

## **Women Agricultural Labourers in Tiruchirappalli District, Tamil Nadu, South India (A Comparative Study Between Wet & Dry Taluks)**

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### **Abstract**

This study has made an attempt to explain the socio-economic characteristics of women labour households in two taluks, namely, Mannachanallur and Manapparai of Tiruchirappalli district, Tamil nadu, South India. The study has also brought forth the nature and extent of women labour in agricultural and non-agricultural activities during season and off-season, the wage differentials between male and female labourers in each agricultural operation *i.e.*, wage and actual wage, as well as actual wage and expected wage, The percentage contribution of women to total family income, savings position, total borrowings, expenditure and problems of women agricultural labourers with regard to employment, wage, hours of work and problems at home have been analysed.

**Keywords:** agricultural operation, minimum wage, wage differentials, wage discrimination, women agricultural labourers

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Women play an important role in economic development in rural areas of India where economic activities involve women in some way or other. Besides spending 10-12 hours daily in household activities, they contribute in an important way to agricultural production, animal husbandry and other allied activities like storage, marketing of produce and food processing. The household chores include a number of activities like cooking, nurturing, cleaning, collecting firewood, sewing, tailoring, teaching and washing. Rural women of India, thus, work harder and longer hours than men and supplement the family income in a big way. It has been estimated that the value of unpaid household works done by such women constitutes 25-39 percent of the total gross national product in developing countries. They are responsible for 60-70 percent of agricultural operations. They being a real symbol of dedication, patience and sacrifice are taken for granted as "nurturer" and it is only in recent years that some attention has been focused on women as workers in the economic sense of the term. This may be due to the fact that majority of the rural women (about 54 percent) are engaged in marginal occupations. About the half of the working rural women are unpaid helpers in family farms and allied activities. Their participation in economic or gainful activities is low and they are still to be fully integrated with economic development.

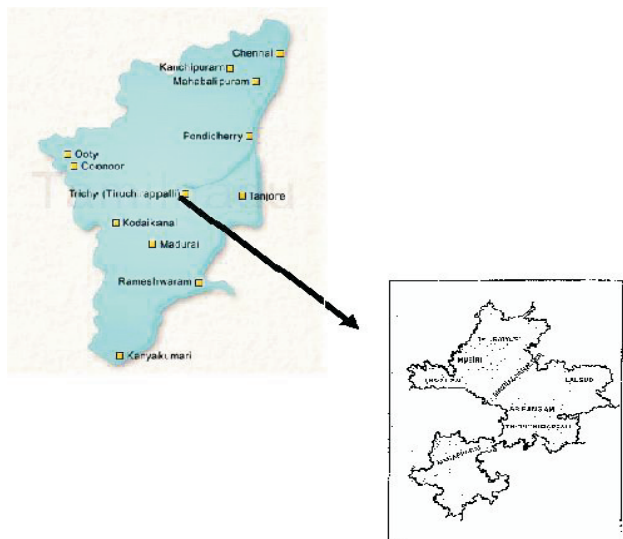
Women labour is an important segment of the total work force in India. More than 90 percent of the working in this country is engaged as wage labourers in the

unorganized sector and they belong to the poorer sections (Banerjee, 1998). Women workers constitute the largest proportion of agricultural labour in India, and it is more pronounced in southern states. The social status of women agricultural labour reveals that most of them belong to socially backward and economically disadvantaged groups like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward classes (Alva, 1999). Women are also subjected to labour market discrimination and segregated to low-paid and low-status employment. With the change in the level of economic development, women are pushed to the periphery in terms of productive employment. This phenomenon is referred to as marginalization of women in the development process. (Census of India 1991, 2001). Over the years, the share of the agricultural sector in the national income has dwindled from about 59 percent in 1950-51 to 33 percent in 2001. The progress in the non-agricultural sector failed to provide employment to the surplus agricultural labour (Tamil Nadu Human Development Report 2003). The prospects of increase in the employment opportunities in the years to come are also bleak in view of the emphasis laid on privalization and globalization that encourage use of capital intensive production technology (Minhas and Srinivasan, 2000).

In India, the work participation rate of women indicates that the women in self-employment is on the increase (53.1 percent) where in women are mostly found in less risky ventures (Hirway, 1999), for the reasons that they have to balance the household and business. Hence, women are differentiated and subjected to discrimination both in wage and self-employment opportunities. As Rajuladevi (2001) pointed out, there is a legal sex based wage-differentials in Tamil Nadu

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**Figure 1. Map showing the location of study taluks in the Tiruchirappalli district, Tamilnadu, South India**

which shows women get 90 percent of male wage averages only. She added that even when women take-up vacant male jobs they are paid only female wage rate.

During the last five decades, the agricultural sector has experienced various strategies of the Government for augmenting income and increasing employment. In the initial years of planning, elimination of exploitative elements like absentee landlordism, village money-lenders and marketing functionaries played a vital role along with the expansion of area under irrigation. It was followed by Green Revolution. They have however seemed to have little impact on real income of agricultural workers and their employment status. Therefore, this study was taken up to analyze the employment conditions of agricultural labourers with special attention to understand gender discrimination if any, in wages and employment of agricultural labour.

This paper describes the results of a study on the socio-economic characteristics of women agricultural labour households in the selected two taluks of Tiruchirappalli district, South India, viz., Mannachanallur and Manapparai, which was carried out to understand the nature and extent of employment of women agricultural labourers, assess the extent of discrimination of women in employment and wage rate (operation wise), compare the minimum and actual wage rates as well as actual and expected wage rates, and find out the percentage contribution of women to the total income of the family.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This is an empirical study. Therefore, data required for the study had been collected both from primary and

secondary sources by survey method in the Tiruchirappalli district which has 33 community development blocks (Panchayat Unions) covering 848 revenue villages and eight taluks. They are: Lalgudi, Manapparai, Manachanallur, Musiri, Srirangam, Tiruchirappalli, Thotiyam and Thuraiyur. The taluks were grouped into two distinct agro-climatic regions, namely, Wet region (Mannachanallur taluk) receiving irrigation from river cauvery and Dry farming region (Manapparai taluk) depending largely on rainfall and ground water irrigation is to a limited extent. In each taluk, five revenue villages were selected and in each village, 20 women labour households were selected by simple random sampling method. Therefore, the sample consisted of 200 women labour households selected by a multi-stage stratified random sampling method.

**Collection of Data And Tools Of Analysis**

All the workers in the labour households were covered by the study. Primary data were collected by personal interview method with the help of specially designed, pre-tested and comprehensive questionnaires.

Primary data collected from the sample labour households were processed and analysed with reference to the specific objectives. First attempt was to estimate the number of days of employment during season and off-season of women labourers by comparing the actual days of employment with the standard of 300 days in a year for the full employment. Wage discrimination was calculated by applying the following formula - operation-wise, that is, harvesting, sowing and threshing. Therefore,

$$\text{Wage Discrimination} = \frac{\text{Male wage} - \text{Female wage}}{\text{Male wage}} \quad (\text{OR})$$

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**Period of Study**

The data for the study related to the agricultural year (July - June) 2002 - 2003 and actual field enquires were conducted during the month of August-November 2003.

## Limitations

The women agricultural labourers do not maintain records of their income, expenditure, savings, investment and employment data. While they were interviewed, they could give the data only from their memories. Hence the data are subject to recall bias. And due to the limitation of time, cost and resources the study is limited to one particular period namely August - November 2003 and that too analysed and restricted only to women agricultural labourers. So, the total sample size is 200.

## RESULTS

Results of the present study are given in tables 1 to 4 and the major findings are summarized below.

### 1. Socio - economic characteristics of women agricultural labour households.

- **Size of the family:** The average family size of the household in Mannachanallur is 4.7 and 4.6 in Manapparai, and the maximum is 9 and above in four percent only. The overall average size of the family is found to be around five members.
- **Type of the family:** Only 3.5 per cent of the women labour households live in joint family and 96.5 percent prefer to live in nuclear type of family.
- **Caste:** Majority of the women agricultural labourers (86.5 per cent) belong to scheduled caste and remaining 13.5 percent to backward community.
- **Religion:** In both the study taluks, all of them are Hindus (100 per cent) and none of them are Christians and Muslims.
- **Type of house:** 85 per cent live in huts, nine percent own tiled houses and six percent dwell in concrete houses.
- **Age:** Most of the women agricultural labourers were found in the age group of 30-35 years (37 per cent) and only very low numbers (72.5 per cent) were found in the age group ranging from 35-40 years.
- **Educational level:** Sixty Six per cent of them are illiterates, 23 per cent had only primary education while 10.5 per cent had secondary education and very few (0.5 per cent) had higher secondary level education in Mannachanallur taluk. But, in Manapparai taluk, none of them had studied above primary level.

**2. Economic Aspects:** Regarding the nature of occupation, in both the taluks, women agricultural labourers are mostly (83 per cent) casual labourers, and only 17 per cent are considered as permanent labourers. Regarding the employed, unemployed and the earner dependent, the percentage worked out was 40.63 and

59.36 and the ratio was 1: 1.46 in Mannachanallur taluk and 49.13 and 50.86 per cent and 1:1.03 in Manapparai taluk. Therefore, in every household, at least two members have to earn.

**3. Wage and Total Income:** In Mannachanallur taluk the total wage of women in a year is Rs. 6905/- and in Manapparai it is Rs. 7485. The total income of the family in Mannachanallur is Rs. 18,629 and in Manapparai it is Rs. 27,037/-. The percentage contribution of women to total family income is 37 per cent in Mannachanallur and 28 per cent in Manapparai.

**4. Savings and Borrowings:** The total amount of savings in Mannachanallur is Rs. 16,500 and Rs. 25,700 in Manapparai. The total borrowings in Mannachanallur is Rs. 40,800 and Rs. 1,78,000 in Manapparai.

**5. Nature and extent to employment of women agricultural labourers:** They do both agricultural and non-agricultural activities for 239 days in Mannachanallur and 260 days in Manapparai. Out of ten agricultural operations, 70 per cent are carried out by women agricultural labourers and men do 60 percent of the operations.

**6. Wage discrimination:** Wage discrimination is found in three agricultural activities in both the taluks. Women do not get wages on par with men in these three activities, namely sowing, harvesting and threshing.

**7. Comparison of minimum wage and actual wage / actual wage and expected wage:** It is found that minimum wage is higher than the actual wage in Mannachanallur taluk. However, it is lower in Manapparai, but the expected wage is higher than the minimum wage in both the taluks.

## CONCLUSION

From this study it is clear that the women agricultural labourers are socially and economically backward. Their wages are very low in order to maintain their family. Their standard of living is also very low. Most of them live in huts. Government and voluntary Organizations should come forward to spread awareness about the Equal Remuneration Act to solve wage discrimination in agricultural operations. Minimum wage practice should be followed. Women agricultural labourers can form an organization or union to fight for their rights (ie) wage hike, regulation of hours of work, incentives in the form of cash or kind etc. Another viable alternative is to initiate rural women to become the member of Self Help Group (SHG) and engage them in cottage industries, that would provide financial assistance during off-season.

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\* Tamil Nadu Human Development Report 2003