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Problems of agriculture women labour in Bihar

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Abstract

Agriculture is the first culture that man learnt to practice as a means of livelihood. It is the primary sector of any economy either it is developed or developing. Agriculture is considered the backbone of the Bihar's rural economy and is a family enterprise and an important engine of rural growth and poverty reduction. Bihar's economic security is heavily dependent on agriculture and in terms of employment; it is the most important source, especially for rural women. Women in India are the backbone of the society and important resource in agriculture and rural economy. They make essential contributions to the agricultural development and allied and household activities and pursue multiple livelihood strategies. These activities include producing agricultural crop, cleaning animals, preparing food, working in rural enterprises, engaging in trade and marketing, caring family members and maintaining their homes. About 63% of all economically active men are engaged in agriculture as compared to 78% of women. Traditionally, women have always played an important role in agriculture- as farmers, co-farmers, wage labours and managers of farms. They have conventionally been producers of food from seed to kitchen. Women carry heavier work burden in food production, however due to gender discrimination, get lower returns for their work. The multiple role of women leads to a significant contribution in real terms to the productive system. But it is unfortunate that her role is not adequately recognized and properly her contribution not qualified in the male- dominated society.

Keywords: Agriculture, employment, women, production, livelihood and strategies

Introduction

Agriculture is the first culture that man learnt to practice as a means of livelihood. It is the primary sector of any economy either it is developed or developing. Agriculture is considered the backbone of the Bihar's rural economy and is a family enterprise and an important engine of rural growth and poverty reduction. Bihar's economic security is heavily dependent on agriculture and in terms of employment; it is the most important source, especially for rural women. Women in India are the backbone of the society and important resource in agriculture and rural economy. They make essential contributions to the agricultural development and allied and household activities and pursue multiple livelihood strategies. These activities include producing agricultural crop, cleaning animals, preparing food, working in rural enterprises, engaging in trade and marketing, caring family members and maintaining their homes. About 63% of all economically active men are engaged in agriculture as compared to 78% of women. Traditionally, women have always played an important role in agriculture- as farmers, co-farmers, wage labours and managers of farms. They have conventionally been producers of food from seed to kitchen. Women carry heavier work burden in food production, however due to gender discrimination, get lower returns for their work. The multiple role of women leads to a significant contribution in real terms to the productive system. But it is unfortunate that her role is not adequately recognized and properly her contribution not qualified in the male- dominated society. They have been underrepresented in the development process. Despite their dominance of the labour force, women in India still face extreme disadvantage in terms of pay, land rights and representation in local farmers' organizations. Apart from this, women face many challenges due to limited access to productive resources in agricultural production which prevent them in enhancing their productivity.

Women play multidimensional role in sustainable development of economy through their contribution in household and agricultural activities. They contribute in every field of agriculture-from land preparation to harvesting of crops.

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Apart from this, they also manage allied activities like dairy cattle, fodder collection, beekeeping, mushroom production, goat rearing and poultry etc. They contribute substantially in family income generation directly thus help enhancing social status of their families. Income and its source are important measures to understand the level of households' living standard and ways to achieve that level. Income along with households' expenditure and possessions reveal aspects of inequality. Women play prime role in traditional farming from manual farm activities to agro-processing to homemaking. On various occasions, women have proved that they can step up farm modernization using modern farm implements, however contribution are less recognized.

The gender composition of agricultural wage labour is changing significantly in the era of globalisation. 'Feminisation' of agricultural wage labour is a result of a combination of regionally diverse processes which in many regions began well before the 1990s. In paddy cultivating regions especially, women's labour has always been the major basis of production. But the proportion among women counted as 'main workers' who are agricultural labourers has increased rapidly in relation to that among men since the early 1960s. This trend has been further intensified by the New Economic Policies since the early 1990s. In particular, the collapse of rural non-farm employment and the growing crisis in the agricultural sector is leading to massive long-term, long-distance migration by men from rural poor households in areas like Bihar., leaving women to survive through agricultural wage labour. Women's dependence on agricultural wage labour as a source of income has also increased in these regions with the destruction of many household based industries employing mainly women.

Women have participated actively in wage struggles. These struggles have generally been launched during the periods of peak labour demand in areas where rice is the major crop, these are paddy transplanting and paddy harvesting, in which women participate heavily. It has therefore frequently been women who have initially placed wage demands before employers, and subsequently collectively refused to work.

And women's participation has gone much further than this, in Bihar for example, women have also led marches of thousands to physically occupy land for redistribution, and have been at the forefront of resistance and protest against the repression unleashed by the landowners. Women mobilised thousands in a sustained struggle for equal wages. Some months ago when activists in Central Bihar were holding discussions with labourers in different villages about the formation for the first time of a separate organisation for agricultural labourers, the Khet Mazdoor Sabha, they found that women were often the most enthusiastic. They felt that here at last was an organisation that would represent their specific needs and demands. Even in households where men showed little interest, women came forward to join the organisation. And they encouraged their daughters to join - when the men would say 'what is the point, she will be going to another village once she is married' the women responded that 'when she goes, she will take part in the organisation there'.

Review of literature

Review of related literature makes the investigator fully aware with the previous work that has been done. It also

provides an opportunity of gaining insight into the method, measures, subject and approaches employed.

Pattnaik *et al.* (2017) ^[2] have examined the trends in participation of women in agriculture in India and its states using Census data. They find substantial variation in dependence on agricultural employment across states. A regression analysis across states shows that women's participation in agriculture is negatively related with the size of holding and positively related with poverty levels. They conclude that women's participation in agriculture is higher when the family and the agriculture are less advantageous for livelihoods.

Krishnaraj & Shah (2014) ^[1] in patriarchal societies, men are assigned those types of activity which have a direct exchange value and therefore the work of men is considered more useful and that of women is considered less prestigious in the social hierarchy. Such job segregation has several consequences for female workers as it creates a disparity in wage rate, brings down the bargaining power of women workers and reduces them to state of marginal, intermittent or reserve labour which is highly unorganized (Sunder, 1981; Mies, 1980). It has direct impact on the status of female in the family and society thereby affecting decision making power of women within the household.

Narasimha Reddy and Venkatanarayana (2013) ^[3] have examined the changing nature of labour use in rice cultivation in the state Andhra Pradesh. Using NSS data they show that the number of females self-employed in agriculture has declined from 10.6 million in 1993-94 to 7.7 million in 2009-10. There was a sharp increase in casual labour engaged in agriculture. Family and casual labour used for per hectare of rice cultivation has also shown a declining trend in Andhra Pradesh during the period 1990-91 and 2009-10. The trend in gender-wise labour use in rice cultivation in Andhra Pradesh between 2005 and 2011 indicate that both the male and female labour use is declining. However, the rate of decline is relatively faster with respect female labour than that of male counterpart. Two operations that have shown a noticeable decline in their share during the period are harvesting and threshing/winnowing. Increasing mechanisation of female labour intense operations such as harvesting could be possible explanation for the declining share of female labour in rice cultivation.

Methodology

This is a Descriptive as well as Analytical type of research in nature. This study is purely based on secondary data. The secondary data was collected from various sources such as Journals, Articles, RBI publications, Ministry of Finance publications.

Result and discussion

The share of agricultural workers in total workforce is presented in Table 2. The table revealed that share of agricultural work force in total workforce has declined from 47.98% in 2001 to 27.46% in 2011. Women's share has also come down from 16.57 % to 6.23% in as per census of 2011. The decline could be due to increase in literacy rate among women, as literate women are getting engaged in other vocations like SHG's, government and private jobs. Work participation in public and private sector has improved the status of women and socio-economic background of family has also improved.

Table 1: Share of Agricultural workers in total workforce

Year	Particulars	Work force (lakh)	Agricultural work force (Lakh)	Gender wise participation in total workforce (%)	Participation of agricultural workforce to total work force (%)
2001	Total	279.74	134.22	100.00	47.98
	Female	74.91	46.87	26.78	16.57
	Male	204.83	128.16	73.22	45.81
2011	Total	347.25	95.37	100.00	27.46
	Female	95.28	21.64	27.44	6.23
	Male	252.22	73.73	72.56	21.23

Source: Census 2011 data for Bihar.

Table 2: Total workers in agriculture in Bihar

Particulars	2011 (in lakh)			
	Total	Rural	Urban	
Cultivators	Total	54.13	52.61	1.52
	Female	7.24	7.09	0.14
	Male	46.89	45.51	1.37
Agricultural labour	Total	95.37	92.26	3.12
	Female	21.64	21.13	0.51
	Male	73.73	71.13	2.60
Total Agricultural workers	Total	149.50	144.87	4.64
	Female	28.88	28.22	0.65
	Male	120.62	116.64	3.97
Total Work force	Total	347.25	313.60	33.65
	Female	95.03	89.23	5.79
	Male	252.22	224.37	27.85
% of female/male in total agricultural work force	Female	19.32	19.48	14.01
	Male	80.68	80.51	85.56

Source: Census 2011 data for Bihar.

The increase in farm land holdings a consistent trend since the 1970s, has been slowing down in the past 20 years but there is a rise in the number of female land holders, a possible indicator of higher involvement in farm activities, the provisional agriculture census 2015-16, has revealed. The trend may reflect migration of men to cities for non-agricultural activities and also explain slowing down of land division as rural people seek alternate livelihoods. The figures show landholdings have doubled in past 45 years (from 71 million in 1970-71 to 146 million in 2015-16), resulting in decline in average size of farms by more than 50%, a real worry for policy-makers as this makes agriculture un-remunerative for farmers.

The gender wise worker participation in agriculture in rural and urban Bihar is presented in Table 3. The table reflected that as per census 2011, out of total 54.13 lakh cultivators in the state women cultivators were only 7.24 lakh with majority 7.09 lakhs living in rural area of the state. The share of female agricultural workforce in total agricultural workforce was estimated to be 19.32% in the state. Female agricultural workers in total agricultural worker were computed to be 19.48% and 14.01%, for rural and urban areas, respectively.

Participation of women in different agricultural operations

Participation of women in different activities of agricultural operation was estimated using plot level data of Cost of Cultivation Scheme for the year 2013-14 for the state of Bihar and the findings thus obtained are shown in Table 4. The findings pointed out that major participation of women labour was observed in harvesting of crops (14.56%) followed by sowing of crops (11.36%). Overall participation in all the farming operations was assessed to be 35.94%.

Table 3: Percentage participation of female in different agricultural activities in Bihar (%)

S. No.	Operations	Male	Female
1.	Land preparation	2.79	0.01
2.	Sowing	14.34	11.36
3.	Plant protection	0.25	0.00
4.	Manuring	6.32	0.07
5.	Interculturing	3.10	5.00
6.	Irrigation	10.34	0.06
7.	Harvesting	16.46	14.56
8.	Threshing /Winnowing	9.68	4.85
9.	Transport on farm	0.78	0.01
10.	Total	64.06	35.94

Source: Computed from plot level data of Cost of Cultivation Scheme for Bihar of 2013-14.

Ownership of land resources is another issue confronting the women farmers in Bihar. Female land holdings accounted for 8.50 lakh ha in the state (Table 5) which constituted only 13.31% of the total land holdings 66.88 lakh ha of the state. Out of total marginal land holding accounted 14.55% followed by small 12.82%. Total share of male in landholdings in the state was recorded 86.27% which reflected dominance of male in the society. Meena *et al.*, 2018 reported that in Madhubani district of Bihar despite low resources at their disposal women headed households performed all the agricultural operations including taking crucial managerial decisions.

Women agricultural labourers are facing a crisis of employment

A feature of the globalisation of Indian agriculture has been an acute employment shortage for those dependent on agricultural wage labour for survival and this has hit women hardest. The collapse of non-farm rural employment, the

crisis faced by small cultivators, and the decline in access to land among the rural poor have all contributed to the increasing numbers of agricultural labourers. The overall agrarian crisis has left the rural economy unable to cope with natural disasters like drought and much of the burden is borne by poor and landless women labourers. In addition, in several areas where women have successfully fought for wage increases, employers have attempted to undermine these struggles by introducing harvesters, and by bringing in male workers from outside to do paddy transplanting (traditionally done by women) on a contract basis. For example in Bhabhua district in Bihar, the employment available to women in transplanting and harvesting has declined from one-and-a-half months per year five years back to only 5-10 days in some villages. However women are actively resisting these moves and demanding that where there are enough women to harvest, harvester combines should be prohibited. In places where employers who used harvesters called women to do the weeding, they refused, telling them to invent machines to do the weeding too!

Patriarchal oppression intensifies the exploitation of women agricultural labourers by their employers. Patriarchal values and relationships legitimise the exploitation of women labourers. In Bihar, whereas the official minimum wage for agricultural labour is Rs.300 per day, an AIPWA workshop in which women from 15 districts participated revealed that the wages for transplanting work have increased very slowly. Even such increases have occurred only in areas where struggles have taken place. Women are in general paid lower wages and face worse working conditions than their male counterparts. Men workers are generally also given a meal, whereas women are not, even though women often have to bring young children with them to work. The only areas where men and women receive equal wages are those where wages are extremely low. Unequal wages are justified on the basis that women's work is "less arduous" or women are "less efficient" even though this is evidently not the case.

For many women agricultural labourers, sexual harassment and abuse by employers or other members of the landowning classes is a daily occurrence. This has been a key issue around which struggles have taken place. Global capital is incorporating existing pattern of exploitation of women agricultural labourers and adapting them to its own needs as global capital increasingly penetrates Indian agriculture it incorporates existing feudal and patriarchal forms and patterns of exploitation and reshapes and adapts them.

Sexual violence against women agricultural labourers

In many regions, men of the dominant landowning groups have considered it their birthright to sexually abuse and even rape poor rural women. This has been a central issue for labourers' movements and in areas like central Bihar where there is a long history of organising, women testify that landowners no longer dare to routinely commit such crimes. However acute violence against women is now being used by feudal forces and the state as a means to crush resistance and attempt to maintain the status quo. For example in the ongoing movement for land redistribution and minimum wages taking place in West Champaran district of Bihar, the police have particularly targeted women, raiding homes, dragging women out, pulling off

their clothes and beating them up with rifle butts and lathis and arresting them.

The most extreme and inhuman forms of violence against women were witnessed in the Bathani Tola and Laxmanpur Bathe massacres carried out against poor agricultural labourer families in Bihar by the notorious landowners armed gang, the Ranvir Sena. The Ranvir Sena targeted women as those who would "give birth to Naxalites" and their children who would "grow up to be Naxalites" for the most horrendous mutilation and murder. The Ranvir Sena has the stated goal of 'uprooting the red flag from Indian soil'. The links are made explicit in the recent formation of the 'Jai Shri Ram Sena' in the Bihar.

The struggles of women agricultural labourers lead to challenges to domestic gender relations women labourers' involvement in movements for change has inevitably led to their questioning oppressive domestic relations within the home. Very often these challenges begin with the woman's determination to be actively involved in the movement and her resistance to her husband and in-laws who attempt to prevent her.

In Bihar, women have refused to continue to tolerate domestic violence and have challenged men publicly on this issue. In Bihar we have found that the emergence of women activists at a village level itself has a profound impact in the context of a deeply feudal and patriarchal society. When women see women and men working as equals in the movement and particularly when they experience this themselves, the idea that gender equality in day to day life is possible takes root. Women become determined to fight inequality oppression on many different levels, using whatever means necessary.

Demands raised by women agricultural labourers

- Implementation of statutory minimum wages and equal wages for women and men.
- A comprehensive legislation providing protection to agricultural labourers and guaranteeing them 100 days work per year (there are still no labour laws relating to agricultural labourers, and at best they are recognised as an unorganised sector occupational category for minimum wages, which, in any case, are never enforced).
- Social Security measures for agricultural labourers at par with other workers, including 3 months maternity leave.
- No use of harvesters without assured alternative employment; formation of committees of owners, workers and the administration to monitor such conditional and restricted use of harvesters.
- Distribution of land pattas (titles) in the name of wife and husband jointly.
- Implementation of the ban on the Ranvir Sena and seizing of all arms from them. Giving licensed arms for self defence to poor rural women.
- Effective and transparent implementation of DWACRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) and other schemes for women in the rural areas.

Conclusions

In Bihar about 30.39% of the total female agricultural workforce of total female work force is engaged in farming occupation. The share of female agricultural workforce in total agricultural workforce was estimated to be 19.32% in

the state. Female agricultural workers in total agricultural worker were computed to be 19.48% and 14.01%, for rural and urban areas, respectively. Major participation of women labour was observed in harvesting of crops (14.56%) followed by sowing of crops (11.36%). Overall participation in all the farming operations was assessed to be 35.94%. Thus, women play a key role in the agricultural activities of the state.

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