

Agrarian Studies 6

Women and Work in Rural India



Edited by

Madhura Swaminathan, Shruti Nagbhushan, V. K. Ramachandran

Contents

Foreword	vii
Preface	ix
Introduction <i>Madhura Swaminathan and V. K. Ramachandran</i>	xi
I CONCEPTUAL, THEORETICAL, AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S WORK	
1 Work, Employment, and Labour Underutilisation: What the ILO Resolution Means for India <i>Indira Hirway</i>	3
2 Measuring Women's Work with Time-Use Data: An Illustration from Two Villages of Karnataka <i>Madhura Swaminathan</i>	19
3 An Augmented Definition of Work Participation in Rural India <i>Yoshifumi Usami, with Subhajit Patra and Abhinav Kapoor</i>	40
4 Proletarianisation and Women's Work: Notes on Rural India <i>V. K. Ramachandran</i>	67
II WOMEN'S WORK IN AGRICULTURE AND ALLIED SECTORS	
5 Sectoral Shifts and Declining Labour Participation Rate of Women <i>Jayan Jose Thomas</i>	85
6 Women in the Rice Economy of India: Evidence from Village Studies <i>S. Niyati</i>	109
7 Forms of Wages in the Assam–Dooar Plantations: A Historical Perspective <i>Jeta Sankrityayana</i>	134
8 Women in Livestock-Rearing <i>R. Vijayamba</i>	167

III CASTE AND CLASS ISSUES

- 9 Scheduled Caste Women in India's Periodic Labour Force Survey
Khalid Khan and Sukhadeo Thorat 189
- 10 Employment Trends among Scheduled Tribe Women
Athary Janiso 209
- 11 Employment and Unemployment in Manual Worker Households
Shruti Nagbhusan 221

IV WOMEN IN NON-AGRICULTURAL WORK

- 12 Conditions of Work among "Scheme Workers"
K. Hemalata 237
- 13 Women's Participation in NREGA: A Review of the Literature
Smita Ramnarain and Smriti Rao 256

V WOMEN'S WAGES AND EARNINGS

- 14 Women's Work and Earnings in Nineteenth-Century Rural Bihar
Madhavi Jha 281
- 15 Trends in Male and Female Wage Rates
Arindam Das 298
- 16 The Gender Gap in Wage Rates: Exploring the Role of Female Labour Supply with Evidence from PARI Villages
Arindam Das 322

VI ACCESS TO FINANCE

- 17 Women's Access to Banking in India: Policy Context, Trends, and Predictors
Pallavi Chavan 343
- List of Contributors 375
- Index 377

Introduction

Madhura Swaminathan and V. K. Ramachandran

The empirical study of women's work and of women in the diverse labour processes that exist in rural India is meagre. This is unfortunate, since a necessary condition for India's development transition is the participation and leadership of its working women, most of whom live in the countryside. This neglect reflects the undervaluation of women's contribution to economic production by academics and policy makers, and conditions the public perception of women's work and agency.

This book seeks to broaden our understanding of the nature of women's work in different sectors of the rural economy. It does so by drawing on novel concepts and definitions and multiple sources of data, in particular, time-use surveys and gender-disaggregated data from village surveys.

At the Census of 2011, there were 275 million women aged 15 and above in rural India. By official count, 35 per cent – or 96 million rural women – were in the work force. By augmenting the official definition of workers to include women engaged in a range of activities relating to agricultural production, processing, collection of firewood and other products that have economic benefits, the number doubles. In other words, although over 190 million rural women engage in different forms of economic activities, we have serial data on some variables (sector of employment, occupation, days of employment and unemployment, and wage rates and wage earnings) for only half these women.

The quality of data in the work force, the number of days worked and unemployed, and wage rates and wage earnings are impaired by problems of infrequency and irregularity, and of survey method. Data users have limited access to disaggregated unit-level data in these fields. Problems of quality and ease of access are worse with respect to data on the female work force than with respect to data on the male work force.

There thus is a huge gap in our understanding of rural women's work. What are the economic activities in which this population is engaged? In what ways do rural women participate in agricultural and non-farm production? What are the relations into which they enter in the process of production? How do class and caste affect the world of women's work? How do the agrarian crises of work

and livelihood specifically affect women? Our understanding of the agrarian economy and of our society will be determined by the answers to such questions.

In official data, undercounting of women in the work force begins with the definition of “work” itself. A major consequence of the failure to conceptualise, define, and measure women’s work accurately is that official statistics show low and declining female work participation in economic activity in India. This statistical outcome (often termed a “puzzle”) in official data has led to the generation of a huge literature on the “withdrawal” of women from the labour force, supposedly on account of higher incomes and better educational achievements. Evidence from the ground suggests otherwise. At the Vayalar conference, at which most of the papers in this volume were first presented, Brinda Karat presented the view of frontline women activists on this issue. She pointed out that the reality was not of women *opting out* of the work force but of *a crisis of regular employment*, leading to further invisibility of women’s work and greater vulnerability among women who sought work outside their villages.

Data on women are lost in aggregates or in the specifics of data collection methods. An important example is work in tending animal resources and dairying. In general, most family labour on animal resources – and perhaps more than 90 per cent of labour time on animal resource maintenance – is expended by women. The labour of women at these tasks, however, is not necessarily expended in continuous stretches of labour but in short, discontinuous stretches. These tasks are often unrecorded.

Data that deal with women as separate participants in labour processes and in production relations in rural India do not exist if they are not collected by scholars. Such data are nevertheless essential if we are to understand the part played by women in the economy. Studies of classes and their socio-economic characteristics in the countryside deal typically with *households* and the classes to which *households* belong. When our attention is on households as a whole, we miss the specific features of the deployment of labour of women within them, features that call for specific attention and study.

To understand the lives and labour of hundreds of millions of rural women, we thus need to explore new concepts, new definitions, and, very importantly, new sources of data. In order to understand women’s work in rural India better, the papers in this volume draw not only on official labour force surveys, but also on alternative sources of data, including government reports and records, large and micro-level time-use surveys, and village-level, household-level, and worker-level data from the archive of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies.¹

¹ Several chapters in this volume draw on the village data archive of the Project on Agrarian Relations in India (PARI) of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (see www.fas.org.in).

SOME MAJOR THEMES

In sum, this book challenges the prevalent notion of “low” work participation of women in rural India and their growing “withdrawal” from the labour force. The evidence from academic research as well as from the experience of activists demonstrate clearly that women are facing a crisis of regular employment while actually working very long hours in production-related activities.

Secondly, the book examines the relations into which workers in poor peasant and manual worker households enter in the process of production – separately for men and women. A clear conclusion of the analysis is that women and men in the same household deploy their labour very differently, and that specific demands have to be raised for women workers in every socio-economic class.

Thirdly, the gender gap in agricultural wages remains large and has narrowed only a little over the last few decades. The gender gap is the widest in respect of new employment opportunities, that is, in the non-agricultural sector. This issue is of particular relevance to women from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes who constitute the bulk of the rural labour force.

Fourthly, more than a decade after the implementation of a policy of financial inclusion, rural women remain at a big disadvantage with respect to access to credit from banking institutions. Micro-credit, it turns out, is not a serious alternative, accounting for a minuscule proportion of total credit in the economy.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The first set of chapters in this volume deals with conceptual and methodological issues in measuring women’s work in rural areas. The basic premise of the chapters here is that existing labour force surveys and concepts and definitions do not adequately capture the work undertaken by women in rural and informal settings. Indeed, several chapters take the underestimation of women workers in official statistics and the lack of recognition of women’s work as the starting point of their analysis.

The 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, held in 2013, proposed major changes in the concept of work and in definitions of employment and unemployment. Indira Hirway explains the major changes proposed by the ILO recommendations, their implications for the work of women, and ways in which these recommendations can be implemented in India.

Time-use surveys are an important tool in studying women’s work because they include all activities undertaken in a certain time period, usually 24

hours, rather than covering only “economic” activities. As of now, data are available for only one pilot time-use survey, completed 20 years ago. Madhura Swaminathan uses data from village-level time-use surveys on time spent by women in different activities during the reference week (24-hour data for seven days consecutively) to identify workers. There are clear patterns of seasonality in the hours spent in economic activity (that is, activity within the production boundary or System of National Accounts). A finding of major significance is that, during the peak or harvest season, almost all rural women fell within the definition of “worker.”

In order better to evaluate women’s work with data from existing labour force surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), Yoshifumi Usami defines and estimates an “augmented work participation rate.” He does so by adding women’s engagement in specified activities, such as activity connected with tending household poultry and livestock, to the standard definition of workers based on usual principal and subsidiary activity status. Not surprisingly, he finds distinctly higher rates of work participation with the augmented definition. He uses panel data from three villages of West Bengal for 2010 and 2015 as a way of ground-truthing his observations on levels and trends in women’s work participation.

The basic unit of investigation in studies of agrarian classes in India has been the household. The database generated by the Project on Agrarian Relations in India (PARI) permits us to examine production relations as they affect men and women in households separately. The chapter by V. K. Ramachandran in this volume is on poor peasant and manual worker households in 16 villages in different parts of India. It finds significant differences in the deployment of male and female labour time in households, and, further, that processes of proletarianisation among men and women have distinct features. These findings, in turn, have important implications for theory and practice.

SECTORAL STUDIES

The chapters in the second section explore women’s work in different sectors of the rural economy, using official statistics and primary village-level studies. The chapter by Jayan Jose Thomas, which uses data from the National Sample Surveys, deals with national and State-level inter-sectoral shifts in employment. Thomas argues that one of the reasons for low and falling women’s employment is that non-agricultural employment opportunities were not available to women as demand for labour in agriculture declined.

Tea plantations in eastern India have historically employed men and women in family units. Jeta Sankrityayana examines changes in the Assam–Dooars

tea plantation economy over a long time period, and analyses the effects of a structural shift from large tea plantations to small-holder tea production units on women workers. He argues that women workers have been made “invisible” as they shifted from wage work on plantations to family labour on small tea gardens.

Although women have been the backbone of the rice economy of Asia, in recent times, there has been surprisingly little scholarship on women’s changing roles in rice production. Drawing on detailed evidence from seven villages surveyed by PARI, S. Niyati examines women’s work in specific field operations in rice cultivation. Her main findings are of relatively low use of female labour in villages with high rice productivity on account of mechanisation and displacement of female labour. While many scholars have noted the spread of piece-rate contracts in agricultural field operations, Niyati discusses the ways in which this change affects the gender division of labour.

When a household owns livestock, women invariably spend two or more hours each day on animal care. Using an augmented work participation approach, R. Vijayamba estimates that in 2012, nearly 50 million women (of a total of 275 million adult rural women) were involved in livestock-rearing in different degrees, making this one of the most significant occupations today for rural women.

CLASS, CASTE, AND SCHEDULED TRIBES

Women’s occupations are marked by different types of sectional social distinctions. The three chapters in the third section focus on women from the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and manual worker households, and build a picture of work and employment opportunities among oppressed sections of the rural population.

Khalid Khan and Sukhadeo Thorat use data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2017–18, to demonstrate inequalities across social groups in respect of employment by industry and occupation. Although the employment rate is high among Scheduled Caste women, they are disproportionately employed in occupations with the lowest skill levels,² that is, they must work in unskilled and poorly paid jobs to secure their day-to-day survival.

Janiso Athary examines all-India and State-level trends in employment among Scheduled Tribe women from 1983 to 2017–18. Although there has

² In the National Classification of Occupations 2004, the lowest skill level refers to performance of simple and routine physical or manual tasks, and is associated with minimal educational requirements.

been a clear decline in the work participation rate among women over this 35-year period (according to data from standard labour force surveys), the absolute level of employment among Scheduled Tribe women remains higher than among any other social group. More than 90 per cent of Scheduled Tribe women were employed in agriculture (either as self-employed or casual workers), reflecting the absence of opportunities for occupational diversification.

The final chapter in this section, by Shruti Nagbhushan, looks at features of employment among women in manual worker households, that is, households dependent primarily on incomes from wage labour. Her study is based on data for 21 villages from the PARI archive, a data-set that provides for a socio-economic classification of households. One of the striking findings of her study is that, in manual worker households, there are often an equal number of men and women workers. That does not, of course, imply availability of adequate and suitable employment for them.

STATE-DRIVEN EMPLOYMENT

There is a broad consensus, based on official sources of data as well as village surveys, that agriculture is the main employer of women in India at present, and that low levels of employment among rural women reflect, in large part, the lack of suitable non-agricultural jobs. In the last few decades, the two main sources of new employment for women in rural areas have been engagement as “scheme workers” (that is, workers who implement government schemes at the ground level) and public works employment generated by the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

In the fourth section, K. Hemalata documents the nature of work contracts among a range of scheme workers in India. There are about 8 million scheme workers in India; their official work status is that of “volunteers,” not workers; and their remuneration is considered an honorarium, not a wage. This chapter, by an author who has years of trade union experience, provides a detailed and first-hand account of the dismal conditions of work that they must endure.

Smita Ramnarain and Smriti Rao contribute to the existing literature on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) by examining the conditions that led to large-scale participation, much above the required 33 per cent quota, of women in the programme. While it is known that the NREGA came about in response to widespread agrarian distress and unemployment, the class and gender factors affecting participation in it have not been studied in detail. This chapter explores factors such as women’s reproductive burden and male–female differences in employment within households, and proposes areas for further research.

WAGE RATES AND EARNINGS, HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY

The chapters in the fifth section of the book focus on wage rates and earnings of women in rural India.

Madhavi Jha provides an account of women's labour in nineteenth-century Bihar: work on the fields, in grain processing after harvest, and in fuel collection and preparation. For each of these activities she identifies the remuneration, and argues that women's paid work was a significant and often critical component of the earnings of a labouring household.

Arindam Das analyses trends in wage rates for different crop operations as well as for unskilled non-agricultural labour for a two-decade period, from 1998–99 to 2018–19, drawing on data from *Wage Rates in Rural India*. His study shows that, after a long period of stagnation, real wage rates grew substantially from 2006–07 to 2015. Over the last few years, however, the rate of growth of real wages slowed down, and even declined in some States. The wage gap itself remained wide (although it narrowed somewhat during the period of growth in wage rates), and was the highest for non-agricultural jobs. This is a matter of some policy importance, since the non-agricultural sector (where wage rates are higher than in agriculture) is where future employment opportunities are expected.

In an exploratory companion piece, Arindam Das uses village-level data from 16 PARI villages to examine wage rates for women and the gender gap in wage rates at a more disaggregated level – for example, at the level of individual crops, crop combinations, and crop operations. He suggests that the size of the female agricultural labour force or labour supply at the village level plays a role in determining the level of wages and the gender wage gap, a hypothesis that needs further testing.

FINANCIAL INCLUSION

The lack of recognition of women's engagement in economic activity is reflected in the exclusion of women from credit advanced by formal financial institutions. In the last chapter of this volume, Pallavi Chavan reveals the huge gender gap, a decade after the introduction of a policy of financial inclusion, in access to credit from banks. Women's access to credit was much lower than their contribution to savings through bank deposits. Further, counting all loans received by women – from banks, microfinance institutions, and self-help groups – women's share in total credit from the banking system in India was a mere 8 per cent.

WAYS AHEAD

First, we need to count women workers better, with new concepts and definitions and multiple data sources in addition to standard labour force surveys. More specifically, data collection on employment and unemployment in India needs to take cognition of the new ILO proposals, in particular, the concept of potential labour force. Using existing labour force surveys, estimates of women workers were much higher with the augmented definition of work participation. Unfortunately, the new Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) has dropped the collection of data on “specified activity,” the component used to define augmented work participation. Time-use surveys suggest huge underemployment among rural women. A national time-use survey was conducted in 2019 – the results must be released soon, and such surveys should be conducted regularly.

Secondly, we need further study of women’s labour in the current context of development of capitalist agriculture and associated changes in agrarian relations in different regions of the country. The Project on Agrarian Relations in India (PARI) has village-level data for more than 25 villages, a data-set that has information on socio-economic classes and gender-disaggregated data on forms of employment. Drawing on this archive, some features of women’s work among peasant and worker households are explored in this volume. More such studies are needed to understand the effect of socio-economic hierarchies and caste–class interactions on women’s work. Such research is also critical to address the problems of women of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Thirdly, this volume highlights sectors of the rural economy or occupations where millions of women work – in agricultural and allied sectors such as rice cultivation, animal-rearing, and tea gardens, as well as in non-agricultural occupations such as scheme work and public works under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Research must engage with the sector-specific characteristics and concerns of women workers, including those relating to working hours, wages and remuneration, and work contracts.

Put together, this volume speaks of a serious crisis of employment and livelihoods for rural women, one that can no longer remain unheeded or understudied.