

‘PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN RURAL WORKFORCE IN BIHAR’

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When we examine the data across different classes, castes and landholding groups, we find that there are significant differences among the categories with respect to all the three criteria. Women from households of higher status, be it with respect to any of the three criteria, participate less in non-agricultural wage work. The importance of social, as opposed to strictly economic factors, in explaining this trend is indicated by the fact that the pattern with respect to land size is relatively weak compared to the caste and religious groups. The participation in other wage-earning activity, that is, in the sector of agriculture and animal care, is relatively more than in the non-agricultural sector. The participation rate here is 38.1 percent. Here again the rates differ among classes, among land sizes and also among caste religion groups. Women from upper three classes, quite naturally, do not participate in such work; a very percentage of poor middle peasant women undertake this work. But surprisingly, a good number (28.6 Percent) of women from non-agricultural households participate in this work. As expected, a large number of women from agricultural labour households (from about 70 to 75 percent) participate in this work. Castewise, the work is forbidden for the upper caste women; more than one-third of the backward caste women and slightly less than half from among the Muslims do this work; and as expected, the percentage is very large (about 80 percent) for scheduled caste women. This participation rate has also a strong correlation with landholdings with increase in landholding, participation by women in this activity steadily declines and in the category ‘above 1 acre land per capita’, it becomes zero. Thus, this activity is also strongly influenced by caste, class and landholding characteristics.

Table 5.2: Rate of Participation (Percentage) among Ever-Married Women by Land Owned

Activities	Per Capita Owned Land (in acres)					All	Chi-Square	Significances
	0.0	Up to 0.2	0.2-0.5	0.5-1.0	1.0 & More			
1. Working in own cultivation and animal care	12.8	12.5	7.1	2.4	0.0	11.0	2.91	--
2. Wage work in cultivation and animal care	63.9	34.8	10.7	4.8	0.0	38.1	68.33	0.000
3. Other wage Work	9.3	2.7	1.8	0.0	0.0	4.9	9.53	0.049
4. Other subsistence activities	80.8	72.3	53.6	54.8	25.0	68.4	14.57	0.006
5. Festivals, Social & religious activities	21.5	30.3	46.4	47.6	46.4	31.8	8.87	--
6. Fetching Water	94.8	83.9	82.4	88.1	64.3	87.4	13.22	0.010
7. Other household activities	97.1	95.5	96.4	95.2	92.8	96.1	0.66	--
Total Number	174	112	56	42	28	412	--	--

Source: Sharma, Alakh N. (1993) 'Works and activity Pattern of Women in Rural Bihar', (ed.) Women and work in India", p-203

Apart from working in agricultural and animal husbandry for wages, women also take part in self-employment in this sector. Here too, as in the case of wage-earning activities, tradition does not offer much scope for the upper-caste women to take part in this activity. Caste operates as a powerful barrier. The next important factor is the size of land operated by the household. Women from those households which neither own nor lease-in land can hardly take part in this activity, except, of course, in animal care. So, in the case of those who do not have any operable land, the participation may be low. Further, women of those households who have relatively more land under cultivation probably need not participate in this work. The disinclination of women to participate in self-cultivation in such households is partly due to the fact that the land-man ration is rather low even in some relatively landrich households and in case of those limited number of extremely land rich households marginal utility of income would be too low to induce female participation in self-cultivation. Yet another relevant aspect is that the high-status classes in rural Bihar would avoid

their women taking part in this activity as it would cause a lowering of their social status. Thus, only about 11 percent of sampled women as a whole reported participation in this activity. This as against the 38.1 percent who participate in the wage-earning activities in agricultural and animal care, suggests that the necessary condition for participation in this activity (that is, land for self-cultivation) is far from sufficient. There are a number of women who could have participated in this activity because of economic necessity, but do not necessarily do so because of caste or other social barriers. As is evident from table 1, forward caste women's participation in such activity is almost nil; it is less than 10 percent for backward caste and Muslim women; but one-fourth of scheduled caste women are doing such work. Class wise Women from landlord/ gentlemen farmers and big peasant households do not undertake this work and only a small percentage from poor-middle peasant households do this work (Table 3). The highest participation (about 25 percent) is in case of middle peasant women probable because of their better landholding position and weak social taboos among them.' They are followed by agricultural labour households whose women are mainly engaged in leased-in land and animal care. Land holding wise, there is not much difference in lower holdings, but participation is low in middle holdings and it is altogether absent in the category of 'above 1 acre land per capita.' The values of Chi-square in Table 5.1 and 5.3 clearly indicate that the differences in frequencies are statistically significant among caste/religion groups and also among classes. But land size groups do not lead to a significant chi-square value

Table 5.3: Rate of Participation (Percentage Among Ever-Married Women by Class)

It is, therefore, clear that traditional values related to caste/religions and class status have

Activities	Class								All	Chi-Square	Significance
	Landlord Including gentleman farmers	Big Peasant	Middle Peasant	Poor Middle Peasant	Agr. Labourers, tied	Agr. Labourers, untied	Non-agriculture class				
1. Working in own cultivation and animal care	0.0	0.0	25.0	10.7	10.9	19.3	7.1	11.0	32.57	0.000	
2. Wage work in cultivation and animal care	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	76.6	68.9	28.6	38.1	172.63	0.000	
3. Other wage work	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.3	7.8	10.1	3.6	4.9	16.03	0.014	
4. Other subsistence activities	32.07	53.9	95.8	80.0	82.8	82.3	60.7	68.4	70.62	0.000	
5. Festivals, Social & religious activities	58.6	47.2	12.5	33.3	10.9	16.8	53.6	31.8	64.42	0.000	
6. Fetching water	81.0	75.5	100.0	83.3	92.2	94.9	89.3	87.4	25.47	0.000	
7. Other household activities.	96.5	95.5	100.0	96.7	95.3	96.6	92.3	96.1	2.11	--	

Total Number

58

89

24

30

64

119

28

412

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greater influence over women's participation in this activity rather than land. In upper caste Hindu households and upper-class households, women are prevented from undertaking this activity because of feudal and traditional values and in case of lower castes and classes the relatively lower participation is due to non availability of land. Because upper-caste women in low-land size groups do not work and lower caste women in relatively high land sized group participate, the chi-square value is not statistically significant for land size groups (Table 5.2). There is, however, considerable

economic pressure to participate in the remaining self-employment category of other subsistence activities'. There the participation rates are seven times higher than in own cultivation because traditional values do not interfere with participation in the other subsistence activities, as they are generally performed within the boundaries of the dwellings.

"Fetching water" is a household activity where the difference in rates of female participation is statistically significant for caste/religion, class and land size group. Thus our hypothesis that this activity rests on a different footing than "other household activities" is substantiated. The participation of women of upper caste, upper classes and big land size groups in this activity is far less than that of women from lower strata of the society.

A little less than one-third of women participate in festivals and social and religious activities in Bihar. The participation of higher in case of upper caste women and in upper classes and in large landholding size groups than among others. It is evident that affluence promotes festivities and social and religious rituals.

The aforesaid discussion and analysis suggest that female participation in rural Bihar is significant in subsistence and other economic activities. Apart from domestic work, women from all categories are engaged in many types of subsistence and other economic activities which are very important for the survival and well-being of their families. Due to social and feudal values, participation is relatively lower in some economic activities like wage work and self-employment in agriculture and animal husbandry outside the home; but even in such activities the participation of women from lower castes and classes is extremely high. Women drawn from such households not only work within the confines of their houses and in their own cultivation to add to the household income, but they also undertake wage work for earning a living. In addition to providing substantial income to their families by such work, there women still have to devote time for gathering fuel, processing food, fetching water, cooking and so many other household chores, Though all the women are under the pressure of double bind' of domestic as well as economic activities, the load is the heaviest in case of women form poorer and lower castes/classes. The argument that women are supplementary earners does not apply in the case of this rural agricultural 'proletariat'.