



C O N F E R E N C E

Conference on Women's Work in Rural Economies: A Report

FAS Team*

The Conference on Women's Work in Rural Economies (hereafter Conference) organised by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS) took place in Vayalar, Kerala from November 30 to December 2, 2018. Besides the inaugural session on the evening of November 30 and the closing session on December 2 afternoon, there were ten technical sessions in which a total of 36 presentations were made. Most presentations were of 20 minutes' duration. A good mix of senior scholars and activists as well as younger scholars participated in the Conference.

The themes discussed at the Conference included conceptual and measurement issues related to women's work, historical perspectives on women's work, women in the plantation economy, changes in the nature and quantum of women's work in agriculture and allied activities, the pluriactivity of rural working women, and rural women and migration.

In her inaugural address to the Conference, Brinda Karat noted that the work force participation rate (WFPR) of women is grossly underestimated in many surveys, including sources of large-scale official data. These estimates have been interpreted by some scholars as showing that women have withdrawn from the labour force because of higher household incomes or because of an increase in the years spent in formal (including tertiary) education. Such readings miss the crisis of employment that women face and the invisibility of the work in which they are engaged. Brinda Karat also drew attention to the importance of looking not only at the quantum of employment, but also at the quality of employment that women receive. In particular, the intensity of work that women have to endure in their struggle for survival needs careful empirical analysis. Can one, for instance, develop measures of energy expended by female workers in specific tasks and not merely record the time spent and the wage received?

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A key theme of the Conference concerned conceptual and measurement issues in the definition of “work,” the distinction between “work” and “employment,” and issues in inferring female workforce participation rates from typical large scale employment-unemployment surveys.

In the session immediately following the inaugural, there were three presentations. Indira Hirway made a presentation on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Resolution, 2013, concerning statistics of work, employment, and labour underutilisation. The new ILO definition broadened the concept of work while the definition of employment was made narrow. This was done because including multiple activities under the ambit of work began to interfere with employment planning. According to the new definition, the categories of work are based on whether the output of the work is sold in the market or used for own consumption. Unpaid family workers who are working in household units producing goods for the market are considered to be employed, whereas they are not considered to be in employment when goods are not for sale. According to the new ILO conceptual framework, work is an activity performed within the reference week, for a minimum of one hour, and by persons of any sex and age in the working age group. Only activities that cannot be delegated to others (such as personal hygiene) and non-productive activities like begging and stealing were excluded from the definition of work.

Indira Hirway emphasised the importance of time-use studies as a tool to supplement labour force surveys and provide a more comprehensive understanding of women’s work. While labour force surveys need to be modified, time-use studies had to be conducted separately, and not merely as a module of labour force surveys.

In the second presentation of the session, Madhura Swaminathan discussed the results of a time-use study conducted by FAS. Data for two villages in Karnataka – Alabujanahalli, an irrigated village in Mandya district, and Siresandra, an unirrigated village in Kolar district – showed that, using the current weekly status definition of work, all women were workers in the harvest season and around 70 per cent were workers in the lean season. A seasonal shift in the employment status of women was evident in the dry village. However, there was no change in their total working hours across seasons. This can be explained by the negative correlation between the number of hours in production and in extended production. Those who worked longer in production worked fewer hours in extended production. In such cases the housework responsibilities were shouldered by other females in the households. It was also found that more educated and younger women were working less in production work in both the villages. Caste also played a role. For instance, Dalit women from manual worker households were invariably engaged in production work.

In the third presentation, Wendy Olsen reported on the findings from a three-year study titled “Adult Women’s and Men’s Time-Use and Discussions of Work in Rural India and Bangladesh: Reframing Key Stylised Facts.” The study covered

900 households, 15 per cent of which were female-headed households in Bangladesh and India.

On the second day of the Conference, Yoshifumi Usami discussed conceptual and measurement problems of secondary data sources such as the Employment and Unemployment Surveys (EUS) of National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) in measuring female work participation rates (FWPR) in rural India. The data show a decline in FWPR between 2004–05 and 2011–12. Neoclassical economists attribute this to the so-called “income effect.” This interpretation is clearly contestable. Usami and his collaborators pointed out an important source of underestimation in the EUS of women’s participation rates (this issue, Usami *et al.* 2019). According to NSSO data, none of the workers engaged in taking care of animals were categorised as workers. This is primarily because of recording errors when collecting data given that animal husbandry is not stable and continuous work. Animal husbandry is an extension of housework for women. In fact, however, it is a very important supplementary economic activity, especially for landless labourers as well as marginal and small farmers. Usami and his collaborators concluded that the decline of FWPR since 2004–05 decelerated but continued till 2015–16. They also made the point that work participation rate including animal husbandry is more appropriate than the standard measure used by the NSSO (usual principal and subsidiary status) for measuring women’s participation in economic activity.

V. K. Ramachandran presented a paper on variations in patterns of female work in rural India across socio-economic classes, drawing on the rich empirical material from FAS surveys of select villages across several states of India. In all the villages surveyed, poor and middle peasant households hired in labour for specific agricultural operations. In many instances, the extent of labour hired in by poor or middle peasant households was found to be greater than that of family labour performed. In general, this was truer for female labour than for male hired labour. Female family labour was shifting from agriculture to animal husbandry while, on the farm, female hired labour was displacing female family labour.

The paper by Ramachandran and his collaborators also discussed how the market for hired labour in agriculture has broadened with more sections than earlier participating in wage employment. These include a large new section of peasant women as well. The fact that a significant share of wage labour, especially female wage labour, in the countryside is provided by members of poor and small peasant households points to the potential for strengthening the worker-peasant alliance in the struggle for a democratic transformation.

The Conference explored the theme of changing employment patterns of women and their implications for how women’s work is getting restructured. There were papers on women in the plantation economy and in rice cultivation. Questions of feminisation and casualisation of female labour in agriculture were the subject matter of some

presentations. There were papers based on case studies including a paper on India by R. Rengalakshmi and on Japan by Tamaki Kashio. These discussed the effect of mechanisation of certain agricultural operations on the employment of female agricultural workers. Madhavi Jha's paper, explored women's labour in Famine Public Works in rural India in the nineteenth century, a period of recurrent famines. Her work detailed the presence of women workers in public works such as the construction of roads, canals, railways, tanks, and other structures. It also traced the history of gender differential in wages, famine wages, and family wages in light of the differing status of women as individual workers and as family wage earners during periods of famine. The paper by R. Najeeb was a historical study of the migration of Mappila Muslim women workers to tea plantations in Wayanad district, Kerala. It discussed how the *kangani* (overseer-cum-labour contractor) system played a significant role in the transition of migrant Mappila women from agriculture to plantation work. An important instrument of this transition was the payment of wages to women workers.

The paper by S. Niyati focused on changing labour patterns in rice farming in seven villages surveyed by FAS between 2005 and 2011. Three of these villages were located in West Bengal and were surveyed in 2010. The other four villages were located in Andhra Pradesh (2005), Uttar Pradesh (2006), Karnataka (2009), and Punjab (2011). This paper noted a decline in female labour absorption in rice cultivation for the villages located in Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, and replacement of daily wage contracts by piece-rated ones, blurring, in the process, the gender division of tasks involved in crop operations. The paper has noted that mechanisation is occurring in specific operations, with mechanisation of threshing particularly reducing the use of female labour. Female labour absorption is also affected by class and caste status. Women from Scheduled Caste households are engaged both in work on own farms and in hired labour in rice farming.

The presentation by Ritika Goenka and Madhura Swaminathan was on drudgery in women's work. One side of the current debate examines the declining calorie intake among women workers as a result of economic distress and impoverishment while the other view holds that mechanisation and lower infection rates have reduced women's energy requirements. Based on time-use data, the authors find that the energy expenditure of rural women corresponds to very high activity levels. The paper by Nitya Rao studied the impact of women's agricultural work on their nutritional requirements. Her paper dealt with women's social reproduction and the gendering of care work and housework, using data collected by means of time-use study in two districts (Wardha, Maharashtra and Koraput, Odisha).

Papers on the plantation economy discussed the informalisation of work in the plantation sector and the differential impact of informalisation on men and women. These changes have affected women's work in terms of wages as well as access to employment benefits. Jeta Sankrityayana gave a detailed account of the tea

economy of Assam and the Dooars (this issue, Sankrityayna 2019), and the effects of growth in small tea gardens and bought-leaf factories on the working conditions of women workers. The paper by Ashmita Sharma and Karan Raut also studied small tea gardens in Assam. It found that recruitment was family-based. Unlike large tea gardens, small tea gardens do not have their own processing units. Private buyers bought tea leaf factories; these increased the work burden on women workers, since wage payment was task-rated, involved mandatory plucking, and no overtime wages. The demands made by trade unions of larger tea factories were ignored while small tea gardens were not bound by legislation pertaining to the plantation economy. The overall impact on the working conditions of labour in the plantation sector as a result of these changes was negative for women workers. Molly Chattopadhyay's paper on coffee plantations provided insights on the forms of exploitation of women workers in coffee plantations and high female worker-population ratios on plantations.

Discussions in the Conference also explored the implications of the shifts in employment patterns of women on the peasant movement in India and recognised the need to formulate gender-specific demands. State policies on labour movements in agriculture and the plantation sector were also discussed.

Agricultural labour is the single largest occupation in terms of the number of people employed. It is widely recognised that the wage labour force in Indian agriculture is among the most marginalised sections of the population. An issue of significant concern with respect to agricultural labour is that of gender differentials in wage rates. The paper by Arindam Das of FAS was an empirical analysis of wage rates for female workers in agriculture by crop and operation, based on data from Wage Rates in Rural India (WRI) and FAS data from eight villages across four states. The paper sought to examine trends in the gender gap in rural wage rates. It also sought to understand the factors underlying such differentials. The paper notes that 1998–99 to 2006–07 was a period of stagnation in rural wage rates for women and men across occupations and States. However, from 2006–07 to 2014–15, rural wage rates rose significantly for both women and men. At the all-India level, wage rates for females grew faster than for males. In nine States, female wage rates grew faster than wage rates for men for sowing, transplanting, and weeding. The gender gap in wage rates remained stagnant or widened from 1998–99 to 2005–06, but fell marginally from 2006–07 to 2013–14. After 2014, the gender gap has again begun to widen. The author argues that the changes in gender gap in wages as between females and males are also associated with changes in patterns of land use and of cropping, mechanisation and urbanisation as well as the rise of non-farm employment. While wage discrimination is sometimes attributed to the gender division of labour (“different wages for different tasks”), village-level data from FAS surveys show clear evidence of males being paid higher wages than females for similar tasks.

The presentation by Seema and Jayan Jose Thomas on low rates of female work participation in rural India found that there was no clear correlation between

female work participation rates (FWPR) and indicators of female empowerment such as female literacy or sex ratio. Instead, they argued that the decrease in FWPR could be attributed to the failure to distinguish between the categories of “self-employed in agriculture” and “attending to domestic duties alone.” Another reason could be the absence of suitable employment opportunities. The paper by Sukti Dasgupta and Fernanda Barcia de Mattos was a comparative analysis of women’s participation in non-farm work in India and Bangladesh. Official secondary data sources show that while agriculture in India is undergoing a process of defeminisation, women’s participation in agriculture in Bangladesh is on the rise. However, they found that, in both countries, women’s non-farm employment grew faster than farm employment and almost at the same rate as that of men.

Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal’s paper discussed the multiple forms of deprivation that Dalit women workers face. Participants also noted that the rates of unemployment and casual labour were higher among Dalit women than other women. Papers on the role of women in sectors allied to agriculture such as animal husbandry (R. Vijayamba), sericulture (Chandan Roy, Shruti Nagbhushan and Aparajita Bakshi), and floriculture (Sarai Miranda) were also presented. Nguyen Huu Minh presented a paper on rice cultivation in Vietnam. The paper argued that while women’s work in rice cultivation and orchards was substantial, men were the decision-makers. The paper discussed the decrease in dependence on men for decision-making in farming in regions of Vietnam where scientific knowledge among women cultivators had increased. Further, land entitlements, access to credit, and male migration were some of the other factors that contributed to increased decision-making among women cultivators.

An issue of importance across the world is that of child and adolescent labour in rural areas under neoliberal regimes. The paper on “Male and Female Child Labour Use in Floriculture in Rural Mexico” by Sarai Miranda focussed on this issue in the context of Mexico. It explored the conditions of female daily labourers, mainly adolescents and young persons, in the flower growing industry in Villa Guerrero in Mexico.

With access to land, machinery, other inputs and credit sources, female involvement in decision-making could potentially increase. Entitlements of women to land and other means of production were briefly touched up on in the context of Peru, Malawi, and in Kerala under the Kudumbashree Programme. The paper on Peru by Rosa Luz Durán was based on rural Living Standards Measurement Surveys. The data showed that the largest share of land was either jointly owned or owned by men. It was rare that only women owned land. However, in cases where land was registered formally and only in the name of females, husbands did not get involved in agriculture. Duran concluded that land ownership might not be sufficient to guarantee women their economic independence; that cultural norms can override property rights in both positive and negative ways. Non-cooperative models might

be better suited than cooperative models for describing interactions among household members. She also came to the conclusion that

while the fundamental importance of land ownership as a source of social and economic security for women is beyond discussion, the formal ownership of land does not seem to yield significant measurable effects on workload.

Haroon Akram-Lodhi presented a paper that examined the gender gap in agricultural productivity. The paper was based on data from nine villages in Malawi in sub-Saharan Africa, where there is increasing feminisation of farming but farms run by women are seen as less productive than others. This was explained using a mixed method of research on a heterogeneous group of men and women farmers cultivating land. It was observed that there was a difference in inputs and in production choices between farms run by men and farms run by women. Decomposition analysis showed that farms owned by women were characteristically smaller plots, with lower quality of land, less male labour, limited agricultural extension services, and lower inputs than farms owned by male farmers.

Qualitative research revealed certain factors that led to less productivity on female-managed farms. Unpaid work at home left less time for work on farms while gender-based violence further reduced time and resources for farming. Men took away the produce from women, which acted as a disincentive for women to invest. Women provided labour on their husband's land first and cultivation on their own plot was given less priority.

The Kudumbashree programme was started in Kerala for the economic and social empowerment of women. The presentation by K. Vijayam from Kudumbashree was on the structure of Kudumbashree, its model and mission, and the type of support they provide to joint liability groups (JLG) of women to lease in and cultivate land jointly. Following this presentation, Madhav Tipu Ramachandran and Arindam Das presented a case study of the Kudumbashree group cultivation initiative. It noted, among other things, that the levels of productivity and income in the group farms were significantly higher than the district averages. Productivity and income varied with cropping patterns, ecological region, and holding size. There was also a large variation in income across various Kudumbashree farming groups despite the groups being relatively similar with respect to caste composition, the education levels of farmers, levels of initial investment by groups, and the use of machinery and inputs. The paper pointed out that the Kudumbashree model provides independence in making financial decisions to women in farming. With joint liability groups, loss is socialised, an advantage when it comes to facing the consequences of crop failure. The paper also offered a number of suggestions to enable the initiative to better meet its objectives.

The foregoing papers dealt with some aspect of female entitlements and rights, in particular with issues of empowerment and decision-making with respect to

farming. While land entitlements increased female bargaining power within households and on farms, and led to economic empowerment, it also often had the consequence of increasing the work burden borne by women. The discussion highlighted the need for State intervention to provide childcare and other institutional support mechanisms for domestic work, as well as the need to struggle against patriarchal norms and practices that impose an unconscionably high burden of domestic and care work on women in households.

While almost all presentations in the Conference had policy implications, there were some papers that concentrated on government policy. Pallavi Chavan's excellent presentation on "Women's Access to Banking Services in India," was in this category.

The banking sector has undergone multiple policy changes over time starting with nationalisation and the policy on priority sector lending, to liberalisation and financial inclusion after 2005. Chavan's paper showed that the policy on financial inclusion has resulted in a much greater thrust on deposit mobilisation, and the mandate to have 25 per cent of the branches opened in unbanked rural areas has had a positive effect on expanding the rural banking network. However, the way this policy is structured has resulted in banking outlets that mobilise deposits for urban and non-agricultural activities rather than provide the rural population with important and essential banking services. The financial inclusion policy, now repackaged as Prime Minister's Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has the same emphasis on deposits but hardly any focus on credit. In 2015, there was a 13-point programme initiated by the government for public sector banks to have five per cent credit for women. It is necessary to pay attention to women's credit service needs because the gender gap in credit has been widening over time. Even after PMJDY, the percentage of women with access to credit has hardly changed. There has been absolute marginalisation and exclusion of women from access to credit services. The perception of women's credit as being essentially a subset of microfinance has hampered efforts to arrive at a proper understanding of the challenge of women's access to banking.

An important policy oriented presentation at the Conference was the study on "scheme workers" by K. Hemalata and Usha Rani. The paper covered women workers employed in various government schemes, including the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), National Health Mission (NHM), Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Eight million workers are employed by different government departments and most of them are women. However, the majority of them are not recognised as workers and the remuneration they receive is very low. Since most of them are contract workers, they do not receive social security benefits. Even the Supreme Court judgement denied them permanent worker status saying that they were social workers, "volunteers," and "activists" and did not work regularly.

Usha Rani pointed out how the hours of work for scheme workers were long (around nine hours a day), often involving travel within and outside the village. Many of them were also given responsibilities beyond their regular functions. ASHA workers, for example, were given responsibilities of conducting village-level surveys because of their familiarity with people of the village and Anganwadi workers were asked to collect food and material from NGOs for the Mid Day Meal scheme.¹ These additional responsibilities were not remunerated.

The paper by Kiran Moghe highlighted the need for a Domestic Workers Act, particularly in rural areas, to ensure that minimum wages are fixed. There is no measure for standardisation of wage rates for different kinds of tasks. Wages are very low and workers work long hours. A very important issue is migration and its implications for women, both as migrant workers and as those burdened with domestic and care functions. Indu Agnihotri and Indrani Mazumdar presented evidence from Odisha pertaining to women's migration.

The fact that domestic work, scheme work and migration for low-paid manual work seem to be among the most important avenues of employment for women from landless poor households, policy recommendations for these and other rural informal jobs led to detailed discussions at the Conference. Female workers form a large part of the categories of domestic workers, scheme workers, and migrant construction workers. They receive low wages and are subject to hard physical toil. State interventions such as the public provision of institutional childcare and mobile crèches, and social security benefits like minimum wages and health insurance are absolutely necessary to improve the working conditions of female workers.

LIST OF AUTHORS AND PRESENTATIONS

Agnihotri, Indu, and Mazumdar, Indrani, "A Note on Issues of Rural Women Migrating for Work."

Akram-Lodhi, Haroon, "The Gender Gap in Agricultural Productivity in Eastern and Southern Africa."

Bakshi, Aparajita, and Nagbhushan, Shruti, "Women's Work in Sericulture in Karnataka."

Chattopadhyay, Molly, "Women Workers in Coffee Plantations."

Chavan, Pallavi, "Women and Access to Credit."

Das, Arindam, "Gender Wage Differential in Rural India."

Das, Arindam, and Ramachandran, Madhav, "Women's Farming Groups in Kerala."

Dasgupta, Sukti, and de Mattos, Fernanda Barcia, "Non-farm Work, Determinants in Rural Asia, with Special Focus on Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India."

¹ ASHA stands for Accredited Social Health Activist.

Duran, Rosa Luz, "Female Land Rights and the Division of Labour Between Spouses in Rural Farm Households in Peru."

Goenka, Ritika, and Swaminathan, Madhura, "Drudgery and Women's Work."

Hemalata, K., and Rani, Usha, "Women Scheme Workers in Rural India."

Hirway, Indira, "Changes in Concepts of Work in the New ILO Definition."

Jack, Helen, "Challenges Facing Rural Women's Work in South Africa."

Jha, Madhavi, "Labouring Women in Public Works – Gender and Labour in Rural North India, 1860–1910."

Kashio, Tamaki, "Farm Mechanisation and its Impact on Women's Work: A Case of Shiga Prefecture, Japan."

Minh, Nguyen Huu, "Women's Participation in Rice Farming and Orchard Growing in Vietnam."

Moghe, Kiran, "Rural Origins of Domestic Workers in India."

Najeeb, R., "Tea Plantation Labour: A Socio-historical Profile of Mappila Muslim Women."

Niyati, S., "Women in the Rice Economy of India."

Olsen, Wendy, "Definition of Work with Time-use Data in Rural India and Bangladesh."

Ramachandran, V. K., Patra, Subhajit, and Nagbhushan, Shruti, "Women's Work Across Socio-economic Classes: Evidence from Village Studies."

Rao, Nitya, "Gendered Time, Seasonality, and Nutrition: Insights from Two Indian Districts."

Rengalakshmi, R., "Role of Farm Mechanisation in Women's Agricultural Work."

Roy, Chandan, "Women in Sericulture in West Bengal."

Sabharwal, Nidhi Sadana, "Discrimination Faced by Dalit Women Workers in Rural India."

Sankrityayana, Jeta, "Women's Work in Tea Estates."

Sarai, Miranda, "Male and Female Child Labour Use in Floriculture in Rural Mexico."

Seema, and Thomas, Jayan Jose, "Women's Work in Rural India: Evidence from Inter-State Analysis and Survey Villages in Haryana."

Sharma, Ashmita, and Raut, Karan, "Women in Tea Gardens: Emerging Concerns on Wages."

Swaminathan, Madhura, Chakraborty, Sanjukta, and L.Vijaykumar, "Women's Work: Evidence from a Pilot Time-use Study in Karnataka."

Usami, Yoshifumi, Kapoor, Abhinav, and Patra, Subhajit, "Measuring Female Work Participation in Rural India: What Do Primary and Secondary Data Show?"

Usami, Yoshifumi, and Reddy, Bheemeshwar A., "Work Status of Women from Scheduled Tribes."

Vijayam, K., "Presentation from Kudumbashree State Poverty Eradication Mission."

Vijayamba, R., "Women in the Livestock Economy."