Chapter XI

Factors Encouraging or Discouraging Female Participation in Agriculture

The nature and extent of female participation in agriculture is determined by certain structural (e.g. family size, holding size etc.) and institutional factors (like family custom, existence of group institution). The work participation of females is also affected by time, health, social, religious and legal constraints in addition to level of education of the females, income and occupation of the family. External factors emanating from such considerations affect the nature of work done by females to a greater extent than the work pattern of males. Work participation may also depend on the subjective consideration of the females (e.g. their attitudes to and preferences for jobs). A brief idea of some factors affecting work participation of females in economic activities is presented in Chapter I. An attempt is made in this chapter to identify some other factors which encourage or discourage the nature of work participation of females in agriculture.
11.1 Economic Factors

Economic gain is the vital consideration to encourage female family workers to take part in agricultural activities. Economic compulsion to engage in farm activities is much higher for the females in poor families, but females in well to do farm families enjoy more freedom to choose between work or leisure. In marginal and small farmers' households, farm activities are carried out mainly by family workers. Most females in such households, who cannot find sufficient work either in the farm or in the household, seek wage employments in farm and non-farm jobs elsewhere in order to earn additional cash income for the maintenance of the family to supplement the income of their male family members. Females in households with large farm sizes generally work in their own farms and do not seek wage employments outside.

Out of the total female workers covered by the study, about 80 per cent responded positively about their interest in farm works due to habit and social custom and the rest stated that the economic compulsion was the main reason for their participation in agricultural operations. It was observed that participation of females in farm activities during certain months in the crop season was highly essential for majority of the households, as available male workers alone cannot meet the total
requirement of labour in the peak periods. Demand for female workers was very high during transplanting and harvesting seasons in the sample villages. This is particularly true in the upper Assam Districts (Dibrugarh, North Lakhimpur) than in the lower Assam Districts (Sawarup and Goalpara).

Income of the household was found to be one of the main economic indicator in the determination of wage employment of females in agriculture. The impact of higher income and the associated social status was found less intense on participatory behaviour of females in small farms as unpaid family workers. Other economic indicators like size of the farm, volume of works in the family farm, and financial capability of the household to engage hired labour, were more important in the determination of participation rate of females and the nature of their engagement in farm activities. Because of such considerations, female participation rate was found higher in medium farms than in small farms in seven villages out of ten. In case of marginal farms, participation rate of females was the highest which is an indication of poor economic positions of the households. In the villages, about 74 per cent of the farm families were small and marginal and the number of large farms were very less. Female workers were therefore an important component of the total labour force engaged in agriculture.
A pattern of inverse relationship between the economic position of the household and participation rate of females is indicated by some studies in the Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. With the increases in income beyond a particular level, the female participation rate had declined as women's participation in wage employments was no longer required.

The nature of primary occupation and the extent of availability of secondary sources of income are important factors determining the work participation rate of females. Female participation in farm activities is encouraged in those households which are primarily cultivator families. In case of the households which have secondary sources of income with cultivation as the main source, or which have some male members of the households engaged in service or business, participation of female family members in farm activities is much less.


In rural households farm activities can be divided into activities normally reserved for males and others for females. The nature of such division of labour varies in different regions although there is no specific norm to classify agricultural activities strictly into male or female tasks. The activity pattern in the farm is divided in such a way that some agricultural operations are assigned to female workers while the rest of the operations are carried on by male workers.

Existence of such system of division of farm labour by sexes influences the demand for male and female workers during different periods in the crop season. In general, demand for male labour is very high for preparatory tillage operations, but no female worker is engaged in such activities even if scarcity of male labour arises. On the other hand, female workers are considered suitable for transplanting and harvesting operations and for such activities female workers are demanded in large numbers. Seasonal variation of female participation in agriculture is higher than male workers and as a result, appropriate farm works could not be found for female workers for longer periods in a year.
Such specialisation of the labour market in rural areas into male or female task cannot be said to be related to natural differences between the sexes. The basis of such division of labour in farm activities is found in cultural and social behaviours in different regions rather than in physiological differences between men and women. Comparison of the rural labour markets in different parts of the world indicates that the role of women in agriculture is determined mainly by the farming system and farm technology followed and on the stage of development reached in agriculture. The nature of division of labour in agricultural activities is not similar in every agricultural situation. There is no specific agricultural activity which is reserved solely for male or female workers all over the world. Under shifting cultivation females do most of the agricultural works but under plough cultivation role of male workers in farm activities is more profound. In India, throughout the Himalayan Region, in Himachal Pradesh and in hilly regions of North East India, farm activities relating to land preparation are conducted by females.

2. (i) E. Boserup - Women In The Labour Market - Indian Women, Edited by Devaki Jain, 1976.


(iii) G. Vyardal - Op cit, 1968, Chapter 22, p. 1070-1092.
workers also, (along with male workers) but in other
states such activities are done mainly by male workers.

Cultural and social prejudices affect the
nature of work done by women greatly and lead to
differences in the work pattern of men and women in the
society. Such restrictions on the work to be done by
women are, in fact, a barrier to the development of
working efficiency of women and also upon development of
rural economies. Lewis referred to spirit of adventure
as the cost of effort of economic growth and pointed out
that the taboos relating to family life, especially those
relating to the sort of work which women may do are
important factors which can seriously keep down the
standard of living in the early stages of economic growth.

11.3 attitude to work

Productivity in agriculture depends on several
biological and technical factors along with efficient
management of the productive resources. For raising
agricultural production, it is also necessary that the
labour engaged should be willing to work efficiently.

3. Report Of The Committee On Status Of Women In India,

Working for longer hours may not be sufficient if the work is not done properly and efficiently and to the best of the ability. Such willingness to work conscientiously is both an objective and a subjective consideration of the labours.

Attitude of the female workers towards agricultural activities can be explained in relation to core environmental factors in addition to economic, cultural and social influences which are already pointed out. The nature of the work and the environment in which the work is carried on determine whether a particular work is pleasant or exhausting. Climatic conditions also affect the attitude towards work and make continuous work for a long period impossible when climate is extreme during certain periods in a year.

A study of attitudes and preferences of the female workers towards agricultural operations in the sample villages reveals that majority of the female workers preferred to work in the field for harvesting operations than for transplanting operations as the former operation is less arduous and exhausting than the later. Continuous works for transplanting operations require more energy, skill, and perseverance than harvesting operation. According to Yrdal

climatic conditions not only affect the length of the work year and day, but also the intensity with which worker's effort to the job is applied. Virdal referred to rural conditions in north India and observed "it must not be forgotten that the transplanting, weeding and harvesting of rice are laborious process and that the first two have to be carried out in mud and sludge under a very hot sun".

Combined with such environmental factors are the influence of health and nutritional standard on the efficiency of work performance of the female workers. Heavy burden of domestic duties and child care and high fertility rates of rural women depress their attitude for regular participation in farm activities. Such factors also reduce the duration and efficiency of work of female workers.

Institutional impediments of a cultural nature like festivals, ceremonies take away a substantial portion of the working days and stand in the way of diversification of work schedule which would have contributed to more effective utilization of labour. On such occasions, females spend their days on social and family affairs and are reluctant to engage in works or to work hard. The loss of working days due to such reasons is comparatively less for males. From a study of rural labour market in
Nowgong District of Assam, Goswami and Bora indicated that 43.08 per cent of labour units of adult female workers were used for social and family affairs but the corresponding percentage for adult male workers was only 4.95 per cent. One of the reasons for large scale idleness during off agricultural seasons among rural population can be attributed to such ceremonious occasions which are difficult to change. The traditional cropping pattern and cultivation techniques are also responsible for longer idle periods for female labour in rural areas.

11.4 Scientific And Technological Knowledge and Training

Inadequate access to scientific and technological knowledge and training in agriculture act as a discouraging factor for female workers in diversifying their role in rural economies. Lack of knowledge of improved agricultural practices stand in the way of increasing productivity of female workers.

Agricultural training courses are usually attended by men and the knowledge gained is seldom communicated to the females. In the absence of special training programmes for rural female workers, the knowledge of improved farm practices or about the use of improved tools and implements cannot be imparted to workers directly.

This is particularly true of female workers who are mostly illiterate, conservative and easily satisfied. As a consequence, the scope for increasing participation rate of female workers in agricultural operations remains limited. While illiteracy among females remains as a formidable barrier to acquire knowledge of improved technology in agriculture, lack of suitable media to extend knowledge and training among females is another factor which affects the willingness of female workers to make more efficient contribution to agricultural production. As female workers constitute a significant proportion of the total labour force in rural areas, exclusion of the females from agricultural training programmes adversely affects spread of improved technology and thereby farm productivity and rural incomes.

The findings of the present study indicate that many female workers were encouraged in spreading manures in paddy fields, but they were never engaged to apply fertilizers or chemicals which were considered as jobs of male workers only. Female workers were also not engaged in operating power tillers, weeder and thrashers which were operated mainly by male workers. Several research
studies indicate that due to knowledge gap between males and females, employment prospects of female workers in agriculture have declined with the advancement of farm technology. As the knowledge and training of operating agricultural machineries are given to men only, females continue as unskilled labour and as a result total volume of employment of female workers in farm activities has been declining. This applies to multiple agricultural operations like weeding, harvesting, thrashing and food processing. Due to introduction of improved technology, the prospect of employment of male labour has increased while that of female labour has declined. This process deprives the female workers of the opportunity to improve their skills and acquire improved technical knowledge. Dasgupta, pointed out that the introduction


of new technology in agriculture in India has been associated with the tendency to commercialisation of agriculture and towards a shift from family labour to hired workers. As a result participation rate of family labour, particularly of female labour has declined. This tendency has occurred due mainly to withdrawal of intermittent work force consisting mainly of women and children, and a corresponding increase in duration of work of those employed. In such a situation most females in land owning households have to remain without farm activities as they cannot go out as hired labours. Billings and Singh estimated that the mechanisation in agriculture in the Punjab would reduce human energy demand by 17.4 per cent in 1983-84. The greatest displacement will occur in the months of April and May, the period of harvesting when demand will fall by 25.4 per cent and 43.9 per cent respectively. Another 37 per cent fall in labour demand will be caused by the use of thrashers and reapers. As the engagement of female labour in harvesting and thrashing is much higher, such displacement in human labour demand would affect female workers in greater proportion than that of male workers.

Rural women’s interest in raising their work efficiency or in increasing their role in agricultural production is adversely affected due to absence of their ownership right on land for all practical purposes. Their association in family farm activities is contingent upon the wish of the male members of the family. In rural households females are not assigned any role in making intra-household decisions about management of farm or disposal of farm products. In the absence of right on land and control over the product of the land, the incentive of the females to increase participation rate in farm operations and enhance productivity through improved farming methods is less. Most female workers are even not adequately conscious about their crucial importance in agricultural production; their participation in farm activities is under instructions of male workers of the household.

The foregoing discussion highlights that women’s employment in agriculture is affected by a wide set of factors which determine the volume and nature of female labour. Some of these factors are different in many respects from the considerations which affect male workers. The findings of the present study reveal that farmin
in the villages is mainly a family based enterprise. Human labour is the most important input to agriculture and female workers constitute about half of the total labour force in rural areas. The contribution of female workers to agricultural production is also very significant.

Economic compulsions, social habits, life and culture of the rural population are the factors which inspire the females to participate in farm activities. The environment in which females live and work, the status granted to women in the society and the facilities available for rural women to reduce burden of household tasks and institutional arrangement to improve working efficiency of females, have a greater role to play in helping or hindering participation of females in agriculture.