

Women's agricultural labor a key factor in malnutrition in India

June 26 2019

Recognition of Indian women's roles in both agriculture and domestic work is key to improving household nutrition outcomes, according to new research from the University of East Anglia (UEA).

New research concludes women's work in agriculture potentially has a [negative impact](#) on household [nutrition](#), through a combination of reduced time for [care work](#) and seasonal energy deficits.

The findings are part of a study led by Prof Nitya Rao, professor of gender and development in the University of East Anglia's (UEA) School of International Development.

In most of rural India, women work as agricultural and family farm labourers, in addition to performing nearly all the childcare and household duties. Often men have gone to work in urban areas, leaving women to balance agricultural and household work, including food gathering and preparation.

Overall, women's work in agriculture seems to have a negative impact on household nutrition, through a combination of reduced time for care work and seasonal energy deficits. Longer working hours for women or increased work intensity can have detrimental effects on their own health and, in turn, their ability to care for their children. This leads to poor child- and household-level nutrition outcomes.

The study examines the intersections of gender with other forms of

social identity and inequality. The paper titled, 'Gendered time, seasonality and nutrition: Insights from two Indian districts', is published on June 26, 2019 in the journal *Feminist Economics*, a leading peer-reviewed journal that provides an open forum for dialogue and debate about feminist economic perspectives.

In India, class, caste and ethnicity play important roles in shaping access to resources, especially land. Those structural factors also determine women's agency, social norms around appropriate behaviour, notions of care and food cultures.

Prof Rao said: "This new research examines how social identity, seasonality and context shape women's [agricultural work](#), as well as food intakes and feeding practices.

"Women's agricultural work could potentially have negative outcomes, especially for the young child whose nutrition depends more on the mother's time for breastfeeding and supplementary feeding. The double burden of work and care often leads to a time trade-off between the two."

Prof Rao's research draws on primary data from 12 villages in two Indian districts, Wardha (Maharashtra) and Koraput (Odisha) between 2014-2016. The study villages comprise a mix of castes and ethnicities, all with distinctive cultures and livelihoods, from land-owning cultivators to landless groups who survive by engaging in wage labour. Malnutrition is high in both areas, with near or more than 50 per cent of children underweight. In both regions, women account for nearly all the household work, such as bathing and feeding children, washing clothes and collecting water.

In Wardha, women harvest cotton manually, but the semi-arid region has reported severe agrarian distress over the past decade. Moreover, the

smell of cotton and cotton dust causes headaches and leaves workers with no appetite or desire to cook or eat, which has implications for the rest of the household.

In Koraput, located in the semi-humid tropics, literacy rates and other human development indicators are low. People in this region work, on average, close to 13 hours a day, resulting in [sleep deprivation](#), especially during the peak agricultural seasons of planting and harvesting.

As Koraput participant Kamala Paroja said: "We leave for our fields for transplantation early in the morning. There is no time to go to the forest to collect vegetables or greens, and no time to cook. We eat once a day—rice and ambli (sour gruel of rice flour and tamarind)."

Prof Rao said in order to improve women's lives and household nutrition and health outcomes, policies need to be context-specific, taking into consideration factors such as caste and location. Regardless, though, policies must aim to reduce the time- and effort-intensity of women's agricultural [work](#).

Prof Rao said: "The lack of attention to women's time as a key factor in child nutrition outcomes is perhaps the main reason for the persistence of poor nutritional outcomes despite economic growth.

"Infrastructural support that can reduce the drudgery and effort/time intensity of tasks, especially cooking, as well as clean energy and drinking water, alongside strengthening child-care services, will help India move toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of reducing hunger and stopping intergenerational nutritional deprivation."

This article is part of the gender research in India generated by the Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA) Research

Consortium, led by the M.S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF). The project is funded by UK aid from the UK government.

The paper, 'Gendered time, seasonality and nutrition: Insights from two Indian districts', will be published June 26, 2019 in the journal *Feminist Economics*.

Provided by University of East Anglia

Citation: Women's agricultural labor a key factor in malnutrition in India (2019, June 26)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2019-06-women-agricultural-labor-key-factor.html>

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