

Raising the discourse for women cotton- pickers in Pakistan



How LANSA addresses the problem

Agriculture employs 43.5% of the total workforce in Pakistan with almost three quarters (74.2%) of these female. In spite of their efforts for better living conditions of their families, their children are likely to have poorer nutritional outcomes compared to non-working mothers, as per Pakistan's Demographic and Health Survey (2012-13). This relationship between women's agricultural work and nutrition has not been sufficiently investigated yet, leading to possible oversight in public policy.

The Collective for Social Science Research (CSSR) and Leverhulme Centre for Integrative Research on Agriculture and Health (LCIRAH) joint study on *Women, Work and Nutrition (WWN)* aims to address this. It evaluates the impact of women's work in agriculture on their own nutrition and that of their young children and seeks to find ways to reduce the negative impacts and enhance the positive ones. It does this by determining the direction and magnitude of the impact, and analysing the pathways through which it occurs. Specifically, it examines and empirically establishes correlations and associations between women's work (paid and unpaid) in agriculture and the nutrition of children, through the intermediation of household resources and care provision.

The study aims to highlight women as the force behind the agriculture sector and contribute to the dialogue on labour policy around women's work in agriculture. By clarifying the nutritional impacts of women's work in the sector, it seeks to focus the design of health and nutrition policies on the needs of women agricultural workers, and social protection policies on optimising the positive impact of women's agricultural work on nutrition.

Introduction

There is evidence of increasing feminization of the agricultural workforce in Pakistan, coinciding with stagnant or declining nutritional outcomes for children.

Women's work is thought to lead to positive nutrition outcomes through their higher purchasing power, and the propensity of women to favour pro-nutrition consumption choices.

It is also thought to be associated with adverse impacts if work leads to their having less time and energy for looking after themselves and caring for their children.

The existing policy paradigm in agriculture in Pakistan has been virtually blind to women's role as agricultural workers, largely ignoring their concerns around the trade-off between the need to work and care for their children.

With a focus on the agriculture-nutrition linkage, policies and programmes to improve women's incomes, their control over agricultural assets, and their access to health facilities, can improve nutrition outcomes by reducing adverse impacts and enhancing positive impacts of women's agricultural work.

Research to Action

CSSR held an Agriculture-Nutrition stakeholder workshop in April 2014 to stimulate wider engagement around this topic. The researchers presented on women's contribution to agriculture, and discussed the gendering of agricultural policy. A journalist from DAWN, Pakistan's most widely read English newspaper; Hassan Mansoor reported on these discussions and became engaged in ongoing discussions. He wrote another article in September 2014 called "Women cotton pickers of Sindh await recognition" which drew attention to the poor working conditions of women agricultural workers.

A few days after this article was published, Haris Gazdar, CSSR's lead researcher for LANSA spoke about this topic as the keynote speaker at an event entitled "Right to Food". The event was hosted by the Sindh Agriculture and Fisheries Workers' Cooperative Organisation (SAFWCO) and supported by Oxfam Pakistan. Other panellists included two serving senators and the head of the Sindh Chamber of Agriculture.

This topic began to get wider traction. In December 2014, Reuters published an article called 'Pakistan's women cotton pickers find power in uniting over wages'.

The article carried an interview with the Sindh Community Foundation (SCF), an organisation that works to inform women about their labour rights and trains them to bargain for better wages, an organisation also in attendance at the SAFWCO event.

SCF hosted a provincial dialogue to discuss policy and legal issues of women cotton pickers at a provincial dialogue on 'Organizing and Building Capacities of Cotton Picking for Women Economic Justice' in December 2014.

Haris Gazdar, as keynote speaker, presented findings from the paper "Synergies or Trade-Off Between Agricultural Growth and Nutrition: Women's Work and Care", which he had earlier presented at the annual conference of the Pakistan Society of Development Economists in Islamabad, the paper served as an early version of the LANSa working paper.

In attendance at the dialogue were government officials from the Labour Department, journalists, women rights workers, researchers, NGO leadership and women cotton harvesters from the marginalised Bheel community from the Matiari district of Sindh.

The paper on women agricultural workers and nutrition drew upon desk research as well as fieldwork with women cotton harvesters in Sindh. The findings were validated by a large number of participants. SCF and other NGO participants agreed on the importance of focusing on women's work, health and care. The event and findings were reported in national newspapers such as DAWN and the Express Tribune.

The same month CSSR also shared a round table with heads of NGOs, agriculturalists, the Sindh Abadgar board, and landowners on a Gender Assessment of USAID's Economic Growth and Agriculture programmes.

The Vice President of the Sindh Abadgar Board mentioned that the assessment had failed to take into consideration nutrition, and cited nutrition issues related to women cotton pickers as a key concern when looking at women and agriculture.

Further Information

DAWN, 2014: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1100155>

DAWN, 2014: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1129690>

REUTERS, 2014: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-cotton-widerimage-idUSKCN0JJ1KX20141206>

DAWN, 2014: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151239>

EXPRESS TRIBUNE, 2014:

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/808570/backbone-of-industry-female-cotton-pickers-call-for-recognition/>

References

http://www.researchcollective.org/Documents/Synergies_or_trade_offs_between_agri_growth_and_nutriton.pdf



Hassan Mansoor at CSSR LANSa stakeholder

Impact

In April of 2014, there had been little policy or media mention of women cotton harvesters, and months later when the issue was raised it was with regard to wage. CSSR had spent a considerable amount of time emphasising the feminisation of agriculture and its policy implications and through LANSa research were further able to link income, care and nutrition.

In this manner when the topic of economic rights of women cotton harvesters entered the public policy sphere, CSSR was well positioned to speak at appropriate forums and was able to introduce the linkage to nutrition.

While CSSR had been publically speaking about women cotton harvesters, the issue was raised in the media, amongst advocacy organisations and with the government by a range of other stakeholders, including women agricultural workers themselves. This gave the topic credibility, but the fact that LANSa research findings were endorsed by the experiences of women cotton harvesters themselves added weight to the research. This is evidenced by the considerable coverage that Haris Gazdar received in media coverage of the event.

Conclusion

Through LANSa research CSSR played a role in helping put the issue of women cotton harvesters on the policy agenda and then was able to link nutrition to the discussion on their labour rights.

Insights from the research were able to change the discourse amongst key agricultural stakeholders and help make linkages between women's agricultural work and their nutrition.

Key Contacts

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