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Social Protection and Women’s Work in Rural South Asia

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Abstract

A vast majority of the women who are counted as workers in South Asia are in agriculture, and women account for over half the agricultural workforce in most countries of the region. Women agricultural workers and their work, however, remains largely unrecognized in law and policy. It is either unpaid or underpaid. Household poverty, chronic as well as transient, is an important driver of women's work in this sector, and for many women this work is not associated with economic empowerment. Work that is not recognized may often go uncompensated in terms of women's own nutritional needs and those of their children. The time spent on work does not always lead to less time on care but can draw on time available for rest and leisure. This paper draws out implications of women's agricultural work in South Asia for social protection programming, highlights the relative strengths of some of the larger programmes in place, and identifies gaps and possible ways forward.

1. Introduction

Can social protection play a greater transformative role with respect to women's rights than it currently does?¹ This paper argues that it can for large numbers of economically vulnerable women in South Asia. Agricultural remains the largest employer of women, and a majority of the agricultural workforce consists of women. Women's agricultural work is closely associated with household poverty and food insecurity on the one hand and undernutrition on the other. Moreover, the agriculture-nutrition link through women's time, work and health, implicates care within the household. The period over the last decade or so has seen significant positive changes in the scale, reach and gender-sensitivity of social protection programmes in South Asia (Koehler and Chopra 2014). This paper tries to show that an explicit focus in these programmes on women's agricultural work (as well as their work in other comparable sectors) can help to transform the landscape of women's economic rights, the care-work balance, and the health and wellbeing of a large proportion of the world's undernourished population.

The paper draws on published and unpublished research conducted under the UKAid-supported Leveraging Agricultural for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA) consortium. Reviews of literature on the region and primary studies in India and Pakistan on the link between women's agricultural work and nutrition form the main sources of insight (Rao et al forthcoming). Section 2 provides a summary of some of the salient findings of this research. Implications for social protection programming are drawn in Section 3, and Section 4 concludes with observations on a transformative social protection agenda.

2. Women's agricultural work and women agricultural workers

Although agriculture has been overtaken by other sectors in terms of the share of the GDP, it remains one of the largest sources of livelihoods in South Asia, accounting for over two-fifths of the workforce across the region. National statistics show that over three-quarters of the women who are reported as working are to be found in this sector. Agriculture is also where the poorest as well as the most food insecure households are to be found. In much of the region, the sector acts as a low-wage sump for those who do not find more remunerative opportunities elsewhere. Although land ownership patterns

¹ A 'transformative' approach to social protection goes beyond economic vulnerability and safety nets. It aims to address structural inequalities through a range of instruments such as collective action, legal and regulatory change, and affirmative action, which may complement more conventional tools (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux 2007).

vary greatly across the region, landless or land-poor agricultural labourers form a major proportion of the rural population in most parts of South Asia.

While national statistics have become better at enumerating women who work in agriculture, there remain major gaps in data. A majority of the women in the sector are classified as unpaid or contributory family help, and survey methodology has significant consequences for the counting and undercounting of women's economic contribution to the sector (Mazhar et al 2017).

There are, of course, many factors that lead to systematic biases in measurement, but two are of particular interest to the topic of this paper. First, the sector as a whole is mostly within the informal economy. Employment relations are based on a range of considerations of which contract is but one, and formal contracts are virtually unheard of.

Second, within this overall institutional setting of informality, the work that women (and children) do is subsumed within the household economy. Much of this work is unpaid and seen as being of a subsistence nature even if the value addition to which this work directly contributes is counted squarely within the productive economy. For example, the livestock and dairy sub-sector, which accounts for over half the value addition in agriculture in some parts of the region, relies overwhelmingly on women's (and children's) unpaid work. In many instances where work is paid in cash or kind – for example grain harvest work – women's involvement is seen as being compensated as part of the household's economic gain. Even for paid activities such as cotton harvesting which are almost exclusively seen to be women's work, payments are often counted and made in the name of the male head of the household (Balagamwala et al 2015).

In general, women's economic contribution is unseen and unrecognized. Standard labour force surveys which ask (male) respondents about work done by individual household members undercount women's involvement with productive activities because enumerators, male respondents and even women themselves do not regard many of the activities which women undertake as 'work'. Being unseen and unrecognized goes hand in hand with being unpaid or underpaid. Improved survey methodologies which probe 'activities' rather than work have helped to overcome some of the invisibility.

What drives women's work in these conditions is household poverty, food insecurity, low social status and absence of alternative economic opportunities. Across much of rural South Asia women are more likely to work (in agriculture) if their households are poor and food insecure, if they are from historically marginalized communities, and if they have little or no education. Women's agricultural work declines up the income, status and education scales. Work is often not a matter of deliberative choice or agency, but an unavoidable means of family survival. And to the extent that there is a tradeoff between work and care time, this is experienced in a stark and direct way. There seems to be relatively little give with respect to care time. Women who work more tend to have to less time for themselves. We also find evidence from India and Pakistan that involvement in intensive seasonal work such as cotton harvesting is associated with below normal BMI for women (Rao with Raju 2018, Pradeilles et al 2017). Low maternal BMIs are associated, in turn, with low birth weights and an increased risk of stunting among children.

Women's agricultural work over much of South Asia, therefore, is neither empowering nor a cause, in itself, of poor health and nutrition. It is one of the major mediating factors between household poverty (broadly defined to encompass low wealth, incomes, social status, food security, and education) and patriarchal norms around work and care on the one hand, and health and nutrition outcomes on the

other (Rao et al forthcoming). Our findings and other comparable ones show that this work does not, by itself, lead to women's increased agency in economic or other domains. Work cannot, in these conditions, be seen as either a metric or instrument of empowerment. At the same time these findings cannot be interpreted to advocate that women withdraw from agricultural work, but that their rights as workers need to be recognized, protected and promoted, and their position as carers needs to be supported and complemented. Adopting such a perspective implies possibilities not only in the design of social protection programming, but also in our expectations of these interventions.

3. Social protection programmes

The innovations and advances with respect to social protection programming in South Asia in the last decade or so have included the introduction of largescale cash transfers, food price subsidies and employment guarantee schemes (Koehler and Chopra 2014). These major initiatives represent an important departure from the historical legacy of conventional social insurance approaches focused on formal sector employees and urban consumers. Cash transfers and food subsidies are generally means tested without any explicit reference to work. In some situations, the identification of women as primary beneficiaries has marked a significant institutional change in government systems and social norms alike. Employment guarantee schemes retain the link with work but mostly as a means of effective self-targeting. These schemes have had a salutary effect on rural wages in general and women's wages in particular.

Then there are other interventions typically implemented by NGOs or quasi-NGOs, often with public funding, which are smaller in scale and focus on enhancing women's productivity and incomes in agriculture through small-scale asset transfers or credit, and training and support services. Many of the empirical studies on the measurement of women's empowerment are evaluations of such interventions. These find support for the hypothesis that economic empowerment can lead to improved health and nutrition outcomes.

There are potentially transformative elements in all of the various types of programmes which engage with women in the agricultural economy even if many of these impacts are derivative. Cash transfers which exclusively target women beneficiaries, for example, can and do lead to their enhanced agency with respect not only to consumption choices but also in accessing administrative systems more broadly. Workfare schemes that do not exercise wage discrimination can and do have an equalizing effect between sexes in the wage labour market. Focused agricultural interventions can and do shift local social norms around women's ownership and use of assets.

Given the mediatory position of women's agricultural work between poverty and other outcomes of interest there is need to modify some of our expectations of existing social protection interventions. For example:

- If a UCT leads to women's withdrawal from the workforce this might be a GOOD thing²
 - Likewise, a food security programme
 - And asset transfer programmes

² The empirical debate on the impact of social protection programmes continues to be dominated by the 'lazy worker' hypothesis – that beneficiaries will withdraw from the workforce and that this has negative welfare consequences. See for example Banerjee et al (2017) for a rebuttal, which nevertheless accepts the premise that withdrawal from work, if it occurred, would be a 'bad' thing.

- The rise in women's wages due to an employment scheme might be a GOOD thing
- The rubric of 'right to work' should extend to the right, also, NOT to undertake productive labour
- Interventions in agriculture (such as asset transfer and support programmes) can be more transformative if they change prior social norms around asset ownership and use – and not just individual women's access to assets that are already considered women domain³

Many of the transformative elements of existing and emerging social protection measures are seen as incidental to the main task of poverty alleviation, hunger and risk reduction, and income enhancement. Bringing focus on to women's agricultural work and its role in mediating between poverty conditions and outcomes can help to make the transformative elements stand out and be taken more seriously.

The delinking of social protection programming from formal employment has been a positive development in the South Asia region where an overwhelming majority of the workers, particularly the poor, and particularly women within them, work in informal sectors. Formal sector employment is already a privileged position in these economies. It is right that the weight of resource allocation in social protection should shift towards those who are not already members of a relatively privileged club.

4. Conclusion: towards a transformative agenda

Agriculture will continue to be one of the most significant economic sectors for the poor in general, and women in particular. There is a need, therefore, for greater formalization of the situation of those who work in this sector. There are attempts at various levels in the region – from legislatures down to the community – for the formal recognition of women as farmers and agricultural workers. One of the ways in which formalization can take shape is through social protection programmes that explicitly address the conditions of agricultural workers, particularly women agricultural workers. A transformative agenda might consist of the following:

- Recognition – formal recognition in law, policy-making and programme design of women agricultural workers and the need to protect and promote their economic rights and wellbeing as workers
- Registration – establishing systems for the registration of women agricultural workers, and the use of registration as an instrument for promoting and enforcing regulation and effecting the transfer of resources including income support, maternity and child care benefits, and asset transfers, and eventually mechanisms for social insurance
- Regulation – active promotion of collective action by groups of registered workers in unions and associations around minimum, fair and equal wages, working conditions, child care provision
- Resources – reallocation of existing support to the sector through the registry, from more privileged and political powerful stakeholders to workers

³ See, for example, Bandiera et al (2017) who find that an asset transfer programme to ultra-poor women in Bangladesh had positive impacts on household income and food consumption, led to higher levels of work by women, but had no detectable impact on measures of women's empowerment. The intervention design was purposive in offering ultra-poor women economic opportunities which better off women in the community were already enjoying – namely livestock rearing – rather than attempting to shift existing norms by expanding domains of women's economic empowerment.

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