Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The situation of women in the Third World and in India has received considerable attention in recent years. Several studies on employment, health and nutrition, and poverty and development programmes have focussed on the conditions of women and the extent to which they change in the course of or as a result of economic development. However, so far only a few studies have examined the economic participation of women in the labour force, particularly in Indian agriculture.

"The status of any given section of population in a society is intimately connected with its economic position, which (itself) depends on rights, roles and opportunities for participation in economic activities. The economic status of women is now accepted as an indicator of the society's stage of development" (Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Government of India, 1974). It is relevant in this context to study the work participation of Indian women.

1. IMPORTANCE OF MICRO AND MACRO STUDIES

As in the case of other research problems, to understand the processes which characterize work participation of women, a combination of micro and macro level studies is desirable. Micro level studies permit an indepth analysis
of a variety of issues concerning women and help highlight the specific characteristics of women workers and nonworkers.

Very few micro level studies on female employment have been conducted in India. These studies differ in terms of their focus and methodology. While some studies provide work profiles of women in different occupations based on personal interviews of these women (Gulati, 1981), others outline women's work situation in a particular production process such as the cultivation of rice (Mencher and Saradamoni, 1982). There are also a few time allocation studies of members of a relatively small number of households in the rural areas (Jain and Chand, 1982). These micro studies, based on information relating to a few individuals or a few households in some particular region essentially help to generate hypotheses or insights that become meaningful in efforts to understand the macro context.

Aggregate data at the macro level do not permit such detailed analysis of individual work situations as is feasible at the micro level. However, they provide a broad perspective on the problem. The relationship between female employment and various macro variables such as agricultural development and poverty can also be ascertained primarily at the aggregate level. Their results as well as the macro indicators of time trends in female employment provide a perspective to assess the need for and the results of specific field studies.
2. FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

The thesis proposes to investigate the characteristics and features of female employment in agriculture. It seeks to identify correlates of the participation of women in the labour force. Female participation in the work force is determined by a host of factors only a few of which are economic. Various other social and cultural factors also influence female participation. The analysis in this study shall, however, be restricted to economic factors only.

The basic analytical framework for the study can be stated thus: female labour force participation rate is a function of a number of factors. Due to the interplay of social, cultural and economic factors, it is difficult to define precisely a causal relationship in a functional form, i.e., to hypothesize clear cut causal links of specified independent variables with the dependent variables. However, a detailed study of the characteristics of the dependent variable itself is likely to throw some light on these links. The possibility that an analysis of the nature of employment would provide insights into the factors causing women to enter the labour force provides the starting point for this thesis. Inferences regarding various determinants of female participation are made while studying some broad issues of female employment using macro level data.

The nature of female participation and the probable correlates of their entry into the labour force can be studied
in the context of three broad macro issues of employment: the overall level and structure of employment, the economic condition of wage workers in agriculture and the level of unemployment and underemployment in the economy.

Trends in the overall participation rates and changes in the structure of the work force provide a macro picture of the employment situation. The overall participation rate gives a broad idea of the level of employment in the economy. The structure of the work force in rural areas can be studied in terms of the sectoral distribution of the work force into agriculture and non-agriculture; and the status distribution of the work force in agriculture in terms of the self employed and wage labourers.

A second major issue relates to the wage employees in agriculture who form a sizeable proportion of the work force in rural areas. It is necessary to assess the economic situation of this section of the work force over time and the associated trends in the work force participation by women and children in employee households.1/

A third related macro issue is the complex problem of unemployment and underemployment. This is important because women often tend to withdraw from the labour force when faced with a situation of lack of work, e.g., during the slack

1/ An employee household is one in which wages or salaries form the major source of household income.
season in agriculture. Whether these women should be included in the unemployed labour force or considered outside the labour force is an issue which can be sorted out only with a thorough understanding of the macro concepts of unemployment and underemployment. Such an understanding will also help to analyse various dimensions of the problem of what causes women to enter the work force.

Various studies have been conducted in India on these macro aspects of employment. However, most of the available macro studies which analyse various aspects of employment and unemployment using secondary data sources explicitly exclude women from the analysis on the ground that the estimates on women workers are unstable and not comparable over time (Krishnamurthy, 1970 and 1984; Jose, 1974 and 1978). The macro studies in general also tend to be rather narrow or restricted in two respects. First, they mostly pertain to the country as a whole and do not attempt a disaggregated analysis. Secondly, they restrict their analysis to only a particular aspect and one data source and thereby provide a very limited picture. No study has yet comprehensively looked at various aspects of female participation using all available secondary data sources.

3. FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The objective of the thesis is to document the trends in the employment of female workers in agriculture during 1961-81 on the basis of various secondary data sources. In order
to obtain a comparative perspective, the thesis analyses various aspects of employment and unemployment separately for males and females and highlights sex differentials in the observed phenomena. The analysis is conducted for 14 major states as well as for regions at the sub-state level to provide a fairly disaggregated picture. More specifically, the following aspects of female and male employment are analysed in the thesis:

(a) trends in the rates of work participation in rural areas;
(b) inter-sectoral shifts in the work force;
(c) trends in the proportion of agricultural labourers in the rural work force;
(d) trends in the quantum of employment, wages and incomes of agricultural labourers;
(e) activity status of female non-workers;
(f) reported conditions for the availability of women for work and additional work; and
(g) determinants of the interregional variations in (i) work participation in agriculture, (ii) proportions of agricultural labourers in the work force, (iii) levels of unemployment and (iv) daily wage earnings of casual labourers in agriculture.

The study is divided into two parts. The first, which is the major part, is an analytical description of how these various dimensions of labour participation have changed over the past two decades. The second part is an exploratory analysis of how certain socio-economic factors are associated with the regional variations in these aspects of labour participation.

4. DATA BASE OF THE STUDY

Three main sources of data have been used extensively in the thesis to analyse the employment situation. They are
the following.

The decennial Population Census: The main source of data on trends in the participation rates are the population censuses. The last three censuses of India 1961, 1971 and 1981 have been used in this study.

The National Sample Survey (NSS): The Employment and Unemployment Surveys of the NSS, the 27th Round (1972-73), 32nd Round (1977-78), and 38th Round (1983), have been used to obtain information on many of the issues under study.

The Agricultural/Rural Labour Enquiries: The first three enquiries were conducted by the Labour Bureau through the NSS Rounds. Since the 1970s, they have been incorporated in the NSS Employment-Unemployment Survey. Information on trends in the quantum of employment, wages and incomes of agricultural and other rural labourers has been obtained from these enquiries. The second Agricultural Labour Enquiry of 1956-57, and the Rural Labour Enquiries of 1963-65, 1974-75 and 1977-78 have been used.

Besides, additional information on various aspects of agriculture at the sub-state level has been collected from the Statistical Abstracts of various states, the Livestock Censuses of different years and the Agricultural Census of 1976-77.

5. ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

One of the major concerns of the studies on employment has been changes in the level and structure of the work force
over time. Frequent changes in the concepts and definitions in the recent Indian censuses and National Sample Survey Rounds, the two main sources of data on the labour force, have made comparability difficult and there have been conflicting views on trends in labour force participation. The Indian censuses and NSS data also provide conflicting evidence on the change in the proportion of agricultural labourers in the work force. Until recently the structure of the work force in India was reported to have remained unchanged with an overwhelming proportion of the labour force dependent on agriculture.

A detailed discussion of the concepts and definitions used in the various censuses and NSS rounds and the problems of comparability between them is undertaken in Chapter 2. In the light of this discussion, sex differentials in the trends in labour force participation, changes in the structure of the work force and the proportion of agricultural labourers over the period 1961-81 are studied in the chapter.

Another aspect of female participation examined in the study relates to the temporal changes in the employment, wages and incomes of agricultural labourers over the period of study. There is a general consensus that the agricultural labourers and small cultivator households constitute the poorest section of society in rural areas. Besides, a very large section of the female workers are agricultural labourers. In a study of female participation in agriculture, it is important to understand the nature and conditions of work of this large and
increasing section of female workers. In the 1970s there was an interesting discussion on whether the conditions of agricultural labourers, in terms of real wages and incomes, had improved or deteriorated with the advent of the green revolution. The whole debate was, however, based on male wages and incomes only. The issues raised in this debate are further explored in Chapter 3. The links between aggregate output, real wages and incomes of both male and female agricultural labourers are analysed. In addition, the relationship between the quantum of employment of female agricultural labourers and changes in aggregate output and income levels in different years is also explored.

An important component of the total labour force participation is the unemployed labour force. In an underdeveloped economy a very large section of the work force being self employed, open and visible unemployment is likely to be less while underemployment and disguised unemployment would be more prevalent. The choice of an appropriate concept of unemployment and its measurement are difficult issues. There is extensive literature on various concepts and definitions of unemployment and there have been a number of attempts at measuring it. A detailed review of these concepts and definitions of employment and underemployment is undertaken in Chapter 4. The estimates of unemployment and underemployment available from secondary data sources and individual attempts at measuring it
are brought together in this chapter in an attempt to gauge the dimensions of the problem.

A large section of the female population does not report itself as employed or unemployed. Considering the overwhelming poverty in the country, it is rather difficult to believe that most of these women are not working or are not available for work. Female unemployment is a complex phenomenon since the entry of women into the work force is often influenced by the availability of work and is conditional. Obviously, there are certain constraints on the free participation of women in the labour force. In Chapter 5 some qualitative information on the preferences of workers and non-workers, both male and female, is analysed to see for how long and under what conditions they are available for work or additional work. The implications of sex differentials in the labour supply behaviour of different sections of the population are discussed.

An attempt is made in Chapter 6 to identify the determinants of inter-regional variations in various aspects of female employment studied in earlier chapters. More specifically, the factors that explain regional variations in participation in agriculture, the proportion of agricultural labour, the unemployment rate in a region and the average daily wage earnings of casual labourers in agriculture are sought to be identified. In a cross-sectional analysis at the regional level for the year 1977-78 some of the following issues are analysed:
(a) the influence of agricultural development in a region on female participation in agriculture,

(b) the factors that cause women to work as agricultural labourers in a region,

(c) the relationship between unemployment, poverty and agricultural development in a region, and

(d) the determinants of average daily wage earnings accruing to casual labourers in agriculture.

The major conclusions emerging from the discussion are summarized in the final chapter. The lessons learned in the process of analysing the varied sources of secondary data and the issues for further research are highlighted.