



## An Empirical Study of Status of Women Agricultural Labour in India

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### ABSTRACT

*Women constitute half of the global population and one-third of the labour force, but receive only one-tenth of the world income and own less than one per cent of the world's property. The process of economic development induces several key changes in the structure of the developing economies that includes changes in the allocation of labour in different economic activities. The most important change concerns with the participation of women in the economic activities. Women are often more vulnerable than men, disproportionately concentrated in low-wage sectors or occupations and often segregated into the informal sector.*

*Women constitute nearly half of the adult population in India and 77 per cent of them belong to the rural area. The major occupation of rural women is agriculture and related activities and thereby they contribute about three-fourth of the labour required for agricultural operations. Women workers play a significant role in agricultural development and allied fields including in the main crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post harvest operations, agro/social forestry, fisheries etc. Women also play vital role in allied agricultural activities such as entire management of dairy animals starting from collection and cutting of fodder to feeding, cleaning of cattle and cattle shed, collection of dung, milking, preparation of milk products, etc. Their role in sectors like poultry, piggery, duckery, goatery, sheep rearing, rabbit rearing, fisheries, sericulture and mushroom cultivation is also overwhelming. Sericulture is another area where women perform better than men.*

*Women contribute in innumerable ways to the development process. Broadly their contribution to socio-economic development has two fold, say, within the home as well as outside the home. Outside home, a woman tries to be an equal and able partner in the economic activities. In agriculture, she is engaged in seeding, planting, weeding, irrigation, processing and harvesting operations.*

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### • CONCEPT OF WOMEN AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

The definition of women work underwent many changes since 1901 and more particularly since 1961 census. During the three censuses, 1901, 1911 and 1921, the total population was divided into two categories i.e., actual workers and dependents. The term actual workers referred to all persons who actually did work or carried out business, personally or by means of servants, renters, pensioners etc. The persons who were not actual workers were categorized as dependents.

The concept has been changed from 1981 census onwards. A worker was the one who was associated with economically productive activity rather than the capacity to earn. Hence, a young person who is learning work or undergoing apprenticeship is a worker and a property owner who lets out her/his property and collects rent or hires changes is not a worker. On the basis of 1981 census, the total population was broadly classified into two categories, i.e., workers and non workers. According to 1981 Census of India, a person who worked in another person's land for wages in cash, kind or share of crop was regarded as an agricultural labour.

The first Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (ALEC), 1950-1955, defined agricultural labour as "those people who are engaged in raising crops on payment of wages". The second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee, 1956-1957, enlarged the definition to include – "those who are engaged in other agricultural occupations like dairy, farming, horticulture, raising of live-stock, bees, poultry etc". In the context of Indian conditions the definition is not adequate, because it is not possible to completely separate those working on wages from others. There are people who do not work on wages throughout the year but only for a part of it.

The first ALEC used the concept of agricultural labour household. If half or more members of household have wage employment in agriculture, those households should be termed as agricultural labour household. This concept was based upon the occupation of the worker. The Second Committee submitted that to know whether a household is an agricultural labour household, we must examine its main source of income. If 50 per cent or more of its income is derived as wages for work rendered in agriculture only, then it could be classified as agricultural labour household.

According to the National Commission on Labour "agricultural labour is one who is basically unskilled and unorganized and has little for its livelihood, other than personal labour". Thus, persons whose main source of income is from wage employment fall in this category. Some of the economists have stated that all those persons who derive a major part of their income as payment for work performed on the farms of others can be designated as agricultural workers.

All these definitions, with little difference, accept broadly the principle that an agricultural labour is one who is engaged on wage employment either permanently or casually.

### • CLASSIFICATION OF FEMALE AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

To understand the nature and rural class structure, rural women are classified into two categories, namely, landless agricultural labour and very small cultivators. Landless labour in turn can be classified into two broad categories, say, permanent labour attached to cultivating household and casual labour. Permanent or attached labour generally works on annual or seasonal basis and they work on some sort of daily wage. Their wages are determined by custom or tradition. On the

other hand, temporary or casual labour are engaged only during peak period for work. Their employment is temporary and they are paid at the market rate. They are not attached to any landlords.

The second category very small cultivators can again be divided into three subgroups, namely, cultivators, share croppers and leaseholders. Small farmers possess very little land and therefore have to devote most of their time working on the lands of others as labour. Share croppers are those who, while sharing the produce of the land for their work, also work as labour. Tenants are those who not only work on the leased land but also work as labour.

Agricultural labour are not organized like industrial labour. They are not organized into unions. They are illiterate and ignorant, it is difficult for them to bargain with the land owners and secure fair wages. Most of the labour have no land of their own.

An important characteristic of the female agricultural labour in India is that women get low wages because hired labour can be substituted by the family labour. Economic conditions of women labour are very pitiable. The hours of work are not fixed. The wage rates paid are also low compared to the male workers for the same work. Illiteracy, lack of awareness, low level of skills, suppression, nature of employment, lack of knowledge about Minimum Wages Act, lack of bargaining power and migration are the disadvantages of women labour.

In the process of development women labour suffers in many ways. She believes that men and women both have equal strength and that none is inferior to her. Women in overall activities as well as household works were higher than men. It was lower in agriculture compared to men. Women hired as farm labour invariably do transplantation of paddy and weeding operations amongst various crops. In paddy transplantation women from neighboring farms would gather and help each other.

Women workers play a significant role in agricultural development and allied fields including in the main crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post harvest operations, agro/social forestry, fisheries etc. Women also play vital role in allied agricultural activities such as entire management of dairy animals starting from collection and cutting of fodder to feeding, cleaning of cattle and cattle shed, collection of dung, milking, preparation of milk products, etc. Their role in sectors like poultry, piggery, duckery, goatery, sheep rearing, rabbit rearing, fisheries, sericulture and mushroom cultivation is also overwhelming. Sericulture is another area where women perform better than men.

Women, quantitatively, supply labour force through her reproductive function; qualitatively, improve productivity of workers through her proper care at home; and supplement income of the family and thus helps in improving the standard of living and also helps by contributing to savings. But women's con-

tribution in terms of production, employment, earnings have been overlooked and labeled as 'supplementary', 'casual', 'optional' and 'supporting'. Far from these, their contribution is substantial. It is unfortunate that her role is not adequately recognized and her contribution not quantified properly. There is gross under estimation of this invisible force. Woman, as an active worker, producer of goods and services is not duly recognized by this male-dominated society.

The discrimination faced by women in the economic sphere reinforces their low status as their contribution goes unrecognized and remains undervalued. Women in India, which is predominantly agricultural, participate in economic activities and contribute their labour actively. Yet, due to the nature of their work, which is intertwined with household activities at times and is often unpaid, on the one hand, and the flawed definition of economic activity, on the other hand, women's economic participation remains statistically invisible.

In the overall situation, women exploitation is more in the Indian society. She became slave and served the dominant sections of the society. Even for the same type of work, wage discrimination is there particularly, if the women belong to scheduled caste, scheduled tribe or backward classes, as they are poor, landless and illiterate. A large proportion of female earners in agriculture are mainly from low castes, because it was considered derogatory for higher castes to allow their women to work on the fields. Thus the Indian women are exploited in every field in the society. These are the drawbacks in the process of development and production.

With the development of agricultural economy and other economic activities, the demand for women's labour in both the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors has been on the rise. Women may work on the farms owned by them or on family farms or as tenants or as wage earners and as such they form large proportions of agricultural workers.

#### • CONCLUSION:

Moreover, studies dealing with women and their development indicate that the economic and social gains of development have been unevenly distributed not only across gender and social classes, but also across regions. The women in agriculture sector are disadvantaged in many aspects of socio-economic dimensions. Studies on rural development in India have revealed that rich farmers have grown richer and the poor have become poorer. Over a period of time, there has occurred a marginalization and pauperization of women labour in agriculture. In the developing countries, studies show that apart from the economic marginalization of women, the efforts of economic development have resulted in an increase in the work activities of rural women on the one hand, and shrinking of their resource base and opportunities for well-being as persons on the other. Lack of facilities to acquire other skills and unavailability of opportunities to enter into other fields has turned them desperate and depressed. Apart from the pressure of unemployment, mechanization of agriculture has further displaced women from their traditional work.

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