

More Production and Better Livelihoods with Unhealthy, Undernourished and Fatigued Workforce? Rethink.

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Expecting high productivity and gains without paying attention to or improving the working conditions and health of the women labouring in the rice fields is a foolhardy and narrow perspective of development and social practice; without supporting and nurturing the latter, the former is bound to dwindle.

During 2011–12, I was doing my field work in three villages of Odisha for my doctoral work related to labour issues in SRI. These villages were located in three different districts, with diverse agro-ecological features, (coastal plain, hilly and mountainous areas), ethnicity, labour use practices, and rice-growing practices. PRADAN has been working in one of those villages.

When I went to the villages, I noticed that the agricultural workforce was greying and comprised of more women, especially in the rice-growing areas. In my study, I focussed essentially on women from small and marginal farming households and landless women, who work in their family farms or on leased farms or in others' farms, for wage or exchange.

In this article, I discuss the condition of women rice-field workers in the Odisha villages that I visited and my experiences in Sambhav as a trainer and a practitioner of organic farming, researcher and development worker. I was aware of the condition of women engaged in rice farming earlier; and I gained more insights into their lives during my research work and systematic investigation.

Whether SRI uses more labour or less and how labour is one of the major constraints in the adoption and expansion of SRI has been dominating discussions, both academic and non-academic, related to labour issues. Most farmers and extension workers agree that production can be enhanced by following SRI principles.

As I started interacting with more and more people during the study period, many more aspects attracted my attention. For instance, often women rice-field workers expressed that they experience less drudgery and pain in SRI. And yet, they said that they were not able to follow SRI principles in most of their plots.

If that is the case, my question is, “Have the extension agencies taken note of this and tried to address the constraints that people face in trying to follow SRI principles in more plots?” ‘Weather’ was cited as one of the important factors to be reckoned with. Again I questioned, “When they are able to practice SRI successfully in a few plots in the same weather conditions, why not in the others?” These questions prompted me to investigate the reluctance in adopting SRI practices on a large scale from a labourers’ perspective, especially women labourers’ and the extension workers’ perspectives.

I assume that readers of *NewsReach* are already familiar with the idea of SRI because it has been discussed here many times. However, in brief, the basic idea of SRI is that the production potential of rice is enhanced if younger seedlings (preferably at the two-leaf stage) are planted singly with wider spacing (preferably at a distance of 25 cm from plant to plant and from row to row) in non-flooded conditions. The plants too have to be managed differently. The faster growth of weeds in this method needs more frequent management (preferably every 10–15 days for 3–4 times) and preferably mechanically. All these activities, especially the transplanting and the weeding have to be done in time in order to harvest the maximum benefits. Therein lies the biggest challenge of practising

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SRI, that is, managing the timely mobilization of labour.

In most societies, transplanting and weeding are operations mainly done by women. We must acknowledge that a majority of the women, who work in the rice fields, are

malnourished, have more work as well as high diseases burden making them fatigued during that period. This affects their performance and the timeliness of operations, which later will potentially impact the yield. How can we use new technologies to help improve the well-being of our workforce? How can we invest in improving their working conditions? Not much has been thought about this aspect. The fact is that this women’s workforce actually invests their bodies to produce our food and other crops. This body capital, instead of getting enriched, degenerates over the years due to natural biological reasons and also because of the nature of their work, their work environment and their living conditions.

WORK AND WORK ENVIRONMENT IN RICE FARMING

Growing rice is physically very demanding. During my research, I learned that, traditionally, women work for around 1,000 to 1500 hours per ha, in activities such as removal, transportation and transplantation of seedlings and weeding. This is in addition to their household work and community work. The work on the farms is mostly done in a bent posture, in wet, hot and humid conditions, primarily in muddy fields, exposing the farmers to agro-chemicals (wherever chemicals are applied). They also have to walk many miles and carry heavy bundles of seedlings and weeds. They do all these work with their bare hands except for, maybe, a small hand hoe

for weeding in non-flooded up-lands. They use a sickle or a knife for harvesting.

Working in typically flooded rice fields is very different from working in non-flooded conditions of other crops. Some up-land/highland rice plots are a little different because there may not be standing water in those fields. No other crop is usually cultivated in such muddy, slushy conditions. The burden of such work and the work environment is borne mostly by women and they remain in such an environment for long periods—six to eight hours or more a day for two to four months. The other work also done by women are taking care of seeds, applying compost in rice fields, removal of weeds in the nursery, harvesting rice and complete post-harvest activities.

Additionally, women's work includes caring for domestic animals and birds, making manure, cleaning sheds and sometimes grazing farm animals. They are involved in economic activities such as the collection and processing of forest produce, managing small businesses, growing other non-rice crops, observing rice-related and other rituals and so on. Adolescent girls contribute by helping their mothers. Besides this, the women carry out many other household activities including child bearing and rearing, and community work, which is often non-negotiable. They spend a lot of energy doing all of this work.

The inconvenient truth is that the women work with a fatigued body to produce food. Unless we calculate every aspect of their work, we will never be able to understand the nature and volume of the work women do on an average, in general, and during the rice season, in particular.

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Diseases

In many rice-growing belts, incidents of diseases rise during the wet rice season because of the rise in the population of hematophagous (blood-sucking) vectors and causal organisms that thrive in the wet and humid environment. Many people suffer from diseases such as malaria, intestinal diseases such as worm infestation, typhoid, diarrhoea, jaundice, cold, cough, fever and various types of skin diseases and so on. Sometimes, they also suffer from injuries while working in the fields. Moreover, due to the work pressure and working in a bent posture in flooded fields for many hours for many days, often women suffer from musculo-skeletal disorders (temporary and chronic joint and muscle pain) and gynaecological problems. They work and live with that pain. Delayed or untimely eating, and skipping meals is routine. All such diseases or health problems have their implications on the overall work performance.

If these women workers fall sick, they cannot work on those days; even if they do go to work, they do not perform optimally. When they themselves and their family members do not pay immediate attention to their health problems, such diseases often become complicated and later create multiple problems. If a family member gets sick, the women, as care-givers, often absent themselves from work. Additionally, they spend money on travel to health-care centres and on food, both for the patient and the attendant(s), on medicines and various pathological tests. Often, they spend their savings, sell or mortgage assets or crops, or borrow money to meet all these expenses.

From the pass-books of women SHG members, it is clear that health is the most frequent reason for the women borrowing money and, even more so, during the rice season. Women are found borrowing both from non-institutional sources and from institutional or formal sources.

In some villages, women borrow money for health care but give other reasons, which they mentioned during interviews and in group discussions. The women recognize the fact that absence from work due to health reasons affects the timely operation of activities, which, in turn, impacts plant growth and yield. Absenteeism causes loss of wages when it is needed the most. In many instances, therefore, women continue to work despite ill-health.

MALNOURISHMENT

By the beginning of the rainy season, vegetables become unaffordable or unavailable for many. (The situation of availability and cost of staple foods were worse before the government subsidized staple grains). The main reason for this is that the summer vegetables finish by then and the rainy season vegetables have yet to start yielding. This is called the *sandhi samay*, meaning the fall time or the time between the two main seasons.

In some villages in Odisha, people say that this is a time of *bahare kancha*, *bhitare chuchha*, meaning that the plants outside look green due to rain, but inside the home, there is nothing to eat. So, from kitchen gardens, people do not get much and the vegetable supply decreases and prices go up in the market. Hence, many are not able to buy the vegetables they need. The food basket gets narrower by this time. Diversity in diet also reduces during this period. Many farming families are cash-constrained and the expenditure on purchased food,

mainly vegetables, is pushed back, affecting the nutritional status.

Many women, eat rice with some salted dry mango or tamarind pickles, salt, chilli, one or two roasted vegetables such as brinjal, or jackfruit seeds or sometimes with some leafy vegetables, etc. In the past few years, the most commonly used vegetables such as potato and onion become unaffordable. If people are fortunate, they get some mushrooms or leafy vegetables from the wild, and crabs or small fish from the rice fields or streams. All depends upon whether they have forests or streams near their habitat or not. If they do not have such a cushion and depend on their kitchen garden or the market, the situation is worse.

Owing to our cultural practices, often women have their meals after everyone else in the family has eaten; therefore, the quantity and quality of food intake is different for women (often also for girls) than for other family members. With the exhaustion/work pressure/diseases or seasonal morbidity, women seldom have a good appetite and do not feel like eating. Even when disease strikes them and when they are recovering and when they require nutritious food the most, they rarely get it.

Cooking with wet fuel is laborious and harmful for the women due to the excessive smoke. Often, they do not feel like cooking, resulting in fewer dishes or dishes that take very little time to cook. This too has an impact on their food. Sometimes, women manage with left-over or stale food. Hence, seasonal mal-nourishment among women rice-field workers is quite prevalent. Malnourishment increases their weakness and makes them more vulnerable to diseases. The inconvenient truth is that the food growers remain ill-fed.

CASH-CONSTRAINED TIME

Many families are cash-constrained from the beginning of the season till the monsoon recedes around September. For instance, the need for cash increases for:

- ♦ health care
- ♦ purchase or hiring of agricultural inputs such as seeds/fertilizers/pesticides/irrigation/equipment/labour, etc.
- ♦ health care of draught animals and other domestic animals, which often fall sick during this time
- ♦ children's education (because this is the school/college-opening time)

By the time weeding begins, most of them are already cash constrained. Families then tend to spend less on purchased food and the women try to work on their family farms for longer (over-exploitation of women family labour) without hiring external labour.

Women work despite these conditions to grow our rice. However, all these experiences vary in degree for women rice-field workers, depending on the age, status in the family, health conditions (including pregnancy and nursing status), types of work that they are engaged in, family size and composition, meal culture, economic status and social status of the family, caste and so on.

Ironical it is that the growers of food go without much food and nutrition when they require it the most, that is, during the rice-growing period. No wonder malnourished mothers give birth to underweight children, adversely affecting the quality of the future human capital. Unless the quality of the workforce,

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especially women workforce, improves substantially and their drudgery is reduced, it is futile to expect that substantial production and productivity gains will be sustainable.

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

Women work despite their poor physical condition. This is a completely neglected area. If such is the condition of our women rice-field workers, how can they be expected to perform

better, even if you give them better technology or modern inputs? Further, we brand them as unskilled labourers and hence, officially and socially, their wages remain lower than that of men, especially in rice farming. This keeps them in poverty. The questions we need to ask are: Will we support them to come out of this condition? If they are unskilled, will we invest in improvement of skills?

We cannot change the nature and extent of the rainy season and we may not be able to change the nature of the rice fields immediately; however, we can take some steps to improve the working conditions of women workers. The workload on women can be reduced by following a different production method such as SRI. We can improve their health conditions by making investments in equipment that reduces drudgery. Efforts also need to be made on social innovations to reduce the workload on the women further. Men need to be encouraged more to share the workload of women and participate in more activities. Whereas alternative production systems such as SRI provide some relief as far as drudgery and body pain is concerned, the basic issue of the women's health and nutrition as a determinant of productivity should receive attention through creation and provisioning

of facilities through changes in policy and alternative research..

It may be an inconvenient truth to accept that the health of the women labourers may be one of the important factors contributing to low yields. But the subject of better health and nutrition status of women rice-field workers could form research and intervention agendas. In addition, issues of skill development and the provision of friendly technologies that make a significant impact on yield could be addressed. If it is significant, why do not we pay attention to it? Why do we not invest in addressing these issues?

Based on my observations of the rice-growing practices and my interactions with the rice-field workers, I propose that we invest in making our workforce healthier. This will help women contribute to the enhancement of the yield, be less indebted and earn more; in short, they would live better lives.

Once we shift our focus from the uni-dimensional thought that productivity and production gains can only be achieved through provisioning of more inputs and subsidies to a more holistic approach of taking care of the health and nutritional aspects of the women workforce, the gains will truly be both substantial and sustainable.