

Nov-2005

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## Recommended Citation

Nandal, Santosh (2005). Extent and Causes of Gender and Poverty in India: A Case Study of Rural Hayana. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7(2), 182-190.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol7/iss2/12>

## **Extent and Causes of Gender and Poverty in India: A Case Study of Rural Hayana**

By Santosh Nandal<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

In spite of the enshrining anti-poverty programs and objectives of the poverty eradication programs contained in India's five year plans, women's poverty in India, even after 58 years of independence, is glaring. This paper, based on a field survey, addresses the issues of economic constraints and the denial of women's access to productive assets in the form of land ownership and human capital such as education, skill-training. The article contributes to the overall picture of female poverty at the national level. The author finds an exaggerated emphasis being placed on women laborers and inadequate economic opportunities among them as the major obstacle to reducing female poverty. Because of these constraints and discrimination, women enter into the unorganized sector, i.e. the agriculture sector.

This paper examines how lack of skills, heavy physical work of different types, long hours of work with limited payment, lack of guarantee of minimum wages, lack of job security, lack of minimum facilities at the work place are the characteristics of the informal sector which contribute to women's economic disempowerment.

*Keywords:* Women, India, poverty, Informal sector

### **Introduction**

India's development performance and its yet 'unleashed' potential have been the subject of much discussion and debate in policy as well as in academic circles. Yet the most glaring feature of the Indian economy—its more than disturbing record in human resource development, particularly as it relates to women education—continues to receive inadequate attention. While there have been numerous policy pronouncements and government programs to improve the situation, which would contribute to poverty reduction, the reality on the ground, shows highly unsatisfactory results. In 2001, for instance 45.84 per cent women and 24.15 per cent men were illiterate.

It is estimated that 350-400 million people in India live under absolute poverty of 275 dollars per capita per annum and a majority of them are women. The Human Development Report (1990) has a succinct conclusion that poverty has a decided gender bias. Similarly, the U.N. Report on Global Outlook (2000) states that if current trends are not modified, projections indicate that the participation of women would lose income earning opportunities. The World Bank country study (2001) on "Gender and Poverty in India" presents the problems faced by poor women against a background of depressing statistics which shows how Indian women continue to be denied access to productive assets, in the form of financial credits, markets or land ownership and human capital such as

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education and skill-training which would enhance their abilities as economic agents.

Lifting women out of poverty will depend, to a large extent, on a better understanding of how many poor there are, where they live, why they are poor, and what their precise circumstances are. According to an estimate by National Commission on Self-employed Women (1988a), of the total number of women workers in India, about 94 per cent of the workforce are in the unorganized or informal sector (agriculture sector), whereas just six per cent are in the organized or formal sector. The Indian census (2001) estimates that 80 per cent of economically active women are engaged in agriculture. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the unorganized sector in India *is* the women's sector. However, the condition of women in this sector is miserable as they work for extremely low wages, with a total lack of job security and social security benefits, and they are not protected by any government labor organizations or labor legislation. There are hardly any unions in this sector to act as watchdogs.

The causes of female poverty in India have been the subject of a number of studies based on secondary data (Sen 1996, Tendulkar 1998, world Bank 1997, Tendulkar 1998, Datt 1998,1999, Sen 2000, World Bank 2000 and Sundaram 2001). Most studies have been carried out in metropolitan cities and there is hardly any study on the pattern and problems of women workers in the agriculture sector in rural India. In this paper an attempt is made to supplement these studies with a field-based investigation. While occasional reference will be made to secondary data, the focus is primarily based on fieldwork investigation.

### **Concept of Poverty**

Poverty has traditionally been defined in terms of income or consumption. Thus it is "the inability to attain a minimum standard of living" (WDR, 1990). The level of income which ensures the minimum standard of living is taken as the income poverty line. Those persons whose income is less than this poverty line fall in the category of "poor" In India, all those who fail to reach a certain minimum level of income (Rupees 49 for rural areas and Rupees 57 per capita per month for urban areas at 1973-74 price) and having a daily calorie intake (less than 2400 per person in rural areas and 2100 per person in urban areas) are regarded as poor. The World Development Report (2000-01), providing a new perception to poverty (using one U.S. dollar per day as measure of the international poverty line), has estimated that 44.2 percent of the population was living below the poverty line in India in 1997.

### **Poverty Estimates: Long Term Trends**

Before going into to the results of my field-work investigation, I present in table 1, the poverty estimates pertaining to the women poverty in India, conducted by National Sample Survey organization as reported by planning commission (1998). As table 1 reflects, large numbers of people in India live below the poverty line and a majority of them are women.

**Table 1**  
Estimates of Poverty in India

Year population poverty line in	Total population below poverty line in millions	female population below poverty line in millions	male below poverty line in millions
1973-74	321.3	192.7	128.6
1977-78	328.9	197.2	131.7
1983	322.9	193.7	129.2
1987-88	307.1	184.7	122.4
1993-94	320.3	192.0	128.3
1999-2000	260.2	156.0	104.2
2001-02	246.8	148.0	98.8

Source: Planning Commission: Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002)

## Empirical Analysis

### *Data*

I used household survey data from a rural region for my empirical analysis. The present study survey covered ten villages of remote rural areas of Haryana State. Two sets of rural regions are considered: 1. dry land regions (agriculture depends on the rain) characterized by frequent crop failure, lack of employment opportunities, and uncertainty of livelihood among the poor; and 2. the wet area (availability of water for irrigation) where employment opportunities are high and there is less uncertainty about livelihood among the poor. The survey was carried out at different intervals during the period 2001 to 2002 to explore various aspects of the lives of women working in the agriculture sector. For this purpose primary data was collected from selected 1000 female respondent households engaged in paid agricultural work through the personal interview method.

The age of entry into a job is an indicator of the organized nature of an occupation. For the present study the working ages of women were between 15 and 64 years. Most were married, 87.50 per cent. Ten per cent were unmarried and 2.50 per cent were widowed (once married). One of the important indicator of poverty is the level of literacy, because illiterate and unskilled women are engaged in low paid jobs like agricultural labor. Table 2 shows the literacy profile of the sample respondents. Most of the women laborers (60 per cent) were illiterate. A fraction (35 per cent) had some schooling i.e. Vth class, and of these 2.50 per cent in the sample had studies up to the eighth standard, while 2.50 per cent had passed the XIIth class exam. The absence of literacy resulted in the employment of women in the agriculture sector.

**Table 2**  
Educational qualification of women agriculture laborers.

Education level	No. of respondents	% of respondents
Illiterate	600	60.00
Vth class	350	35.00
VIIIth class	25	2.50
XIIth class	25	2.50
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	1000	100

Source: Field Survey

While analyzing the income level of women workers in the agriculture sector, it is worthwhile to highlight their present economic position. Economic position refers to the cash earning of the respondents. For workers engaged in the informal sector, minimum wages and statutory working hours are alien words. The wages are not determined by any wage law and there is no equal wage criteria. As stated earlier, the informal sector is not protected by government labor legislation. The wages are determined according to the quantum of work and vary from one employer to another. Table 3 reflects the average monthly income of women workers in agriculture sector.

An analysis of the income data reveals that the monthly income of the agriculture workers is extremely low because of low paid jobs in the agriculture sector. Agriculture is seasonal in nature, so they get employment only in peak seasons.

**Table 3**  
Average Monthly Income of Agriculture Workers

Average income (Monthly in Rupees)	Number of Respondents	% of respondents
50-70	100	10.0
70-100	225	22.5
100-140	450	45.0
140-170	75	7.5
170-200	95	9.5
200-210	55	5.5
Total	1000	100

Source: Field Survey

No agricultural laborer has an income of more than 210 rupees per month, while 100 (10%) of agricultural workers have an income as low as 80 rupees per month. About 85 percent of the agricultural workers have an income much below the national average income (rupees 2650) of the other category of workers.

Judged from this angle the entire workforce in the agriculture sector is exposed to acute poverty.

The real standard of living of the people depends upon the total earnings of the household. Total earnings of the family refers to the contributions by different members of the family to the total income. Table 4 provides this information.

**Table 4**  
Respondents' Total Family Income

Income Distribution per Month in Rupees.	Number of Workers	Percentage
0-500	150	15.0
500-1000	225	22.5
1000-1500	337	33.7
1500-2000	102	10.2
2000-2500	75	7.5
2500-3000	48	4.8
3000-3500	35	3.5
3500-4000	28	2.8
Total	1000	100

Source: Field Survey

Family size varies from two to five members (71.2 per cent), six to eight (22.5 per cent), and 9 to 11 (6.3 per cent). The data reveals that 150 (15%) families have to manage with a total monthly earning of less than rupees 500. When this limit increases up to rupees 2000 then 66.4 per cent are seen to fall into the net of low standard of living. The same lies with the income group up to rupees 3000, a much improved standard of living. Yet only 6.3 per cent of respondents belong to households having a total earning of more than rupees 3000 per month. In the absence of regular increments or benefits of wage indexation, these families are affected by rapid rises in prices. While they are theoretical beneficiaries of the public distribution system, they cannot manage to take time off from their work to stand in queues for essential commodities like rice, sugar, fuel etc. from the public distribution stores.

The low income of respondents has a severely negative impact on their lives with respect to indebtedness. Borrowing is very common among agriculture workers and is resorted to quite frequently whenever there is deficiency in income to meet family consumption expenditures. Prevalence of high levels of indebtedness among agricultural workers is shown in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
Distribution of Respondents by Amount of Debt

Amount in Rupees.	No. of Workers	Percentage
Not in debt	237	23.70

0-150	500	50.00
150-350	180	18.00
Above 500	83	8.30
Total	1000	100.00

Source: Field Survey

Among 1000 respondents 763 respondents reported indebtedness. In contrast only 237 did not report indebtedness. On human grounds the employers normally give loans to the agriculture workers without charging interest and get back the loan in installments at the time of wages. A major reason for employer preference for this type of facility is their “flexibility” in working hours, which can also be translated as exploitation of workers through a long work day.

### Gender Inequality in Access to Assets and Decision-making

With regard to the economic position of Indian women, it is clearly evident that India is principally an agricultural economy, and despite their significant contributions to economic production, they are far from equal to men. Land, for example, is a critical asset in rural areas. Evidence points to gender disparities in access to this and other assets necessary for poverty reduction. Having rights to land is a crucial factor in determining how people will ensure their basic livelihood. In all cases women’s more limited access to these assets hamper their efforts to reduce poverty and diminishes the effectiveness of poverty reduction more generally. Although the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution (in its preamble with respect to fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles) with respect to the ownership of land, women are absent from land registers. Traditional India had seen women only as members of families or groups, as daughters, wives and mothers and not as individuals with an identity or rights of their own.

Financial independence is a requirement of gender equality. Thus one of the major indicators connected with the female poverty is the control of assets. Table 6 shows the classification and ownership of property of sample households.

**Table 6**  
Ownership of Property

Category of property(in Rupees)	No. of households	No. of respondents own property
10000-20000	265(26.5%)	2(.2%)
20000-30000	305(30.5%)	1(.1%)
30000-40000	325(32.5%)	-
40000-50000	105(10.5%)	1(.1%)
Total	1000(100%)	4(0.4%)

Source: Field Survey

For instance, 26.5 per cent of sample households own property between rupees 10,000 to 20,000. Another 30.5 per cent own property between 20,000-30,000 rupees. And the remaining 43 per cent own the property between rupees 30,000 to

50,000. It is very surprising that out of total sample merely 0.4 per cent of women own property. These women were widows and after the death of their husbands, they got a share from their husband's property. They reported that they own this property for the time being; however, after some time it will be transferred to the male members of the family. The cultural traditions and social hierarchy compels them to transfer their share to their sons; the women surveyed had already filed an application in court to transfer this property. It is also important to note that women who maintain a traditional attitude towards their position are appreciated and respected by the family and society, qualities regarded as beneficial for marital harmony. The term *Pativarta* used in Hindu texts, for instance, explicitly prescribes male domination and female subordination.

Participation in the decision-making process is also an indicator of power and control over the affairs of the family. Not only land, but family labor including women is often controlled by men. In spite of women's contribution toward family income, their position in the family hierarchy mostly remains subordinate. Table 7 shows the decision-making power of women in the surveyed households. This table reveals that 13.7 per cent of women were found making decisions and these women were either divorced, widowed, or married to men who were addicted to alcohol or gambling. The remaining 86.30 per cent men were found making decisions, because of their feeling that the women are incapable of taking decisions due to illiteracy or low level of education among them or their confinement to the four walls of the houses.

**Table 7**  
Decision Making power of Women

Decision making power in the households	Reporting households	Percentage
Husband	520	52.0
Father-in-law	210	21.0
Son	133	13.3
Wife	79	7.9
Mother-in-law	58	5.8
Total	1000	100.0

Source: Field Survey

### **Poverty and “Trickle down” in the Rural Sector**

The theory of “trickle down” economics states that the rapid growth of per capita income will be associated with a reduction in poverty. In India trickle-down mechanism exist, suggesting that the rise in agricultural production and income levels per head would lead to some decline in poverty. But the available empirical evidence shows that trickle down has actually played out according to theory. Growth did not occur quickly enough to achieve the desired reduction in poverty proposed periods because real agricultural income did not increase



comparably to growth in the rural population. As a result, agriculture NDP per head of the rural population showed no significant trend.

Trickle down approaches had some impact on the poor up to the mid-sixties, which increased the use of labor and thus benefited the poor. Yet agricultural growth over the last three decades has been mainly the result of new technologies, which introduced various changes in the rural economy, to the disadvantage of the underprivileged. This ultimately limited the downward flow of benefits. The new technology has brought about a decline in the participation of women in the agricultural workforce and this has, in most cases caused a decline in the earnings of relatively poor households. While trickle down strategies have not alleviated poverty, I am nonetheless, not in favor of their total exclusion from economic planning, particularly if strategies are devised that ensure adequate flows of benefits to the poor. Target-oriented programs aimed at the weaker sections, for example, should be implemented. Trickle-down processes alone, however, are not adequate solutions.

### **Summary and Suggestions**

The aggregate statistics examined in the aforesaid analysis have been important in understanding the nature of the quality of gender and poverty in India. By way of recapitulating the main under-currents, I may venture to make certain broad observations.

The lives of women working in the agriculture sector are exhausting and tough. Several scholars have pointed out that poverty is the single most important factor influencing female participation rates, which cut across regions, religions, age and time. In poor households they often shoulder more of the workload than men, with illiteracy compounding their social and economic suffering. Studies conducted in various parts of the country have shown awful conditions of women laborers in the unorganized sector. All this was also found in the case of agriculture workers in rural Haryana as well.

Moreover, this group is highly unskilled, involved in heavy physical work of different types for long hours with limited payment; lack of guaranteed wages; and lack of job security. As well, there were no facilities of various forms of leave, for sickness or maternity, for instance. My attempt to know the extent of poverty did reveal that lack of economic opportunities among women, educational deprivation, gender inequality in access to assets and decision-making produce cycles of poverty for Indian women. Although some measures had been initiated to improve the situation, the results were not encouraging.

In the final analysis, enhancing the participation of the poor specially poor women in economic decision making should be helpful in reducing poverty. Investment in basic education and literacy, especially for girls, appropriate investment in health care, especially productive, maternal and child health should go a long way in reducing poverty. When households have secure opportunities to use their labor to good purpose and household members are skilled, educated and healthy, minimum standards of living are ensured and poverty is reduced. If such opportunities do not exist or are lacking, poverty remains. This is the clear

portrait of the agriculture women workers, that I obtained from field survey of the agriculture sector.

*Note:* This is the revised version of the paper presented at 'International Association for Feminist Economics', 5-7 August 2004 held in Oxford, England. I am thankful to the participants and specially Amartya Sen, Keynote speaker, for their valuable comments and suggestions. I particularly want to thank the anonymous reviewers of JIWS, and specifically Professor Diana Fox, executive Editor of JIWS, whose constructive comments encouraged me widen the scope of the work.

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