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The invisibility of mother's work and its effect on the child's nutritional wellbeing

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Abstract

The current study is a part of a larger project which aimed at reducing the undernutrition levels of children below 5 years of age in the tribal pockets of Odisha. Considering the multiple work roles of women be it household activities, child care responsibilities, economic activities and non-economic activities, it is imperative to understand the mother's availability in the household. The correlation between the mother's hectic work schedules, the mother's time availability and the mother-child interaction plays an integral role in the child's wellbeing. The feeding of the child is a skilled activity and requires the supervision and the presence of the mother or any caregiver especially for young children. The samples were selected from three tribal villages of the Koraput district of Odisha. The data was collected for a one year period using a structured mother child questionnaire. A seasonal data collection was done three times in a year. The findings reveal that the child's activity pattern is dependent on the presence of the young child. The data on the hours of separation shows that 80 percent of the mothers have been separated from their children during the harvest period. However, during the lean harvest periods, most mothers have been around their children performing their multifaceted responsibilities. A comparative study of the nutritional status of children shows a minimal reduction in the levels of undernutrition. This clearly depicts an urgent need for spreading awareness among mothers and caregivers regarding the importance of the mother and caregivers and its relationship with the child's nutritional status.

Keywords: Child feeding, unpaid work, invisibility of women's work, child care responsibilities

1. Introduction

The double burden of malnutrition by way of under and over nutrition is evident both globally and in the Indian context (Ramachandran, P and Kalaivani, K, 2022). There has been a minor reduction in children's undernutrition levels owing to the policy changes based on the NFHS 3. The survey laid the foundation for several nutrition sensitive interventions like POSHAN initiative, awareness on exclusive breastfeeding (0 – 6 months), maternal and child health services etc. Till the nineties factors like poverty, food grain production and distribution, improvement in literacy rates, especially maternal literacy were considered to be the major issues. A multidimensional approach including interventions to reduce poverty, improving household food security and food supplement provisions for the disadvantaged sections have in a way helped in the bridging the gap in nutritional requirements. A contrasting picture shows an economic boom and improvement in the country's GDP, a plethora of nutritional schemes on one hand and a fragile picture of malnutrition (undernutrition and over nutrition) levels. There is a need to identify the 'missing' factor and addressing it.

A study of 10 National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau states shows that despite the decline in food intake and findings (1975 – 79 and 2010 - 11) have brought about a marked reduction in undernutrition levels from 76 percent to 42 percent. The gap between the Recommended Dietary Allowance and the actual food intake by the children (0-5 years) has been much below the Recommended Dietary Allowance. Studies by Berti (2012) ^[21], disclose the inequitable distribution of nutritious food among the women population. Wheeler (1991) ^[22] and Sudo *et al.* (2006), through their study have also brought forth the fact that women and children do not receive their 'fair share' of nutritionally rich foods. Of late, there is increasing realization to address the inequalities in intra household distribution of food and nutrient intake, especially of the young child. The transition of the child's diet from a liquid diet of human origin to a complimentary liquid or semi-solid diet needs to be dealt with carefully.

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From the caregiver's perspective, the prepared food needs to be palatable and nutritious for the child. Moreover a child has to be fed small portions of food at regular intervals considering their capacity. The caregivers availability and patience to adopt an appropriate feeding style to enable active feeding (ie) to help the child to eat 'it's full' is of utmost importance.

Child feeding is essentially conceived of as a 'female' activity which is usually done by mothers, older women or adolescent girls. However, the impingement of the concept of invisibility of women's labour, in the minds of both men and women, has been existing since times' immemorial. Numerous studies Samantroy and Khurana (2015) ^[15], Floro and King (2016) ^[4] both in India and other developing countries show that in addition to such typical domestic activities as cooking and cleaning, poor women spend considerable time collecting firewood, preparing cow dung cakes, or cleaning grain (Manhas and Gupta, 2017; Sanghi *et al*, 2015) ^[12, 16]. Although such activities are highly productive, they are usually called "marginal economic activity" or "expenditure-saving activity" (Anker, Khan, and Gupta, 1988). The underlying fact remains that women bear the brunt of additional responsibilities of both household chores and child care responsibilities (Narayanan, 1997) ^[14]. In addition, women are the receiving end, trying to meet social responsibilities, completing arduous tasks in the absence of any support system. These duties performed by women often go unrecognised and undocumented (Hirway, 2015) ^[5].

Reports of the International Labour Organisation (2016) have explicitly brought out the role of rural women as subsistence farmers, small scale producers etc. They play a key role in the rural economy but when it comes to wage compensation, on an average they get 25% less than the men folks. In sharp contrast they work for longer hours and are involved in arduous and back breaking activities. Yet another report, strongly condemns the gender bias and discrimination towards women workers. They perform the economic activities along with unpaid work (ILO, 2019) ^[9]. Moreover they have to face "the unequal access to education, health, care, property and financial services". H Lamb, Sternberg, Hwang and Broberg (1992) ^[11] in their book titled *Child Care in Context* bring out the fact that exclusive mothering was never an option for women in *Homo sapiens* history. Child care responsibility was shared among the parents and other caregivers based on the season, the activity pattern of the caregivers, the age of the child, the availability of alternative caregivers and provisions at the women's workplace. This plight of women in the informal sector with regard to their work pattern and the child care situation is best illustrated in the *Shramshakti* report by the National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, 1988. The network 'FORCES' Forum for Creche and Child Care Services was yet another forum to concentrate on the issues related to child care. A collaborative study on women's work and child care conducted by the Department of Human Development and Family Studies of the University of Baroda funded by the IDRC, through research has stressed on the concept of 'availability' of the caregiver within close proximity of the child. Age of the child is an important determining variable. A younger child of 2 – 3 years requires someone to attend to his basic needs like feeding, bathing etc. while older children need to be verbally instructed and supervised while self-feeding. This also raises queries regarding the nature and quality of care and attention children

receive because of multiple demands on women's time. Another study addresses the key resource "time availability" of the mother. Mothers with young children get less time for self-care and rest. Due to overburdening, they also spend less time on cooking. This affects both the child and the mother's nutritional parameters (Irani and Vemireddy, 2021) ^[10]. Zaidi (2017) ^[23] stresses on providing support to women's unpaid activities and child care responsibilities so as to enable them to perform their economic pursuits with ease.

The invisibility of women's household chores and their non-monetized work is evident from the fact that the national surveys provide a very myopic preview of the status of women (Swaminathan, 2009). However, the ASTRA (1981) ^[1] study on 'rural energy consumption pattern' by the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore clearly depicts the time spent by women and men on individual tasks. However, the underlying irony is that women perform a lot of arduous activities involving physical labor and time involved in the completion of these tasks. Moreover, agricultural activities are seasonal while the domestic activities are carried out on a daily basis and are life supporting activities which need to be carried out based on the season of the year. The current study is a part of a larger project aimed at reducing the incidence of undernutrition in children in the 0 – 3 years of age. Based in the backdrop of a tribal setting in three villages of Koraput district, the available data shows a clear demarcation in the duties followed by the women and men folks. In this paper we attempt to look into the gender division of labor among the men and women and their role in handling child care duties which is ingrained in the society as a mother's work.

2. Methods and Tools used

This study has taken into account the actual time-use patterns of the women folks inhabiting the tribal villages of Koraput. The result presented in this paper has been collected for a one year period. The data collection is done 3 times in a year based on the season (summer, winter and rainy) using a mother and child questionnaire. The samples included all the households with children in the 0 – 36 months age group from the three study villages. Forty five mothers were selected after fulfillment of the criteria for the study. Monthly surveys were conducted across a one year period. Structured questionnaire was an integral data collection tool which included questions pertaining to different maternal activities (household, child care and economic) performed throughout the day. Details of the child caretaker in the mother's absence and the different child care practices followed were documented to explore their effects on the child's nutritional status.

3. Results and Discussion

The sample of mothers belonged to a mixed social group. A majority (56%) of the mothers belonged to the Paroja tribe which is among the major tribes of the Jeypore tract in Odisha. About 11 – 13 percent comprised of the Gadaba's and the Rana's. The Scheduled Castes, Bhumia and Kamar constituted 9%, 7% and 4% respectively. The illiteracy rates among the tribal population of Jeypore is 82 percent. Thirteen percent of mothers have studied less than class 5 and can only put their signatures. A marginal (4%) of the mothers have completed fifth standard.

In the study spanning over a 1 year period, there is variability in the number of children included under the study. This is mainly due to the age criteria set for the selection of samples to be studied. Child care is additional responsibility on the part of the mother who is already struggling to manage her

time productively. However, it is interesting to note that as many as nine percent of the mothers from the study households had as many as 4 children and another 38% and 36% respectively had 2 to 3 children thus indicating their additional workload. Seventy three percent of the women studied had become mothers by 21 years of age and another 24 percent gave birth to children around 21 – 25 years. Early marriages are prevalent in the tribal societies and higher fertility rates is evident from the statistics given below (Table 1). Six young mothers in the age group of less than 21 years had children ranging from 12 days to 36 months. Sixty three percent of the mothers with 35 children in total fell in the 21-25 years category. Yet another mother aged 34 years had a 23 months old child.

The index mothers perform multifarious responsibilities which can be broadly classified as household, child care, economic and non-economic responsibilities. This burden essentially befalls mothers with 7-36 months old children. The normal day to day activities was undertaken by as many as ninety three percent of the women at the time of the survey

and only four percent were engaged in household and child care responsibilities. The table underneath lists the range of activities performed by the mothers in their day-to-day lives (Sriram and Ganapathy, 1997) [18].

The internalization of gender roles takes place early in life. Girl children as young as five years old can be seen pumping water and eight year old girls washing clothes. Hardly any men or boys are seen helping near the pumps. Men’s childcare responsibility is limited to minding the child when the mother is at work, entertaining the child or taking the child to the doctor. Child feeding in the study villages is carried out by only 5% fathers from the total population (Primary data collected in December 2013). However, child feeding, toileting, washing clothes and cleaning vessels fall strictly in the women’s domain. The agricultural season makes things worse for the mother since she is expected to combine childcare tasks with other domestic and economic responsibilities mostly carrying the children tied to their chests in extreme cases.

Table 1: List of activities under the three heads performed by the tribal women.

Household Activities	Child Care Responsibilities	Economic Activities	Non-economic activities
Fetching Water	Maintaining personal hygiene of the child	Working in the field (Agriculture)	Fuel collection
Cooking	Dressing the child properly	Cleaning of cereals and pulses and preservation	Making cow dung cakes
Maintenance of household	Planning the child’s diet	Kitchen Garden	Socialization
Washing Clothes	Preparing for the child’s meals	Cleaning of shed	
Washing Utensils	Feeding the child	Wage Labor	
	Spending quality time with the child.		

Note: Household and child care responsibilities are carried out by all the mothers irrespective of the age of the child with or without external support. 3 of 45 mothers did not perform economic activities at the time of the survey

Household work consumes a tremendous portion of the mother’s time thus sidelining childcare duty on a whole. The mother’s activity pattern is structured depending on the presence a young child in the household. Mothers with children < 6 months old usually remain indoors and abstain from engaging in economic work owing to their child feeding responsibility. Twenty two percent of mothers with children below 12 months engage in household activities with ease. However, they find it difficult to remain separated from the child for longer intervals. At this age breastfeeding essentially sustains the child along with very little complementary food.

Hence, separation is likely to have an impact on the child’s feeding. However, in extreme cases, separate arrangements are made wherein the child is most likely to be carried by the mother to her workplace or the child’s caretaker may be requested to carry the child to the work area for its feed.

Forty percent of the mothers of 13 – 24 months children start taking up outdoor activities for supplementary income along with household work because of the decreased dependence of the child on breast milk for its nutritional needs. With a manageable child at hand, the child is left in the care of other caretakers like grandparents, siblings, aunts etc when the mother’s seek economic work. A similar childcare practice is followed by 33 percent of the mothers with 25-36 months old children.

Table 2: Resumption of normal activities by mothers and time of separation from child (7 - 12 months)

Months	Resumed Normal Activity			Separated from the child			Hours of Separation		
	No.	Yes	No	Yes	No	% of Separation	1 - 3 hrs.	4 - 5 hrs.	6 - 12 hrs.
Jan	10	10	0	8	2	80	7	0	1
Feb	9	9	0	2	7	22	1	1	0
March	8	8	0	2	6	25	1	1	0
April	4	4	0	1	3	25	1	0	0
May	4	4	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
June	7	5	2	2	5	28	2	0	0
July	8	5	3	1	7	13	1	0	0
Aug	5	5	0	2	3	40	0	2	0
Sep	8	8	0	2	6	25	0	2	0
Oct	11	9	2	2	9	18	0	0	2
Nov	12	10	2	2	10	17	0	0	2
Dec	10	7	3	0	10	0	0	0	0

Source: Primary Data (2013)

The one year period data, on mother’s work, presented above indicates that all the mothers have resumed their normal activity both domestic and economic. But it gives an

impression that they do not venture out to long distances for work. The data on hours of separation shows the long hours for which mothers have actually been separated from their

children. Eighty percent of the mothers have been separated from their children in the month of January. This being the harvest time, most mothers have been separated from their household for only 1-3 hours except one mother who was away for 6-12 hours. This is followed by the month of August wherein only 40 percent of the mothers were away from their household for 4-5 hours. March and April showed a similar trend with about 25-28% of mothers being away from their homes for paid labor. However, during May and December majority of the mothers performed activities in and around the households and were not separated from their children.

The table above shows that with the start of complementary food, the mobility of the mother increased. The children between 1 – 3 years start taking complementary food so the mother's need not be around for most part of the day except for the meal times. This is evident from the fact that 42% and 30% of the mothers of this group of children remain away from home for longer periods 3 - 8 hours owing to their increased responsibilities outdoors. However, this absence of the mother from home has a delirious effect in terms of child feeding. The grandparents, siblings might be efficient in child minding but child feeding requires a lot of coaxing and persuasion (Engle, 1995).

The feeding of small children is a skilled activity and needs to be entrusted to a responsible caretaker in the mother's absence. Ninety four percent of the children are fed by their caretakers when separated from their mothers. 39 and 36 percent of the caretakers fed the children at least one or two major meals to the child in the mother's absence. However considering the hectic schedules of the mothers, the mother-child interaction especially during feeding is integral for the child's overall wellbeing (Baydar *et al.*, 1999).

A comparative study of the nutritional status of children in January 2012 and January 2013 indicates a minimal reduction in the levels of undernutrition from 61 percent in January 2012 to 51 percent in January 2013. A follow up of the morbidity pattern also shows a similar trend and reduction in the incidence of illness in children in the 0 – 3 year category. Parents and caregivers awareness regarding the timely introduction of complementary feeding and the number of times a child had to be fed, the slow reduction in undernutrition levels is indicative of the need to study in depth the actual food intake and the role played by the caregiver in feeding or supervising the food intake by the child. Hence, efforts would be taken to help the communities to provide adequate rest to mothers during the first six months after the birth of the child, to improve spacing between two children, support for childcare beyond seven months and improve feeding practices during the period of one to three years.

4. Recommendations: There is a strong need to

1. Spread awareness about the multiple activities women perform and the support needed.
2. Sensitize caregivers regarding the mother's and caregiver's role in child feeding.
3. Provide a strong support system for mothers to comfortably fulfill their economic and non-economic responsibilities.

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