

A woman's status in a rural society, apart from her role as a mother and wife, depends on how her labour is utilized – a decision made by men. In short, in most of the countries male domination is apparent and women are treated as subordinates to men leading to gender inequalities. Gender inequality is a crucial issue affecting not only human rights but also the overall development of an area.

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several reformers fought against those aspects of the system that have resulted in the inequality between male and female. A number of specific measures have been undertaken by the Government of India to improve the status of women. Status of women is intimately connected with their economic position, which in turn depends on opportunities for participation in economic activities. The nature and condition of the labour market for women differs from that of men because of reproductive role of women and also face discrimination in the market because of engendered aspects of work.

Most of the families in rural areas would starve to death if women do not work for much of the days in the fields to grow food for feeding them. Hence, it seems inconceivable that the contribution of this nature could be overlooked for so long. Agriculture is one field where concentration of women is more as far as rural areas are concerned. In agriculture, poor women find employment as agricultural labourer in which no skill is needed and no investment is required. The present study is an attempt to bring out the problems of women agricultural workers.

Gender inequality is still widely prevalent in all parts of the world especially in India. It is also surprising to note that even in Kerala, a State which ranks high in terms of women literacy and empowerment in India, the situation is not better. With improvement in education and decline in fertility, one would expect that the

female work participation rate in economic activities would rise. However, in the case of Kerala the female work participation rate has declined from 21 percent in 1961 to 16 percent in 2001. Kerala is one of the few States in India where the female work participation rate has continued to decline. Though women work participation is noticed in all sectors, agriculture remains '*the*' major economic activity for female workers in Palakkad District.

Palakkad district is selected for the present investigation because it is the area where the percentage women workers, especially women agricultural workers, is higher compared to other districts of Kerala. Paddy is the prominent crop of the district which provides employment to the larger sections of women. The main aims and objectives for the present study are:

1. To study the spatial pattern of women workers in the study area.
2. To bring out the temporal variation in the spatial pattern in the selected time points of 1971, 1991 and 2001.
3. To analyze the causes for the sectoral shift of women workers in the study area for the selected time points.
4. To study the impact of changing cropping pattern in the work participation rate of women
5. To study the socio-economic status, health and working conditions, gender disparity and problems of women agricultural workers.
6. To suggest suitable planning strategy for improving the status of female agricultural workers and to reduce gender inequality.

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data is collected from among the women agricultural labourers using pre - tested questionnaires. Based on the analysis of the female agricultural labourers, the

sample size for the primary survey is finalised. Sample size is based on the variation in the female agricultural labourers between 1971 and 1991 and between 1991 and 2001. Percentage variation of female agricultural labourers is divided into three categories, high variation, medium variation and low variation. 50 samples are selected from blocks with high variation, 40 samples from blocks with medium variation and 30 samples from low variation blocks.

Palakkad district has only two physical divisions of midlands and highlands. The Western Ghats dominate the highlands in the eastern parts of the district. Bharathapuzha and its tributaries form the major drainage feature for the study area. The region enjoys a humid tropical climate and gets rain from both Southwest and Northeast monsoons. Nearly 31 percent of the district is under forests. Laterite is the most predominant type of soil in the district. The district with 11.5 percent of the total geographical area of the State accommodates 8.2 percent of the population. Out of the 13 blocks, Palakkad, Pattambi and Mannarkkad together have more than one-third of the total population of the district. Being a highland area Attappady and Nenmara have the lowest share of population.

Palakkad block has the highest population density followed by Pattambi and Thirthala. Attappady has the lowest density. The district has a positive sex ratio in 2001. Nearly one-sixth of the total population belong to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Nearly 85 per cent of the total population are literates. Female literacy is also comparatively high. Nearly 30 percent of the total population constitute the main workers. About one-third of the main workers belong to the agricultural labourer category

A detailed analysis has been made with reference to the overall work participation rates and women work participation rates in the study area for 1971,

1991 and 2001. Sectoral nature of women workers have also been analyzed which brought out the fact that women workers are mostly concentrated in the agricultural sector. To understand the change better the land use and cropping pattern of the district have also been analyzed. The major conclusions derived from these aspects are:

Data have been subjected to factor analysis, to extract four dimensions, to understand the status and to bring out the perspectives on gender disparity and problems faced by the women agricultural workers of Palakkad district.

Because of under-employment problems in agriculture, women have to seek alternative employment opportunities for subsistence for a major part of the year. Hence, they are forced to move from agriculture to other sectors like, MGNREGS, construction, sales persons in various shops, petrol bunks and in various other services. In addition to lack of adequate number of working days, gender discrimination in wage rates makes women's position more vulnerable.

The following are the major **findings** of the present study:

- Female work participation rate at the national level is increasing continuously from 1971-91 and 1991-2001. In the case of Kerala, there is a continuous decrease. The rate of female work participation in Palakkad is decreasing continuously but the rate of decrease is more in the second period.
- Gender gap in work participation is decreasing at the national level, but for Kerala and Palakkad there is a fluctuating rate is noticed. In the case of Kerala there is a slight increase and then decrease in the second period. However for Palakkad Gender Gap has increased for the second period.

- Palakkad tops among the districts in work participation rate in 1971, but holds only third position in 1991 and comes second in 2001.
- Work participation rate is higher in the eastern part and decreases towards the central part of the district. When one moves, further west the rate decreases more.
- Except Attappady, all blocks show a marginal decrease in work participation between 1971 and 1991. Between 1991 and, 2001 all blocks show a decreasing trend with Attappady showing a very high decrease. Change between 1971 and 2001 show that above average decrease is noticed in the western and southwestern part of the district.
- Considering the female work participation, Palakkad is better placed with other districts of Kerala. Female work participation has come down sharply all over district in the last decade i.e. between 1991 and 2001.
- In 1971, female work participation is highest in the southeastern part of the district. It declines towards northwest and west. The western blocks show the lower rate. Change between 1971 and 1991 show a declining trend except Attappady. Between 1991 and 2001 the rate of decrease is higher in the eastern part and lower in the western part of the district.
- In 1971, more than four fifths of the total workers are in the agricultural sector, mainly as agricultural labourers. A decreasing trend is noticed from 1971 to 1991 and a still higher rate of decrease between 1991 and 2001.
- Cultivators show a stagnant picture in all three periods. Intra district variation among the blocks show a general decreasing trend, but in certain blocks like Chittur, Alathur and Nenmara there is an increase.
- Maximum number of women workers in Palakkad are agricultural labourers. There is wide variation in the distribution of agricultural labourers from 29

percent to 70 percent in the district. Among the workers, female agricultural labourers were prominent in the southeastern part of the district and are very low in the western part. Even though negative change is the common pattern identified, major paddy growing areas in the east show a comparatively lower negative change.

- There is a continuous increase in the female workers in other sectors over the years from 1971 to 2001 in most of the blocks. Higher representation of females in other sectors is generally low in regions with high work participation.
- Net sown area is the single largest land use type for both the periods. Changes noticed in the case of net sown area and area under non-agricultural land use. Non- agricultural land use increased and net sown area decreased.
- Labour shortage and increase in the land value led to a change in the cropping pattern in the district and this change is negative towards paddy and positive towards coconut and rubber.
- The paired t test gives a positive relationship between area under rice and women agricultural workers. A negative relationship between area under coconut and women agricultural workers is also noticed.
- Rubber and coconut are not labour intensive crops. Cultivators changed to these crops during the study period and this led to the lowering of labour days of women.

Primary data has been generated from 520 samples distributed in all the blocks. The varied socio-economic and perceptual characteristics of the respondents have been analyzed. The major findings in this regard are:

- Males form the head of the family in almost all the sample households except in the case of widowed households.

- Backward communities and Scheduled Caste / Scheduled Tribe communities share equal proportion of the samples. Less than 6 percent is the share of other communities especially from higher castes.
- Unmarried women constitute only a mere three percent of the respondents, at the same time widows share is more than 18 percent.
- Productive age group constitute only four percent of the respondents and at the same time, older women aged fifty and above constitute about one-fourth of the respondents. It indicates that younger generation is moving away from employment in agriculture as labourers and the pathetic economic situation of the older agricultural labourers who cannot have their day's meal without work.
- Literacy rate among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is generally low and the same is the case with the agricultural workers. Further, the female literacy for the total population in the district is very high (80%), while literacy of the agricultural workers is only 63 percent.
- About 79 percent of the family comes under nuclear type and the remaining is joint family. Out of the thirteen blocks, eight of them are having more than 80 percent of nuclear families with Attappady (88%) and Alathur (87%) ranking at the top.
- 25 percent of the sample respondents belong to the small families with less than four members in the study area. It varies from about 58 percent in Attappady to about 12 percent in Pattambi. Only less than 4 percent of the sample respondents in the study area have more than six members in their family. The remaining 71 percent is average sized family of 4 to 6 members.
- Women agricultural workers have only a maximum of 120 to 150 labour days in a year with which they have to meet the entire annual needs.

- Most of the women agricultural workers earn only Rs1000/- to Rs2000/- as monthly income. This group accounts about 45 percent of the samples. About 42 percent of the respondents have a monthly income of more than Rs2000/-. Thrithala, Pattambi and Srikrishnapuram in the southwestern part of the district have more than 50 percent of the respondents in this category. Due to lower income, women workers are struggling to meet their daily requirements.
- An average of about 40 percent of the respondents received financial support from the government. Various schemes provide support to the respondents for the construction of houses, toilet and other purposes like purchase of cattle, goat, etc.
- The level of expenditure depends upon the level of income. It is observed that majority of them spend major part of their earnings on food, since their income level is not even enough to meet the food requirements. Hence, for other purposes like religious ceremonies, health expenses, social expenses, repayment of loan, etc. they get loans putting them in debt.
- Despite the wages of men being higher than that of women, when it comes to the household expenditure, women's contribution becomes the substantial part. More than 80 percent of the family expenditure comes from female earnings.
- Even though the economic condition of the respondents is poor, more than half of them own a Television or a radio. Nearly 60 percent of the households have mobile phone, which became a necessity nowadays.
- Condition of work in the agricultural field is satisfactory, according to 71 percent of the respondents. 14 percent says it is good; however, the condition is poor for the remaining 15 percent.

- Wages, decision-making and property ownership are the important areas where distinct gender disparity prevails according to the opinion of the respondents.
- More than 50 percent of the respondents are members of trade unions, which helped to increase the level of social awareness and their bargaining power for higher wages and other facilities.
- The higher incidence of chronic skeletal muscular and postural health problems such as joint pain and back pain are common diseases, indicative of their work-related health hazards.
- Government hospitals are used by more than 80 percent of the respondents for illness. The present study shows that among the respondents, coverage of immunisation of their children is 90 percent. More than 80 percent of the respondents' delivery was in hospitals. This is lower when compared with the district average for the whole population.
- More than 54 percent of the respondent adopted birth control measures. However, the major responsibility for practising birth control measures falls on women irrespective of the methods adopted. Gender disparity is observed very clearly in this respect.
- Major problems so far identified from the analysis are the decreasing and irregular number of working days, insufficient wages and inadequate support from the male members in family expenditure. In addition to that, indebtedness and health problems are also noticed.

Factor analysis is carried out using SPSS 11.5 version. 39 variables have entered and factor dimensions have been extracted and interpreted. Four factor dimensions account for a variance of about 61 percent and they have been interpreted in detail so as to group the blocks into categories for planning.

- ❖ Malampuzha, Chittur, Mannarkkad and Alathur register positive factor loadings for all the four factors. This indicates that these are the areas where the problem of women agricultural workers is more acute. It may be seen that in all the blocks except Mannarkkad rice cultivation is dominant.
- ❖ Kollengode, Attappady, Nenmara and Palakkad belong the moderate problem area category. These blocks have both positive and negative factor loadings.
- ❖ Pattambi, Ottappalam, Srikrishnapuram, Thrithala and Kuzhalmannam blocks have comparatively lesser problems with regard to women agricultural workers. It may be noted that almost all these blocks lie in the western part of the District.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- Health care, childcare, and old age pension shall be provided to all women agricultural workers.
- Minimum and equal wages shall be enforced in all farm and non-farm activities in agriculture and allied activities. This shall be monitored by women representatives in panchayats
- Landless women and workers with seasonal employment shall be given priority and provided opportunities for work throughout the year.
- Schemes shall be formed to subsidize and promote the formation of labour cooperatives and collective farming amongst women agricultural workers, especially the landless workers and marginal farmers.
- Lease land farming under NHG should be promoted.
- Provision of funds should be made to enable transfer of lands vested with government to women's groups (including NHGs) for productive use and appropriate economic activity. Women's control over complementary

resources like irrigation, credit, water, forest, fuel, fodder, information and training should be ensured.

- Decline in area under paddy is a major problem not only for Kerala as a whole but also for Palakkad, the rice bowl of the State. This should be checked to ensure food security.
- Special schemes should be made for protection of agricultural labourers.
- Procurement of paddy should be taken up by the Government at a rate which is profitable to the women farmers, which will pull them out of the poverty trap.
- A task force needs to be formed at the Grama Panchayat level to learn about the problems of women cultivators and an appraisal needs to be done with the various stakeholders about the problems affecting cultivation.
- Technology and loan should be given to women for off-season income generating activities such as animal husbandry, forestry, etc.
- There should be a special cell in each Panchayat/Block to look into the problems of women agricultural labourers.

Scope for Further Research

The analysis so far made clear that female work participation is decreasing in Palakkad. The main source of employment to the unskilled persons especially women are agricultural labour. However due to change in cropping pattern the availability of labour days is decreasing and there is insecurity in job. The changing cropping pattern from food crops to commercial crops is a threat to food security of the people of not only Palakkad but for the whole State. A detailed study on the food security under these circumstances is a topic for research, which needs utmost importance.

A cost benefit analysis need to be performed so as to get a better idea on where the necessary changes has to be made to bring down the cost and increase the benefits of cultivating paddy. Studies on women workers in other districts of Kerala may also be undertaken so that additional dimensions related to the factors affecting their status may be brought out. This will ultimately help to devise a better planning strategy so that women in general and women workers in particular may lead a better and comfortable life.