THE INVISIBLE WORK FORCE: WOMEN IN THE TRADITIONAL FARMING SYSTEMS OF KERALA, SOUTHERN INDIA

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1. Introduction

Rural women constitute the invisible work force which keep the family and the rural economy alive. But they and their labour often go unrewarded or underrewarded. Women represent half of the world's population and one-third of the official labour force, but they receive only 1% of the world income and own less than 1% of the world's property (U N Conference, Copenhagen, 1980). Women play a crucial role in food production, producing more than half of the world's food (F A O, 1986). In Kerala about 79% of the female work force is absorbed by the agricultural sector; female cultivators constituting 33% of the total female work force and female agricultural labourers constituting 45.6% (Census of India, 1981). Nevertheless, underestimating the amount of agricultural work done by women is very common, for conventional statistics most often measure wage labour, not unpaid homestead farm work.

Taking this premise as the point of departure, a micro level study was conducted with the objective of assessing the role of women in Kerala's agricultural sector, with special reference to homestead farming.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in Palode Village, Trivandrum district, Kerala in the year 1990. 97% of the farming community in the village is constituted by small and marginal farmers. Homestead farming system - an intense mix of annual and perennial crops, woody or nonwoody, with or without livestock, poultry etc. - is the major agricultural production system covering more than 60% of the cultivated area. A random sample of 80 farm households were surveyed using a structured questionnaire to elicit the required information. Secondary data sources were also used.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Women's participation

The distribution of farmers based on gender is given in Table 1. Out of the 80 farmers interviewed, 19 were female, which means 23.75% of the farmers/cultivators are women. This departs from the official statistics which says only 4.6% of the cultivators are women (Census of India, 1981). Thus, about 19% of the female cultivators become invisible, and they may go under the pet label `housewives'. This data lends credence to the idea that the

Table 1 : Distribution of farmers based on gender

Holding size class (Cents)	Gender	
	Female	Male
5 – 50	15 (18.8)	33 (41.3)
51 – 100	3 (3.7)	13 (16.2)
101 – 250	1 (1.3)	8 (10.0)
251 – 500	--	7 (8.7)
All	19 (23.7)	61 (76.3)

Percentages are given in parentheses

notion of women workers has been "mystified" by assuming that all women are basically housewives. Their agricultural work is considered merely an extension of their role as a housewife (Mies, 1987). Out of the 19 female farmers, about 79% belong to the smallest holding size class (below 50 cents) (Table 1). The male members in this category are often engaged in off-farm activities, especially wage labour. In the largest holding size class none of the farmers were women. This reveals the class dimension of women's participation in agriculture. A similar phenomenon where more women are involved in agriculture in the marginal households is noted in rural Bangladesh (Safilios-Rothchild and Mahmud, 1989).

It may be noted that there was a 28% decline in the number of male cultivators in Palode Village in the decade from 1971 to 1981, while the number of female cultivators increased by 84% (Census of India, 1981). The tremendous increase in the number of female cultivators shows the increased role of women in the agricultural sector. The reverse phenomenon was observed in the case of agricultural labourers. The number of male agricultural labourers increased by 14% while that of female labourers decreased by 24%. Migration to the Middle East during the period could be one of the reasons for the decrease in the number of male cultivators. So also, due to the subdivision and fragmentation of land, more and more cultivators were forced to join the agricultural proletariat and other miscellaneous work force to support their families. More than 50% of the paddy lands in the village have shifted from labour intensive rice crop to other (cash) crops which require less female labour (Darley Jose and Shanmugaratnam, 1994). This could be a reason for the reduced number of women agricultural labourers.

The decrease in women agricultural labourers suggests that wage-based agricultural labour opportunities have not increased, but in effect decreased for women over the decade. The data is a pointer towards the increasing trend of marginalisation and absorption of women workers in unpaid agricultural activities. As men are drawn more and more into the folds of the market mechanism, women are increasingly left behind to tend to subsistence activities. A similar trend has been reported from Himachal Pradesh where there was an increase in the proportion of women cultivators while the proportion of women agricultural labourers declined (Sethi, 1991). The displacement of women from wage labour has implications for the crucial issue of women's empowerment and the welfare of the household (Darley Jose and Shanmugaratnam, 1994). This would also accentuate the feminisation of poverty.

3.2 Land Ownership Pattern

An analysis of the intrahousehold ownership pattern of land showed that though land is owned by both sexes, the remnants of the patriarchal norms of land ownership are still in vogue. In the same decision making unit, part of the land may be owned by the female and part by the male. Women had titles to land in 52.5% of the sample households, while men had titles in 71.3% of the households (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of the households based on intrahousehold ownership pattern of land

Size class (Cents)	Female	Male
5 – 50	18 (22.5)	34 (42.5)
51 – 100	12 (15.0)	11 (13.8)
101 – 250	6 (7.5)	6 (7.5)
251 – 500	6 (7.5)	6 (7.5)
All	42 (52.5)	57 (71.3)

Percentages are given in parentheses.

In 38% of the households in the smallest holding size class, women owned land. In the second, third and fourth holding size classes, in 75%, 67% and 86% of the households respectively, women had titles to land. As regards the class dimension, the ownership pattern showed a reverse trend from that of agricultural participation. The higher the farm size class, the higher was the frequency of female titles to land; whereas participation decreased with higher farm size class.

Unlike in other parts of India, in Kerala there are no social and legal barriers to women owning land. The matrilineal mode of inheritance and the matriarchy which prevailed in certain communities have often been pointed out as a reason for this.

3.3 Decision making

To gather an idea about the gender roles in the farm decision making process, questions were asked as to who takes decisions on seven important farm activities. The answers revel that men obviously have an upper hand in decision making. In 25% of the households women are the decision makers whereas in 52% of the households men are the decision makers (Table 3). However, in 23% of the households decisions are taken jointly by the male and female. On an average, it could be said that women have only about 36% role in the farm decision making process. This is inspite of the fact that women have titles to land in about 52% of the households. The patriarchy in operation is evident here. There exists a school of literature which tends to generalise that Kerala is a matriarchal society where women have the power of self determination (though matriarchy and matriliny was prevalent in certain communities). Out study proves otherwise.

Table 3: Distribution of households according to gender roles in farm decision making

Activity	Decision maker		
	Female	Male	Both
* 1	22 (27.5)	39 (48.8)	19 (23.7)
2	20 (25.0)	40 (50.0)	20 (25.0)
3	19 (23.8)	43 (53.7)	18 (23.5)
4	23 (28.7)	37 (46.3)	20 (25.0)
5	20 (25.0)	43 (53.7)	17 (21.3)
6	20 (25.0)	44 (55.0)	16 (20.0)
7	20 (25.0)	42 (52.5)	18 (22.5)
Mean	20 (25.7)	41.2(51.4)	18.2 (22.9)

Percentages are given in parentheses.

* 1 = Choice of subsistence crops to be grown
  2 = Choice of cash crops to be grown
  3 = Planting trees
  4 = Livestock keeping
  5 = Labour hiring
  6 = Purchase of agrochemicals
  7 = Quantity of food produce to be sold.

3.4. Women's Labour in Homestead farms

Homestead farming is a special feature of Kerala agriculture. This mixed farming system covers more than 50% of Kerala's agricultural area (See Darley Jose and Shanmugaratnam, N. 1993).

The mean area of a homegarden/homestead farm in Palode Village was found to be 48 cents. This 48 cents generate a mean number of 143 labour days per year (Table 4). Female labour days constitute 14% of this. The labour days employed can be classified into family labour and hired labour. A family worker is a member of the family, necessarily a kinperson related through ties of blood or marriage, who works without receiving wages in cash or kind, on the family farm though he/she may have played an effective role in the management and produce of the land (Census of India, 1981). For all the size classes, family female labour employed in the homegarden was much higher than that of hired female labour. The extent of hiring in of male labour as compared to female labour is revealed by the fact that, for every female labour day hired, 8 male labour days were hired.

A comparison of the female and male family labour employed in the homestead farm shown that the female labour employed is about 19% higher than that of the male labour. The data proves beyond contention that women contribute more labour to homestead farms than men. Women constituting the chief labour force in subsistence agriculture is a general phenomenon observed in the Third World countries (Jiggins, 1984; Dunkelman and Davidson, 1988 and Sethi, 1991).

Our study showed that 94% of the total female labour days was constituted by family labour. Hired female labour days constituted a mere 6% of the total female days employed. 94% of the female labour (family labour) forms 41% of the total labour employed in the homestead farm in a year. Since this is unpaid labour, it is not given due value, and is not included in any statistics and thus become invisible.

Table 4: Total labour days employed in the homegardens of Palode Village

Size class (Cents)	Female		Male		Total
	*1	2	1	2	
5 – 50	70.5	0.4	40.4	2.9	114.2
51 – 100	49.2	5.1	51.4	34.0	139.7
101 – 250	24.6	3.1	74.4	53.4	155.5
251 – 500	46.7	24.6	78.4	178.0	327.7
All	59.0	3.8	49.7	30.1	142.6

* 1 = Family labour
2 = Hired labour

According to the western concept of work, developed after the industrial revolution, activities such as livestock keeping for domestic use, house work etc. are not economic activities, and therefore non-work (Bell, 1977). Non-work is unpaid and unvalued. Women's work in the homestead farms is not considered as an economic activity, but as an extension of the household duties. Thus women's contribution to the production process is underplayed. The main source of omission of female labour from statistical returns seem to be an inadequate

coverage of unpaid family labour (F A O, 1985). One can also notice a growing tendency in the literature to refer to women's work in household production systems like homestead farming, livestock rearing etc., as `filling in unoccupied time' or `leisure foregone' (ILEIA Newsletter 1/93), though this `leisure foregone' accounts for a sizeable number of labour days (Regeena and Darley Jose, in press).

The emerging agricultural scenario and the trends in Kerala' cropping pattern - the drastic transition from subsistence to cash crop monocultures - would increasingly marginalise women. Women's work would become more burdensome and less socially valued (Dunkelman and Davidson, 1988). The marginalisation process would be accelerated where there is a desperate and pervasive need for cash to meet family needs. If those needs can only be supplied by the market, unpaid traditional roles would no longer evoke respect, thereby undercutting the authority of women (Huston, 1985).

4. **Conclusions**

Women play a significant role in reproducing the rural household economy by their involvement in household production systems. But their role is rather underplayed by the conventional statistics and the ambiguity in classifying women's work. This study shows that even when women are the owners of the means of production, their labour is being exploited, and that their role in decision making is rather limited. This exploitation surpasses even the classical Marxian exploitation, where the surplus appropriated is after playing for the value of labour (wages). One is tempted to conclude that declassing the society per se is not a sufficient condition, though necessary, in obtaining a balanced gender equation.

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