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**An Assessment on Women's Work Participation
and Economic Equality**

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Beginning of Agriculture and Women

In the history of human civilization, the advent of agriculture was the beginning of the settled life. With the settlement of erstwhile nomadic people, the relationship of family, kinship and community crystallized with time between different sexes and age groups. Thus the beginning of agriculture had a special significance in defining and determining the status, role and contribution of women thorough out the world. Since then women play a different role in their home, viz., activities as wives in their personal lives, as mother responsible for the development of their children and as homemakers in charge of the operation of their homes. In addition, women also played a pivotal role in agriculture and livestock management. In modern agriculture too, women continued to share a number of farm operations with men.

Tradition and Roles of Women

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An Assessment on Women's Work Participation and Economic Equality

Traditionally, women had no definite role in majority of family affairs system. The situation not seems to be changing considerably in spite of the changing scenario in the society. The patriarchal system of the family life, which has been in voyage since time immemorial, has downgraded women. The work of women at home includes collection of firewood, bringing water from long distances and helping in the family or in the fields and third type of work is not recognized because they are not paid for it. The work burden on women is extreme.

Srivatsava (1985) reported that women irrespective of land, status of the family provide 14 to 18 hours of productivity physical labour in different chores. The energy spent by them in performing these is more than it is physically feasible for them to spend particularly in a below subsistence level of living. Indian women work for 69 hours a week, while men work 59 hours per week. It is estimated that the average hours of unpaid work done by women outside their home ranges from 6.1 to 7.5 per day, with some women working for 10 hours and more.

Women in Current Work Force

For equal participation of women in the work force, Ministry of Labour had set up a Women Labour Cell in 1975 with the intention to focus the condition of working women and bring improvement in them. Yet the work participation of women in both organized and unorganized sector is yet to improve.

The gradual realization of self resulted with women's movements for the enlistment of women. Men and women are indispensable part of humankind. They are supplementary and complementary to each other; neither can stand-alone. The development of community, society or nation in any field, be it social, economic, political or spiritual, depends on both men and women. Women are the mothers of race and provide the liaison between generations.

Constitutional Rights of Women in India

Indian Constitutional Rights define the position of women in a State. It defines the political, social and economic ways of living and the status of women. The Constitution of India not only guarantees equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt positive measures in favour of women for neutralising the socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages. Rights to equality are a fundamental Right.

But in practical, it could be seen that the society from the very beginning, being very backward in thinking regarding the freedom of women. Nehru once said "To awaken people it is the women who must be awakened, once she is on move the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves" (Mishra, 1993).

The role of women has to be visualized as described in the words of Rabindranath Tagore in *Chitra*. “The heroine speaks to Arjuna, I am no goddess to be worshipped, not yet the subject of common pity to be brushed aside, keep me by your side, in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self”. Today women are educated, employed and economically independent with decision making power.

Undervaluing Women’s Contributions

The workingwomen of today represent a new dimension of Indian womanhood. They are women dedicated to their job and challenge the changing society as well as committed to their dear and near one’s. The prosperity and growth of nation depends on the status and development of women as they not only constitute nearly half of the population, but also influence growth of remaining half of the population. The crucial role of women in household activities, agriculture and allied occupations however has been underestimated and undervalued. Women take up different works to eke out their livelihood and the majority of the rural women depend on agriculture, which is the major occupation in unorganized sector in India.

The Real Issue

The real issue therefore, is more serious despite their enrolment in agricultural work in such a long magnitude, they have not been actively involved in the main stream of development and there is hardly any appreciation and recognition of their extensive contribution. By and large, they have remained as “invisible workers”.

Women work participation in rural areas even today remains confined to household activities and women are considered as a helping hand to their men folk in agricultural and allied activities. Many of these labourers are landless, homeless and belong to the socially depressed class of the society.

Hence, this paper focuses on the work participation of the women in various sectors and across the States. The study is based on State wise data of main and marginal workers from Census of India 1991 and 2001, which constitute the inference.

Discussion

Women’s rights are nationally accepted and constitutionally guaranteed to uplift them through socio-economic and educational opportunities to satisfy the constitutional goal of equality and social justice. Their development over the past decades is being pursued through positive discrimination in their favour in education, employment, governance and other areas. But women’s rights, though granted in theory gradually during 21st century, their implementation became slow and dilatory. The socio-economic, political and legal

changes have brought changes in the status of women in the country. Many of these changes are both in a positive as well as in a negative direction such as a rapid increase in female life expectancy and literacy, participation at grass root level democracy and increasing awareness about rights and access to productive resources. Moreover, women bear a highly disproportionate share of the overall burden of work.

The Plight of Working Women

The plight of working women is worse than that of men as they have to perform double and sometimes triple duty, namely, full-time duty at work place, looking after children and performing the household course-cooking, cleaning, washing and sometimes shopping also. Work related inequalities result from the fact that for the same nature of workwomen are paid less as compared to their male counterparts (Dreze, 1997).

Women in Workforce: Some Statistics

Women form an important part of the Indian Workforce. According to the information provided by the Registrar General of India, the work participation rate for women was 25.7 per cent in 2001. This is an improvement from 22.3 per cent in 1991 i.e., a slight increase of up to 3.4 per cent. The two important aspects that require mention are that while there has been an improvement in the work participation rate of women, it continues to be substantially less in comparison to the work participation rate of men.

Among the rural population in the year 1991 female work participation is only 26.8 to that of male. In the year 2001 the rate has increased to 31.0. Moreover, there seem to be a rural urban divide in so far as work participation of women is concerned. Among the urban population the female work participation rate was 9.2 in the year 1991, which shows the slight increase to the rate of 11.6 during the year 2001. In rural areas women are mainly cultivators and agricultural labourers. In the urban areas 80 per cent of the women workers are in the unorganized sectors such as household, industry, petty traders and services, and building and constructions.

Table 1. Work Participation Rate by Sex – 1991 and 2001 Census

Place of Residence	1991		2001	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Rural	26.8	52.6	31.0	52.4
Urban	9.2	48.9	11.6	50.9
Total	22.3	51.6	25.7	51.9

Source: Census of India, 1991 & 2001

Application of Relevant Laws and Implications of Statistics

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According to an estimate by the National Commission on Self Employed Women (1988); of the total women workers about 94 per cent are in Informal or Unorganised sector whereas just 6 per cent of them are in organized /formal sector.

Only the women in the organized sector can be considered to be protected by the labour laws while the women in the unorganized sector are marked with high incidence of casual labour doing intermittent jobs at extremely low wages, total lack of job security and social benefits, long hours of work, unsatisfactory working and living conditions. Thus the hours spend by the women in economic activities is devoted to unpaid work that largely remains unrecognized.

According to the Census report it is observed that the Percentage distribution of women in organized and public sector (Table 2) are comparatively low both in the year 1991 and 2001. In the year 1991 the percentage distribution of female work participation in the organized sector is only 14.2, which has increased to 17.1 per cent during the year 2001. A similar result is observed in the public sector too. Thus across the census period there seems to be no absolute change in women's work participation between the organized and public sector.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Women in Organized and Public Sectors

Sector	1991		2001	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Organized Sector	14.2	85.8	17.1	82.9
Public Sector	12.6	87.4	14.4	85.6

Source: Census of India, 1991 & 2001

Male versus Female Workers

In India according to 2001 census, working population (Table 3) of both male and female is 40.2 million persons. Female workers comprise only 1.2. million persons. The state wise data on female main workers inferred that Maharashtra shows the highest female main workers (1.03 million) followed by Andhra Pradesh (95.8 Lakh), Tamil Nadu (74.5 Lakh) and Karnataka (54.6 Lakh). Kerala shows the least participation of female main workers of 17.7 lakh. In case of female marginal workers the state wise distribution shows that Uttar Pradesh has the highest participation of female marginal workers (80.0 Lakh) followed by Madhya Pradesh (45.5 Lakh) and Rajasthan (44.7 Lakh).

Table 3: Distribution of Population by Working Category

	Main Worker	Marginal Worker	Total Worker
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State	Persons	Females	Persons	Females	Persons	Females
India	313004983	72857170	89229741	54363078	402234724	127220248
Rajasthan	17436888	4595570	6329767	4475283	23766655	9070853
Uttar Pradesh	39337649	4999389	14646175	8002877	53983824	13002266
Bihar	21052875	3541857	6921731	3949746	27974606	7491603
West Bengal	23023583	3528612	6458107	3565034	29481690	7093646
Madhya Pradesh	19102572	5046293	6690947	4552858	25793519	9599151
Maharashtra	34748053	10331758	6425298	3989498	41173351	14321256
Andhra Pradesh	29040873	9585381	5852986	3646286	34893859	13231667
Karnataka	19364759	5467914	4170032	2831522	23534791	8299436
Kerala	8236973	1776280	2046914	741962	10283887	2518242
Tamil Nadu	23757783	7454473	4120499	2323412	27878282	9777885

Source: Primary Census Abstract: Census of India 2001

As noted in the case of main workers in Kerala, female marginal workers show the least participation of 7.4 lakh persons. Among the southern states Kerala is the least populated state has the lowest working population (10.2 million). Hence both the main and marginal female workers are low when compared to that of other states. Moreover it is generalized that the working age group of male members in Kerala are migrated to foreign countries, which influences the high standard of living of women and thus reflected in the female work participation.

Distribution of Workers

Distribution of main workers to population by State is provided in Table 4. This infers that in India the female main workers have declined from 18.07 in 1991 census to 16.77 in 2001 census. Though the same result was observed across the states, compare to northern parts of the country southern region evidenced the participation of more female main workers. Main workers are classified by industrial category are provided in Table 5.

Table 4: Distribution of Main Workers to Population by State

State	1991 Census		2001 Census	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
India	51.29	18.07	44.51	16.77
Rajasthan	48.91	15.59	43.70	19.99
Uttar Pradesh	49.38	9.14	38.19	7.26
Bihar	48.12	11.26	40.17	9.75
West Bengal	51.00	8.83	46.00	8.87

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Madhya Pradesh	52.98	27.21	45.33	21.78
Maharashtra	51.67	36.30	47.78	33.57
Andhra Pradesh	57.31	37.28	51.93	30.87
Karnataka	55.20	27.71	52.30	24.66
Kerala	44.21	13.42	40.86	10.78
Tamil Nadu	57.16	32.89	51.79	30.08

Source: Census of India 2001

Table 5: Main Workers Classified by Industrial Category, India 2001 Census

Industrial Category	Female Workers
Agriculture, Hunting & Forests, Fishing	3617948
Manufacturing and repairs	4381139
Mining and Quarrying	262928
Electricity, Gas and Water Supply	67451
Construction	1064350
Wholesale and Retail Trade	1857666
Hotels and Restaurants	215187
Transport, Storage and Communication	368279
Financial Intermediation, Real estate, Renting and Business Activities	755870
	7763064
Public Administration & Defence, Social Security, Health & Social Work, Social and Personal Service Activities, Private Households with Employed Persons	

Source: Census of India 2001

Generally, the prevalence of female work participation in public sector is common against other private sectors. It is true in the case of female workers according to 2001 census. The data shows that majority (77.6 lakh) of the female workers are engaged in public administration, defence, education, security, health and social work and private household with employed persons, closely followed by 43.8 lakh female workers engaged in manufacturing and repair works.

Though India is a agrarian society the participation of female in agriculture, hunting and forestry, fishing are evidenced a record in third place (36.2 lakhs). Involvement of women in wholesale and retail trade and construction is higher to that of the male dominated industrial categories like financial intermediation, real estate, renting and business (7.6 lakhs), transport, storage and communication (3.7 lakh), hotel and

restaurant (2.2 lakh) and hazardous categories like electricity, gas and water supply (0.6 lakh).

Though the government and service sectors encourage women to participate in all endeavors, it is evidence that their work participation is considerably low to that of male members on the whole. Moreover, among the working categorical areas the female work participation is comparatively low in risk-oriented sectors and more in service sectors.

Conclusion

India generally is a patriarchal society where male members head most of the works. Female-headed works are comparatively low. Women act as workers but do not take part in decision-making authority. This is evidenced that in India though there is an improvement in standard of work participation from the year 1991 to 2001 still their participation in main works are comparatively low and found reluctant change. Women are still far behind from the reach of empowerment. They are still in inhibition to take part in hazardous occupation like electricity, transport, water etc., where male domination is more.

Women's empowerment is not a concern of women alone it is on part of both men and women. This process involves sincerity, earnestness, capacity and capability of the human. Women's empowerment is a complex issue having many societal ramifications, women alone cannot solve it, men also should understand the need for women's empowerment and support their cause.

Women should learn to articulate their needs and rights in clear terms and work for them without at the same time upsetting the domestic harmony and family life. They have to work tirelessly in their march towards their empowerment and a life with an identity of their own.

The attitude towards women needs to be changed to make women part and parcel of the family as well as society on the whole by carving out an important place for them. Men have built an impression that women are inferior and they cannot face emerging situations. This attitude has to be changed through positive approach of equality in their rights. Thus they need to be motivated/encouraged in work participation level. The work participation of women to gainful economic equality has to be raised by enhancing their rights. The goal of the development could be achieved only by the overall improvement in the quality of women.

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