

Women's Health is Men's Concern

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Men of the Chakhesang tribe of Nagaland aid their wives during delivery of the newborn. Most men in the picture-postcard village of Chizami in Phek district believe it is shameful to depend on a neighbour's help when such a momentous event is taking place in their family.

Angami women, like most other women from Nagaland's rural areas, know how to recognise edible herbs and leaves according to the altitude and topography of their growth. They can also collect up to a hundred wild vegetables and fruits from the forests that are nourishing and safeguard health. The social life of the village revolves around gathering food and medicinal plants from the forest.

These traditions still exist in Nagaland today. But they are fast eroding with a younger generation who are under pressures to conform to the ways of 'mass produced, plastic societies'. While modern society is slowly recognising the life giving value of what the Nagas have - the growing demand for naturally grown health food or the return to traditional medicine - it may be nearly too late for the Nagas.

Poor nutrition status, for instance, is now an underlying factor in the high incidence of anaemia suffered by women in Nagaland. An enormous work burden, lack of access to health services and constant child bearing, additionally contribute to the high incidence of illness and death amongst Naga women and children in many interior districts.

A two years study conducted by health researcher Monisha Behal -- amongst the few sources of reliable data available -- shows that anaemia affects over 96 per cent of the women interviewed in seven districts of the state. Linked to anaemia are ranges of complaints like weakness or irregular menstruation. Her study also finds a high incidence of miscarriages.

According to Naga elders, the commercial exploitation of the forests is seeing a limited variety of green leaves and vegetables in the cooking pot. There is an excessive reliance on red meat to accompany the staple rice. In the past meat was consumed only once a week, or at festival times, they say.

Knowledge of young mothers on how to feed their babies is abysmal. Undermining their efforts to learn are the government anganwadis that promote a culture of biscuits and weevil infested milk powder. In Chekiya village, Dimapur district, Sema women say they feed their babies with rice, tinned milk powder and meat that they first chew to pulp (a primary factor in hepatitis B transmission).

While the villagers in interior districts continue to produce naturally grown millet, corn, rajma and unique strains of hand pounded purple and red rice, these vital sources of nutrition and energy are lost to housewives in urban areas, who are turning to commercial products with dubious labels of the complete health food.

Despite a growing market for naturally grown food, the villagers are unable to produce more. Many communities in interior Nagaland are still emerging out of the 'hunter-gatherer stage', and have yet to master settled cultivation.

At a meeting with Konyak men in Longchang village of Mon district, to talk about the health needs of their women and children, their primary concern was how to grow common vegetables. They felt it would improve health in the village and generate income for the education of their children. At present, the villagers practise jhum (slash and burn) cultivation, and their once yearly crop of rice, and some corn, yam and millet, barely meet their own survival needs.

The Konyaks suffer severe eye problems and need to eat food sources rich in vitamin A, like papaya, carrots and peanuts. But none of these are available in the market at Mon town. Fruits, even the common banana, are scarce!

The lack of health education is also undermining vital food sources. In Chizami village of Phek district, Chakhesang tribe women believe do not encourage their children to eat the juicy peaches and plums profusely growing around the village, because it causes diarrhoea. They do not associate their children's diarrhoea with the flies that sit on the fruit, and the need to wash it before eating, says Seno Tsuhah, a health worker.

Naga tradition stresses customs that safeguard women's health. For instance after giving birth to a baby, a women must rest at home for at least five days before returning to the field. Some tribes strictly enforce this as a social taboo. But amongst others, factors of poverty have compelled women to immediately get back to work, carrying the baby with her, resulting in severe health consequences for both.