



RURAL WOMEN: STATUS AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

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Abstract

A change in the status of the women is a good gauge of the pattern and direction of social change. If the direction of that change is towards a more democratic distribution of roles between men and women, in tune with the constitutional directives, then the course of change is a wholesome one. If however, the various modernizing process result in an intensification of inequalities, then we are moving away from the spirit of the constitution. In the present paper, the author has discussed the status of rural women on three planks viz., socio-cultural, society's attitude towards the role of rural women and economic. The economic status of rural women has been assessed in relation to agricultural industrial Sector.

Keywords: Status, Women, Social change, Society



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Introduction

On the threshold of the 21st century, the country is witnessing a major 'Women's upsurge', which is the result of the cumulative and interactive effect of the sustained efforts of government, the women's movement and the civil society at various fronts over the last two decades. In this process, an active and grass root level leadership is emerging among women. If properly harnessed, this can be a very effective and catalytic agent for transforming the social conditions of women in the country. There are at two positive indicators of this 'upsurge' and a negative one, which is indicative of women's assertion of their rights for justices, for equality of status and level of empowerment.

In the last few decades, women's issues and concerns have been debated widely; the major issue being equality. Though their contribution in different economic, social and political activities is very well recognized, yet the idea of equality is still a distant dream. Women all over the world are overwhelmingly concerned with the issue of gender equality through women's empowerment. Status of women in Indian society is a reflection of unequal relationships sustained by patriarchy built on male superiority and female inferiority, sex stereotyped roles, expectations and economic, social and political predominance of men and

dependency of women. Women's movements have the credit of sharpening the issues confronting women and enabling them to participate in different spheres of life. Women's journey from survival to dignity and empowerment has not been an easy one. Though a lot of ground has been covered; from women in development to women and development, yet, a lot remains to be achieved.

The overall social and economic development along with dissemination of ideas and technologies and increasing reach of the media has made a big impact on society, social values and aspirations. The general assumption that education, growing opportunities for productive work, particularly for women, and a consequent higher status would lead to more equal and just society does not seem to be valid in India's case. Rather there is phenomenal increase in violence

against women during the last few years. Rape, eve-teasing, kidnapping, abduction, dowry deaths, torture, molestation, sexual harassment, importation of girls have frequent occurrences despite the legal provisions such as Immoral Traffic Act, 1956; Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1979, and Domestic violence Act, 2006. As more and more women are participating in public domain, they are back lashed. They are safe neither in their homes nor outside it. Violence against women takes many forms; traded in sex and labour; they are killed in womb. This is clearly reflected in the juvenile sex ratio for the country as a whole, dropped from 927 to 914 girls per 1000 boys from 2001 to 2011 censuses. Far from improving India's already abysmal gender inequality, statistics seem to have taken a turn for the worse. Data shows India's gender inequality index has further worsened between 2008-2011 and India ranks 129 out of 146 countries, better only than Afghanistan in South Asia. On Human Development Index (HDI 2011), India ranks 134 out of 187 countries. The

development scenario in general and gender inequality in particular are posing complex challenges and need to deal with quite seriously.

The provisional results of Census registering a change in female literacy from 22% in 1971 to 54% in 2001 and 74% in 2011 indicate that India's women have reached a 'critical mass' that foretells marked changes in human energy and social change. The second can be derived from women's' participation in the panchayat and municipal election after the 43rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, both as candidates and as voters. Both these indicators have their cascading effect on society, cutting across caste, communities and religious groups.

The negative indicator is provided by the data on crime against women, which is on the rise even though much of the domestic violence against women is not fully captured by the statistics. As the women assert their rights in a male dominated patriarchal society, they have to face resistance and opposition leading to violence. The challenging task of social empowerment of women in India in the coming years is how best to further unfold the positive changes and counter the forces of violence in all its forms through a process of education, regulation and awareness.

Related Literature

Mukherjee (1993) in the article “Understanding Rural Women through Participation” emphasizes that the importance of perception of rural women can hardly be over-emphasized. Their role in society, their problems priorities and capabilities, if truly appreciated, can lay the foundation of a gender based approach to rural development much stronger and productive than that of earlier decades. The rural women as a mother, as a partner in a rural household and as a member of rural society and the nation as a whole performs functions which are both critical and burdensome much of which is not always visible and touchable in terms of economic output. In Ecuador, Bastidas (1999) found that women’s participation in agriculture was higher in female-headed households. In households where the couple had small children women’s participation in agriculture was limited due to family obligations. Where the couple had no small children women preferred to engage in other activities where they could control their income. He also found that women with rural background are more likely to participate in agricultural activities than those with an urban background.

Srivastava (1988) work on “Women of Rural India” pointed out that the rural women have the dual burden of contributing to the family income as well as shouldering the responsibility of looking after the family. Although they play important roles, yet they do not find any place in the village power structure as Panchayats or Sabhas have no separate wings for women. The invisibility of women’s work and its undervaluation in the development discourses has been discussed widely. The low value and the social status given to women’s manifold activities such as domestic labour, child care, and other remunerated employment including agriculture reflects the reinforcement of gender inequities at ideological and practical levels as well.

According to Suryanarayana; Nagalakshmi (2005) rural women are subjected to some hindrances, which impose limitations on their potential to play their role effectively. Women are said to have equal status in the society, but when it comes to the actual decision making, men have final say while the women have to accept a subservient status. In general, rural

women have low literacy level, which in turn affects the attitude of women to be socially mobilized. Education no doubt widens the individual's mental horizon and releases him from the clutches of ignorance and superstitions. Economic incentives thus provided will free the women from the shackles of inside/outside dichotomy. Increased economic productivity will be able to influence their status and image in the family, as well as in the wider societal level. The ability of the women to contribute more in the family income will provide them with a greater bargaining power. Shubha (2015) found out that though a large number of women workers are found among the ranks of agriculture workers and their contribution to the rural economy is significant, they have not received adequate attention. Women agricultural workers encounter many difficulties because of their distressing and pitiable working conditions such as long working hours, low wages, inhuman treatment and gender discrimination. Direct access to income will in turn reduce the dependency syndrome they have been traditionally suffering from. In the long run such economic independence will have its impact on increased demand for better education, health and family welfare services needed for the overall wellbeing of women (Rath et al. 2015).

Discussion

The available related literature have brought the issues of populations, health education, employment and social security to the 'center stage'. The natural population pyramid of the country is changing. The sex –wise pyramids are becoming increasingly dissimilar, creating grave gender –based imbalances and disadvantages. The reverse employment pyramid of women, the sharp decline in sex –ratio of under seven population, more women than men in the 60+age group, continuing sex wise differentials in literacy, IMR and CMR etc. are the issues, which need immediate and concreted attention during the tenth plan. Several research studies, including National Family survey (2000), were conducted, which revealed that there were many issues related to women, which needed attention. Some of these are:

- Women had no access to political participation.
- They lacked organization in groups, and were consequently isolated.
- They had no access to credit or resources.
- They lacked education, vocational training and skills to earn a livelihood.
- Women's health and nutritional status was poor; with around 50% women aged 15-49 years being anemic.
- Water and fuel were not easily available their homes, and around and fodder was not easily available within a convenient distance.

- In case of medical emergencies, adequate medical attention was not available, leading to high mortality, especially maternal mortality. There is lack of good roads for speedy transportation.
- In case of adverse life situations, social support measures are inadequate in rural areas e.g. widowhood or disability.

A change in the status of the women is a good indicator of the pattern and direction of social change. If the direction of that change is towards a more egalitarian distribution of roles between men and women, in tune with the constitutional directives, then the direction of change is a wholesome one. If however, the various modernizing process result in an intensification of inequalities, then we are moving away from the spirit of the constitution. Status is referred to as a social system or a subsystem which is distinguishable from and, at the same time, related to another positions through its designed rights and obligation. However, status involves comparison and grading.

The Committee on the Status of Women Recognized Status as:

- Place in ritual hierarchy.
- Financial position.
- Independent job.
- Educational background.
- Political participation.

Socio-economic Status of Women in India

Some of the factors affecting women's health are high female mortality rate in certain age groups, marked preference for sons and the consequent neglect of female infants, lower status of women and the general neglect of women at all ages. The other factors affecting the status are the adverse impact of frequent and excessive child bearing on the health of women, higher evidence of certain diseases in women and higher work burden and drudgery.

Society's Attitude towards Women

Our customs and traditions still decide how women should dress and what norms will a widow follow. This indicates that women can not take decision by themselves. This custom creates a barrier in the participation of women in areas where men are important actors. While most men express disapproval of dowry, they are found to be opposed to an equal share between them and their sisters in parental property. The inequalities inherent in our traditional social structure, based on caste, community and class, have a very significant influence on the status of women, in different spheres. Socially accepted rights and expected

roles of women, norms governing their behavior and of others towards them vary among different groups and regions. They are closely affected by the stage methods of development and the by the group in the social hierarchy. This makes broad generalizations regarding women's status unrealistic.

Traditions and religions have a strong influence on women on in guiding their lives from birth to death. It is also observed that these did not have a homogenous pattern and have undergone many changes remodeling under the compulsion of changes in other spheres of life; especially economic and political. Nevertheless, the social disabilities, although continue. Marriage and motherhood continue to be the most honorable and religiously valuable achievements for women.

In some religious texts, women are found to be excluded from officiating at community worship. In matters of law relating to divorce, maintenance, custody and inheritance, women continue to stand at a disadvantage. Derogatory social practices and atrocities, such as rape, dowry, bride burning and so on, continue to effect women at large. They are the most vulnerable targets of political violence too. These are expressed in rape, killing of women especially of schedule castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes, who are increasingly participating in struggles for higher wages, land rights, rights to use forest produce like fodder and fuel and so on.

While the impact of various developmental policies, plans and programmes implemented over the last few decades have brought forth a perceptible improvement in the socio-economic status of women, problems like illiteracy, ignorance, discrimination and violence continue to persist even today. The following paragraphs give an account of achievements in the selected areas of demography and vital statistics; health and family welfare; literacy and education; work and employment; decision –making political participation; etc.

Social Status

Violence against women and girls is the most pervasive human rights violation in the world today. Opening the door on the subject of violation against the world's females is like standing at the threshold of an immensely dark chamber vibrating with collective anguish, but with the sounds of protest throttled back to a murmur. Where there should be outrage aimed at an intolerable status quo, there is instead, denial and the largely passive acceptance of 'the way things are.'

Male violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon. Although not every woman has experienced it, and many expect not to, fear of violence is an important factor in the lives of most women. It determines what they do, when they do it, where they do it and with whom.

Fear of violence is a cause of women's lack of participation in activities beyond the home, as well as inside it. Within the home, women and girls may be subjected to physical and sexual abuse as punishment or as culturally justified assaults. These acts shape their attitude to life, and their expectations of themselves.

The insecurity outside the household is today the greatest obstacle in the path of women. Conscious that, compared to the atrocities outside the houses, atrocities within the houses are endurable, women not only continued to accept their inferiority in the houses and society, but even called it sweet. In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India. Every 26 minutes, a woman is molested. Every 34 minutes, a rape takes place. Every 42 minutes, a sexual harassment incident occurs. Every 43 minutes, a woman is kidnapped. And every 93 minutes, a woman is burnt to death over dowry. One-quarter of the reported rapes involve girls under the age of 16, but the vast majority are never reported. Although the penalty is severe, convictions are rare.

Women are Subordinate in Society

Exposure to and interactions with the outside world are instrumental in determining the possibilities available to women in their daily lives. The situation of women is affected by the degree of their autonomy or capacity to make decisions both inside and outside their own household.

“The position of women in northern India is notably poor. Traditional Hindu society in northern rural areas is hierarchical and dominated by men, as evidenced by marriage customs. North Indian Hindus are expected to marry within prescribed boundaries: the bride and grooms must not be related, they have no say in the matter, and the man must live outside the women's natal village.

Parents of brides are socially and ritually inferior to the parents of grooms thus, necessitating the provision of a dowry. After marriage, the bride moves into her husband family. Such a bride is “a stranger in a strange place”. They are controlled by the older females in the household, and their behavior reflects on the honour of their husbands. Because emotional ties between spouses are considered a potential threat to the solidarity of the patrilineal group, the northern system tends to segregate the sexes and limit communication between spouses – a circumstance that has direct consequences for family planning and similar –“modern” behaviours that effect health. A young Indian bride is brought up to believe that her own wishes and interests are subordinate to those of her husband and his family. The primary duty of a newly married young women, and virtually her only means of improving her positions in the hierarchy of her husband's household, is to bear “sons”.

Dowry

Women are kept subordinate, and are even murdered, by the practice of dowry. In India 6000 dowry murders are committed each year. This reality exists even though the Dowry Prohibition Act has been in existence for so many years, and there are virtually no arrests under the act. Since those giving as well as those accepting dowry is punishable under the existing law, no one is willing to complain. It is only after a 'dowry death' that the complaints become public. It is estimated that the average dowry today is equivalent to five times the family's annual income and that the high cost of weddings and dowries is a major cause of indebtedness among India's poor.

Inheritance

Women's rights to inheritance are limited and frequently violated. In the mid -1950s, the Hindu personal laws, which apply to all Hindu, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains were overhauled, banning polygamy and giving women rights to inheritance, adoption and divorce. The Muslim personal laws differ considerably from that of the Hindus, and permit polygamy. Despite various laws protecting women's rights, traditional patriarchal attitudes still prevail and are strengthened and perpetuated in the home.

Economic Status

- **Women work roughly twice as many hours as men**

Women's contribution to agriculture – whether it be subsistence farming or commercial agriculture- when measured in terms of the number of tasks performed and time spent, is greater than men. The extent of women's contribution is aptly highlighted by a micro study conducted in the Indian Himalayas, which found that on a one –hectare farm, a pair of bullocks works for 1, 064 hours, a man for 1, 212 hours and a woman for 3, 485 hours in a year.

- **The impact of technology on women**

The shift from subsistence to a market economy has a dramatic negative impact on women. The Green Revolution, which focused on increasing yields of rice and wheat, entailed a shift in inputs from human to technical. Women's participation, knowledge and inputs were marginalized, and their role shifted from being "primary producers to subsidiary workers".

- **Women have unequal access to resources**

Extension services tend to reach only men, which perpetuates the existing division of labour in the agricultural sector, with women continuing to perform unskilled tasks.

Political Status

The representation of women in the decision –making levels through the Premier Services viz, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and Indian Police Service (IPS), which stood at only 5.4 % in 2000, increased marginally to 7.6% in 2005. However, the figure is still very low, requiring not only affirmative action, but also special interventions to help raise the number of women at various decision–making levels.

Critical Areas of Concern

Malnutrition: India has exceptionally high rates of child malnutrition, because tradition in India requires that women eat last and least throughout their, even when pregnant and lactating. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle.

Poor Health: Females receive less health care than males. Many women die during childbirth of easily preventable complications. Working conditions and environ- on mental pollution further impair women’s health.

Lack of Education: Families are far less likely to educate girls than boys, and far more likely to pull them out of school, either to help out at home or from fear of violence.

Overwork: Women work longer hours and their work is more arduous than men’s yet their work is unrecognized. Men report that “women, like children, eat and do nothing.” Technological progress in agriculture has had a negative impact on women.

Mistreatment: In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India, in terms of rapes, assaults and dowry –related murders. Fear of violence suppresses the aspirations of all women. Female infanticide and sex- selective abortions are additional forms of violence that effect the devaluing of females in Indian society.

Powerlessness: While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions. Women lack power to decide who they will marry, and are often married off as children. Legal loopholes are used to deny women inheritance rights.

Policy and Planning:

- Given the diversity of the agro- ecological system and the resulting wide varieties of farming system, it is important that state level efforts in gender planning are supported by gender/ sex segregated data pertinent to local situation.
- The current efforts on creating agricultural data and gender information in farming system across the country should be coordinated and the available information should be fed into the planning process.

- Planning at the local Panchayat level should be gender sensitive and should have gender/sex segregated information to support local development efforts.
- Agriculture education institution and training centers should develop regular curricula to integrate approach in all technical areas of agriculture sector.
- Existing policies related to target women and gender-equity should be widely communicated to all involved development work including women clientele.
- Review of the land right policies and implementation of land distribution gender equity and women's land rights.
- Farmer's right initiatives should explicitly address concerns of women farmers.

Recommendations

- Develop programmes to train Panchayat leaders in gender –integrative participatory approaches and local planning.
- Develop programmes for rural women to build leadership skills for managing agriculture community–based development activities.
- Develop economic and political literacy programmes for rural women to utilize development inputs effectively.
- Support agriculture extension in-service training programmes and other relevant agriculture curricular activities to support gender sensitive extension agents.
- Put in place appropriate institutional mechanism for information exchange and cooperation between the agencies that focus on women's affair and agriculture – related technical activities.
- Support women –managed rural production and marketing ventures in horticulture, floriculture and post –harvest processing of commodities.
- Provide technology training and input support to women to take advantage of emerging high –value agribusiness sector including bio-technology and forest products.
- The issues concerning women should not be discussed separately without having any direct link with the overall development.
- Re-training women, so that labour displacing technologies leading to women's unemployment have minimal effect.
- Providing support system like child care facilities, so that women can enter the labour market. Land reforms and distribution of surplus land of the landless.

- Agricultural land may also be registered in the joint names of husband and wife, and removing barriers to women's inheritance of agriculture land
- Ensuring employment for women in sectors where their role as workers will be socially recognized; their skill and security levels will help ensure economic dependence and resist all policies of general agriculture development, which are resulting in increasing casualisation of the female workforce.
- Effectively removing the wage differentials between men and women. This would entail the linking of women issues to the issues and demands of the agriculture workers.
- Participation of community people in achieving these goals is necessary. So they must be actively involved in the process of implementation.

Conclusions

In the present paper, the author has discussed the status of rural women on three planks viz., socio-cultural, society's attitude towards the role of rural women and economic. The economic status of rural women has been assessed in relation to agricultural industrial Sector. What is perhaps essential for us to know are the factors that have influenced the researchers, social scientists and the policy makers to generate information and data on women's status, which was hitherto invisible and to accept in principle such crucial contributions that the CSWI, Shram-Shakti and other reports have made in this regard. The data on the status of rural women have not only been revealing, but have also become compelling. They have exerted an enormous influence on the policy makers to redefine the strategies for women's development. The shift from welfare-oriented strategy to development-oriented approach is the result of certain compulsion emanating from the data while they reveal the issues affecting the life of rural women. Hence, for the effective implementation of programmes for rural women on the lines of development-oriented strategy, consideration of the issues affecting rural women is inevitable. The establishments of National Commission on women, and the formulation of National Perspective plan for women, we believe, are correct steps in this direction.

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