

Mainstreaming Equity and Inclusion in Interventions Addressing Hunger and Malnutrition through Participatory Learning and Action: The Case of the Nourish North Initiative

Shribavan Kanesamoorthy¹, Prabu Nadaraja² | ¹ University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka ² SUVADI, Sri Lanka

RATIONALE

Over the course of one year, women living in households below the poverty line in the selected villages from three districts within Sri Lanka's Northern Province engaged in a participatory learning and action program. These women have faced an enduring cycle of malnutrition due to various calamities spanning decades, including the long-standing civil war, adverse weather events, Tsunami, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Compounding their challenges is Sri Lanka's current severe economic crisis, one of the most dire since gaining independence, making it increasingly difficult for these women and their families to afford basic necessities, including food. This collaborative effort is spearheaded by a small group of dedicated professionals, including public health practitioners and indigenous doctors, who are working to empower these women and bring about positive change in their communities. Various government departments such as the Small Enterprise Development Department and the Provincial Department of Indigenous Health, in collaboration with grassroots organisations like Women's Co-operatives and Mothers Clubs, have come together to offer assistance.



BACKGROUND

The study published in 2014 has revealed the pivotal role women play in ensuring household food security across all three dimensions of food security. They make substantial contributions to farming, significantly increasing household food availability. Moreover, their economic input is of utmost importance, particularly within low-income households, as it greatly facilitates household food access. Furthermore, their nutritional knowledge proves invaluable in ensuring that food is utilized effectively within households. Even though women's participation in decision making related to agri-food system is limited. Furthermore Disadvantaged women often lack awareness of available health and social services, leaving them unaware of their entitlements as beneficiaries of such programs.

Nourish North is an initiative of SUVADI supported by the Australian High Commission to Sri Lanka through a Direct Aid Program Grant.

OBJECTIVE & METHODS

Our aim is to create an intervention that places a strong emphasis on equity and inclusion in addressing micronutrient deficiencies among rural women to break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition in the post-war Northern Province of Sri Lanka. To achieve this, we have leveraged Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) as the foundation of our research. In our research, we conducted a baseline survey and a post-intervention survey in conjunction with PLA approaches. PLA methodology allows us to gain an in-depth understanding of the community and its unique situation, with the active participation of community members.

We utilized a variety of participatory tools and approaches to gain valuable insights, including transect walks, community mapping, preference ranking, timelines, seasonal calendars, role-play exercises, and 24-hour food recalls (list method). All information gathered through these tools was rigorously validated by the community. Once we had collected a comprehensive dataset and reached a saturation point, we proceeded to the next stage, which involved the development of a community action plan. This action plan underwent multiple revisions and was refined through reflective discussions. After one year, we employed the "most significant change" methodology to assess the outcomes of the program, providing a comprehensive view of our intervention's impact.



RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Women are indispensable in ensuring food security, as they serve as agricultural producers, income generators, and caregivers, despite frequently facing constraints in decision-making. In a village located in the Kilinochchi district, residents effectively campaigned for enhanced land and water accessibility to facilitate the cultivation of paddy and millet. Similarly, in a rural village within the Jaffna district, women established robust communication channels with local government authorities, enabling them to access the essential services and entitlements rightfully owed to them.

The active participation of women in savings and credit initiatives, alongside their involvement in joint-liability groups, empowers members to collectively pool financial resources, access small loans, and establish valuable connections with external lenders, including banks. This dynamic is expected to result in increased household income, the accumulation of assets, and the ability to safeguard both food and non-food consumption against unexpected challenges. Furthermore, the improvements in income-generation have extended women's influence beyond their families, enabling them to participate in decision-making not only at the household level but also within the broader community.

One of the primary challenges women face in achieving their rights is the deeply ingrained mindset of oppression that has been shaped by long-standing gender and class discrimination. Initiatives for women's empowerment, which employ participatory learning and action methodologies, have played a pivotal role in helping women break free from this oppressive mindset. Through collaborative efforts in agricultural, income-generating, and food preparation activities, they have also strengthened community cohesion. Another issue they encounter pertains to the community's expectations regarding gender roles. Society often places certain behavioral expectations on women and is hesitant to accept the new roles women are taking on. To address this, role-play activities have been instrumental. Through these activities, women simulate how society might react to their new roles and explore different approaches to handle these challenges.



IMPLICATIONS

The Nourish North initiative showed how Participatory Learning and Action can help to mainstream Equity and Inclusion in Interventions addressing hunger and malnutrition. It is unique in its approach to addressing both environmental and health challenges together, by enabling the fullest participation. The project empowered women leaders and enabled grassroots action, which can be reflected in resource-poor, low-income settings in LMICs.



Nourish North
A SUVADI INITIATIVE