

Women in Farming: A Case for Better Representation

International Day of Rural Women

October 15 International Day for Rural Women, and the right time to recognise efforts made by agrarian women as the backbone of society. It is essential to realise that women need not only more opportunities for active participation but also deliberate recognition and acknowledgement for their consistent efforts. Initial policies aimed towards women did not achieve desired results due to underdeveloped information channels and lack of representation by women in rural areas.

Although most efforts by women go unnoticed due to non-quantification of their contribution, we have tried to highlight some statistics which show that rural women have a long way to go, and require deliberate interventions to empower their status in Indian society.

1. Health Status

Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for the literate population of rural India was observed at 2.3 as compared to 1.7 in urban areas. There has been a significant difference in the age specific fertility rate of the age group 20-24 years in rural (132.8) and in urban (90.7) areas. There is a similar difference seen in the age group of 25-29 years in rural (154.3) and in urban (118.3) areas.

According to the NSS 75th round (July 2017- June 2018) on Household social consumption on Health, the Percentage of Persons Reported as Ailing (PPRA) in last 15-days period is 10.0% (Female) and 8.2% (Male) in urban areas, while the same percentage is 7.6% (Female) & 6.1% (Male) in rural areas. In rural areas, the highest gender gap was observed in Rajasthan (25.0) followed by Uttar Pradesh (20.1) and Bihar (19.9).

The above indicators for health of rural women might imply that women in rural areas are more at risk due to increased probability of number of child births, reflecting less choice with respect to contraceptive methods, combined with low levels of literacy to manage health. The indicators of ailing women could also imply that rural women have less access to healthcare facilities which lead to less reporting of health ailments. Socio economic development is likely to be hindered by high fertility rates as claimed by researchers and demographers.

2. Education Status

According to the NSS 75th Round (July, 2017- June, 18), the literacy rate for persons of age seven years and above is 73.5 and 87.7, in rural and urban areas respectively. The literacy rate for rural women is the lowest among all categories - urban male and female and rural male and female. The gender gap in rural areas is 16.5 while this gender gap is 9.4 in urban areas. In urban areas, 6.3 % females and 8.3% males were pursuing technical/professional courses whereas in rural areas, 1.7% females and 2.9% males were pursuing technical/professional courses.

These figures imply that there is still immense scope for improvement in the educational participation of rural women, a very important indicator for human development due to the broad beneficial contributions to society by more educated women.

3. Economic Status

According to the latest PLFS Survey Annual Report 2019-20 launched by National Statistical Office (NSO), female labour force participation rate in rural areas of India **showed an increase** from 18.2% in 2017-18 to 24.7% in 2019-20. This rise was much sharper as compared to urban working women.

Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2018-19 results indicate that in the rural sector, the Worker Population Ratio (WPR) was 19.0 for females and 52.1 for males. In the urban sector, the ratio is 14.5 for females and

52.7 for males. In both rural and urban areas, WPRs for females were considerably lower than WPRs for males. WPR in 2018-19 vis-à-vis 2017-18 has risen except for urban males. According to PLFS (2018-19), in the rural areas, both females and males, the maximum WPR for persons in the age group of 15 years is in Dadra & Nagar Haveli.

PLFS (2018-19) shows that the majority of the female (59.6%) and males (57.4%) workers in usual status (**ps+ss = principal activity status + subsidiary economic activity status**) were self-employed in rural areas.

PLFS (2018-19) data for the age group of 15 years and above shows the **unemployment rate for women in rural areas was 3.5** as against 5.5 for men whereas it was 9.8 and 7.0 for women and men respectively in urban areas. Rural women in three categories - 1. Self-employed (59.6% of total workers w.r.t. usual status of employment) 2. Regular wage/salaried employees (11.0%) 3. Casual labourers (29.3%)

According to the data of Basic Statistical Returns of Reserve bank of India, the percent of the bank accounts in Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCB) held by the female population is 31.88, 29.51, 31.43 and 30.44, in Rural, Semi- Urban, Urban and Metropolitan areas respectively.

The Time Use Survey Report 2019 shows that, on an average, 299 minutes were spent in a day by females at all India level for “Unpaid domestic service activities for household members” against 97 minutes spent by males on the same activity. Similar trends were observed both in rural and urban areas. Under the ‘all unpaid domestic services’ category, females are spending a major time on the activity - “Food and meals management and preparation” in rural as well as urban areas.

Although it looks promising to see more rural women in the workspace, the real reason seems more like a forced adoption of farms by women due to the trend of feminization of agriculture. Increasingly, men are moving out of agriculture, to be replaced by household women, who join the agricultural labour force and work on the land without having direct ownership for it. The agricultural sector is crippled by disguised unemployment, and this trend adds to the disguise of unpaid family women working on farms due to the void left by males, leading to underrating of the recognition of their efforts. The amount of time women spend on activities that are unpaid is a trade-off for the time which could have been spent on some paid activities i.e. they contribute more to household work which goes non-remunerated. Financial independence has been recognised as one important way in which women can mobilise their efforts and make them count; SHGs being one prime example of the value of this intervention.

4. Political Status

The highest women participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions was observed in the state of Rajasthan (56.49%) followed by Uttarakhand (55.66%) and Chhattisgarh (54.78%).

Percentage turnout for female voters in the 2019 general elections was more than 60% in all the States/UTs except in the States/UTs of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Jammu & Kashmir. The representation of women in the Central Council of Ministers has declined over the years and the proportion of women ministers is 9.26% in 2020. There is an upward trend in the number of female candidates contested as well as elected from the 14th to the 17th Lok Sabha General Election.

Women show a very gradual rate of development of participation in decision making roles like political and leadership positions. The increased burden on working women has been starkly highlighted during the pandemic when several women had to leave their jobs for managing affairs of the family as well. Sectors needing more representation like environment and sustainability, technology and innovation should seek increasing contributions from women.

Active participation of the private sector to enable safer and better institutions for women should be a priority at the ecosystem level. The potential contribution by women can be much higher if the right players intervene and aim at addressing the structural and systemic challenges these women face.

Source:

[Women & Men](#) in India - Latest 2020 Report based on data from the [Periodic Labour Force Survey \(PLFS\) report 2019-20](#)