



TOPIC NOTE

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Transforming gender relations in agriculture through women's empowerment: *benefits, challenges and trade-offs for improving nutrition outcomes*

South Asia has had extraordinary economic growth over the last two decades, yet has the highest rate of child malnutrition in the world, [with 4 in 10 children chronically malnourished](#). While agriculture is the main livelihood for majority of rural families in the region, clearly its potential to address undernutrition is not being realised. This we can see from the macro-level neglect of rural areas in targeting investments (agriculture / infrastructure) to adverse prices for agricultural commodities, and the neglect of the agricultural workforce (increasingly feminised) in terms of both skills and returns. Most nutritional interventions do target women though, given their central role in child-care, yet the problem persists. So, what is really missing in our research and analysis, and our policies?



A socially differentiated analysis of women's position, roles and work burdens appears to be absent. Men too are missing from policy discourses on nutrition, though food production and provisioning are central to masculinities in South Asia. These gaps in our understanding must be filled in order to inform policies and programmes in the region and [LANSA research programme](#) seeks to do this.

The gender-nutrition-childcare connection in South Asia

Recent research has indicated that the regularity of feeding and care has significant implications for the nutrition and health of children below two years of age ([Kadiyala et al 2012](#)) seen primarily as a woman's job.

In South Asia, women are responsible for 'reproductive' activities (childcare; domestic work; health care), in addition to both paid and subsistence 'productive' work. Yet these social norms and expectations are not fixed, they shift through an individual's life-course, but also in response to broader social and structural changes. New production regimes, processes of commodification, migration, price fluctuations, market competition, educational expansion, health provision, and contexts of conflict – can all change the [dynamics of gender relations](#), and consequently, nutritional outcomes (Mitra and Rao, 2016*). These changes all contribute to shaping gender hierarchies and hence deserve due consideration.

In [Afghanistan](#), The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), supported by FAO, has formulated a strategy for 2015-2020 on women in agriculture. It argues that the role of women in the Afghan agricultural sector is a paradox: 1) on the one hand, women are major actors in agriculture contributing more than 40% of the labour force; 2) at the same time, Afghan women are marginalised in relation to control and decisions over productive resources.

The situation of child nutrition is alarming in [Bangladesh](#) with 36% stunting, 14% wasting and 33% underweight. As an agrarian country it there is a huge potential to improve the nutritional status of women and their children through agriculture. However, there is only limited evidence on how one may influence women in agriculture to address their own health, and the nutrition of their children.

Similar is the case for [India](#) – a majority of rural women are engaged in agricultural work, and are faced with a harsh trade-off – to work or care for their children. While there are policies for women's empowerment, for supporting women in agriculture and for improving nutrition, there is little synergy between them. [LANSA research in India](#) demonstrates that without attention to the reduction of drudgery and the redistribution of women's work and attention to their personal socio-economic wellbeing, outcomes are unlikely to improve substantially.

Emerging findings from [LANSA research in Pakistan](#) show that women's agricultural work can have positive impacts (through higher incomes) as well as negative impacts (through less time and physical energy available for their own and their children's care) on nutrition. Agricultural workforce is becoming increasingly feminised and evidence shows that [children of female agricultural workers suffer from higher levels of malnutrition](#). However, women's agricultural work remains almost universally underpaid. In addition, certain agricultural activities (cotton picking / livestock rearing) are deemed exclusively 'women's work' and men fail to compensate for increases in women's agricultural labour by providing more care in the household. Although progress has happened with the formulation of the Inter-sectoral Nutrition Strategy, women's work needs greater recognition in agricultural policy, programming and investments.

Opening up discussions online

Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia programme is engaged in cooperation with FAO's [FSN Forum](#) in running this online discussion. We invite opinions and encourage discussion on processes, as well as examples of good practice with regard to policy changes empowering women in agriculture, and how these changes altered the woman's nutrition status for the better, and subsequently child nutrition.

You are welcome to contribute to the online discussion live on the FAO website <http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/user/register> between June 27 and July 15, 2016.

From this e-discussion we would like to explore:

1. How far can policy recognition of women's roles and contributions to agriculture lead to strengthening women's agency, empowerment and in turn nutritional outcomes?
2. Are there experiences / strategies that can help address the issue of women's time?
 - a. examples demonstrating the impact of the reduction or redistribution of unpaid care work on nutritional outcomes in agricultural households
 - b. Do men, community / state institutions take responsibility for the care of young children, especially during peak cultivation seasons when women's labour is much needed?
 - c. How rigid or flexible are social norms when it comes to issues of survival?

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3. Are you aware of changes in gender divisions of work, roles / responsibilities in contexts of change (eg: shifts in cropping patterns, technical innovations, the loss of ecosystem services, social and political conflict)? How is the contribution of men to household nutrition changing?
4. What is the link between dietary diversity, women's engagement with agriculture, and access to ecosystem services?
5. For Afghanistan, we want to capture experiences about women's roles in agriculture and agribusiness value chains in order to shape policies and interventions to recognise and support women's contribution to livelihood security.

We need to know more about policies and programmes that enable women in South Asia to manage the competing pressures of agriculture, childcare and household responsibilities, and to identify approaches that improve household wellbeing and nutrition, particularly of young children, and very much look forward to reading your responses.

Thanking you in advance!

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**Mitra, A and N. Rao (2016) Families, farms and changing gender relations in Asia. In FAO and MSSRF (eds.) Family farming: Meeting the zero hunger challenge. Academic Foundation, New Delhi*