



Women in Agriculture and Nutrition in India

Focus policies and programmes

- Draft **National Policy for Women 2016**
- **National Policy for Empowerment of Women 2001**
- **Supplementary Nutrition Programme under ICDS**
- **National Nutrition Policy 1993**
- **National Food Security Act 2013**
- **National Policy for Farmers 2007**

Current policy scenario

The Government of India has a **National Policy for Empowerment of Women (2001)** which enunciates the need for special attention to women in the agriculture and allied sectors.

The **National Nutrition Policy (1993)** states: *“The most effective way to implement Nutrition with mainstream activities in Agriculture, Health, Education and Rural Development is to focus on improving the status of women, particularly the economic status.”* It is important to advocate for recognition of women’s contributions to agriculture including those related to livestock, fishery and forestry – as farmers. This is probably the first step to ensuring that women have equal



access to benefits and services in their own right as farmers.

The draft **National Policy for Women (2016)** lists focus on nutrition for pregnant and lactating

↑ Anganwadi helper preparing meal for children at ICDS centre in a village in Odisha.
LANSA

women, low body weights and BMI, under nutrition and special drives to enhance health and nutrition education as a priority.

In India, following the **National Policy for Farmers** in 2007, the National Commission for Women in 2008 prepared a draft **National Policy for Women** in the agricultural sector. This was followed by the **Women Farmers' Entitlement Bill** introduced by Prof M S Swaminathan in 2011 as a private member's bill in Parliament. This was however not taken up. There is now a network of over 100 women farmer-organisations across the country, called *Makaam*, which is in the process of drafting a revised bill, with support from UN Women and the National Commission for Women looking into this aspect.

LANSA research evidence

A LANSa study that attempted to explain the variations in underweight rates across predominantly rural areas of districts in India has looked at the agency effect of women's work participation and educational levels in an agricultural setting. Women's agency gets enhanced with the combined influence of women's work and education. The policy implications appear to be signifying the need for social provisioning of healthcare, improved sanitation and education to strengthen women's agency, which has the potential to impact on improving child nutrition outcomes in rural India.

Another LANSa study using the 2005 Indian Human Development Survey looked at dietary diversity and women's nutritional status using body mass index (BMI) as an indicator. Lower rates of maternal undernutrition based on BMI cut-offs was observed among women in cultivator households or among those who have a higher share of agricultural incomes as compared to women in non-agricultural wage labour households. This study also demonstrated clearly that an adult woman's BMI is not only dependent on dietary diversity but also requires enabling environmental conditions such as quality drinking water, good sanitation, smoke-free cooking facilities and better access to health care.

Further reading

Brinda Viswanathan, Getsie David, Swarna Vepa and Bhavani R V (2015) **Dietary Diversity and Women's BMI among Farm Households in Rural India**. *LANSA Working Paper Series* Volume 2015 No.3 September

http://www.eldis.org/vfile/upload/1/document/1510/LANSA_Working_Paper_Series_No3.pdf

Swarna Sadasivam Vepa, Brinda Viswanathan, Bhavani R V and Rohit Parasar (2015) **Child Under-weight and Agricultural Productivity in India: Implications for Public Provisioning and Women's Agency**.

Review of Radical Political Economics, 47: 579 – 587. DOI:10.1177/0486613415584587

<http://rrp.sagepub.com/content/47/4/579>

<http://lansasouthasia.org/content/paper-presentation-impact-nutrient-intake>

<http://lansasouthasia.org/blog/supplementary-nutrition-programme-example-social-protection-india>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xy-l5ATzsGE>

Nutrition status assessment at the **Farming System for Nutrition (FSN)** study locations in Wardha and Koraput districts shows that while both men and women are undernourished, the proportion of undernourished is higher among women.

Ongoing research at the same locations indicates that seasonal variations affect women's workload and nutrition status. During peak agricultural seasons, the time available for cooking and caring declines substantially; this creates energy deficits in women and others in the households. There is more pressure particularly on women's time at home, impacting on their own health and that of their children. Inadequate attention has been paid to reducing the drudgery of women's work.

In spite of their hard work, women have little say in decision-making and benefits too are not shared equally. Gendered wage discrimination persists,

“ In spite of their hard work, women have little say in decision-making and benefits too are not shared equally.”

and there are few attempts at redistributing or reducing the burdens of domestic and reproductive work.

Recommendations for policy

Policy debates around agriculture and nutrition and the crucial role of women needs to be informed by evidence that research programmes like LANSA generate. The available evidence recommends the recognition of women's roles in agriculture and nutrition. One important step in this direction would be the enactment of the **Women Farmer's Entitlement Bill**.

Women are engaged in agriculture, livestock, fisheries, forestry and allied activities and they need to be recognized as farmers. Their contributions to agriculture and the generation of household incomes have to be recognized and acknowledged. Such recognition could be used to strengthen their legal entitlements and access to inputs and services, and also enhance their agency and say in household decision-making.

We need to make sure that women also receive fair returns for their work contributions. **Gender**

wage gaps in agriculture often disadvantage women workers, and this needs to be addressed.

All forms of inequalities whether economic or social such as gender and caste, need to be addressed at the same time. In poor, rural households, whole families are nutritionally disadvantaged and not just women. The goal therefore has to be to improve the wellbeing of the entire household and not just women within it.

The added burden during peak agricultural seasons demands specific **support services to be provided for women farmers during this period**, especially for child-care.

Culturally and socially, women are responsible for domestic chores, elderly-care and child-care work, including cooking and feeding the family. Issues of male responsibility and awareness are also central to addressing the burden of malnutrition alongside achieving women's empowerment, and gender equality more broadly. It could also involve a more equitable sharing of tasks between men and women in households.

“Women are engaged in agriculture, livestock, fisheries, forestry and allied activities and they need to be recognized as farmers.”



← Women are engaged in transplanting rice saplings in several villages in India. A scene from Tamil Nadu.

LANSA

There has to be a thrust on developing **women-friendly appropriate tools and technologies** to reduce women's work burden, both on-farm and at home. Drudgery reduction technologies are needed for both productive and domestic work, including provision of cooking fuel and clean drinking water, which is accessible.

A strategy must thus ensure that women have sufficient time for these tasks without stretching their working day.

Evidence shows that **women's educational achievement** has an important role in reducing the prevalence of child undernutrition. Ensuring educational opportunities and access to education to school age children and adolescent girls should hence be a priority.

Sanitation and **women's access to toilets** has a significant impact independently on prevalence of child underweight even in rural areas. Seamless joining up with initiatives like **Swachh Bharat Mission** and access to healthcare facilities will have an impact through changes in the enabling environment on women's role in agriculture-nutrition linkages and the consequences to their own and their children's health.



➡ A woman in Wardha, Maharashtra, taking a break from agricultural work to breastfeed her child.

LANSA

The importance of social and behavioural change in all this cannot be over emphasised. **Knowledge and awareness of nutritious diets, promoting culinary practices** related to indigenously available fruits and vegetables and **Behaviour Change Communication** are of crucial importance. Technology can be effectively leveraged for this purpose. All these issues when seriously taken into consideration and addressed through policy initiatives and interventions, can enhance the important role that women play in leveraging agriculture to improve nutritional outcomes in India.

Credits

LANSA MSSRF team based on research conducted in India (2013–2016).

Readers are encouraged to quote and reproduce material in their own publication. In return, LANSA requests due acknowledgement and for quotes to be referenced as above.



LANSA is an international research partnership, exploring how agriculture and agri-food systems can be better designed to advance nutrition in South Asia. Led by MS Swaminathan Foundation, members include BRAC, Collective for Social Science Research, Institute of Development Studies, International Food Policy Research Institute and Leverhulme Centre for Integrative Research for Action on Health. LANSA is funded by the UK Government. The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

Web www.lansasouthasia.org **Email** Sangeetha Rajeesh, Research Uptake Manager lansa.india@gmail.com **Twitter** @LANSAresearch