

# **Changing Perspectives of Women's Work and Decline in Female Labour Force Participation Rate in Rural India: A Case of Arunachal Pradesh\***

## **1.1 Introduction**

One of the fundamental aspects of gender discrimination, in almost all parts of the world, is the unequal access of women to gainful employment opportunities. The key question that needs to be addressed in the context of economic transformation of Arunachal Pradesh is the changing patterns of gender division of labour and the underlying changes in social attitudes and stereotypes. In the tribal regions of North east India women are engaged in agriculture, cooking, housekeeping, child care, fetching fuel wood and water, collection of forest produce, care of livestock, storing grains, etc. Much of the work which is of importance for the maintenance of families is largely done by women. According to anthropologists and some historians, women were the major producers of food, textiles and handicraft throughout human history and continue to provide a major labour input, in production in the small scale subsistence sector. Women's work is mostly not visible or partially accounted for in the data on workforce participation. Their work also differs according to age, gender, income, occupational group, location, size and structure of family. As women's work is mostly for self consumption, much of the work they do is not recognized as 'work' in national income statistics. The present study is an attempt to understand the phenomenon of declining female labour force participation rate in Arunachal Pradesh and the changing perspective of women's work in the State. Despite the fact that the Indian economy has registered an impressive growth rate in the last two decades, we have observed a declining female labour force participation rate in rural India. There are many studies that have tried to analyse the declining trend of female work and labour force participation rate in India and they all point towards the fact that the single most important factor for the decline in the aggregate labour force both in rural and urban India has been mainly because of "missing female labour".

## **1.2 Objectives**

The major objectives of the study have been set as follows:

1. To study the inter-temporal changes and regional pattern of women's workforce participation in India and in Arunachal Pradesh since 1971.

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2. To study the level and inter-district variations in the work force participation in Arunachal Pradesh.
3. To investigate the prevalence of division of labour (in SNA, extended SNA and Non-SNA work) according to sex among the people of the relatively developed, less developed and under-developed regions of the state.
4. To examine the Changing Perspective of Women's work in rural Arunachal Pradesh.

### **1.3 Methodology for the Study**

The study is both empirical and qualitative in nature and is based both on primary as well as secondary data. In the first stage, the districts of Arunachal Pradesh were classified into developed, relatively less developed and underdeveloped district and then one district from each category has been selected. Further, three blocks from each district and one village from each block has been selected on the basis of its remoteness from the urban centre. Physical infrastructure i.e. road connectivity, has been taken into consideration, as in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, all other infrastructure facilities are closely connected to road connectivity. After selection of the villages, the households have been selected on the basis of simple random sampling. Further, at least two members from each household have been interviewed through a detailed socio-economic structured questionnaire method.

The data on food gathering and food producing activities, income generating activities, asset holding patterns, collection of forest produce, agricultural operations etc. has been collected at the household level. Individual members of the households have been interviewed about their time allocation pattern, on the basis of a separate questionnaire. In the time-use survey, both yesterday approach and activity approaches have been used. However, information on the time spent on different activities on a normal day in the agricultural and lean period has been collected through the recall method. The time use study has meaningfully revealed the average time spent on housework and agricultural activities by men, women and children and has thrown some light on gender division of labour in rural Arunachal Pradesh.

### **1.4 Study Area**

The Study area is confined to the State of Arunachal Pradesh. In the first stage three districts were selected, one a fairly developed district of East Siang from central Arunachal Pradesh, another a relatively less developed district of West Kameng from the western side of the State and finally a under-developed district namely Changlang from

the eastern most part of the State. Further, three blocks from each district and one village from each block has been selected on the basis of its remoteness from the urban centers. The nine villages surveyed were namely Mebo, Niglok, Berung, from East Siang district; Khengku, Bobang, Manchum, from Changlang district and Shera, Yewang and Morshing from West Kameng district.

## **1.5 Findings**

It is extremely difficult to make generalizations regarding the position of women in Arunachal Pradesh and the changes in it, primarily because of the extraordinary diversity in the socio-economic conditions, institutional arrangements and cultural ethos of the different tribes and sub-tribes of the state. The following analysis, based largely on the available secondary data as well as primary data generated through a household level survey, and a time use survey, is far from exhaustive, but it is intended to provide an insight into the complexities of the transition process in terms of its relationship with gender relations in the State. It focuses on the work participation and time-use pattern of rural women in Arunachal Pradesh and also on the changing perspective of women's work and how women's work is being transformed in numerous ways.

In order to understand the changing nature of female work participation, a detailed analysis was undertaken using the population census data. Work Participation Rates in Arunachal Pradesh, during 1981-2011, for both males and females, tend to be higher than the national average. However, the gap between the two was wider in case of female work participation rate (FWPR). In 2011, FWPR of the state was 35.44 per cent in comparison with the national average of 25.50 per cent. Primarily because of the greater 'productive' contribution of women, the gap between male and female work participation rates in the State was lower than that at the national level. This can also be attributed to the relatively higher percentage of ST population as well as the low levels of development in the state.

FWPR in Arunachal Pradesh, however, has declined significantly from 51.28 per cent in 1971 to 35.4 per cent in 2011, although an increase in FWPR was noticed in urban areas during 1991-2011. The gap between male and female work participation rates, which had been increasing during 1971-91, declined during the 1990s, partly because of a sharper fall in male work participation rate during the period. As expected, gender gap in work-participation is much higher in urban than in the rural areas. In 2001 and 2011, FWPR in the districts was negatively correlated with female literacy rate, while FWPR of

rural women was negatively correlated with female literacy rates and positively with the share of ST population to the total population.

Contrary to the popular perception of more egalitarian gender relations in tribal areas, it was found in the study villages that the intra-family division of work burden was heavily skewed towards women. In fact, it was observed that women in the villages of the underdeveloped hill district were more burdened with work compared to that of women in the relatively developed plain districts. Further, it was also observed that as women were predominately responsible for the primary-SNA and non SNA work that was very much critical for household survival, they tend to suffer more in terms of work burden, if the households are primarily dependant on *jhum* cultivation and are away from the urban centers as well as the forests i.e. there is lack of physical infrastructure and road connectivity and the forest is far away from the villages. In the under-developed hill district, majority of the households were dependant on agriculture, while in the relatively developed plain district they depended on non-farm occupation. It was observed that women in the villages of the under-developed hill district performed all the work in the family farm, collected vegetables, grasses, fruits and leaves for manure from the nearby forests. They even performed those work, like clearing of the jungles in the *jhum* fields, which was traditionally performed by the men, as the men folk move-out to work as daily wage labourers in the construction sites where roads and bridges are being built. It was further found that the women folk also worked as daily wage labourers at the construction sites in the hill district of West Kameng and Changlang. This was not to be found in the relatively developed plain district of East Siang.

Further, it was found that degradation of forest had led to a situation where women in the underdeveloped hill as well as in the relatively developed plain districts had to walk greater distance to collect firewood, tubers, leafy vegetables, leaves and medicinal plants and spend more of their time in collection of these items. Various studies have also pointed out that the degradation of forest has led to an increase in women's work burden in the state (Upadhyay, 2011; Upadhyay, 2014; Mishra and Mishra, 2012). It was observed that the degradation of the forest was much more in the district of East Siang and Changlang, where timber was being commercially exploited to be sold in the bordering state of Assam, despite a Supreme Court ban on felling of trees for commercial use. Further, in the villages of the relatively developed plain district it was observed that as men moved out and joined the non-farm sector the work burden on the women folk

increased manifold. In both the underdeveloped hill and relatively developed plain districts it was observed that despite the fact that the work burden of women was much more than their male counterparts, they did not have much say in important decision-making. All important decisions in the household were being taken by the men of the household in all the nine villages of the three districts. The secondary as well as the primary data clearly reflects that the female work participation rate is higher in the villages of the underdeveloped hill district compared to that of the relatively developed plain districts. Women in the underdeveloped hill district have higher work burden, as they work in the *jhum* fields, which is very labour-intensive and also because of the difficult hilly terrain and lack of road connectivity.

It was also found that there is an inverse relationship with the literacy level and work participation rate. In 2011, the literacy level in the hill district of Changlang (59.80 per cent) and West Kameng (69.40 per cent) was lower than the literacy level of the plain district of East Siang (73.54 per cent), while the work participation rate was higher in the hill district of West Kameng (46.09 per cent) and Changlang (42.48 per cent) and lower in the plain district of East Siang (38.45 per cent). Thus we see that the work participation is higher in the districts having low literacy level. Further, it was also observed that low levels of urbanization have led to a situation of high work participation rate. The study found that in the hill district of West Kameng and Changlang there was less urbanization compared to the plain district of East Siang and the work participation rate for both males and females was higher in the hill districts than in the plain district of East Siang.

The economic contribution of women, for a variety of reasons, remains systematically under-reported in the official data systems. In case of Arunachal Pradesh, given the relative importance of subsistence production, and low levels of commercialization of the economy, the problems of underestimation of women's work are expected to be far more serious, hence the time use survey has an added significance.

To find out the total work burden of women, a time-use survey was undertaken in the nine villages by interviewing one male and one female adult member of the household in all the three districts of the State. It was found that in 'economic activities' men put in more hours of work compared to that of women. The survey reveals that on an average in SNA activities women worked for longer hours compared to that of men. While even in SNA extended activities, which includes unpaid work like

household maintenance and care of children and old people, women put in more hours of work than men. In non- SNA activities we find that in terms of leisure and entertainment, women put less hours than men.

In order to bring out the difference in the time spent by males and females a Gender disparity index was constructed. It was found that in all the villages of the three districts, the gender disparities in Extended SNA activities are much higher compared to non-SNA activities, where disparity was found to be comparatively lower. It was observed that in the villages of both the relatively developed plain and underdeveloped hill districts the gender disparity favours women in extended activities. On the other hand, the remaining villages show low levels of disparity in SNA primary activities. In activities like crop farming, kitchen gardening etc., very high level of disparity is observed in all the surveyed villages. In other activities such as horticulture, gardening etc. women were found contributing much of their time compared to that of men in both hill and plain districts. The disparity indices figure varies across districts. Thus it is found that the women in the underdeveloped hill districts spend more time compared to woman of the relatively developed plain district in work related activities. In other words, the disparity is high in the hill districts compared to that of plain district, in activities like horticulture, gardening etc. As far as activities like collection of water, fodder, fuel, fruit etc., is concerned, disparity exists in all the villages of the three districts.

Thus it is observed that the work burden of the women in the hill districts is much more compared to that of the plain district. There are many factors which have an impact on women's work burden. Total work burden which is defined as the percentage of the total time devoted to work, which includes both economic activities and household work (that is, SNA plus extended SNA). It is observed that the dependence of household on *jhum* and animal husbandry increases women's work burden substantially. The distance of the agriculture field from the house also has an impact on their work burden. Education of female worker decreases the work burden, but the coefficient is not very significant. The relatively lower levels of participation in paid-work, however, do not mean that women have lesser work burden. Typically women shoulder a disproportionately higher share of reproductive responsibilities, including child-rearing, caring and other types of domestic work. They also contribute substantially towards meeting the consumption and survival needs of the household members, thereby contributing to the household food security. Although women perform some of the most onerous and tedious tasks and spend a considerable time and energy in doing unpaid

domestic work along with a host of 'productive' and income-generating activities, their contribution remains undervalued and unrecognised. In much of the developed and developing world, women's employment is constrained by a number of structural inequalities such as, relatively lower wage rates and fewer hours of paid work for females, sex-segregation in the job market, sex-stereotyping of jobs resulting in designation of women's jobs as unskilled, explicit barriers to entry for women in some segments of the job market, etc. Any policy design for rural development in general and that for empowerment of women in particular needs to take into account these aspects of women's work. What is clear of course is that in the study districts at least the overall work burden of women is higher than that of males, but their participation in 'gainful economic activities' is less than that of men. So steps have to be taken to count the works which are performed by the female members of the household in the 'unpaid' category as economic activities.

Women empowerment involves fundamental changes in the organization of decision-making processes. The expansion of freedoms cannot be made possible without guaranteeing the fundamental right to choose between alternatives. As regard to the attitude of people towards women's work, it was found that people tend to take it for granted that there are certain tasks which are to be performed only by women. Few questions were put to both the male and the female respondents of the same household separately in order to know their perception regarding women's work. When enquired whether a working status of the women outside the household increases their status and honour in the society or in the community, we found that majority of them both male and female respondents agreed that it did have a positive impact on the status of the family. When enquired whether it was true that most women wanted a family and a home and not a job, it was found that around majority of the male respondents agreed to it, while majority of the female respondents disagreed. They were of the view that this perception had changed and increasingly women were becoming career oriented in today's time. Majority of the male respondents were of the view that a child as well as the family usually suffers if the mother is employed, while majority of the female respondents disagreed. They were of the view that it was a perception and a mindset that made people believe that working women had a negative impact on the wellbeing of the family. It was also found that the general perception of the man being the earning member in the family and the women taking care of the house as well as the children still exists in our society.

Among the indigenous communities, again, there is a great deal of difference in the relative position of women in decision-making, though by and large, it is argued that women enjoy greater autonomy in tribal communities. It is, however, equally important to note that in some communities in Arunachal Pradesh male dominance is found to be quite high. Again, within the communities where women enjoy some control over decision-making within the household, this participation is almost always enjoyed within well-defined and differentiated spheres of action and socially sanctioned parameters. Thus we see that the general perception towards women's work is changing, but the rate at which the change is occurring is very slow. Even today there is a general perception that women can work outside their homes, but not at the cost of household chores and other household related activities.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

Thus we see that the overall Female Work participation Rate in Arunachal has declined marginally during the last two decades, but it continues to be higher than the all India female work participation rate. The decline is more pronounced in the rural areas, where as in the urban areas there has been an increase in female work participation rate in the state. One of the factors leading to a decline in rural work participation rate is an increase in girls enrolment at the primary and upper primary levels. Further, we also find that the enrolment percentage of girls at higher levels of education has increased substantially in the last one decade. It has been observed that as the households become well-off they tend to withdraw their women folk from the labour market. Though the state is predominately an agrarian state and the agriculture practiced in this part of the region is very labour intensive, we observe that women are withdrawing themselves from the labour market gradually and households have slowly started adopting hired labours in case of family labour in their agricultural fields. As regard to the changing perception towards women's work we find that even today there are few identified tasks which are exclusively performed by the women of the households. Though the perception of men towards women's work is gradually changing, but the change in their attitude is occurring at a very slow pace.

The key question that needs to be addressed in the context of economic transformation of Arunachal Pradesh is the changing patterns of gender division of labour and the underlying changes in social attitudes and stereotypes. However, the state of Arunachal Pradesh has undergone a significant and multi-layered transition in past



decades and gender roles within and outside the household are being redefined throughout this on-going transition. Across the state there is a great deal of diversity in the pace, direction and nature of changes in gender roles. While improvements in the levels of education, greater facilities for learning and skill formation along with improvements in infrastructure have opened up new employment opportunities for a section of women in the state, the gender gap in access to new opportunities continues to remain a cause of concern.

