



# Increased Farm Work Worsens Women's Nutrition

Agricultural programs and policies should account for the adverse effects of increased time burdens on women's nutrition

## Study Overview

To assess the impact of time constraints like housework and agricultural activities on women's nutritional outcomes, TCI researchers surveyed 960 women from rural Maharashtra, India, about their time use and diets, among other topics. They also created an index of standardized local recipes to measure nutrient intake and cooking time.

## Background

Women in rural India face severe constraints on time. They spend about 32% of their time on agricultural activities such as transplanting, weeding, and harvesting, while at the same time they are responsible for unpaid household labor like cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and caring for children.

These constraints increase during peak agricultural seasons when they must spend more time—as much as five-and-a-half hours per day—sowing or harvesting. Men, by comparison, do not face such time constraints since they spend very little time doing housework.

## RESULTS

The study reveals that time trade-offs imposed on women by peak-season agricultural work are associated with a decrease in the intake of calories, proteins, iron, and zinc. In terms of opportunity costs, a 100-rupee increase in a woman's agricultural wages per day—meaning she spent more time working on the farm—is associated with a loss of 112.3 calories, 0.7 mg of iron, 0.4 mg of zinc, and 1.5 g of protein.

This decrease is likely due to the women having less time and energy to cook nutritious meals. Most of the women surveyed cooked twice per day, in the morning and at night. When faced with longer hours on the farm, in addition to household chores, women might have less time to cook in the morning or be too tired in the evening, choosing instead to make easier, quicker, and less-nutritious dishes.

The nutritional deficits are worse for landless women who work on other people's farms, grow only food crops, or grow a mix of food and cash crops. By contrast, women who own large tracts of land and specialize in cash crops like cotton see little decline in nutrition during peak seasons, possibly because they have higher incomes.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote and invest in labor-saving strategies and technologies to reduce the burden placed on women by agricultural and household work.
- Recognize the negative impact of time burdens on women and design agriculture and development programs so that the benefits of women's farm work outweigh the losses.
- Implement strategies to increase women's incomes and promote women's empowerment through enhanced household decision-making powers and control over income.
- Align agricultural policies with women's needs in regard to technology, finance, and extension.

Vemireddy, V., and Pingali, P. Seasonal time trade-offs and nutrition outcomes for women in agriculture: Evidence from rural India. *Food Policy* Vol. 101 (2021).

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