

## **Contextualising and Visibilising Gender and Work in Rural India: Economic Contribution of Women in Agriculture\***

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### I

#### LOCATING ISSUES

India has the largest and most feminised agricultural sector in the world. Women constitute almost two fifths of the country's agricultural workforce, with three-fourths of all 'working' women finding sustenance in this sector, and an astounding 85 per cent in non-urban India. Rural India does not only provide 'employment' in the strict sense of the term, but in fact sustains lives and livelihoods.

The concept of livelihoods is among the most textured and diverse, the most simplistic working definition comprising the capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living. Concomitantly, a livelihood becomes sustainable when it can combine at the very least two essential components – the development of the capacity to manage 'stresses' and 'shocks', and when it can at the very least maintain and sustain its assets including labour-power.

The nature of the dynamically dialectical relationship between women's labour and livelihoods is complex and also complicated in that sources of sustenance and strategies of survival are fundamentally non-linear in the context of rural women, both landed and landless. The fulcrum of gender equality in all its myriad manifestations is the ownership and control over resources, and specifically in a developing economy, primarily and essentially land. However, these manifestations and also the intensity of interlinkages between gender equality and resources are to a great level determined by historical and regional specificities relating to economic as well as extra-economic factors and forces.

Among the most contested and contentious of the myriad issues impacting gender equality world-wide is that of control over resources. This struggle over the means of production generally centers on the access to, ownership of, and control over the chief means of livelihood – that of land. Consequently, attainment of gender parity in especially developing economies focuses, in the main, on issues of land rights primarily because the major proportion of those employed are dependent on the

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agricultural sector. This is true particularly in nations where the process of feminisation of the rural economy is well advanced, and often, irrevocable.

In recognition of this central issue which is applicable to all women, Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has given women the right to own and administer property without discrimination (CEDAW, Art. 15), as well as an equal treatment in land and agrarian reform (CEDAW, Art. 14 (2) (g)). Also, Article 16 ensures that both spouses have equal rights in the ‘ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment and disposition of property’. Additionally, Resolution 15 (paras 1 and 3) (1998) of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights on ‘Women and the Right to Land, Property and Adequate Housing’ states that discrimination against women with respect to acquiring and securing land constitutes a violation of human rights law, and urges governments to amend and/or repeal discriminatory laws and policies and to encourage the transformation of discriminatory customs and traditions.

India is a signatory to these and other conventions that make a commitment to gender equality, including the ensuring of land rights. While not going into details, suffice it to say that the Eighth Five Year Plan saw heartening policy support to gender equality, especially the guideline issued in 1995 by the Department of Land Resources, Ministry of Rural Development, to the states to issue patta land in the joint names of husband and wife, as well as a specific proportion to single women both unmarried and widowed. The Ninth Plan introduced for the first time ever individual as well as group distribution of land titles to women. The Tenth Plan recommended the distribution to women of land declared surplus under the Land Ceiling Act. This process of strengthening women’s land rights continued under consecutive plans, including the granting of homesteads. The XII Plan has emphasised enhancing women’s land access from all three sources – direct government transfers, purchase or lease from the market and inheritance- through a range of initiatives including joint land titles in all government land transfers, credit support to poor women to purchase or lease land from the market, increase in legal awareness and legal support for women’s inheritance rights, supportive government schemes, recording of women’s inheritance shares, and so on.

In this context it would be extremely pertinent to quote from the pioneering and very seminal document from the Planning Commission which categorically states that there is “need of taking appropriate legal and administrative steps to end the gender inequalities in providing legal rights to women on property especially on landed property, which is the most important productive asset in the rural India and, hence, access to arable land may be considered as an important instrument for economic empowerment as well as increasing the social status of rural women belonging to agricultural families including the families of landless agricultural labour”. ([Saxena:planningcommission.nic.in/reports/articles/ncsxna/index.php?repts](http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/articles/ncsxna/index.php?repts)).

Consequent to these policy initiatives along with the impact of the burgeoning women's movements, the share of women landholders in the country rose from 10.9 per cent as per the Agricultural Census of 2000-01 to 11.7 per cent in 2005-06 to 12.78 per cent in 2010-11. Although relatively marginal, this almost two percentage point increase is not insignificant within a short span of a decade, reflecting the success of both policy and struggle.

The past few years have witnessed rather dramatic changes in the nature of vulnerabilities characterising the livelihoods and also the labour of poorer women particularly in rural India. These transformations need to be examined in the context of several decisive and defining processes that have come to characterise the neo-liberal phase. One, the withdrawal of the State from the public sphere especially that pertaining to where the majority of Indians and especially women live and labour. Two, the altered equation between capital and labour as well as the forms of surplus extraction, with appropriation extending beyond individually 'owned' property to that which is 'collectively owned' and accessed. Three, that of visibilisation and devisibilisation of women's work in the context of their perceived decline in contributing to the nation's economy.

## II

### VISIBILISING WOMEN'S WORK

Unpaid work and unpaid care work – fully demystified and demythified – are the most fundamental reflections of the complete integration between the system of production of commodities and the system of reproduction of the labour force. This is especially true of the economic and extra-economic patriarchal realities of all labouring women in a developing nation where the motive force is subsistence, where the unit of livelihood is the family. Hence, there can be no family which is non-working, there can be no family member that is non-producing, there can be no woman who is non-productive and non-working. The issue is whether the existing data structures and systems visibilise her work, recognise it and quantify it, and, in the ultimate, include her contribution to the national economy.

This tight integration between patriarchy, production and reproduction works out in context of an apparent dichotomy between market and non-market; formal and informal; tangibles and intangibles. The cause as well as the consequence is the collusion between the State, the market and the family, which combine and simultaneously compete to control the labour of women in various ways; paid and underpaid, of course, and the most crucial of all – work that is not even recognised as work, work that is both unpaid and unrecognised. The benefits at all three levels of macro, meso and micro are many and myriad, and operate through several interlinked ways and methods –

- By upholding a particular form of family which ensures cheap reproduction of labour power with women as a reserve army.
- By subordination of women within the productive and also reproductive process via their non-empowerment in the sphere of production.
- By extending the oppression of women by supporting a form of household in which they provide unpaid services.
- By depending on women's underpaid work and of course also unpaid work to fill gaps in public expenditure and 'genderless' macroeconomic policies.
- By taking advantage of gender norms that put responsibility for both unpaid work and also unpaid care work on women.

Women in India spend nearly ten times more time on unpaid care work than men, and on average, a woman spends between thirty minutes to five hours each day in provisioning water for the household. Numerous micro studies have noted that collection of water is probably the single most important reason for girls dropping out of schools. Also noted is strong correlations between adequate sanitation infrastructure and high female work participation rates particularly in households where there is a working tap. Consequently, it is essential to emphasise the structural nature of the issue of 'women's unpaid work'; the argument being that macroeconomic and institutional structures create conditions that are in violation of civic and civil rights to clean water, sanitation, care, health services and maintenance of commons and are therefore directly responsible for women and girls participating in drudgery filled unpaid work.

### III

#### WOMEN'S 'WORK' PARTICIPATION IN RURAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

We now attempt a 'new' type of analysis to visibilise and also to some extent quantify at least in proportionate terms the contribution of women to agriculture; this is done on the basis of existing definitions of work and workers as utilised in the NSS. Before embarking further, we believe that the participation of women in labour markets cannot always be unequivocally equated with economic empowerment, as perceived in the reality of prevailing patriarchal structures and inequalities.

The increasing involvement of women in the workforce is neither necessarily nor always an indicator of an improvement of employment and livelihood opportunities or of the position of women in the economy. Often, in a reflection of the complexities inherent in the gender-based division of labour that characterises especially underdeveloped nations, an increase in work participation rates for women can be the outcome of and also a response to several simultaneous economic and extra-economic factors and processes which can result in several contradictory and conflicting trends – withdrawal of the State from the public sphere; low growth and recession; reduction in employment opportunities; worsening working conditions;

deepening gender-based division of labour; declining male employment; higher levels of male migration; increased insecurity in the labour market; fall in real wages; decline in household income; increased gender-based wage differentials; rise in female-headed households; extreme poverty as manifested in and often calculated by the growth of female casual workers especially in agriculture. It is of course beyond debate that, apart from economic factors and processes, women's work participation is additionally and significantly determined by societal, institutional, regional, and cultural factors and forces. The following Table presents the basic patterns of women's participation in the rural economy over the last few years in different regions.

TABLE 1. FEMALE RURAL WORK PARTICIPATION RATES:  
2004-05 TO 2011-12

States (1)	2004-05 (2)	2011-12 (3)
Andhra Pradesh	48.3	44.5
Arunachal Pradesh	41	27.8
Assam	20.9	12.2
Bihar	13.8	5.3
Chhattisgarh	45.4	41.5
Delhi	4.7	14.6
Goa	18.8	21
Gujarat	42.7	27.8
Haryana	31.7	16.2
Himachal Pradesh	50.6	52.4
Jammu & Kashmir	26.7	25.5
Jharkhand	31.3	19.8
Karnataka	45.9	28.7
Kerala	25.6	22.1
Madhya Pradesh	36.6	23.9
Maharashtra	47.4	38.8
Manipur	35.1	26.2
Meghalaya	47.8	39.1
Mizoram	44.1	39.4
Nagaland	50.4	31.2
Orissa	32.2	24.6
Punjab	32.2	23.4
Rajasthan	40.7	34.7
Sikkim	31.8	48.7
Tamil Nadu	46.1	37.8
Tripura	8.5	22.8
Uttaranchal	42.7	30.8
Uttar Pradesh	24	17.7
West Bengal	17.8	18.9
All India	32.7	24.8

Source: NSS relevant rounds.

As is obvious, women's rural work participation rates have fallen quite sharply across most states, the national average falling drastically from one-third to one-fourth. Also, all states now report much less than half of their rural women 'working' as defined by the NSSO, with Himachal Pradesh being the only region to record over

52 per cent. It is important to note that the work participation rates for men too have declined, though not in the same proportion. In Figure 1, we present a snapshot of the comparative gender patterns for the country as a whole, extending over more than three decades. The gender differentiated pattern is immediately visible, with males maintaining a somewhat steady trend, while women's participation in the country's economic activities showing an almost consistent decline, especially after 2004-05 when it almost peaked. Figure 2 represents the rural-urban divide in female work participation rates over the same time span. It is at once apparent that rural women appear to have withdrawn from the 'workforce' while their urban counterparts have increased their participation in economic activities based in cities. The latter should not, however, be perceived as being an indicator of economic empowerment, given the fact that most of this increase is due to the rise in the two low-paying and extremely exploitative sectors of construction and domestic workers.

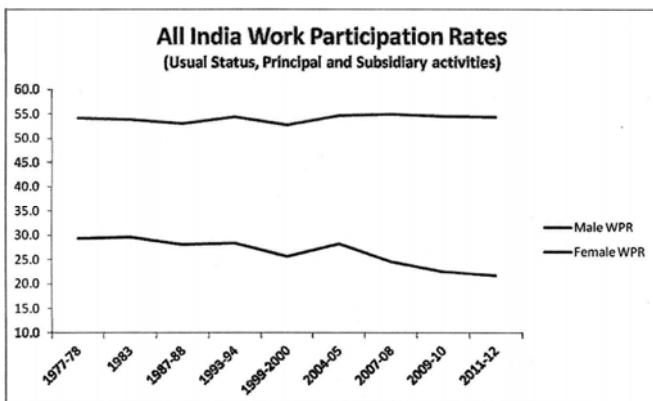


Figure 1. Gendered Total Work Participation Rates: 1977-78 to 2011-12

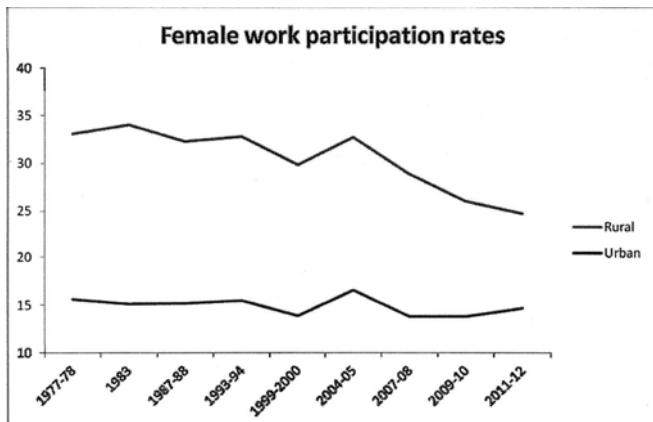


Figure 2. Female Work Participation Rates: 1977-78 to 2011-12

Several explanations can be put forward for the increase in rural women's work pattern in the mid-2000s, including especially the increased migration of men. The most significant reasons are the somewhat enhanced household incomes especially via increase in real rural wages that resulted from the direct and also indirect impacts of MGNREGA, in combination with the functioning of the predictable backward-bending supply curve that is strongly operative in highly patriarchal production systems which also contain strong feudal remnants.

Women contribute in three different ways to the economy – by earning an income, by augmenting family income, and by saving household expenditure. The first is generally and easily captured in data sources as it implies a quantified contribution especially in a monetised market economy. Income augmentation and income saving activities are often outside the market realm if not directly in the non-market economy, and, combined with the nature of women's work being intermittent and sometimes irregular, difficult to assign a value and quantify, often possibly not even recognised.

The fundamental issue that is before us is 'what do rural women do when out of the workforce as defined in Indian data systems'. We attempt to answer this question and thereby re-locate women back in the labour and labouring paradigm without which no family that is subsistence-dependent can survive. What we have done in this attempt to capture and also quantify at least to some extent the participation of women in the rural sector – often indistinguishable from the agricultural sector – is to use the several relevant rounds of the NSS, and to readjust the codes. The major ones that concern us are the following eight, of which we focus on three – 92, 93 and 97.

1. 91 - attended educational institutions
2. 92 - attended to domestic duties only
3. 93 - attended to domestic duties and also engaged in free collection of goods (vegetables; roots; firewood; cattle feed, etc.), sewing, tailoring, weaving etc. for household use
4. 94 - rentiers, pensioners, remittance etc.
5. 95 - not able to work owing to disability
6. 97 - others (including beggars, commercial sex workers, etc.)
7. 98 - did not work owing to sickness
8. 99 - children of age 0-4 years.

The results of our effort to capture women's economic contribution to rural India – whether recognised or not as 'work' – are presented in Figures 3 and 4; Figure 3 relating to total work participation rates of both men and women, and Figure 4 which depicts rural female work participation rates. The data sources are the relevant NSS Rounds, and the time span extends over almost two decades. The analysis of both figures is obviously taken together.

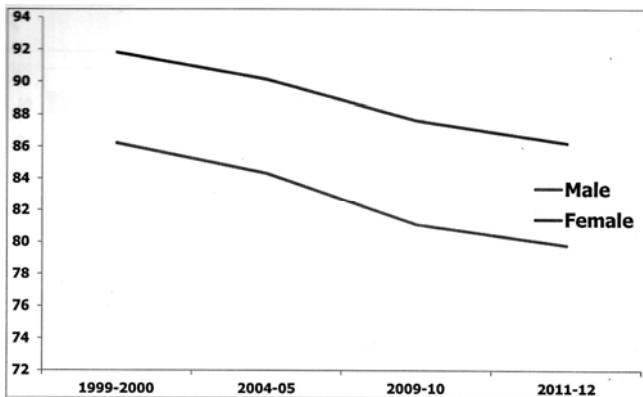


Figure 3. Total Work Participation Rates incorporating Codes 92+93+97:  
1999-2000 to 2011-12

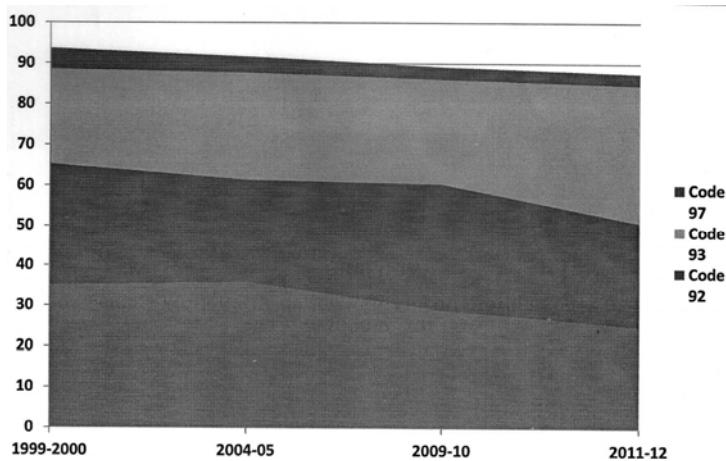


Figure 4. Rural Female Work Participation Rates Incorporating Codes 92+93+97:  
1999-2000 to 2011-12

The single most striking result is the dramatically upward movement of work participation levels of both men and women; there can be no more important lesson for us academicians and researchers than this – that gender analysis impacts both men and women, and hence challenges the entire logic of entire disciplines that omit gender sensitivity from analysis. What is further asserted is that while both genders are impacted, the effect on women is much more significant. This is evident in that the female work participation rates overtake that of males by six percentage points, and that the line moves above that of males. This confirms the oft talked about but little researched issue that women work much longer hours than men, and that the burden of time-poverty impacts women much more.

Women in rural India appear to be moving increasingly into Code 93 – that is, doing domestic activities and also ‘engaged in free collection of goods (vegetables; roots; firewood; cattle feed etc), sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc. for household use’. All these are income saving as well as income augmenting economic activities, out of the ‘market’ and ‘monetised’ spheres, into the shadows of what is dismissively termed as ‘women’s work’.

There are fewer women who restrict themselves to Code 92 – ‘attended to domestic duties only’. The reasons are clear – that no woman can afford to be doing ‘merely’ housework, whichever reductionist manner it may be defined in, particularly in the context of the withdrawal of the State from the public share into the ‘private corporate’ domain, the decrease in subsidies of public goods, and especially environmental degradation and deforestation that compels women and girls to walk hours for water, almost always considered as ‘domestic work’.

Here we would like to reassert the dependency of women on commonly owned resources. When production takes place on common property resources, the urgent need is to protect these areas in the form of environmental preservation and regeneration, and control the possibilities of private appropriation of land that is essentially public; central to this is the role of the State that must protect people’s rights to both individual and commonly owned land and resources. The issue of control over resources is fundamental to the relationship that exists between gender, labour and livelihoods. It is in this context that several major factors emerge – environmental degradation, deforestation, appropriation of land for non-agricultural purposes, and of course the legal rights of women over not only the chief means of production but also their legal rights over land as inherited property as articulated in succession laws. Related to women’s role in production that is outside the private property domain is the democratic definition of common rights; what are the collective rights that individuals must be either guaranteed or denied; to what extent are these rights articulated in law; are these rights implementable and how best can they be protected.

#### IV

#### CONCLUSION

The issues relating to capturing women’s participation in economic activity especially in the context of rural India are myriad and intermixed, and require an urgent rethinking and redefining of concepts of employment, labour, livelihoods and work. Several interdependent connects, possibly also disconnects, need to be focused on in this context – one, the location of women in the systems of production, reproduction and reproduction; two, the changing relations between capital and labour; three, the dynamics that operate between the market and non-market sectors; four, the impact of policies aimed at reducing fiscal deficits on women’s labour; five, the extension of the ‘work’ and ‘employment’ debate to ‘livelihoods’ especially in the

non-linear rural context, and ultimately the current processes and forces that not only re-intensify but also in fact depend upon the subordination of women and their labour in the context of a nation that is still developing.

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