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Socio–Economic Conditions of Women Agricultural Labourers in Cuddalore District

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Abstract

In Indian society, women have a multi-dimensional role and play significant role in agriculture. Women contribute about three-fourth of the labour required in the field. The majority of rural women eke out their livelihood by working on land in a number of ways. The contribution of female labour is towards agricultural production beside their usual domestic work always more than the male labour in all types of land holdings. Based on that, the status of rural women is improving day by day. Even though, most of the contributions made by women in the farm sector are unaccounted and they are not directly paid. The wages paid to the female agricultural labourers are much below the prescribed rates also and the wide spread disparities in wages much to the disadvantages of them. Thus a rural woman, though in reality is an equal partner of man in agriculture, suffers from many handicaps which still their effective participation in the development process. Hence, the present research paper is made an attempt to find out the socio-economic status and the present conditions of the women agricultural labourers in the selected rural areas of Cuddalore District.

Key Words: Agricultural labourers, rural women, Farm operations, Developmental programmes, Socio-economic status, Economic activity.

Background: Agriculture in India is the backbone of the country and is regarded as the largest sector of the country's economic activity. It is the major sector of the state economy, in which the majority of people earn their livelihood. Though the share of agriculture in the aggregate economy has declined rapidly during the planned development of the country, it assumes a pivotal role in the rural economy.

It is widely known to everybody that the agricultural workers are the most neglected class in the Indian masses. Growth in the number of agricultural workers – including the cultivators and agricultural labourers engaged in crop production, has been the most disquieting features of the rural economy of India. The phenomena of underemployment, under development, feelings of want, poverty are simultaneously lives among the

agricultural labourers. They get unusually low wages for the work done under the worst conditions put in excessively burdens on hard work. The opportunity to work is extremely irregular; hence their income is also low since, they possess no skill or training; they have no alternative employment opportunities either. Socially, a large number of agricultural labourers belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Hence, they are an oppressed class. These workers have nothing except their labour to earn livelihood. They are not organized and cannot fight for their rights. Because of all these reasons, their economic lot has failed to improve even after five decades of developmental efforts.

Women Agricultural Labourers: In India, women have a multi-dimensional role. They have a major role to play in the development process also. For the last few years programmes for women have been receiving particular attention under community and rural development programmes. The desirable socio-economic development can be achieved only when women in large are stimulated and motivated to accept and adopt new techniques. The largest number of women in India is engaged in farming operations either as cultivators or as supervisor or as agricultural labourers. They are the main decision makers and participants in various agricultural operations like seed sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing, application of manure, storage of seed and food grains and post harvest home level processing. Apart from all these they also involve in bringing fodder from field, chaff cutting, feeding and cleaning of cattle, maintaining cattle shed and compost making.

Women contribute about three-fourth of the labour required for agricultural operations. Their involvement in agricultural operations is beside their usual domestic work. Most of the contributions made by women to the farm sector also go unaccounted as they are not directly paid. The contribution of female labour is towards agricultural production is always more than the male labour in all types of land holding size. In view of all these things, woman is recognized as a partner of man in agriculture and she is included in the effort of bringing new technology to the farmers because of her intimate involvement in agriculture as a manager, decision maker and labourer. The status of rural women is improving day by day.

Increasing Strength of Female Agricultural Labourers: An important characteristic of the female agricultural labourers in India is that women get wages at lower rates because of the fact that the hired labour can be substituted by the family labour. The wages are not paid even in accordance with the minimum wages act. The wages paid to the female agricultural labourers are much below the prescribed rates. The factors like the casual nature of employment, ignorance of law, low bargaining power of women, fear of losing job and migration have contributed for the wide spread disparities in wages much to the disadvantages of women.

Thus a rural woman, though in reality is an equal partner of man in agriculture, suffers from many handicaps which still their effective participation in the development process. They themselves are not conscious of the impact on the role they play as a home maker and

as an agriculture producer. They believe that men and women are born with defined roles to perform and that none is inferior. By nature, an Indian woman lacks urge for self-development.

The women agricultural labourers are swelling in large number over the years. An analysis of this growth rate over the years indicates how women had lost other opportunities and forced to rely more on agriculture to meet the minimum needs of life for their basic activities. Even though, low social status, unorganized nature of job, seasonal employment, paucity of non-agricultural jobs, rural indebtedness and increase in population are the major sources for prevailing poor socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers especially among women.

Meanwhile, soon after independence, various measures [like implementation of Minimum Wage Act-1948 and MGNREGA, abolition of agrarian slavery – forced labour – bonded labour–zamindari system, fixation of ceiling on agricultural land holdings, organization of labour cooperatives, land reclamation and settlement, special area programme, and provision of housing sites] adopted by the Center as well as State Governments time-to-time have either directly or indirectly sought to improve the conditions of agricultural workers.

Review of Literature: The review of the research provides the investigator with an opportunity to gain insight knowledge into the method and approaches employed by other researchers and helps in formulating the research design.

Scourge (1975) stated that women's role in agriculture is more compared to men, the intensive and long duration activities are performed by women only in the field, with all this women labourers are paid low wages when compared with men also.

Chawhan and Oberoi (1990) stated in their study conducted on 'Gaddi' tribal women of Chama district found that the role of tribal women workers in the farm operations is of immense importance. The proportion of women participation in almost all farm activities is more than 70 per cent. The major crop production activities, participation of farm women have ensured so as to achieve successful results in the agricultural field. Even though, majority of the women have faced the problem of low wages and lack of training.

Sharma et al. (1999) stated in their paper have attempted to study the magnitude of female labour participation in agricultural and livestock enterprises and also the contribution of female labour to farm income. In the cultivation of major crops and in livestock rearing, the contribution of female labourers among the total labour requirements is more than half except for marketing operations. It is high as 75 per cent in the case of inter-culture and harvesting. In case of livestock enterprise also, the contribution of female labourers is around 70 per cent for indoor activities. The result further showed that the contribution of female labourers to total income in all the operations is higher than that of male labourers. The study suggests that training should be given to females of tribal area in farm/non-farm operations for enhancing farm/gross household income.

Statement of the Problem: The problem of women agricultural labourers are manifold and are mainly centered round the basic problems of rural economy which include low income, low productivity and lack of continuous employment. There is a need to tackle intensive programmes of development in order to improve the socio-economic conditions and prospects of women agricultural labourers. Majority of these women are property less, landless with no productive assets of their own except their labour power. Lack of skills, wide shifts in the occupation at agricultural lean season; migration, low wages, and exploitation at the work spot and at home are the common features that effect the development of these women.

With this brief introduction and literature review, the researcher has conducted an empirical study on the particular topic with the help of certain objectives only based on the plight of female agricultural labourers at a selected panchayat in Cuddalore district of Tamilnadu.

Methodology: A descriptive research study has been conducted at a selected panchayat in Cuddalore District with the following objectives, (i) To know the socio-economic status of the respondents; (ii) To study the awareness of the respondents on the developmental schemes relating to agricultural labourers; (iii) To examine the utilization of the developmental programmes by the women agricultural labourers; and (iv) To identify the problems faced by the women agricultural labourers at family and work place.

Researcher has conducted the study with special reference to Arunmozhidevan Panchayat which is located in Parangipettai Block, Cuddalore District and Tamilnadu State of India. Among the availability of women agricultural labourers in the study area, the researcher has randomly selected 50 female agricultural workers as respondents for the present research with the help of purposive random sampling method. Researcher has selected the respondents who are female and working as agricultural labour at the agricultural field in the selected panchayat.

A structured interview schedule has been administered by the researcher to collect the primary data in addition that observation technique has also been used for gathering information among them. The tool has constructed keeping in view of objectives of the study. The interview schedule consists close-ended questions which have been divided into four major parts such as, socio-economic profile, awareness and utilization of developmental programmes, and problems faced by the respondents at family and work place. A two point rating scale has only been used to measure their opinion on agricultural activities. After the data collection, the data have been classified, tabulated, and interpreted in terms of simple percentage calculations.

Major Findings: Based on the field investigation, the data has been interpreted in a simplified manner to know the plight of female agricultural labourers in the Arunmozhidevan panchayat.

Socio-Economic Status:**Table No-1: Distribution of the Respondents by their Socio-Economic Status
N=50**

Variable	Sub Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	20-30	15	30
	30-40	18	36
	40-50	17	34
Educational Status	Illiterates	18	36
	Primary	15	30
	Secondary	17	34
Community	Backward Caste	02	04
	Most Backward Caste	41	82
	Scheduled Caste	07	14
Monthly Income (Rs.)	1000-2000	33	66
	2000-3000	12	24
	3000-4000	05	10
Size of Family (Members)	Small (1-3)	28	56
	Medium (3-5)	17	34
	Large (5-8)	05	10
Type of House	Thatched	36	72
	Tiled	06	12
	Pucca	08	16

From the survey, the table-1 inferred that the majority (66%) of the women agricultural labourers belong to the age group of 20-40 years. Regarding educational status, the great strength (64%) of the respondents have studied up to schooling (either primary or secondary) level only. Based on the community, nearly three fourth (82%) of the female workers belong to Most Backward Caste in the study area. In terms of monthly income, the majority (90%) of the respondents are able to earn Rs.1000-3000 per month as their source of livelihood. Most (56%) of the female workers live in small (1-3 members) size of family and also two-third (72%) of the respondents live in own thatched houses in the study area. Besides, all the respondents belong to Hindu religion, married and they get their wages in daily basis respectively.

Moreover, it is heartening to note that the majority of the female agricultural labourers are not having proper infrastructural facilities in their houses such as safe drinking water (62%); toilet facility (90%); drainage facility (100%); and separate kitchen (84%) respectively. Further, all the respondents are using firewood as fuel for cooking in their houses and followed by 44 per cent of them are using kerosene as fuel in addition with firewood.

Table-2: Distribution of the Respondents by their Mode of Savings
N=50

Variable	Sub Group	Frequency	
		Yes	No
Mode of Savings	Self Help Group	31 (62%)	19 (38%)
	Insurance	21 (42%)	29 (58%)
	Cooperative Society	09 (18%)	41 (82%)
	Banks	03 (06%)	47 (94%)
	Unorganized Savings	18 (36%)	32 (64%)
	No Savings	12 (24%)	38 (76%)

Based on the field investigation, the table-2 expressed that the mode of savings wise distribution of the respondents. Out of the total 50 respondents in each category, it is observed that a good number of the women agricultural labourers have possessed savings habit through SHG (62%); insurance (42%); unorganized savings (36%); cooperative society (18%); and banks (06%) respectively. Further, it is heartening to note that the rest (24%) of the workers have not possessed any form of savings through their wages due to economic needs of the family.

Moreover from the study, it is clear that the half (50%) of the respondents have not owned any sort of farm land for their survival and followed by a great strength (42%) of the female labourers have possessed the own cultivable land at marginal level in the study area.

Awareness on Developmental Programmes:

Table-3: Distribution of the Respondents by Awareness on Developmental Programmes
N=50

Variable	Sub Group	Frequency	
		Yes	No
Awareness	MGNREGA	50 (100%)	-
	SHG	31 (62%)	19 (38%)
	THADCO	12 (24%)	38 (76%)
	SGSY	07 (14%)	43 (86%)
	DRDA	06 (12%)	44 (88%)
	Special Women Developmental Programmes	28 (56%)	22 (44%)
	Cooperatives	41 (82%)	09 (18%)

From the study, the table-3 denoted that the majority of the respondents are very much aware about rural developmental programmes such as MGNREGA (100%); SHG (62%); Special Women Developmental Programmes (56%); and Cooperatives (82%) respectively. Further, it is heartening to note that the significant strength of the female agricultural

labourers are unaware about the programmes such as THADCO (76%); SGSY (86%); and DRDA (88%) respectively.

Utilization of Developmental Programmes:

Table-4: Distribution of the Respondents by Utilization of Developmental Programmes
N=50

Variable	Sub Group	Frequency	
		Yes	No
Utilized Benefits from Developmental Programmes	MGNREGA	50 (100%)	-
	SHG	31 (62%)	19 (38%)
	THADCO	12 (24%)	38 (76%)
	SGSY	07 (14%)	43 (86%)
	DRDA	06 (12%)	44 (88%)
Availed Loan from Cooperatives	For Agriculture	17 (34%)	33 (66%)
	For Non-agriculture	33 (66%)	17 (34%)
Attend the Training Programmes	Health aspects	13 (26%)	37 (74%)
	Special training Programmes	37 (74%)	13 (26%)
	Special financial support	31 (62%)	19 (38%)

On the basis of survey, the table-4 reported that the majority (100% and 62%) of the respondents have fully utilized the benefits from MGNREGA and SHG respectively. Even though, it is observed that the significant strength of the female workers have not benefited by the developmental programmes provided by Government such as THADCO (76%); SGSY (86%); and DRDA (88%) respectively due to their lack of awareness on the developmental programmes. Regarding availed loan from cooperatives, nearly two-third (66%) of the respondents have availed the loan for non-agricultural activities through cooperatives and the remaining one-third (34%) of them have get loan from cooperatives for agricultural purposes in the study area. In terms of attended the various training programmes, the data is noted that the majority (74%) of the women agricultural labourers have attended and benefited through special training programmes from Government for their livelihood and the notable number (62%) of the respondents have utilized special financial support continuously through SHG. Further, it is heartening to note that a great strength (74%) of the respondents have totally not attended and benefited through the health related training programmes due to their condition of low literacy level and ignorance.

Facing Challenges at Family Level:

Table-5: Distribution of the Respondents by their Challenges at Family Level
N=50

Sl.No	Category	Frequency	
		Yes	No
1.	Take care of family properly	20 (40%)	30 (60%)

2.	Drinking habit of husband	31 (62%)	19 (38%)
3.	Correct the children's ill habits	26 (52%)	24 (48%)
4.	Facing domestic violence	28 (56%)	22 (44%)
5.	Intake of energetic food	25 (50%)	25 (50%)
6.	Suffered by severe illness	14 (28%)	36 (72%)
7.	Being peace of mind	24 (48%)	26 (52%)

From the field study, the table-5 observed that the majority (60%) of the female agricultural labourers are unable to take care of their family members properly while going to agricultural work. Regarding drinking habit, a great strength (62%) of the respondents opined that their husbands are consuming of alcohol regularly on daily basis. Besides, a good number (52%) of the respondents are able to correct their children's ill habits then and there in between the busy schedule also. But, the remaining half (48%) of them are unable to correct their children's ill habits due to their busy work schedule and family conditions. It is heartening to note that the majority (56%) of the women workers have victimized by different sort of domestic violence through their family members. Further, the half (50%) of the respondents felt that they have not taken sufficient energetic food for their survival even though, the remaining half (50%) of them have taken sufficient food in terms of their overall work nature. Regarding illness, the two-third (72%) of the respondents have not suffered by any kind of severe illness while continuously involving in agricultural work and the rest (28%) of them have affected by some of the illness such as skin related problems, anemia, and foot problems. In terms of peace of mind, the significant strength (52%) of the labourers are not being peace of mind by psychologically due to their overall work nature, domestic and economic burdens in family also.

Facing Challenges at Work Place:

Table-6: Distribution of the Respondents by their Challenges at Work Place
N=50

Sl. No	Category	Frequency	
		Yes	No
1.	Over load work at work place	38 (76%)	12 (24%)
2.	Get enough wage	07 (14%)	43 (86%)
3.	Chance to save the wage	02 (04%)	48 (96%)
4.	Gender wise discrimination at work place	47 (94%)	03 (06%)
5.	Caste wise discrimination at work place	46 (92%)	04 (08%)
6.	Wage wise discrimination at work place	50 (100%)	-

Based on the survey, the table-6 found that the three fourth (76%) of the respondents have done overload work at agricultural field for their livelihood followed by the majority (86%) of the women workers have not earned enough and sufficient wage for daily means and almost all (96%) the respondents are unable to get a chance to save their wages due to insufficient of wage as well as lot of family commitments. Further, it is sadly to note in the

modern era that the majority of the women agricultural workers have discriminated by others at the work place on the basis of gender (94%); caste (92%); and wage (100%) respectively.

Opinion on Developmental Programmes:

**Table-7: Distribution of the Respondents by their Preference to work other than Agriculture and Opinion on Developmental Programmes
N=50**

Variable	Sub-Group	Frequency	
		Yes	No
Preference to Work other than Agriculture	Construction work	32 (64%)	18 (36%)
	MGNREGA	50 (100%)	-
	Coolie for Non-agriculture work	38 (76%)	12 (24%)
Opinion on Developmental Programmes	Manage day to day life activities	04 (08%)	46 (92%)
	Overcome the economic burden	11 (22%)	39 (78%)
	Helpful and support	26 (52%)	24 (48%)
	Improved social status through wage	34 (68%)	16 (32%)

From the survey, the table-7 inferred that the majority of the respondents have given their preference to work other than agricultural activities in the study area such as construction work (64%); MGNREGA (100%); and coolie for non-agriculture work (76%) respectively. Based on the investigation, it is heartening to note that the majority (92%) of the female labourers are unable to manage even their day to day livelihood activities through agricultural work followed by the three fourth (78%) of the respondents are not confident that there is no any feasibility condition to overcome their economic burdens within the agricultural wage and really they are in very poor conditions even now and the majority (64%) of the women workers agreed that their status of life has improved through the agricultural wages even it is less. Further, the half (52%) of the respondents felt that the developmental programmes are very much helpful and support to them because the particular programmes have raised their standard of living at considerable level and the remaining half (48%) of them have not agreed that the programmes are helpful and support to them due to unable to get benefits from it properly and sufficiently.

Conclusions: It becomes evident from the results that are mentioned in this research the women agricultural labourers played a significant role in crop production and economic activities of family through the wage earnings. This study revealed that the productive age groups of (20-40) women have engaged in the agricultural activities. Only the low economic group of rural women have participated in farm operations and earning between Rs.1000-2000 per month even though most of the respondents are unable to save their wages. It is heartening to note that the maximum of the respondents are not having proper infrastructural facilities in their houses except electricity. The study identified that majority of the respondents have aware and utilized the benefits from some of the developmental

programmes provided by Government such as MGNREGA, SHG, and Special Women Development Programmes. Most of the respondents have availed non-agricultural purpose of loan from co-operatives. Further, SHG has provided special financial support to them continuously. The research also noted that most of the female agricultural workers are unable to take care of their family and children properly while going to agricultural work.

The half of the labourers have not taken sufficient energetic food for their survival due to poor economic conditions. Majority of the farm workers are not being in peace of mind by psychologically due to their work nature, domestic and economic burdens. Further, it is sadly to note that maximum of the workers have done overload work at agricultural field and also the discrimination in the name of gender, caste, and wage at work place has occurred among them seriously. Majority of the respondents have not satisfied about the wage in terms of their smooth survival. During the off season of agriculture, all the female agricultural labourers have preferred the alternative employment opportunity of 100 days of work programme through MGNREGA. The study clearly explained that most of the agricultural workers have affected by severe economic burdens and there is no feasibility condition to overcome their poor status, even majority of the respondents are unable to manage their day to day life activities also.

Even though, majority of the labourers have agreed that the agricultural work and developmental programmes have improved their status of life at significant level and the programmes are very helpful and support to them for raising their standard of living in society. Hence, Government should come forward to fix the working hours and wages per day to protect their interests. Voluntary organizations should help to the rural women and organize themselves into groups and unions for their self-help as well as development.

Abbreviations:

1. MGNREGA–Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.
2. SHG – Self Help Group.
3. THADCO–Tamilnadu Adi Dravidar Housing and Development Corporation Limited.
4. SGSY–Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana.
5. DRDA–District Rural Development Agencies.

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