

USAID Advancing Nutrition India

Gender Considerations for Nutrition-sensitive Agriculture Programming in Assam, India



About USAID Advancing Nutrition

USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project, led by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and a diverse group of experienced partners. Launched in September 2018, USAID Advancing Nutrition implements nutrition interventions across sectors and disciplines for USAID and its partners. The project's multi-sectoral approach draws together global nutrition experience to design, implement, and evaluate programs that address the root causes of malnutrition. Committed to using a systems approach, USAID Advancing Nutrition strives to sustain positive outcomes by building local capacity, supporting behavior change, and strengthening the enabling environment to save lives, improve health, build resilience, increase economic productivity, and advance development. This project contributes to the goals of the U.S. Government's Feed the Future initiative by striving to sustainably reduce hunger and improve nutrition and resilience.

Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

USAID Advancing Nutrition conducted a gender analysis and social and behavior change (SBC) formative research that illuminated critical barriers impeding women's meaningful participation in and ability to benefit from agriculture and livelihood development activities in Assam, India. Though central to farming activities, women are frequently overlooked as skilled and successful farmers and are excluded from agriculture and livelihood decision-making processes. Their limited access to information, productive resources, and markets further impedes their success as farmers. Lastly, the burden of household responsibilities places immense time and energy constraints on women, leaving little room for participation in livelihood development activities. Women also receive less food in the household, which is an entrenched norm that women need less food than men and other household members.

Over the last year of program implementation, USAID Advancing Nutrition has gained insights through formative research and consultations with the project's local implementing partner on the types of interventions that could address these gender-specific constraints in agriculture and nutrition. We suggest that future nutrition-sensitive agriculture programs emphasize building the capacity of women's self-help group (WSHG) members on agriculture and nutrition through local community cadres to equip women with the necessary knowledge, skills, and confidence. Men must also be engaged to foster inclusive, joint decision-making processes within households and increase their support for women in agriculture and other livelihood development activities. Additionally, creating avenues for female farmers to access inputs and market their products is essential for economic empowerment. This can be achieved by leveraging government programs focused on gender and nutrition to establish a wider enabling environment. The proposed activities represent a significant stride towards addressing gender-related barriers in Assam's agricultural landscape.

Introduction

USAID Advancing Nutrition India

USAID Advancing Nutrition India provides technical assistance to government and public sector partners in Assam to demonstrate the potential for community-led nutrition-sensitive agriculture to achieve our goal of improving diets while engaging with potential private sector partners to identify pathways for sustainable, scalable actions. We implement activities under three specific objectives:

- Strengthen women-led nutrition-sensitive agriculture practices and business opportunities
- Strengthen partnerships among multi-sectoral and multi-interest nutrition stakeholders to implement nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities
- Document lessons learned and best practices and disseminate through a learning platform

Purpose of the Gender in Nutrition-sensitive Agriculture and Dietary Diversity Program in Assam

Before starting the project, USAID Advancing Nutrition India conducted a gender analysis in August 2022 to better understand women's access to and control over resources; practices, participation, and time use; roles, responsibilities, knowledge, and perceptions; women's awareness of legal rights and status; and the cross-cutting nature of power as it relates to agriculture and nutrition. Additionally, the project conducted social and behavior change (SBC) formative research between July and August 2022 to understand factors affecting the adoption of nutrition-sensitive agriculture behaviors. This technical brief is based on both documents and incorporates insights from discussions with the implementing partner's team and community discussions with women and men in Assam, India. The technical brief was discussed and validated with the local implementing organization as a part of the gender training held in April 2023.

This technical brief articulates the challenges women face in participating in nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities and adopting target agriculture and nutrition behaviors. It also provides recommendations for addressing these gender barriers in nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities in Assam, India. USAID and other donors, implementing partners, government actors, and other civil society actors may use this document to inform their activities in Assam, India to make them more gender-sensitive and responsive.

Background

Nutrition Situation in India and Assam State

Despite considerable economic progress in recent decades, 224.3 million people in India are undernourished (FAO 2022). The 2022 Global Hunger Index ranks the country as 107 among 121 countries, placing it at the level of “serious hunger” (von Grebmer et al. 2022). In 2020, findings from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) showed an increase in stunting among children under five years old in 13 of 22 states and union territories reported through December, as well as an increase in wasting in 12 of 22 states and union territories (Chatterjee 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened food security and nutrition globally (FAO 2022). The Indian Women and Child Development Ministry estimated 927,606 children from six months to six years were “severely acutely malnourished” across the country as of November 2020 (NDTV 2021). Potential reasons for the decline in progress include worsening economic and socioeconomic conditions, which often impact livelihoods (Chatterjee 2021).

Among Indian states, Assam is one of the poorest. It is home to 34 million people, one-third of whom live in poverty (NITI Aayog 2021). At the state level, 36 percent of children under five years are stunted, which has remained relatively unchanged since the fourth National Family and Health Survey (NFHS), conducted in 2015 (NFHS-5 2021). Among children in the same age group, wasting increased from 17 to 22 percent between the fourth and fifth NFHS (NFHS-4 2016).

Gender Considerations in Agriculture and Nutrition

Agriculture, nutrition, and gender interact with each other in myriad ways (Malapit 2021). Agriculture can contribute to nutritional outcomes in many ways, and gender plays a role in all of them. Gender inequalities in the food system contribute significantly to food insecurity and malnutrition, and evidence shows women’s empowerment and gender-transformative approaches are critical to promoting healthy diets and food security (FAO 2021). According to USAID’s 2023 Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Policy, women often have poor access to credit, limited group membership, high workloads, limited decision-making power, and low access to productive resources and information, which negatively impacts their productivity. Unless nutrition and agriculture programs adopt specific strategies and actions that shift gender norms and promote women’s empowerment, they may not achieve their nutrition goals. Therefore, greater attention is needed to better understand these context-specific constraints and address them through informed program activities.

Gender in Agriculture and Nutrition

Research Findings

The gender analysis and SBC formative research revealed several gender-related barriers preventing women from meaningfully participating in and benefiting from agriculture and livelihood development activities. While there are differences between communities in Assam, India, the gender barriers are broadly the same across the USAID Advancing Nutrition implementation areas, including the Barpeta, Goalpara, and Tinsukia districts.

Women aren't recognized for their contribution or potential contributions in agriculture

Despite making significant contributions to farming, women are often not recognized as farmers and/or seen as authority figures in agriculture. Therefore, their decision-making power related to agriculture, such as what foods to cultivate, which inputs to procure, and/or when to sell their production, are often not taken into account or seriously considered. For example, women are often responsible for land preparation, planting, weeding, and harvest activities; however, they are not consulted when determining what their household should grow.

Women have limited access to productive resources and information

Female farmers have limited access to productive resources needed to invest in agriculture, as well as access to information to be successful. Historically, men are the points of contact for receiving information from extension agents, village influencers, private sector actors, and other related actors. This has resulted in women receiving less information on horticulture and aquaculture and fewer market opportunities. This reinforces the sentiment that women are not capable producers because they do not have the necessary knowledge to participate in agriculture-related activities or decisions. Women farmers' knowledge about inputs and production process is also not recognized. Women often have less access, compared to their male counterparts, to productive resources including agricultural inputs, financial services, and mobile phones that can support their productivity and marketing activities.

Women have difficulty marketing their products

Mobility norms and restrictions prevent women from visiting markets. Even when women have permission to visit markets, they often face challenges of distance and marketing time of evening hours, which hinder their marketing opportunities. Women also often lack the marketing knowledge and negotiation skills to be as successful as their male counterparts in marketing activities. Women's restricted mobility, heavy work burdens, and limited knowledge of and skills in marketing are barriers to access and restrict the income they can earn from their agricultural activities.

Women have high energy and time burdens

Women in the surveyed communities have high energy and time burdens. Specifically, women are responsible for the caretaking of the household, and for contributing to agricultural-related activities, despite their limited decision-making roles. The high energy and time burdens can be harmful to women, as it leaves them with little-to-no time for relaxation or to attend meetings and training sessions for livelihood development activities.

Women and girls are responsible for household nutrition

Conventionally, women and girls are expected to cook for the family. However, men are responsible for procuring all vegetables and food items, thus limiting women's ability to influence food choices regardless of their preferences or nutrition knowledge. Despite the tradition of having family meals together, it is typically the woman serves the rest of the family. This socialized behavior oftentimes

results in an unequal distribution of food, with men and children receiving more food and women receiving less.

Opportunities for Engaging Women in Agriculture and Nutrition Activities

Program Impact Pathway: Overall Summary

The findings from the formative research underscore the importance of incorporating gender considerations into program activities. Key gender strategies involve building the capacity of existing community cadres as change agents for women-led agriculture activities; strengthening WSHGs as a platform for increasing women's voice and agency in agriculture and nutrition; sensitizing men and the community to encourage inclusive, joint household decision-making processes and sharing the household work burden; and influencing village leaders, boys, and adolescent girls to build a more inclusive culture. To improve access to productive resources, programs may consider the development of alternative markets that consider women's resource and mobility constraints. Lastly, there are opportunities to leverage government schemes and programs around women's empowerment and nutrition. Below are prioritized interventions for mainstreaming gender in nutrition-sensitive agriculture activities:

- Develop community cadres as change agents to support women in agriculture and nutrition
- Build the capacity of WSHGs members on agriculture and nutrition
- Support men to foster inclusive, joint decision-making processes in their households and to support women in agriculture and in domestic chores
- Develop market opportunities for female farmers to purchase inputs and sell their production
- Create a wider enabling environment by leveraging government programs on gender and nutrition

Detailed Description of Prioritized Interventions

Developing community cadres as change agents to support women in agriculture and nutrition

Community cadres are important community extension agents who can influence the adoption of target behaviors and support women to be successful in agriculture. Programs should consider strengthening the capacity of community cadres on good agriculture and horticultural practices; gender and social norms and how community cadres can address them in their work; and effective facilitation of trainings, exposure visits, and household visits with WSHG members. Specific gender topics to include in the community cadre training include: the process of socialization; gender roles, access and control over resources; decision making in agriculture and for nutrition; contribution of women in agriculture; importance of nutritional food for girls and women; and intra-household distribution of food.

Build the capacity of WSHGs members on agriculture and nutrition

Programs should consider strengthening the capacity of WSHG members and their spouses in agriculture and nutrition through training, exposure visits, household visits, and other SBC activities. Trainings should aim to not only increase women's knowledge on improved agricultural practices, but also to improve their confidence and belief in their ability to be successful in agriculture. Trainings should also cover the benefits of joint decision-making for household resources and agriculture; the need for nutritional food intake for women and girls, influencing their production, purchase decisions and intra-household food distribution, the need to have involvement of women in family meal planning decisions, taking care of their own dietary practices, and encouraging women and girls not to skip their meals.

Support men to foster inclusive, joint decision-making processes in their households and to support women in agriculture and in domestic chores

Programs aiming to increase women's participation in agriculture and livelihood development activities and/or aiming to improve household nutrition should recognize the importance of men in supporting these changes. Therefore, specific activities should be implemented to influence gender and social norms to increase men's support for women in agriculture and for improved household nutrition. Activities may include sensitization sessions with men to encourage support for their spouses' participation in trainings for WSHG members and including men in specific training sessions to understand the material and help implement the promoted agriculture and nutrition behaviors; and village meetings with men and community influencers to discuss the importance of women in agriculture, their participation in household decision-making, and men's participation in domestic chores.

Develop market opportunities for female farmers to purchase inputs and sell their production

An important constraint to address to increase women's potential in agriculture is their access to markets, specifically input and output markets. Programs may consider a range of activities that reduce access constraints for women including:

- Facilitate bulk purchasing of agricultural inputs by working with input suppliers, cluster level federations, and producer groups to buy input supplies at a bulk price and sell in the community or directly at the WSHG meetings.
- Facilitate aggregation of commodities of WSHG members and other farmers to increase the potential of direct marketing with output market actors. Programs should explore options for payments to be made directly to female farmers through their bank accounts to increase their control over resources.
- Promote local indigenous community-level seed preservations and exchange initiatives through seed festivals and contests.

Create a wider enabling environment by leveraging government programs on gender and nutrition

Programs should align their activities with other government programs to create an enabling environment at the community level. Community days or village events and celebrations can be an opportunity to further disseminate targeted messages on women's empowerment, agriculture, and nutrition. There are opportunities to align activities with Poshan Abhiyan in February with the theme of Food Fortification and Significance of Micronutrients and Poshan Pakhwada in March. The themes could also be adapted to align with international and national campaigns including International Women's Day on March 8, National Women Farmers' Day on October 15, and the 16 days of Campaign on Violence Against Women.

Conclusion

USAID Advancing Nutrition India's research highlights significant barriers faced by women in agricultural activities in Assam, India. Despite their substantial contributions, women often lack recognition and decision-making authority. They also face limited access to resources, vital information, and markets. Moreover, societal norms place a heavier burden on women's time and energy, limiting their participation in essential training sessions and other livelihood development activities. Women's role in household nutrition is significant, but their influence over food choices is restricted and they also receive less food in the household. To address these challenges, we recommend enhancing the skills and knowledge of WSHG members in agriculture and nutrition through training from ASRLM's community cadres. Programs should also target men and other influential leaders to encourage their support of women in agriculture and livelihood development activities, inclusive decision-making in the household, improved dietary intake for all members of the household, and men's participation in household domestic chores. Lastly, programs should investigate opportunities to increase women's access to input and output markets, such as through bulk purchasing or aggregated marketing. Entrenched gender and social norms are critical to consider and work to shift in order to have the intended effect of nutrition-sensitive agriculture programs in Assam, India.

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