

**Panel on
Women in Rural Labour Force:
Factors Influencing Non-Agricultural Engagement
of Women Workers**

**Organised by
Initiative for What Works to Advance Women
and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE)**



Centre for Development Economics
and Innovation Studies
Punjabi University, Patiala

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REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF

PANEL ON

**“Women in Rural Labour Force: Factors Influencing Non-Agricultural Engagement of
Women Workers”**

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8 December 2019, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab

Labour force statistics in India clearly show that women’s work in rural areas remain concentrated in petty activities in the secondary and service sectors that are usually low paid, low-value added and do not have much potential for inter sectoral and vertical mobilities. Such patterns of women workers clustering into these underpaid occupations are a direct manifestation of declining women’s work participation rates in rural areas, led primarily by women’s agricultural work. The Periodic labour force survey (PLFS), 2017-18, estimates rural FLFPRs declined almost by 7 percentage points since 2011-12 and suggests a decline of 23 percentage points in the share of rural women workers in agriculture in the last ten years. More importantly, most of the decline in the WPR has taken place among women with low levels of education. For illiterate women, the WPR fell from 55% to around 29% while that for women with secondary education fell from 30.5% to 15.6% between 2004 and 2018. The data also show joblessness among rural women doubled from 1.7% in 2011-12 to 3.8% in 2017-18. In addition, rural women reporting as attending to only domestic duties have recorded a highest share of 44% in 2017-18 is the highest since the 1993-94. The latter trend indicates a lot of rural women falling out of the workforce. A fair amount of scholarly work has indicated that rural women are choosing to remain outside the labour force due to lack of adequate opportunities in non-agricultural sector. The existing opportunities are either unremunerated and does not meet women’s expected working conditions and returns from labour or are those that require training, education and skills that are not imparted efficiently for engaging women or those that are determined by the women’s social identities. The thrust towards use of advanced technology has also ushered in a different regime of work for women alongside the the traditional methods of organisation of work, for instance in the emerging ‘gig work’ or increasing use of digital platforms for women’s economic collectives or facilitating financial inclusion of women and so on. The panel deliberated and discussed several aspects of ‘what works’ to reverse such decline in women’s engagement; importance of education, skill and training; role of social identities; use of technology and macroeconomic factors influencing economic opportunities for women.

PANEL PROCEEDINGS

At the outset, moderator introduced the panelists for the session and talked about various factors faced by women in the non-farm sector.

The first panelist was **Prof. Atul Sood**, Professor, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi who talked about macroeconomic perspective of non-farm employment and scenario of female participation in the non-farm sector in the context of Punjab. He raised various questions about what non-farm employment is and how it links with the growth of the country. Some other questions included; what is the reality of women's work in non-agricultural sector? How do we look at the non-farm sector when we talk about rural women? Rural women face different problems in getting jobs in the non-farm sector such as non availability of work in the rural Punjab as well as limited opportunities of full time and permanent employment. Moreover, there is also an issue of seasonality in the job market. He also talked about the 1st phase of Green Revolution which had labour absorption capacity of 300 days. However, in the 2nd phase of the Green Revolution, farm mechanization was introduced which reduced the labour absorption capacity. Hence, there was double budgeting but low opportunity for work. In secondary sector, women mainly worked in low cost construction sector. Within manufacturing sector, women faced issue of informality and within formal employment, they received very low wage rate. There is surplus labour available in the tertiary sector such as domestic workers which is also inferior in quality. Even women with higher education get lower wages than men.

Discourser: protect people not job. There is a need to improve the skilling of women. Formalization of informality needs to be taken up. Labour market growth strategy is bread and butter of the economy. We need a strategy for labour market progress and not for the growth of the economy. Labour and employment should be prioritized for non-farm sector growth.

This was followed by presentation by the second panelist, **Dipa Sinha**, Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi who discussed the female labour force participation using NSSO round data. In 1993-94, share of women in the total employment was 32.9 percent which reduced to 23.3 percent in 2017-18. Women's share in employment in rural

sector was 24.4 percent as against 20.5 percent in the urban areas. At the all India level there was defeminisation in agricultural sector. In 1993-94 women's share in agriculture employment was 39.6 percent which reduced to 30 percent in 2017-18. Women concentrated sector other than agricultural sector increased from 9.2 percent in 1993-94 to 21.9 percent in 2017-18. However, this was not the case for men where the share of these sectors in their employment went up from 5.4 percent to 7.2 percent. This indicates that the sectors absorbing men are not providing comparable employment to women. Women are largely getting jobs in the health and education sector and over time, women share in these two sectors has been increasing. Share of women in the health sector has doubled and in the education sector, it has increased four times. Women are mostly employed in the government sector. In rural areas 29 percent of women and 10 percent of men workers are employed in public sector. Similarly, in the urban areas, 17 percent women and 12 percent men are in the public sector with around 5.7 percent workers employed in the railways being women. Women constituted 48.3 percent of the total elementary education teaching workforce. ASHAs, AWWs, AWHs, mid day meal cooks and helpers constituted over 6 million workers. Women are mainly working as regular/government servants' contractual, honorarium based and voluntary based. Women demand jobs in the government sector due to its status, predictable, aspirations, wages among others. In some states (Bihar, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan) there is a reservation for women in the government jobs,. In India there is massive human development deficit. There are 7.5 lakh positions vacant in the central government. These jobs can create opportunities for women with an impact on the human development outcomes as well as for addressing the demand deficit in rural economy.

Third panelist was **Anjana Thampi**, Research Fellow, Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE); LEAD at Krea University who talked about women labour force participation by social groups in India. In spite of high economic growth, female labour force is low and has declined in the rural areas and stagnated in the urban areas. The main reasons behind the low female labour force participation include: increasing educational participation, income effect, declining opportunities, discouraged worker effects and social and cultural barriers. Based on PLFS 2017-18, the presenter illustrated that in rural

areas compared to the urban areas, the share of female was higher in domestic duties and collection, casual public works and unpaid helpers. Across the social groups, there is also a decline in the female labour force participation in both the rural and urban areas. Share of female in unpaid helpers as well as casual labourer is highest in the scheduled tribe community compared to other social groups. In terms of earnings, male-female ratio is low in scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities. In terms of age group, it was shown that irrespective of belonging to any particular social groups, female labour force participation was highest in the age group of 45-49 years.

Moving forward, the fourth panelist was **Nitya Nangalia**, Project Lead, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA Bharat). She talked about SEWA Bharat in building accelerators to promote women-owned, women-operated social enterprises. She spoke about how contribution of education can improve the employment. SEWA imparted training to women in weaving and tailoring to become collective social enterprises. Women have lot of aspiration, however, they continue to face constraint of mobility. It was also mentioned that men are likely to get distracted if women are around. Limited job opportunities and infrastructure is available to them. SEWA women have been trained as financial agent in non- traditional livelihoods in hotel and tourism sector. Women are also in public transport sector which requires semi-skilled workers. Women need both credit as well as technical skills to get better job opportunities.

The last panelist was **Ruchika Chaudhary**, Senior Research Fellow, Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE); LEAD at Krea University. Who focused on the GIG economy which can be classified as digital gig economy and physical gig economy. Digital gig economy involves online labour-freelance work, crowd work. On the other hand, physical gig economy refers to work on demand via apps. In India, physical gig economy suffered from Uber-bias. She also talked about difference between online labour where online labour can be performed remotely whereas work on demand which is a form of work where traditional work such as cleaning, transport gets channeled through apps. In India, gig workforce is concentrated in cab drivers (Uber, Ola) delivery executives (Zomato, Swiggy, Flipkart). However, gig economy is not new. There are pros and cons of the gig economy like any other economy. On one hand, it offers flexibility of working hours which allows the workers

to work remotely from their own working space and it also allows a person with constraint of limited mobility, social barriers, and care responsibility to enter the labour force. On the other hand, there is an issue of security of work. Gig work is considered as non-standard form of employment. A worker in the gig economy is considered as independent contract labour. As a result, they are excluded from the benefits and protection from employers. Gig workers face significant challenge in terms of regularity of wages and working conditions. In India, there are limited data sources available on the number of gig jobs created in India. In India, gig economy mainly evolved in the urban areas and has the potential to create more employment in future.

Gig jobs in India contribute to new kind of informality. Gig jobs for women are highly stigmatized i.e. beauty services, massage services or formalized care works. Low paid and low skilled work dominates India's gig economy. A case study was also presented about Urban clap which is the largest online services platform. It operates in 14 cities in India as well as Abu Dhabi. In the study, hypothesis was tested on informalization of workforce getting intensified through the emergence of gig work and impacting the labour relations within the sector. The main findings of the pilot study were flexibility of work timings being one of the most attractive features for women. Women worked for 7 days a week including weekends, on an average 37 hours a week and earned between 500 INR to 1200 INR per day depending on the number of tasks they performed. However, they are not entitled with any benefits and half of them do not even have any written contract. The survey revealed that women were most satisfied with trainings and learning opportunities and flexible timings and women dissatisfied with incentive structure, lack of opportunity for salary hike, dispute settlements and penalty structure. The main conclusion of the study was that the use of technology for reorganization of labour relations in service delivery mechanism, is a new form of informalization based on disappearance of employer-employee relations. Further, informalization of the gig economy is not homogeneous. The model of gig economy needs to be tested in terms of nature of employment creation and sustainability.

The discussants in the panel namely; **Amit Basole**, Associate Professor of Economics, School of Arts and Sciences, Azim Premji University and **Uma Rani**, Senior Economist, Research Department, International Labour Organizations, (ILO), Geneva discussed how we can mobilize

resources to create employment opportunity and what type of strategy can help in the context of labour force participation? When there is no demand for work, how do we put the resources in the center? There is also a cultural constraint. It was pointed out that there is need for interconnection with the social enterprises and to put pressure on the government. There is a need to strategize and identify the growth driven sector where employment opportunities can be created. In case of digital structure, the main argument was technology of choice and how do we adopt technology for betterment of the economy.

PANEL AGENDA

Moderators |

Sona Mitra, Principal Economist, Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE), LEAD at Krea University

Panelists |

Atul Sood, Professor, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Anjana Thampi, Research Fellow, Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE); LEAD at Krea University

Dipa Sinha, Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi

Nitya Nangalia, Project Lead, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA Bharat)

Ruchika Chaudhary, Senior Research Fellow, Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE); LEAD at Krea University

Discussant |

Amit Basole, Associate Professor of Economics, School of Arts and Sciences, Azim Premji University

Uma Rani, Senior Economist, Research Department, International Labour Organizations, (ILO), Geneva

PHOTOGRAPHS



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