

Work Options for Rural Women- The Economic Sustainability of Micro Enterprises

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Abstract

Farm jobs end up keeping women confined to “low paid, insecure, temporary and exploitative relationships. Agricultural work is the optimization of a patriarchal ideology that has been interpreted the prevalent socio-cultural system of rural existence that continues to keep women confined to their villages. They are totally involved in domestic work. There is a large yet taken for granted kind of gender divide in the socio-culturally stipulated roles of functioning for men and women in a given societal set up across time and space. The unequal work participation in the largest field of employment generation can be witnessed in the fact that women work incessantly in the domestic sphere. They work in various capacities through the agricultural cycle but the men are in charge of all the purchasing. They are adept at dealing with traders of seeds, pesticides, insecticides etc. They are also responsible for the sale of the agricultural output, transactions of yearly contracts and even land deals.

Rising debt among rural households, falling crop prices, numerous farmer protests, even farmers suicides have all taken their toll on the lives, existence and sustenance of the rural women. Over 600 million of the Indian population is dependent on farming. There is rising agrarian distress due to the large number of people becoming unemployed and the larger proportion among these is women. More than 70% of the people in a recent survey by India Spend reported in March 2019 that lack of jobs for sustenance was a constantly significant concern.

The marginalized rural poor are Dalits, Adivasis and larger groups of Scheduled Castes and Below Poverty Line incumbents. The larger land owning classes have diversified their agricultural activities and tend to rely on trade and renting out of machinery. They are

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fortified by asset-backed wealth generation. Most members of rural households especially the women are unable to find skilled jobs largely because of their low levels of education. This gives rise to trends of migration of groups from rural to urban areas from villages and small towns to mega cities in search of lucrative livelihoods.

Out of work farm hands tend to leave the unproductive low remuneration agriculture sector behind in search of better employment. Here too it is the women who loose out as they are tied to their households and children. It is the men folk who migrate and the women have to subsist on whatever resources they can muster on the basis of their efforts in agricultural.

Key Words: Exploitative, Agricultural, Socio-cultural, Pesticides, employment and Income-generating

Rural Women's Agricultural Work Participation

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Women belonging to the marginalized groups are currently suffering the maximum because many of the traditional income-generating opportunities have virtually disappeared. Domestic products like spices and forest products that are collected, dried, cleaned, ground, packaged and sold either in bulk to the local provision store or even the wholesalers coming from nearby urban market hubs. Many of these activities have vanished. The vanishing of such

domestic activities and produce has proven to be severely detrimental for the village economy.

According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) report published by The Indian Express in March, 2019, “an estimated 32 million casual labourers lost their jobs between 2011-2012 and 2017-2018 and 94% of these were farm jobs”. The proportion of the employed rural women fell by 31% from 2011-12 to 2017-18. Only 6% of this reduction was visible among the employed men. This is a reflection of how deeply women and especially rural women are suffering during the ongoing economic crisis.

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Impact on Women of Marginalized Groups

While farm associated activities are an essential part of the package, non-farm activities also represent more than 65% of the overall rural household income. No doubt, agriculture is the main source of income but the sustainability it provides by itself and through allied activities is subsequently less prevalent. According to a paper released in 2017 by the Niti Aayog, the government's policy think-tank almost all the traditional, farm based and even some non-farm based employment opportunities have shrunk drastically.

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According to Ritu Dewan (2019) former Directorand Professor at the department of Economics, University of Mumbai, there were for example, 29 million rural women who have vanished from the labour market between 2011-12 and 2017-2018.

She continued that, “One reason is the occupational and gendered technological division of labour”. Her Contention is that, “Men tend to be more highly skilled, potentially experts in their fields like carpenters and masons, for example, whereas on the other hand, it is usually on the construction sites that the women are condemned to work as menial labour carrying bricks and cement, and much are more dispensable than their male counterparts.”

It must be acknowledged that decreased employment options and increased desperation for survival in challenging situations has resulted invariably in the greater exploitation of the marginalised groups and especially their women. The non-farm sector is explored widely for alternative employment at the village level itself because many of the men migrate to other places for work while the women have to bear the burden of keeping their households running at subsistence level. Among the low-caste Dalit women this results in their taking up low-paid, and even unpaid chores and labour in return for social security and to get some sustenance provisions to take over severely constrained circumstances.

These marginalized rural women are always waiting for their men to send home some money to the villages from the urban centres where they are working. This remittance, however, comes erratically if not irregularly and it is received usually after long gaps. On the flip side they are riddled, by the household demands on a daily basis. Many a times they are beholden to the upper castes moneylenders and take on enormous debt from those providing basic

needs on the promise of their husband's eminent remittances. In many instances they succumb to exploitative terms of employment just to pay their children's school fee or pay for urgent medical needs or any other essential demands of the household.

Another conspiracy of silence attends women as they are targets of sexual exploitation across various platforms as well. While employing agents and individuals tend to segregate workers by skill, language and workers it is only amongst the women workers where the employers begin to leverage their bargaining power to select women on the basis of sexual attraction. They tend to carefully separate the young and slightly 'attractive' depending upon the segregatory and even imaginary checklist of the exploiter.

The low quality of work is often assigned to rural women seeking jobs. In an attempt to make a subsistence these marginalized women belonging to the scheduled castes have to work at a mix of irregular casual labour, with little if any fixed income. Thus, their hardwork is never measured up to a decent regular wage on which they can provide for their households. This is doubly miserable for single women headed households.

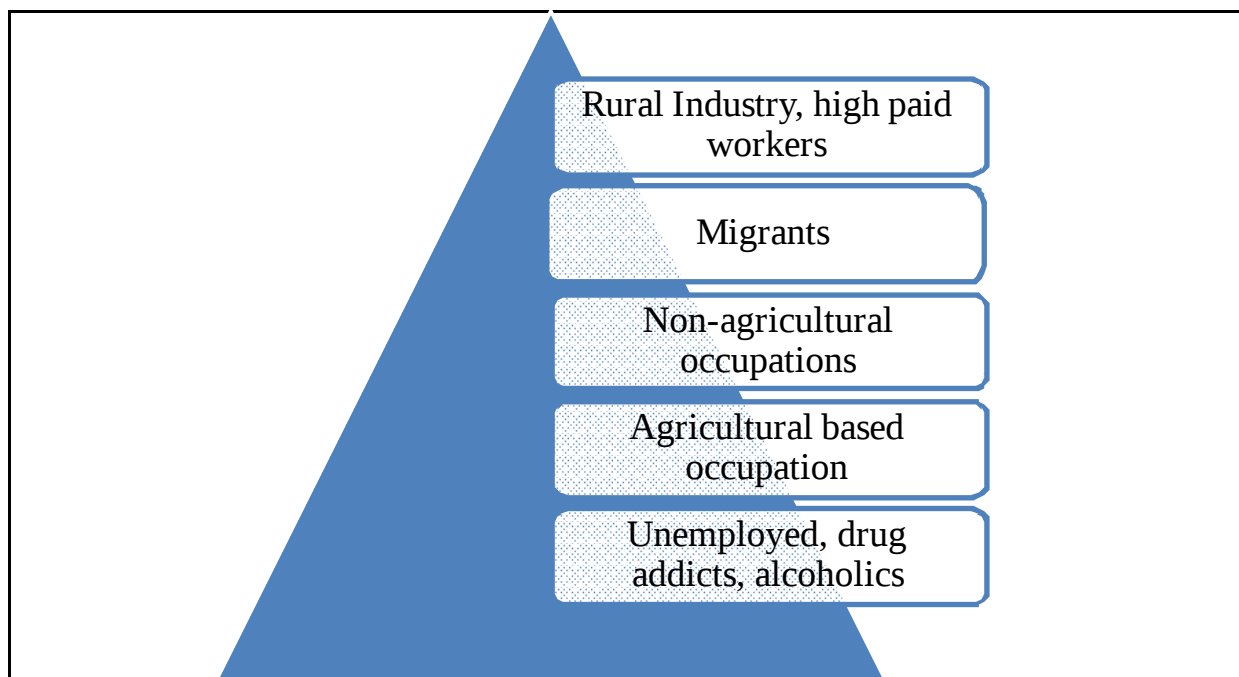
This form of 'vulnerable employment' in India has been estimated to be around 77% in 2019, which is much higher than the average of South Asia. Thus, despite the fact that there are several government programmes to complement livelihoods and income generation in the rural parts of India, the status of women on this barometer remains rather low. The women find it hard to get enough days of employment or even full days of work, and there is no single activity which is sufficient for providing a decent standard of life.

This livelihood crisis, especially in rural areas has increased the wealth gap between those having adequate assets (like land and other forms of wealth) but also those with some form of steady income like local bureaucrats, school teachers on regular payrolls and such. The fact that the rural job market has telescoped for the poor, marginalized workers is evidence from the fact that average land owning villagers have constructed a big house away from the main village and are continuing maintenance of the original homestead by putting it on rent while the small scale farm workers continue living in their ancestral homes that are usually badly in

need for repairs. This visual display of the wide gap in fortunes of the two communities has widened even more over the recent decades.

Another misery being borne by the rural women of Punjab is the agony of having to witness menfolk and especially their sons going to waste. The boys and men of the rural areas have already realized that despite working long hours arduously they can take home only one third of their income largely because of high living expenses in the urban hubs where they seek employment. They have come to the conclusion that if one works in the city one can just about earn Rs. 6,000 per month, one can only end up sending home Rs. 2,000. Life is so expensive in the city. Therefore, most can be seen whaling away their time in drinking alcohol and paying cards during the day in some secluded spot in the village itself. This is reinstated by the fact that only about 20% of the men are employed in the villages. They usually spend their days drinking alcohol and playing cards or even worse are confirmed drug addicts.

Fig.1. Employment and livelihoods in Rural Areas



Social Cultural Restrictions to Women's Work

Punjab has faced most of the country's turmoil and civil strife in the last few centuries. Women have been targeted by invaders crossing its boundaries. In a bid to protect their

women, Punjabis put certain practices like Purdah into place. However, over the passage of time these very protective practices became restrictive, prohibitive and even coercive. The gender relations tended to become stifling and exploitative.

The stringent patriarchal ideology, lack of mobility and confining local socio-cultural traditions become stifling and derogatory for the rural women. Even in the Doaba region which is thought to be economically well off, it is the women's lower educational status and absence of monetary investment that control the rural women thinking of migration for work to places other than their natal or affinal village.

Men are more skilled and educated comparatively and they can take on any job. Women in the Doaba region confessed to being educated only upto the 8th standard on an average, while the men had mostly completed school and left after completing their studies upto the 10th or 12th class only.

Division of labour and the nature of norms governing the types of work, men and women can do are quite partial. The burden of domestic care work like child-rearing, and time-consuming tasks like firewood and water collection results in the fact that fewer women can endeavour to explore opportunities of work outside their village. This further enhances their low socioeconomic status. They are consistently busy with an unending list of household responsibilities which she performs from dawn to virtually midnight. They travel between their marital village and that of their parents. It is impossible that they can even hear about any available jobs opportunities let alone attempting investigate and working there. The women seem to be aware of all the limitations and constraints they can work under.

The only option available to them is that of agricultural labour. Barely 25% of the rural households are dependent upon cultivation as the main source of income and 75% are currently engaged in unskilled and low-paid work.

It must be acknowledged that despite working tenaciously in various forms of labour they have to make do with insufficient income. They face multiple forms of discrimination that

result in their wage being influenced by more than mere economic contract. According to an Oxfam report, “The gender pay gap among rural female casual workers is estimated at 45%”.

The argument that men do more heavy-lifting is often given as the strong reason for their being paid more but this is not the case in the larger number of cases. Women put in longer hours, do strenuous work and even then they are paid half of the compensation amount of hours.

Ultimately the rural women have to rely on home based work, and their entire wages, skills and participation are determined by the local value system and patriarchal norms. The government sponsored scheme called the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or MGNREGS has helped some of the rural women gain some employment in areas where they were earlier excluded like construction, infrastructural development and others. Under the programme women's wages has seen a marked increase in the labour market during 1993-94 and 2011-12. The national gender wage gap has narrowed down by three percentage points largely because of MGNREGS and the introduction of a minimum rural wage, in the 2018 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Government Programmes Promoting Rural Women Livelihoods

There have been voices of dissensions for MNREGA in the face of rising demand for work. There were several complaints of the upper caste men restricting MNREGA from being implemented in certain areas and also dissuading equal wages being paid to men and women as it was seen as an insult to men. In many villages of Punjab the rural women lamented that they could not go to work on infrastructure projects in the village as their men forbade them from doing so. They believed that their ‘izzat’ or honour was at stake and their women working in such projects was considered derogatory and reflected poorly on them. There are 53% of the rural workers in Punjab are women, while in other states and especially those in the south almost two thirds are rural women.

Several other government programmes like the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All movement) as well as the ASHA and the

Anganwadi worker under the aegis of the programme on Community Health and Childcare) workers have all perpetuated the ongoing belief that the social and care work can be remunerated at a lower rate keeping the women's labour unequal and consequently the wages of this labour.

The common perception is that women are seen as reproductive agents and secondary citizens suited only to the social welfare, education and care sectors. The contributions of the women needs to be recognized, made visible and quantified.

Policy Implications and the Need for Reform

Even though 85% of the Indian women are engaged in agriculture, not even 10 percent own the land they work on. This form of dispossession and landlessness translates into the women not being officially recognized as farmers as a result of which they are unable to formally access the formal credit options.

Policy measures need to examine the land rights issue of rural women and introduce correctives that ensure the creating of visibility around women's farming work. This would improve their bargaining position and allow the filtering of allocated resources for men as well as rural women. This would also lead to better social outcomes.

It is a known fact that 90% of their incomes are invested by the rural women in their children and families. These may include the cumulative demand for educational materials, nutritious food, medical care and even household provisions. It has also been observed that most landless famers and especially rural women tend to remain excluded from the government schemes which offer productivity enhancing provisions which can include subsidized seed prices and fertilizer. A policy initiative could be the delinking of land ownership and encrypting the status of an active, functional farmer. The government can help improve infrastructure and institutional support. The objective of all policies and subsequent interventions should be supporting women farmers and raising their income levels.

Besides increasing public investment in irrigation, promoting better storage and transport facilities should become a priority. Another focal areas should be for raising skill levels

substantially through publicly-funded training programmes in areas of rural women's expertise.

Conclusions

Gender friendly policy orientation should be the backbone of the training programme targeting rural workers. This is especially true for all the rural areas where the patrilocal social norms that govern women's mobility are through extensive local dialogue. Providing transportation and childcare facilities are the tip of the iceberg. There is a great need to look into the imbalances in the cost and remuneration for all forms of domestic work responsibilities that women taken on at workplace and home. All these should all be considered.

Gender stereotyped activities like embroidery tailoring and papad making are microenterprises based economic activities which exclude men and are attributed as being the sole domain of women. They constitute upto 80% of all economic activities, making the women's contributions totally invisible. In a way these activities involving solely the women are actually being 'devisibilised' or largely ignored.

Women business owners in India and a few other developing countries tend to struggle with adverse conditions that are much pronounced by the inherent societal cultural biases and a constant as also severe lack of resources like finances, capital and skills training as pre requisites of a successful business.

A woman's ability to realise her full potential for innovation work creation for economic growth and entrepreneurship is largely underutilized. The gender gap is so vast that it constantly comes in the way of the women attempting to explore their entrepreneurship which is critical to harnessing the full economic potential of the rural women. It is most essential to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030. Women entrepreneurs have largely relied on their own resources, strengths and talents to be successful in the business they initiate. There is a need for severe policy implications to be addressed for giving vital impetus to this initiative for rural women.

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