacy than a cash-crop based, market-dependent economy like Wardha. Clearly cash has uses beyond nutrition, with education and production-related expenses prioritised over food. Second, energy stress is gendered, with men in Koraput doing worse than women. This is perhaps due to the need to migrate in search of work during the lean season – a finding also confirmed by the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (2009) study on Scheduled Tribe populations.

7. Managing Seasonal Weight Loss: Most studies of seasonal weight loss undertaken in Africa indicate a modest gender difference with women tending to have slightly smaller

weight losses than men¹. Amongst the Scheduled Tribes in Koraput, however, women (already thinner) reveal 3–4% decline in body weight seasonally as against 2–3% for men. In Wardha too, women experience a seasonal weight loss of 2–3%, while this is negligible for men. A possible strategy to counter this is for women to reduce their activity levels when food consumption declines. This is often not possible in agricultural communities, as periods of hunger coincide with those of intense work.

“ While all women confront seasonal care deficits, it is more intense for particular groups of women; men often do worse, calling attention to focus on households through their life course, rather than individuals at particular moments in time. ”

¹ Ferro-Luzzi, A, G. Pastore and S. Sette. 1987. Seasonality in energy metabolism. IN: Schurch, B and N.S Scrinshaw (eds.) Chronic energy deficiency: consequences and related issues. Lausanne. IDECG.

Implications

Gender, location and social identity intersect to shape the duration and intensity of work across seasons as well as the food available for consumption, be it home-grown or purchased. Our evidence suggests that women's seasonally high work burdens in agriculture have negative implications for nutritional outcomes, both of their children, through time-trade-offs, and their own health, due to energy stress. These, however, change through the life-course, as the nature of households change².

In order to improve nutritional outcomes, it is important to:

- a) recognise women's work in both agriculture and the care economy, and the differences across contexts;
- b) support the performance of these roles by helping reduce the time and drudgery involved in domestic tasks through the provision of clean energy, cooking stoves, clean drinking water and sanitation facilities; and
- c) Encourage a redistribution of care-work by supporting men to share caring roles, and also ensuring the provision of reliable, institutional day care, especially during the peak agricultural seasons..



↑ Women's work in agriculture includes harvesting millets. A scene from Palliguda village, Koraput district, Odisha, India – the woman is harvesting finger millet.

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Further reading

Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). 1999. Time Use Survey (July 1998-June 1999): Brief details and important findings of the survey. New Delhi. Government of India.

National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau. 2009. Diet and Nutritional Status of Tribal Population and prevalence of hypertension amongst adults: Report on second repeat survey. *NNMB Technical Report No. 25*. Hyderabad. National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR).

Credits

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² Mitra A and Rao N, 2017. Gender Differences in Adolescent Nutrition: Evidence from two Indian Districts. LANSA working paper series No 13. <http://lansasouthasia.org/content/gender-differences-adolescent-nutrition-evidence-two-indian-districts>



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