

THE ROLE OF WOMEN AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN CHANGING ECONOMIC CONDITIONS
OF LANDLESS LABOURERS AND CULTIVATORS-CUM-LABOURERS IN
MADURAI DISTRICT OF TAMIL NADU

T. Ramanathan

Assistant Professor, Department of Environmental Economics, MK University, Madurai

E. Inbaparanjothi

Ph. D, Research Scholar, MK University, Madurai

Abstract

India being an agricultural country, one of the most disquieting features of the rural economy has been the growth of agricultural workers, cultivators and agricultural labourers engaged in crop production. Women suffer from a multiple burden on their time due to their home making, child rearing and income earning responsibilities. When they work the whole day in fields and forests, they need appropriate support services like crèches and child care centers. A Gram Panchayat Mahila fund should be established to enable SHGs and other women's groups to undertake community activities that help to meet essential gender specific needs. The feminization of agriculture, due to male out migration, needs specific attention with reference to gender sensitive farm and credit policies. All research, development and extension programmes in agriculture and all services must be engendered.

Key Words: *Cultivators, Child Rearing, Gram Panchayat Mahila and Feminization.*

Introduction

Agriculture is the largest sector of the rural economy and is a family enterprise, since 56 per cent of its population is dependent on it in India. India's economic security is heavily dependent on agriculture. In terms of employment, it is the most important sector. Women in India are the backbone of the society and important human resource. They play a significant and crucial role in agriculture and allied operations and household activities. Traditionally, women have always played an important role in agriculture - as farmers, co-farmers, family labour, wage labours and managers of farms. The selection, preservation and maintenance, the development and sharing of seed stock has long been preserve of women. They have been active not just in crop cultivation but also in allied areas such as horticulture, livestock and fisheries. The fact is that women's contributions in these sectors have either been largely ignored or inadequately acknowledged. Women constitute nearly half the population in any country either it is developed or developing country.

Women Agricultural Labourers

Women constitute in innumerable way to the development process. Broadly their contribution to socio-economic development has two fold i.e., i) in the home ii) outside the

home. In the home, women's role as daughter, wife and mother cannot be underestimated. A woman as a caretaker of the members of the family attends to food requirements. She looks after the health of all members of the family. Woman is also the first teacher. The training imparted by her to the child forms the basis of future skills formation among the work forces. 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, irrigating, processing, harvesting and threshing operations. In Economic terms (Chauhan 2003), women:

- Quantitatively, supply labour force through her reproductive function,
- Qualitatively, improve productivity of workers through her proper care, at home
- Supplement income of the family and thus helps in improving the standard of living and
- Help by contribution to savings.

The various activities of women can be divided into two broad headings viz., "Market Activities" which consist of activities of women in farm and non-farm sectors and "Non-Market Activities" which include personal care of children, cooking, washing clothes, fetching water, animal care etc. In these activities women play an effective role. The dual role of women as paid workers in the outside market and unpaid workers in the household leads to a significant contribution in real terms to the productive system. But throughout the world the rural women have been under-represented in the development process. The male-dominated society has not recognized their proper contribution. A unique feature of female participation throughout India is that they are workers, labourers, cultivators, producers, traders besides performing all household duties which are considered as "Unproductive". In cultivation except ploughing, leveling, irrigation and all other works are generally shared by both men and women. Women are involved in some of the most arduous and hardest work in agriculture fields under different climatic conditions and on the lowest wage rate. This includes bending for hours while weeding and transplanting in knee-deep water and mud. The farm women are the contributors of labour in agricultural production. They are responsible for the management of cattle and other farm animals, storage of seeds, food grains, processing and marketing (Purohit 1995). But women's contribution in terms of production, employment and earnings, have been overlooked and labeled as 'supplementary', 'casual', and 'supporting'. Far from these, their contribution is substantial. It is unfortunate that her role is not adequately recognized and properly her contribution not qualified. There is gross under-estimation of this invisible force. However, 'women and development' as a subject entered in the international scene around 1970, when the disguised economic administrative and social contribution of invisible labour force began to be uncovered. The United Nations General Assembly considered the role and position of women in society and declared 1975-85 as the Women's Decade. In India, constitution has provided equal rights and privileges for men and women and has made

special provisions for women to improve their status in society. Five year plans, those do not seem to have significant impact on them as unequal and unimportant partners. This is evidenced by the fact of low sex ratio, low life expectancy, high mortality, illiteracy, low nutritional status, and low economic and social status of women especially in rural areas. Sixth five year plan on words, the Government of India has evolved a number of programmes in order to benefit the rural women in various fields like social, education, health, economic, political etc and brings them in to the orbit of development.

Role of Women in Agriculture

If at all there is any enterprise, since the dawn of civilization, in which women played a significant role or participated in large number, it is nothing but agriculture. Women played an important role because agriculture is largely a household enterprise. Recent studies highlight that women in India are major producers of food in terms of value, volume and number of hours worked. Nearly 63 percent of all economically active men are engaged in agriculture as compared to 78 percent of women. Almost 50 per cent of rural female workers are classified as agricultural labour and 37 percent as cultivators. About 70 percent of farm work was performed by women. Thus it aptly justifies “most farmers in India are women”. A larger proportion of women continue to be in agriculture than men hence our concern with women’s position in this sector. Actualization has been increasing which indicates uncertain, irregular work with no guaranteed minimum wage. Concern about actualization arises because agriculture itself is declining in terms of its contribution to our gross domestic product (GDP) and in terms of growth. Of the total Indian population, 31.39 percent are main workers and 3.49 per cent marginal workers. The percentage of female main workers and female marginal workers is 16.8 and 6.26 respectively of the female workers, 34.55 per cent are cultivators, 43.56 per cent are agricultural labourers, and 4.65 per cent are engaged in livestock, forestry and fisheries. Of the female marginal workers 47.91 per cent are cultivators 41.43 per cent are agricultural labourers and 1.64 per cent are engaged in livestock, fisheries and forestry remaining 17.62 per cent female main workers and 9.02 per cent female marginal workers are in non-agricultural sector. Thus in India women forces are overwhelmingly engaged in agriculture both as main and marginal workers and played a pivotal role from ancient time. There is no denying the fact that women do not have equal access to beneficial change and status in society is not identical to that of men. This is especially true in villages. Several studies have shown that the woman employee - whatever job she holds - is equal in efficiency and performance to the male employee in identical employment situations. Some of the studies even indicate that in certain aspects of the woman employee is even more efficient.

Status of Women in Agriculture and Allied Activities

Most of the work that women do, such as collecting fuel, fodder and water, growing vegetables and keeping poultry for domestic consumption go unrecorded in the census

country. Many women and girls who work on family land are not recorded as workers. Women constitute 90 per cent of the total marginal workers of the country. Rural women engaged in agriculture from 78 percent of all women in regular work. They are a third of all workers on the land. The traditional gender division of labour ensures that these women get on average 30 per cent lower wages than men. The total employment of women in organized sector is only 4 per cent. A recent study conducted by Women and Population Division of FAO revealed that in developing countries women provide 70 percent of agricultural labour, 60-80 percent labour for household food production, 100 percent labour for processing the basic food stuffs, 80 percent for food storage and transport from farm to village 90 per cent for water and fuel wood collection for households. Women produce between 60 to 80 percent of the food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world's food production; therefore, women's role in food production ensures the survival of millions of people in all regions. Women's livelihood strategies, and their support and means of ensuring food security are diverse and complex, from cultivating field crops to livestock rearing, home gardening, gathering etc. They make above contributions despite unequal access to land, inputs and information. A growing body of evidence indicates that if male -female access to input were less unequal, substantial gains in agricultural output would occur, benefiting, both women and men. Estimations from FAO of United Nations show that women account for more than half of labour required to produce the food consumed in the developing world. In addition to working in the fields, women not only ensure fuel, fodder, water and food, but also have to look after the emotional needs of their families the children, elders and husbands. The nurturing, caring and reproductive responsibilities are the dimension that have never been computed economically but are essential and significant aspects of women's work load. Women's role as food producers is related also to their role as mothers and nurtures and in sustaining their families and communities. Their work is integral to the quality of life of people. Women have major constraints for participation in agriculture is as follows:

- Unequal Land Rights
- Limited Access to Use of Resources
- Lack of Equipment and Appropriate Technology
- Limited Contact with Agricultural Extension
- Lack of Access to Credit
- Lower Level of Education

Kolappan Committee Report

“In India, there are 74.6 millions of agricultural labourers and in Tamilnadu their population is 78.96 lakhs. It is because of the toiling of agricultural labourers, our 846 million hungry stomachs are getting filled up three times daily. If they do not put their

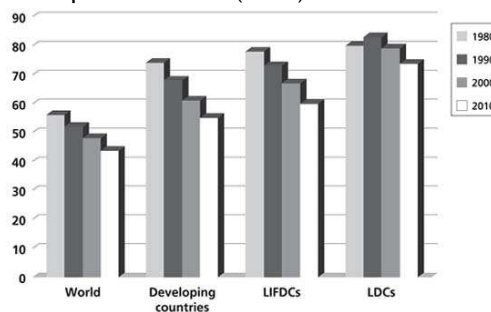
hands in the soil, others cannot put their hands in their food. But, they still remain poorest among the poor in India”

- Kolappan Committee Report (Preface)

The Kolappan Committee report on Agricultural Labourers in Tamil Nadu, submitted in 1998 (based on constitution by the Tamil Nadu Government, in August 1997, of the Committee “to analyse the nature and extent of socio economic problems confronted by the agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu and to suggest the ways and means of improving their levels of living, at least just above the poverty line”) has once brought the debate on the miserable conditions of agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu to front stage.

In May 2000, the State unit of the CPM’s Agricultural Workers Union released copies of the Report, charging the Tamil Nadu Government with “deliberately holding back the major recommendations of the Kolappan Committee on farm labour even 16 months after it was submitted”. In the 2000 Budget Session, the State Govt. announced the acceptance of the Kolappan Committee’s recommendations’. **WOMEN’S CONTRIBUTION TO AGRICULTURE**

Agriculture continues to play an important role in most non-industrial economies, as a major contributor to the country’s export earnings and as a source of employment and livelihood. Official statistics often underestimate the value of women’s work and their overall contribution to national wealth. Women continue to provide a large proportion of the labour that goes into agriculture. FAO’s estimates show that women represent a substantial share of the total agricultural labour force, as individual food producers or as agricultural workers, and that around two-thirds of the female labour force in developing economies is engaged in agricultural work. FAO has noted that while the overall proportion of the economically active population (EAP) working in agriculture declined during the 1990s, the percentage of economically active women working in agriculture at the global level remained nearly 50 percent through 2000, with an even higher percentage in developing countries (61 percent) and in LDCs (79 percent). Furthermore, although FAO projections to 2010 indicate a continued reduction in the overall female participation in agriculture globally, the percentage of economically active women working in agriculture in LDCs is projected to remain above 70 percent. The chart below compares FAO estimates of the proportions of the female economically active population working in agriculture, first at the global level, and then for developing countries, low-income food deficit countries (LIFDCs) and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs).



Women Working in Agriculture, 1980-2010 (Projected)

Part of the overall decline in the percentage of economically active women in agriculture globally is attributable to the greater involvement of rural populations in off-farm employment, in addition to the ongoing increase in migration to urban areas. Yet what is generally clear from the FAO data is that, as an aggregate, the low-income countries of the world - where agricultural production is still labour-intensive - also tend to have the highest percentages of economically active women working in agriculture, particularly in the LDCs. These percentages are also linked to an increase in male migration to off-farm activities, with women either assuming more responsibility for the family farm or for increased production of cash crops and food processing activities in order to increase family incomes.

The female contribution to the overall economy is high throughout Asia and the Pacific region, particularly in terms of labour input into agriculture. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Vietnam have particularly high percentages of women employed in the agricultural sector, with estimates ranging between 60 and 98 percent. Indeed, in most Asian countries the number of women employed in agriculture as a percentage of the EAP is higher than that of men. As FAO reports, "this finding is even more significant given that data for the economically active population in agriculture tends to exclude the unpaid work by rural women in farm and family economies. If unpaid work were included, the figures for female employment in agriculture would be even higher."

Conclusion

Despite a number of economic programmes for rural development initiated. After independence, the record of progress was not satisfactory as planned and expected. Ill-fed, ill-housed the agricultural labourers continue to suffer. Many of them living in object poverty they happened to be the most neglected class of our rural economy and the weakest link in the social chain. Women are a vital part of Indian economy. Over the years, there is a gradual realization of the key role of women in agricultural development and their vital contribution in the field of agriculture, food security, horticulture, processing, nutrition, sericulture, fisheries, and other allied sectors. Women form the backbone of agriculture, in India, Comprising the majority of agricultural laborers women have been putting in labour not only in terms of physical output but also in terms of quality and efficiency. Women are critical to the well-being of farm households. Aside from raising children, women are expected to prepare all meals, maintain the homestead, and assist in crop and animal production, all the while tending to the general health of their families. Perhaps, ironically, it is because women have so many responsibilities that they have been over-looked by agriculturalists and policy makers - it has been more convenient to label men as farmers and women as child raisers and cooks. In truth, women are involved in all aspects of agriculture, from crop selection to land preparation, to seed selection, planting,

weeding, pest control, harvesting, crop storage, handling, marketing, and processing. Whatever the reason for this neglect, the importance of developing farming technologies relevant to women has only recently been recognized. Rural Women form the most important productive work force in the economy of majority of the developing nations including India. Agriculture, the single largest production Endeavour in India, contributing about 18% of GDP, is increasingly becoming a Female Activity. Agriculture sector employs 4/5th of all economically active women in the country. 48% of India's self-employed farmers are women. There are 75 million women engaged in dairying as against 15 million men and 20 million in animal husbandry as compared to 1.5 million men. Beyond the conventional market-oriented narrower definition of 'productive workers', almost all women in rural India today can be considered as 'farmers' in some sense, working as agricultural labour, unpaid workers in the family farm enterprise, or combination of the two. Moreover, several farm activities traditionally carried out by men are also being undertaken by women as men are pulled away into higher paying employment. Thus, Rural India is witnessing a process which could be described as Feminization of Agriculture.

Reference

1. Farm science; a foundation textbook on agriculture William Jasper Spillman
2. Agriculture for Beginners Charles William Burkett, Frank Lincoln Stevens and Daniel Harvey Hill
3. Futures Market in Agriculture - Deepika M G
4. Women in Agriculture and Trade (Hardcover) - Raj Kumar
5. Trade Liberalization and Indian Agriculture - Gulati, Ashok
6. Agricultural Sustainability - Gary W. Vanloon.I. B. Hugar.S. G. Patil
7. An Introduction to Agricultural Social Science - Subbash Chandra