

Feminization of agriculture and employment transitions in rural Assam: issues and challenges

Miss Mondira Tamuli

Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of Social Sciences (Economics), OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract

The rising share of farm work in India pursued by women—commonly known as the '*feminization of agriculture*'. In broad terms, the feminization of agriculture refers to women's increasing participation in agricultural labor force, whether as independent producers, as unremunerated family workers or as agricultural wage workers (Cornheil 2006).

But, quantitative increase in employment of women's work force participation does not necessarily indicate qualitative improvements or better conditions for them. Many scholars in their study argue that the conditions of work and terms of employment are worsening due to larger developmental priorities and policies of the state (e.g. reduce in subsidies, informalization of work etc.).

On this background, an attempt has been made to examine and understand various dimensions and policy implications of feminization of agriculture in Rural India as well as in Assam.

Keywords: feminization, agriculture, labor, workforce

1. Introduction

Gender disparity in the labor market in India is persistent as it has many dimensions including low labor force participation, inequality in wages, occupational segregation, a high burden of domestic work, and many other forms. According to the National Sample Survey (NSS), the rural female labor force participation rate (RFLFPR) has been almost half of the rural male labor force participation rate (LFPR) while in the urban areas; FLFPR is even less than half of the male LFPR. It may be that the "discouraged worker" effect is particularly strong for women, or it may reflect other social causes that inhibit engagement in recognized work.

The rising share of farm work in India undertaken by women – a phenomenon commonly known as the '*feminization of agriculture*' – raises questions about employment transitions in rural labor market. Growing numbers of women in particular occupations are often associated with tenuous and underpaid employment which is ultimately disempowering (Kelkar and Wang 2007). Moreover, quantitative increase in employment of women's work force participation does not necessarily indicate simultaneous qualitative improvements for them.

2. Objective of the Study

1. To understand the concept of "Feminization of agriculture"
2. To highlight the employment transition of female workforce participation in Rural India particularly in Rural Assam over the last two decades i. e from 1991 to 2011.

3. Data and Methodology

The paper uses the employment-unemployment data for 50th to 68th round of the NSS, from 1993-1994 to 2011-12. Data from Primary Census Abstract (PCA) for the last two decades 1991 and 2011 were taken into consideration to assess the trend and pattern of gendered workforce participation in both agriculture and non-agricultural activities in Assam. An empirical study has also been done to capture the real scenario of rural female workforce participation in a flood affected(char) village.

4. The Changed Structure of Rural Workforce in Assam

In Assam, the decline of male agricultural workforce is though much higher than the female workforce, one important observation is that female participation in rural non-agricultural employment is also quite low. An overwhelming share 79.4 percent of female workers still depend on agriculture as their main source of employment, while only 20.6 percent depend on non-agricultural employment. But, involvement in agriculture should not be confused with women's empowerment. Women's involvement as cultivators may not, for many, be financially empowering given the sector is already experiencing severe decline and is no longer considered a profitable occupation. Relatively higher share of rural women workforce in agricultural activities also reflects women substitutes' man over their previous agricultural employment. Data shows sharp decline of rural workforce in agricultural activities for both male and female over the last two decades i.e. 1991 to 2011. In Assam, rural male workforce in agriculture sector declined from 78.2 percent in 1993-94 to 58.6 percent in

2011-12 and the decline of female workforce in agriculture sector during that period was 83.2 percent to 79.4 percent (Table 1).

Table 1: Per 1000 Distribution of Usually Employed Persons (PS+SS) by Broad Industry Division for Rural Assam (in percentage)

Broad Industry Division	Category of Worker	50 th Round (1993-94)	55 th Round (1999-00)	61 st Round (2004-05)	66 th Round (2009-10)	68 th Round (2011-12)
Agriculture	Rural Male	78.2	64.7	69.6	66.6	58.6
	Rural Female	83.2	79.4	88.3	86.2	79.4
Mining and quarrying	Rural Male	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.16
	Rural Female	NA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.25
Manufacturing	Rural Male	2.2	2.9	2.9	3.7	5.91
	Rural Female	NA	8.3	3.7	2.8	3.4
Electricity, water etc.	Rural Male	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.1	NA
	Rural Female	0.1	0.0	0.0	0	NA
Construction	Rural Male	0.8	2.2	3.0	4.1	7.26
	Rural Female	1.9	0.2	0.8	0.9	3.13
Wholesale, retail etc.	Rural Male	8.2	9.9	11.6	11.2	13.9
	Rural Female	0.1	1.5	1.1	2.8	3.01
Transport, storage etc.	Rural Male	1.6	3.3	3.2	3.3	3.8
	Rural Female	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.06
Financial services	Rural Male	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.27
	Rural Female	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.0
Community Services	Rural Male	8.2	16.3	8.8	10.1	NA
	Rural Female	5.8	10.2	5.7	7.2	NA

Source: Own calculations based on NSS data on employment-unemployment (1993-94; 1999-00; 2004-05; 2009-10; 2011-12)

The unorganized manufacturing sector though has got employment potential; data of recent years does not show an encouraging scenario. The rural male worker in manufacturing activities has risen to 5.94 percent in 2011-12 from 2.2 percent in 1993-94 whereas female workforce participation is 3.4 percent in 2011-12. This implies that there was the loss of jobs for women who were engaged in manufacturing. This may be due to the decrease in demand for the products from traditional industries which led to the loss of jobs for women.

In rural Assam construction activities has shown rapid increase over the last two decades. This sector now engages 3.1 percent female workforce (NSS 2011-12). The increase in construction workforce may be due to the implementation of rural employment Schemes like MGNREGA. The work generated by MGNREGA, however comes to criticism on inadequate numbers of days of work generated by this

program. It has been found that only 41.08 % women person days was generated by the scheme in 2018-19. This call for comprehensive review of state supported employment program, especially for women to what extent such program have able to supplement rural household income.

5. Increases in Marginal Worker and fall in Main Worker Category

Increases in marginal workforce and fall in main workers category is one of the important characteristics of Indian agriculture and Assam is not also an exception here. It holds good for both male and female agricultural workforce. The increase in agricultural labor category, increase in self-employment fall in cultivator etc indicates growing marginalization of rural workforce in the state for both male and female.

Table 2: Districts of Assam with Maximum Changes in Main Workers Category

Districts	Category	1991	2011
Dhemaji	Main	74.5	62.4
Lakhimpur	do	73.8	64.2
Sivasagar	do	85.1	63.9
Jorhat	do	89.5	65.2
Golaghat	do	85.2	67.6
Karbi-Anglong	do	88.0	66.1

Source: Own Calculations based on Primary Census Abstract of Census of India

6. The case of Cultivators and Agricultural Labour

There is a decline in cultivator category reflecting deepening crisis of the agriculture sector in the state. Data shows that in cultivator category, in 2011, Dhemaji district had both maximum proportion of both male and female (80.5 percent) engagement in cultivation; the figures however declined as compared to 1991. Among the 27 districts of Assam, in cultivator category, female cultivator in Sivasagar districts has been declined by highest percentage with 38.3 percent followed by Bongaigaon(38.2

percent), and Marigaon (31.9 percent). (Table-3) Noticeably, no districts of the state has shown positive increase in female cultivator category over the last two decades. Data reveals that there is a significant rise in female agricultural labor category in some districts in 2011 compared to 1991. Dhubri (30.2 percent) district has highest female agriculture labour in 2011, although it has been fallen by 1.5 percent from 1991. Dima-Hasao (2.9 percent) district has lowest female agriculture labor followed by Dhemaji (3.3percent), and Lakhimpur (7.1 percent) in 2011.

Table 3: Districts with Highest Variations in Cultivator Category in Rural Assam (In percentage)

Districts	Category of workers	1991	2011	Percentage changes
Dhemaji	Highest Male Cultivator	77.2	72.5	4.7
Dhemaji	Highest Female Cultivator	89.8	80.5	9.3
Nalbari	Lowest Male Cultivator	53.1	30.8	22.3
Cachar	Lowest Male Cultivator	24.0	14.0	10.0

Source: Own calculations from Primary Census Abstract data, Census of India.

It has been found that about 10 districts of Assam such as Darrang (+9.48 percent), Marigaon (+5.9 percent, Nagaon (+2.8 percent), Lakhimpur (+7.1 percent) etc. are experiencing significant rise in female agricultural labor category during the last two decades. (Table-4)

Table 4: Districts with Highest/ Lowest proportion of Rural Agriculture labor (In percentage)

Districts	Category of workers	1991	2011	Percentage changes
Dhubri	Highest Male Agricultural Labor	24.5	23.2	1.3
Dhemaji	Lowest Male Agricultural Labor	4.9	2.1	2.8
Dhubri	Highest Male Agricultural Labor	31.7	30.2	1.5
Dhemaji	Lowest Male Agricultural Labor	5.0	2.1	2.9

Source: Own calculations based on Primary Census Abstract data, Census of India.

Another important observation is that the falling rate of female cultivator is much higher than rise in agriculture labor category. In this context a proportionate change in both the categories was expected. The development may reveal concentration of land in certain categories of people and landlessness of a section. It may also explain women compelling to join agriculture in large numbers. The phenomenon of feminization of agriculture is here can be read as more and more women are compelled to join as agriculture labor in subsidiary capacity.

According to Huber (1991) [5] and Lorber (1994) [12], one of the central features of the gender inequality between men and women is the gender division of labor, both in the economic sphere and the socialization of the gender identities of men and women. This demonstrates that the triple burden of the productive work, reproductive work and community service plays a central role in the gender inequality between men and women. Such engagement may occur under constrained situation and could be termed ‘feminization out of compulsion’.

7. The Changed Pattern of Female workforce in Household Industry (HH) Sectors: Evidence from Non-Farm Based Occupations

The importance of household Industry sector for a populated state like Assam is an important source of generating the employment opportunities both for skilled and unskilled labor force. But, the industrial sector of Assam is still in fragile state. Household based handloom weaving activity is very age-old practice in rural Assam. In spite of being intensely connected with the culture of the State, the handloom Industry has not flourished in commercial sphere. There are only 20 Handloom Production Centers presently functioning in different parts of the State and The Department of Handloom & Textiles is running 102 Handloom Training Centers throughout the State with intake capacity of 15 to 20 trainees per Training Centre per session.

Available secondary data has also shown significant

changes in household manufacturing sectors in rural Assam. District showing sharp decline in household manufacture over the last two decades are Jorhat, Sivasagar, Darrang and Golaghat (Table 5).

Table 5: Districts with Maximum Changes in Rural Household Industry (HH) Workers (In percentage)

Districts	1991		2011	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Jorhat	16.25	28.53	3.4	7.1
Darrang	14.8	26.42	1.3	5.7
Golaghat	14.08	28.4	1.9	3.4
Sivasagar	20.7	36.1	1.9	2.0

Source: Own calculations based on Primary Census Abstract data, Census of India.

It can also be observable that decline in male workers in those household manufacturing activities are much higher than that of female counterpart. Higher involvement of women workforce in household activities may increase the possibility of ‘triple burden’ of work to them. This jeopardize their quality of life and decision making, by preventing them from enjoying economic opportunities through engagement in income generating activities. Noticeably, over the last two decades, a sharp decline of women in household activities can also be observed from available census data. (Table 5). It reflects limited opportunity of absorption of female labor force in non-farm sector within the rural areas of the state. The development also raises query on the state supported program to generate rural non-farm employment for women. The state now promotes Self-Help Groups (SHG) and Joint Liability Groups (JLG) with provisioning of financial support to generate livelihood and it would be useful to evaluate the outcome of initiative taken by the members in self-employment initiatives.

8. Empirical Evidences from Field Survey

An empirical study was undertaken in a flood affected char village named Meragarh of river island district Majuli of Assam to examine the changing structure of economic activities in rural Assam, especially for women. Mera Garh is a medium size village located in Majuli Circle of Jorhat district, Assam with total 84 households. Total geographical area of the village is 165.88 Hectares. The village has population of 405 of which 204 are males while 201 are females as per Population Census 2011 [4]. Total working population of Mera Garh is 221 which are either main or marginal workers out of which 123 are male and 98 are female. 49.77 percent of workers describe their work as Main Work (Employment or Earning more than 6 Months) while 50.23 % were involved in Marginal activity providing livelihood for less than 6 months. Total main workers are 110 out of which male main workers are 103 and female main workers are 7. Total marginal workers of village are 111. A total no. of thirty-four household based on multi-

stage sampling had taken into account according to the sample size of the study. During the primary survey, it has been found that ninety percent of their female workforce is engaged with agricultural activities but most of them are marginal and casual in nature. They are just supplementing their partner's work in farming activities. The most common forms of economic activities for both male and female workforce in rural areas are self-employed and rest comes under casual and agricultural labor category. The agricultural labor category has been found to be highest among women. With little human and physical capital, they are bound to take up low paid daily wage to sustain their lives. This is mainly due to seasonal nature of agriculture work that too in a flood affected char area, where major days of the year they don't get job opportunity so as income. Further, in such areas as there is lack of developed labor market and wage rate for agricultural operations are very little so that minimum requirements of the labors are not merely adequate to sustain a decent livelihood. Traditional activities like handloom weaving; bamboo works etc has lost its significance as they don't have proper market inside as outside the villages. It has also been observed that earlier they used to sell their weaving products in nearby markets but now they only do it for self-consumption.

Livestock rearing is another popular and most common activity practices by the female households in the study area but that too for self-consumption purpose only. In spite of having huge potential, these kinds of activities have not been flourished in commercial sphere due to lack of initiatives taken by both households and govt. departments. It has also been observed that there was a very little scope of engaging in non-agricultural activities by the female workers as the nature of those activities just cannot fulfill their requirements. Here, Physical, socio-psychological factors and social norms are influencing their choice to a great extent. So, feminization of rural workforce doesn't necessarily indicate their economic empowerment or financial independence in real sense. In such situations, the idea of 'feminizations out of compulsion' cannot be ignored at all. Female workers have been found to be more vulnerable in comparison to male workforce in the face of changing structure of economic activities in rural areas. Here, a few photographs of female workers have been illustrated.



Source: own

Photograph 1: Women busy in Handloom and Weaving activity



Source: own

Photograph 2: Women in Agricultural work

8. Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussions, it can be seen that participation of both men and women in agriculture has declined, but the rate of decline has been faster among men than it has among women. Many scholars have addressed this kind of a situation and rightly questioned it whether is it feminization of agriculture or feminization of agrarian distress?

Feminization of Indian agriculture has been taking shape in the context of a complex relationship of socio-economic and environmental conditions such as shrinking land holdings; degraded natural resources; declining accessibility to traditional activities; distorted market incentives etc. People are both a means and end of development in the human development approach. The ultimate aim of development is to improve the quality of life of people by reducing inequality among them and to achieve this aspiration; livelihood provisioning, livelihood protection and promotion should be the main concern of the state to overcome such issues. To transform this kind of a situation, it is necessary to put the attention on women in the overall development plans and policies of the state. The increased participation of women in agriculture will demand more emphasis on the development of gender friendly tools, equipment as well as work places (Mehta *et al.* 2018) [3].

References

1. (n.d.). Retrieved July 29, 2019, from The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005. https://www.nrega.nic.in/netnrega/mgnrega_new/Nrega_home.aspx
2. Abraham V. Employment Growth in Rural India: Distress-Driven? Economic and Political Weekly, 2009, pp.97-104.
3. Mehta CRLP. Women empowerment through. Current Science, 2018, pp. 1934-1940.
4. Census of India, Government of India. Retrieved August 4, 2019, from Government of India; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011. <http://censusindia.gov.in/DigitalLibrary/Tables.aspx>
5. Huber J. A theory of family, economy, and gender. In P. N. Cohen, the gender division of labour: "Keeping house" and occupational segregation in the United States, 1991, 239-255.
6. Husselmann C. A Gender Analysis of the Triple Burden of Production, Reproduction and Community Service in the Rehoboth Constituency. University of amibia, 2016.

7. Economic Survey of Assam. Guwahati: Government of Assam, 2011.
8. Employment and Unemployment in India (1999-2000). New Delhi: National Sample Survey Organisation; Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2006.
9. Employment and Unemployment Situation in India (2011-12). New Delhi: National Sample Survey Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2014.
10. Employment and Unemployment Situation in India (2004-05). New Delhi: National Sample Survey Organisation; Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2006.
11. Itishree Patnaik KL. The Feminization of Agriculture or Feminization of agrarian distress? Tracking the Trajectory of women in agriculture in India. *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 2017, 1-18.
12. Lorber J. Paradoxes of gender. In P.N. Cohen, the gender division of labour: "Keeping house" and occupational segregation in the United States, 1994, 239-255.
13. Key Results on Employment and Unemployment. New Delhi: National Sample Survey Organisation, Department of Statistics, Government of India, 1996.
14. Mech A. Growth and Composition of Rural Non-Farm Employment in Assam: A Post-Reform Scenario. *Journal of Business Management & Social Sciences Research (JBM&SSR)*, 2015, pp 711-716.