

LANSA REGIONAL STORY OF INFLUENCE

Recognising the rights of women agricultural workers: Influencing policy discourse

Multi-level engagements and collaboration for recognition of women's work in agriculture, to enhance their well-being



Summary

Women in agriculture and nutrition has been a major strand of LANSAs research, with the need to recognise women agricultural workers and promote their rights as a first step in improving their health and the health of their children as a key focus of research uptake activities. This has resulted in public pledges of support from key policymakers with LANSAs partners collaborating at high levels to shift the policy discourse towards the recognition, protection and promotion of rights and well-being of women agricultural workers and their children.

Women's work in agriculture and its implications for their health, and health of their children emerged as an important theme within LANSAs research, revealing policy gaps and priorities to improve health and well-being of mothers and children in the region. Agriculture accounts for the bulk of women's labour force participation in South Asia; yet their contribution to the sector remains unacknowledged. Across the region, the steady feminisation of the agricultural workforce, has not been accompanied by nutritional improvement. LANSAs has analysed women's health through primary research, with implications for policy reforms in various sectors including, but not limited to agriculture, health, nutrition, labour and social protection. For example, LANSAs research found that Bangladesh's success in achieving rapid reduction in child stunting was largely due to improvements in the health and well-being of rural women. In Pakistan and India in particular, LANSAs research has explored issues relating to women's role in agricultural labour and its relationship with child nutrition.

LANSA research from a South Asia perspective has been included in the UN Women's Progress of World's Women Report 2018 to be launched in early 2019.

Regional collaboration for greater influence and impact

Building on the emerging evidence, LANSAs has led a series of [national and regional level engagements](#) with its stakeholders to shift the policy discourse towards the recognition of rights and well-being of women agricultural workers. These engagements with key policy makers at the national and regional level have laid the foundation for a cross-country collaboration to develop a shared regional dialogue and contribute to the emerging global discourse on women's paid and unpaid work.



Participants at the 'Recognising the Rights of Women Agricultural Workers in South Asia: Round table on Policy, Politics and Impact', Bangkok, October, 2018

LANSA is now in its final phase and is seeking to ensure that the momentum generated in each of its partner countries is taken forward through concrete measures that will last beyond its lifetime.

The conclusion of LANSA is an opportune moment to draw on national momentum to promote regional multi-stakeholder networking among key change agents in South Asia committed to addressing the needs of women agricultural workers, recognizing their contributions and amplifying their voices in inclusive sustainable development processes. To reinvigorate regional advocacy and action, LANSA partners in India and Pakistan once again collaborated to co-host a one-day regional roundtable: **Recognizing the Rights of Women Agricultural Workers in South Asia: Roundtable on Policy, Politics and Impact** in partnership with UN Women. This roundtable, held in October 2018 in Bangkok brought together 30 key stakeholders from across five countries in South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), including representatives from governments, universities and research institutions, international organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs) and grassroots activists¹. This roundtable has laid the foundations for the first regional forum in South Asia for women agricultural workers. The roundtable was a space to share successful strategies and key enablers that can trigger transformative change to protect the rights of women agricultural workers. Participants identified common policy and programme priorities to promote women agricultural workers' rights across the South Asia Sub-Region and each of the five countries represented, with concrete strategies and actions for moving forward.

A key outcome of the meeting was a statement of “[Joint Recommendations and Call to Action](#)” in which all stakeholders agreed to prioritize policy and legal changes for the recognition of rights of women agricultural workers including the need to “legally recognize women agricultural workers as workers, in all countries, including ensuring equal and living wages; ensure social protection including pensions, housing, childcare, free and quality healthcare including sexual reproductive health, education and maternity entitlements; recognise the importance of unions, organizations and associations of women agricultural workers and the need to prioritize programmes and initiatives to implement policy and legal protections more effectively.”

The regional roundtable is the latest outcome of a series of concerted efforts² by LANSA partners in the region to sustain a regional discourse on recognition of women's agricultural work. It enabled LANSA researchers to set the agenda, with all stakeholders agreeing on a focused, collective effort to establish a Regional Forum on Women Agricultural Workers in South Asia. Policymakers, grassroots activists, researchers, and representatives from government and international organisations have all committed to explore potential mechanisms of engagement in their own countries.

Past commitments by regional stakeholders plays key role

Two [regional events](#) convened by LANSA partners at the 2nd Agriculture, Nutrition and Health (ANH) Academy Week and Feed the Future Innovation Lab Scientific Symposium in Kathmandu in July 2017 played a key role in initiating a regional discourse for recognition of rights and well-being of women agricultural workers. The first, an informal networking session³, brought together researchers, activists, and key policy makers from across the South Asian region. The discussion, moderated by Nitya Rao (LANSA Gender cross-cut lead), was framed using LANSA findings⁴ from [India](#) and [Pakistan](#).



High level participation at the LANSA South Asia Policy Dialogue at ANH Symposium, Nepal. July 2017

It revealed that in countries like India, long-standing advocacy by researchers and activists has led to the acknowledgement of the feminization of the agricultural workforce by both government and community level stakeholders.

For example, in India, a draft Women Farmer's Entitlement Bill, was proposed in the upper house of the Indian Parliament as a private member's bill by Professor M. S Swaminathan in 2011. While the Bill was not legislated on by the Parliament, and significant gaps remain in terms of securing their entitlements, awareness and advocacy on this issue has grown, with a range of channels being explored to expand the recognition of women as farmers and agricultural workers and their entitlements.

Sudha Narayanan from Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, shared: “In India, the definition of farmers is linked to land ownership. Women often do not own land. Under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) however, women get a job card. They find these cards empowering. The cards give them an identity.”

Khushi Kabir, an activist from Bangladesh highlighted that the “situation in Bangladesh has changed with more women entering the labour force as agricultural labourers and receiving wages that are two-thirds of wages earned by their male counterparts. There is a need however, to recognise women’s reproductive work, and focus on redistribution of care work.”

In Pakistan, although the issue is nascent, the need for advancement of rights of women agricultural workers has gained momentum in the policy discourse. The new Labour Policy adopted by the regional Sindh government; the [National Commission on the Status of Women’s \(NCSW\)](#) latest [report](#) on the status of rural women and the Punjab Commission’s initiative to advance women’s social and economic well-being create an opening for the recognition of the rights of women agricultural workers. Nafisa Shah, Member of National Assembly (MNA) of Pakistan, proposed at the session that as Founder of a network of South Asian parliamentarians, and former Secretary of Women’s Parliamentary Caucus of Pakistan, she can suggest a session on the theme of women in agriculture at the SAARC. As a legislator, she can put forward a private member’s bill similar to the draft Women Farmer’s entitlement bill in India, to raise the issue for debate at the national policy level. Khawar Mumtaz, Chairperson, NCSW, suggested that a review of the agriculture policy be conducted to explore this gap.

Both Shah and Mumtaz continued to engage with LANSA Pakistan in subsequent national events to push forward the agenda, with Shah raising the issue in her party, and making pledges to recognise rights of women agricultural workers. Both of them also participated in the Bangkok roundtable.

All participants in the session, identifying common issues confronting women agricultural workers across the region, called for a greater collaboration for joint progress.

The second event was a plenary policy dialogue session organised by LANSA as part of the ANH Academy conference, moderated by Rachel Lambert, Senior Livelihoods Adviser, Agriculture Research, Department for International Development (DFID), UK. It brought together a high profile [panel](#) including policy makers and opinion leaders from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nepal. The session focused on the role of women in agriculture, showcasing some key emerging findings from LANSA research in Pakistan and India, and facilitated a dialogue to share key learnings across the region and highlight critical policy priorities (in the countries and across the region) moving forward. The panellists included Nafisa Shah (MNA, Pakistan), Jatinder Kishtwaria (Director, Central Institute for Women in Agriculture, India), Khushi Kabir (Coordinator, Nijera Kori,

Bangladesh), Indira Dahal (Joint Secretary, Nepal Law Commission, Nepal) and Nitya Rao (LANSA Gender Crosscut Lead and Professor of Gender and Development, University of East Anglia).

LANSA has been able to draw regional and global attention to the women in agriculture and nutrition pathway on digital media as well. In 2016, collaboration with FAO’s Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition to successfully host a [three week e-discussion](#) on ‘Transforming gender relations in agriculture through women’s empowerment: benefits, challenges and trade-offs for improving nutrition outcomes’, provided LANSA with a sense of how the problem was perceived globally. The event saw participation from 16 countries in all, including LANSA focus countries like Afghanistan, and African countries. To appeal to wider audiences, LANSA launched its first animation short film - ‘[Women in Agriculture in South Asia: The Nutrition Connection](#)’ on YouTube on March 8 2017 (International Women’s Day). The film, a synthesis of linkages and disconnects on the issue of women agriculture workers and nutrition emerging from evidence generated by LANSA, has received 1366 unique views till date. Several organisations and networks have reached out to LANSA requesting to use the film as a discussion starter.

Delving deeper into the context of women’s work: highlights from India and Pakistan

Understanding of women’s role in the workforce and the implications for undernutrition, has been a key research theme in both India and Pakistan. LANSA research identified women’s agriculture work in South Asia as a critical mediating factor between household poverty and undernutrition⁵. We also found that many women agricultural workers are compelled to work in order to meet their families’ basic needs but they are either unpaid or underpaid and many of their activities are not recognised as ‘work,’ by their communities, families, or even themselves.



Nitya Rao, LANSA Gender crosscut Lead, shared LANSA research findings with Odisha Government officials, March 2017.

For example, a study in two rural districts (Koraput and Wardha) of India showed that doing care work did not exempt women from productive labour in agriculture –

their days were just busier⁶. In peak agricultural seasons, women spend even more time in productive work, placing constraints on time for care, negatively affecting child and maternal nutrition, as seen in high levels of under-nutrition, and also seasonal losses in body weight, more severe for women who were already thin. The intensity of effort, energy intake and expenditure vary by geographical location, cropping pattern, economic position and social identity. A study conducted in rural Uttar Pradesh confirms the seasonality of both mother's BMI and birth weights⁷.



Haris Gazdar, Lead Researcher - LANSA Pakistan presenting findings from LANSA research on Women's Work and Nutrition survey at a Consultation in Karachi, 2018

In Pakistan, a longitudinal [study](#) conducted in rural areas of Sindh found that agricultural work during pregnancy is associated with poor maternal and early infancy nutritional status. Two out of every three rural mothers reported doing agricultural work while pregnant, and over a third undertook physically demanding labour such as cotton harvesting. Women who worked in cotton harvesting were more likely to be under-nourished and had significantly lower BMIs as compared to other workers. Harvesting cotton during pregnancy increases the likelihood of delivering smaller infants⁸. Another study revealed that 45% of the sample were already stunted when measured at ages 2-14 weeks and catch-up growth was small and correlated with mother's health and education, and household wealth⁹. Moreover, women's wages are much lower than those paid to men and also the national minimum wage in Pakistan. Emerging evidence from a doctoral research study co-supported by LANSA in the *Haor* region of Bangladesh indicates that

growth of children depends on multidimensional factors, including maternal health and nutrition status and time for child care¹⁰.

LANSA research findings shared with the international community

1. Findings from the India research have been shared at a [regional consultation on Farming System for Nutrition in Chennai in August 2017](#); a [national conference organised by National Academy of Sciences, India](#); with the [government of Odisha](#) (see policy brief [here](#)), National Commission for Women and UN Women and also a network of activist groups working on women farmer's entitlements ([MAKAAM](#) or MahilaKisanAdhikarManch), and researchers and activists working on issues of public health and the double burden of malnutrition in Asia.
2. Findings from Pakistan research have been presented at various national and international conferences including a special event hosted by UN Women; [27th Annual Conference of the International Association for Feminist Economics \(IAFFE\)](#); [Agriculture and Applied Economics Association \(AAEA\) Annual Meeting 2018](#); [Agriculture Nutrition and Health Academy Week 2018](#); [Consultation on Rights and Well-being of Women Agricultural Workers, August 2018](#).

Box 1: LANSA research findings presented at various national and regional events

Way forward: Building a regional network of champions, for recognition, protection and promotion of rights and well-being of women agricultural workers

LANSA Pakistan's and India's research findings have been endorsed by researchers, and individuals from academia and activist groups (see Box 1). The issue of recognition of women agricultural workers has gained momentum at both national and regional fronts and LANSA partners are now collaborating at a higher level for a shared regional dialogue on the issue. The regional events in Kathmandu in 2017 and the ongoing collaboration between LANSA and UN Women on advancing rights of women agricultural workers will be instrumental in forming a sustainable regional network of researchers, activists, and policy makers committed to promoting the rights and well-being of women agricultural workers of the region.

1. Participants included a Member of the National Assembly and a Minister of Sindh Province from Pakistan, chair of the National Commission on Status of Women, Pakistan and former chair of the National Commission for Women, India, as well as other policy influencers from the regional offices of [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO), SAARC, and UN Women country offices in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.
2. LANSA Pakistan has engaged with UN Women on several fronts. Shahra Razavi, Chief of Research and Data, UN Women has shown continued interest in the issue, and extended support by connecting UN Women's regional and country offices with LANSA
3. Key participants included: Khawar Mumtaz (Chairperson, National Commission on Status of Women, Pakistan), Nafisa Shah (Member, National Assembly, Pakistan), Sudha Naranayan (Professor, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, India), Erin C. Lentz (Center for Women and Gender Studies, University of Texas at Austin, United States of America), Suneetha Kadiyala (Senior Lecturer, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom), Khushi Kabir (NijeraKori, Bangladesh) and Rachel Lambert (Senior Livelihoods Adviser, Agriculture Research, DFID, UK)
4. See, LANSA Policy Brief 2017 [here](#)
5. Rao, N., Gazdar, H., Chanchani, D., Ibrahim, M. (2019). Women's agricultural work and nutrition in South Asia: From pathways to a cross-disciplinary, grounded analytical framework. *Food Policy*, Vol 82 Jan.
6. Rao, N. with S. Raju (2017) Gendered time, seasonality and nutrition: Insights from two Indian districts. LANSA Working Paper Vol 2017 No 22. <http://lansasouthasia.org/content/gendered-time-seasonality-and-nutrition-insights-two-indian-districts-0>
7. Madan, E. M., Haas, J. D., Frongillo, E. A., Kumar, V., Kumar, A., & Menon, P. (forthcoming). A longitudinal study of infant growth and nutritional status amongst smallholder agriculturist households in Uttar Pradesh. PhD. Working Papers. Cornell University.
8. Pradeilles, R, Allen, E., Gazdar, H., Mysorewala, A., Mazhar, S., Dangour, A., and Ferguson, E. (2017). The relationship between crop-related agricultural workload and maternal and infant nutritional status in rural Pakistan. Paper presented at the Agriculture, Nutrition and Health Academy Scientific Symposium, July 2017, Kathmandu.
9. Pradeilles, R. et al. (2018). Factors associated with catch-up growth in early infancy in rural Pakistan: A longitudinal analysis of the women's work and nutrition study. *Maternal and Child Nutrition* DOI: 10.1111/mcn.12733.
10. Chakraborty B, Yousefzadeh S, Darak S. and Haisma H. "We struggle with the earth everyday": Parents' Perspectives on the Capabilities for Healthy Child Growth in Haor Region of Bangladesh" under review at BMC Public Health.

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