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EDITORIAL

New Recommended Dietary Allowances for Indian Women

Recommended dietary allowances are currently being set in India, and are likely to result in a lowering of the recommended daily calorie intake for the Indian population.

In April 2018, the Indian Council of Medical Research set up an Expert Group to revise the standards for recommended dietary allowances (RDA) for Indians. RDAs were last revised in 2011.

RDAs are determined on the basis of the age, weight, sex, and occupation of an individual. A crucial determinant of energy expenditure – and hence required dietary intake – is physical activity. Occupations are categorised into three groups based on the level of physical activity – sedentary, moderate, and heavy.

There is an argument that the existing RDAs were too high as there has been a substantial reduction in physical activity as a result of growing urbanisation and mechanisation of work processes. In fact, the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–07) document stated that “there has been a reduction in the physical activity and hence reduction in the energy requirements of all age and weight categories.”

The first point of concern with respect to the new RDAs is that only 30 per cent of rural women were counted as workers in 2015–16 by official statistics (data are from the Labour Bureau). What category of physical activity is assigned to women who are officially termed “non-workers,” who constituted 70 per cent of population of rural women? A second concern is whether energy expenditure is being accurately assigned even for those women who are officially counted as workers, since there are very few studies of energy expenditure by rural women in different tasks.

In 2017–18, the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS) undertook a small time-use survey of 36 women in two villages of Karnataka. The women were interviewed twice a day for seven days in a row, over two or more seasons, and information on all activities during the 24-hour reference period was collected. In short, the

Foundation obtained 24×7 data for these women in the lean season and in the harvest season of 2017–18. From this survey, the hours spent each week by each woman on economic activity (which are categorised as coming within the System of National Accounts or SNA) and on household maintenance and care activities (which are categorised as extended SNA) were estimated.

To illustrate: in the lean season, in Siresandra village of Kolar district, the hours spent by women on SNA activities ranged from 4 to 62 hours a week, with most women spending more than 20 hours a week on SNA (including work on fields, in animal rearing, etc.). However, if the hours spent on extended SNA were added to the hours spent on SNA, then, the range of hours worked for the women who were interviewed was 61 to 88 hours a week. This is way above any national or international norms for the number of hours in a working week. The situation in the second village, Alabujanahalli in Mandya district, was similar.

Further, in the harvest season, while the total number of hours that most women worked remained the same, the share of hours of work spent in SNA activities rose. Take the case of Ala, a woman from a landless Scheduled Caste household of Siresandra village. Ala has two small children. During the lean season, she worked 11 hours during the week in economic activity (SNA) and 65 hours in extended SNA (cooking, cleaning, child care, and so on), a total of 76 hours during the reference week. In the harvest season, she worked for 35 hours as an agricultural labourer and another 52 hours in extended SNA. The total hours of work in SNA activities and extended SNA activities during the harvest week was 87 hours. Ala may have been classified as a non-worker in the lean season, but she was clearly a worker in the harvest season.

The question raised by these findings is: how are RDA norms to be assigned to women who are likely to be officially counted as non-workers? How are the 60 to 80 hours a week the women in the survey by the Foundation spent on SNA (for example, on clearing dung or collecting fodder and carrying it home) and extended SNA (for example, on sweeping and mopping or carrying water or washing clothes) activities being accounted for?

Even preliminary empirical observation thus shows that a rural woman's day is marked by substantial physical activity. Very few, if any, activities are mechanised: clothes are washed by hand, spices are ground on a stone, the cow is milked manually, buckets are filled with water and carried back to homes, and so on.

Physical activity levels are measured by nutritionists in terms of MET (metabolic equivalent) or energy cost per activity. The MET value for rest or sitting idle is 1; correspondingly the MET value for most activity is greater than 1. One of the few studies to analyse the expenditure of energy by rural women, by Shobha Rao, Medha Gokhale, and Asawari Kanade, published in 2007, reported the following

MET values for domestic work: fetching water using a hand pump: 3.4, washing clothes: 4.4, washing utensils: 3.3, cleaning the animal shed: 3.1, grinding spices with mortar and pestle: 3.3, and carrying two water containers on the head: 6.1. By contrast, most home activities in Ainsworth's International Compendium have low METs. For example, the MET for mopping while standing (light effort) is 2.5, and the MET for serving or setting the table is 2.5. Multiple household tasks involving light effort are assigned a MET of 2.8 and those involving moderate effort were assigned a MET of 3.5.

Although the FAS study is small in scale and covers only 36 women in two villages of Karnataka, the data are striking and show that most rural women – “working” and “non-working” – have a long work day during which they are engaged in a variety of non-mechanised tasks in agriculture, dairying, non-agriculture and care work. A typical day for a village woman involves many hours of moderate, and at times, heavy, physical activity. How are calorie requirements for such women being set? Are they being revised downwards on the grounds that most women are non-workers or sedentary home workers?

Recommended dietary allowances must capture the physical activity levels of all women, including women engaged primarily in unpaid household tasks. The new dietary norms must take into account the energy expended by rural women in care and maintenance activities.