

Status of farmers' wives in work participation and decision making: a case study of Cooch Behar district, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Farmers' wives constitute the major part of rural women and are regarded as the all time assistants of their farmer husbands. Although they share abundant responsibility on different household works but they are grossly neglected in the domain of decision making especially on financial matters. The study was conducted to analyse the participation status of farmers' wives in different agricultural activities and decision making in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. It was seen that although the wives were engaged in different activities yet out of 24 hours they devoted 40 per cent hours a day on general household activities and 18 per cent on farm activities. Contrary to the work of some earlier workers the present study showed that the status of farmers' wives was impressive in decision making as compared to work participation. However their participation in financial matters of the family was less. It was concluded that the farmers' wives should be given due respect in operating and decision making in financial matters to empower them in true sense.

Keywords: Farmers' wives; activity; decision making; participation

INTRODUCTION

Women play varied roles worldwide. About 70 per cent of the agricultural workers, 80 per cent of food producers and 10 per cent of those who process basic foodstuffs are women and they also undertake 60 to 90 per cent of the rural marketing (Choudhary and Singh 2003, Sabo 2006). Farmers' wives are major part of rural women and sometimes are considered synonymous with all other farm

women. As per Hussain and Hussain (2011) agriculture and farming activities involve joint participation of both male and female labour force. Women perform the maximum farm operations thereby contributing a lot towards the upliftment of the economic and social status of their families and finally accelerating the pace of rural development. They do participate in the farming practices by providing valuable suggestions at various stages of farming. The women are more concerned

towards food security of their families by way of producing food, maintaining livestock and raising kitchen gardens and orchards. Women as agricultural labourers participate in several activities such as weeding, sowing, transplanting, harvesting, carrying, storage etc. There is hardly any activity in agricultural production except ploughing in which women are not actively involved (Swaminathan 1985) but women are increasingly becoming the prime agriculturists with little rights, authority, access to or control over resources required for enhancing production and household income (Acharya et al 2010). Despite women's critical contribution to the family they have still remained as invisible workers. Over the years women cultivators are typically and wrongly characterized as economically inactive and women cultivators play only a supportive role in agriculture as farmers' wives (Samanta 1994). No recognition is given to them as an important contributor and their contribution is not recorded (Chayal et al 2013). Now a days male members of the farm families are willing to quit the profession if they get scope. They migrate to urban areas in search of new job opportunities. Thereby the role of women in farming practices is going to be much more important and critical in the coming days. In this backdrop the present study was undertaken to analyse the participation of women in farm and allied activities and decision making.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. Cooch Behar-II block was purposively selected considering the convenience and time frame for the study. From the block 50 farm families were selected randomly from a purposively selected village (Dhandhing Guri). The village was predominantly agriculture dependent having 778 families (more than 70% were associated primarily with farming activities directly) and rice-based cropping system. The women literacy was low (65.30%) and they were shy to come forward to face the interview. However the collection of data was done in isolation by the woman author of the paper through personal interview method with a structured pre-tested schedule from 50 randomly selected wives.

For analysing and comparing levels of participation, participation index was developed following Pal et al (2006) as follows:

$$\text{Participation index} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n X_i f_i}{N \times n}$$

where X_i = Score assigned for i^{th} level of participation, f_i = Frequency of women participated in i^{th} level, n = Maximum score levels assigned (here 2 for activity and 3 for decision participation), N = Number of women considered for the study (here 50).

Levels of score were 'fully', 'partially' and 'no' with 2, 1 and 0 scores for farm participation and 'never consulted (NC)', 'consulted but not implemented (CBNI)', 'consulted but partially implemented (CPI)', 'consulted and fully implemented (CFI)' with 0, 1, 2 and 3 scores. Mann-Whitney U-test (a non-parametric ANOVA analysis) was employed to draw inference from comparative analysis.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The studied community mainly dependent on agriculture and farmers' wives were taken as respondents. Bar diagram in Fig 1 depicts that 100 per cent sampled families were engaged in agriculture. They also maintained cattle (36%), goats (16%) and hens and ducks (38%) to supplement food and secure nutrition by making a provision of milk and egg (balanced diet) and meat (protein source). Goat keeping also provided meat as protein source but it was mostly reared as a short term insurance. The studied families did not consume goat milk but they reared it as a remunerative enterprise for making provision of cash flow in short term demand.

Farmers' wives are characterized as the all time assistants of their farmer husbands and the respondents of the study area were not the exception to this trend. They were engaged in various fields from daily household activities inside to the farm

activities outside. The Fig 2 shows that though the wives were engaged in different activities but out of 24 hours they devoted 9.67 hours (40%) on general household activities like cooking, cleaning, serving etc. The second largest share was given to farm activities (4.17 h/day on an average which was 18% of total time). Cattle and poultry care and nursing of children and aged persons also shared 12 and 5 per cent time of their whole day respectively. It was seen in the study area that the farmers' wives got only 6.08 h (only 25% of total time) a day for sleep and leisure.

Table 1 presents the participation status of farmers' wives in different domains like farming, financial and household activities. The participation level was assessed as full participation and partial participation. From the participation index value it was found that among all other farming activities the farm women predominantly undertook postharvest operations like winnowing, grading, cleaning of farm produce, drying, processing for future use etc (index value= 0.33). Though in most of the other farm activities the participation of farmers' wives was very less (index value ranging from only 0.11 to 0.21) but in some of the fields in financial matters their participation was quite high. They considerably and very actively participated in management of liquid cash for daily use (index value= 0.61) and purchasing household items (index value= 0.76).

Table 1. Activity participation status of farmers' wives

Activity	Participation level			Participation index
	Full	Partial	Nil	
Farm activities				
Preparatory tillage and debris cleaning	2 (4.00)	16 (32.00)	32 (64.00)	0.20
Seed sowing/transplanting	2 (4.00)	13 (26.00)	35 (70.00)	0.17
Weeding/thinning	3 (6.00)	15 (30.00)	32 (64.00)	0.21
Inter cultivation	1 (2.00)	11 (22.00)	38 (76.00)	0.13
Irrigation	1 (2.00)	8 (16.00)	41 (84.00)	0.10
Harvesting/picking	2 (4.00)	16 (32.00)	32 (64.00)	0.20
Post harvest operation	15 (30.00)	3 (6.00)	32 (64.00)	0.33
Financial activities				
Managing liquid cash for daily use	18 (36.00)	25 (50.00)	7 (14.00)	0.61
Managing saving	7 (14.00)	13 (26.00)	30 (60.00)	0.27
Managing and operating of bank A/C	7 (14.00)	19 (38.00)	24 (48.00)	0.33
Purchasing household items	26 (52.00)	24 (48.00)	0 (0.00)	0.76
Purchasing farm inputs/other item	3 (6.00)	12 (24.00)	35 (70.00)	0.18
Selling of farm produce	0 (0.00)	12 (24.00)	38 (76.00)	0.12
Household activities				
Cooking and serving	50 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	1.00
Preparatory works for cooking	37 (74.00)	13 (26.00)	0 (0.00)	0.87
Child care and nursing service	42 (84.00)	8 (16.00)	0 (0.00)	0.92
Everyday cleaning and beautification	47 (94.00)	3 (6.00)	0 (0.00)	0.97
Repairing of house	0 (0.00)	17 (34.00)	33 (66.00)	0.17
Cattle and poultry related works	15 (30.00)	12 (24.00)	23 (46.00)	0.42
Attending ceremony and relatives	26 (52.00)	24 (48.00)	0 (0.00)	0.76
Overall activity participation index (average)				0.43

Figures in the parentheses indicate per cent values

Index values varied from only 0.17 to as high as 1.00 the maximum value to be achieved. Repairing of house was the least participated activity and cooking and serving, cleaning and beautification, nursing and attending ceremonies and relatives crossed the 75 per cent (equivalent to 0.75 index value out of max 1.00) landmark of participation.

The perusal of Table 2 indicates that in most of the farming decisions the female counterparts were consulted for taking effective decisions in matters like choice of farming enterprises, choice of cropping and employment of labour (index values 0.95, 0.95 and 0.60 respectively). But it was found that in some matters like use of fertilizers and chemicals the female

Table 2. Decision participation status of farmer's wife

Aspect	NC	CBNI	CPI	CFI	Participation Index
Farm decisions					
Choice of farming enterprises	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	8 (16.00)	42 (84.00)	0.95
Choice of cropping	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	8 (16.00)	42 (84.00)	0.95
Selection of crop variety	9 (18.00)	8 (16.00)	25 (50.00)	8 (16.00)	0.55
Use of fertilizer and other inputs	25 (50.00)	0 (0.00)	25 (50.00)	0 (0.00)	0.33
Employment of labour	8 (16.00)	0 (0.00)	33	8 (16.00)	0.60
Financial decisions					
Sale/marketing of farm produce	33 (66.00)	8 (16.00)	8 (16.00)	0 (0.00)	0.16
Purchase/sale of land, cattle, poultry	25 (50.00)	8 (16.00)	8 (16.00)	9 (18.00)	0.34
Purchase of improved farm machinery	25 (50.00)	0 (0.00)	17 (34.00)	8 (16.00)	0.39
Availing of credit	25 (50.00)	0 (0.00)	8 (16.00)	17 (34.00)	0.45
Household decisions					
Attending training programmes	42 (84.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	8 (16.00)	0.16
Consultation with officials	42 (84.00)	0 (0.00)	8 (16.00)	0 (0.00)	0.11
Education of the children	8 (16.00)	0 (0.00)	17 (34.00)	25 (50.00)	0.73
Marriage of the family members	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	25 (50.00)	25 (50.00)	0.83
Social ceremonies	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	17 (34.00)	33 (66.00)	0.89
Overall decision status (average)					0.53

Figures in the parentheses indicate per cent values, NC= Never consulted; CBNI= Consulted but not implemented, CPI: Consulted but partially implemented, CFI: Consulted and fully implemented

counterparts were mostly ignored and they were never consulted.

A farming household takes decisions in important financial matters like availability of farm credit, sale or purchase of farm inputs or outputs and so on. This domain of decision indicated a rather contrasting picture. The female members were more or less kept in dark regarding choice of financial decisions. Only in the matter of availing credit the farm women were consulted and their decisions were implemented. This was most probably due to the poor knowledge

situation and little exposure of the farm women to which the men did not give much importance.

Table shows that on an average in more than 63 per cent cases the female family members were consulted and their decisions were either partially or fully implemented in the matters like education of the children, attending training programmes, performing social ceremonies etc. Actually the domains like children's education, marriage of the family members and performing various social ceremonies were gradually becoming female oriented.

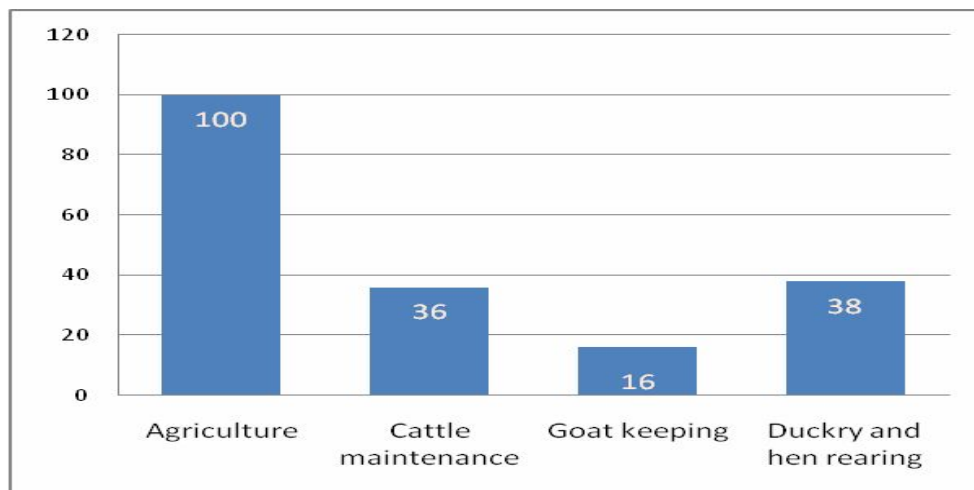


Fig 1. Percentage of families associated with different enterprises

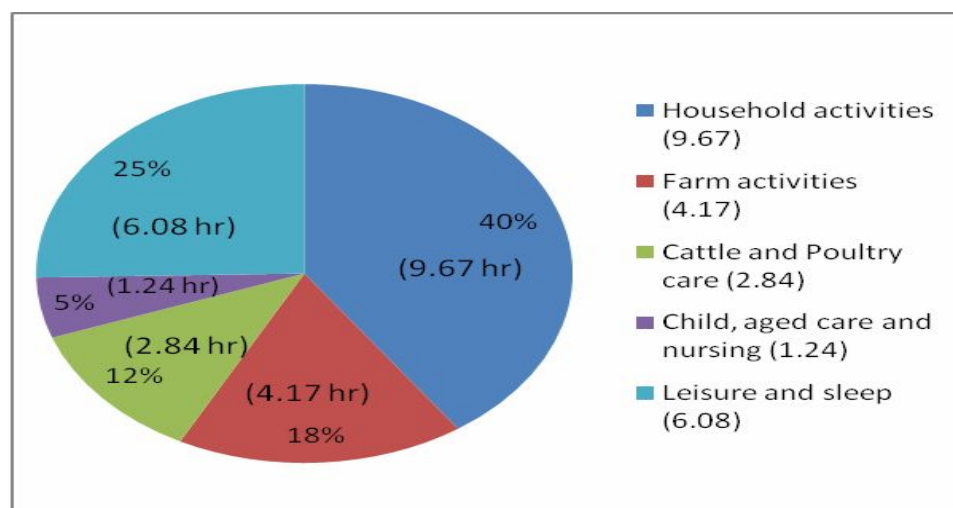


Fig 2. Time share of different daily activities by farmers' wives

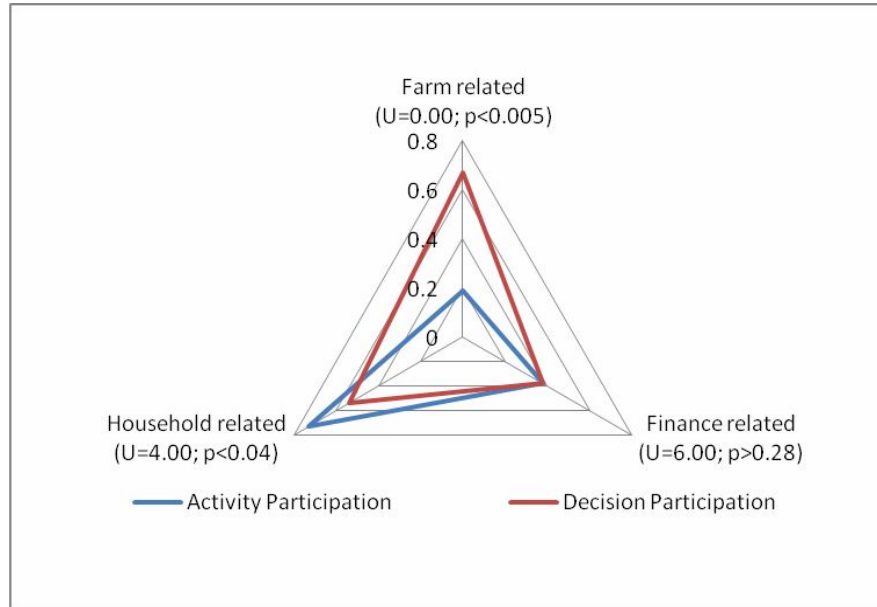


Fig 3. Radar diagram showing comparative status of farmers' wives in activities and decision participation on different household domains

A comparative idea regarding the participation status of farmers' wives in activity and decision arena is presented in Fig 3. The diagram depicts a contrasting view with other authors regarding their status on activity and decision participation in farm, finance and household related activities and matters. It is clear from the diagram that in farm related matters, decision participation was quite high than activity participation (average index value 0.67 against 0.19 respectively). The Mann-Whitney U-value was also significant. But in household related matters their activity participation was significantly higher than decision participation with index values of 0.73 and 0.54 respectively (Mann-

Whitney U-value= 4.00 with $p < 0.04$). In financial matters in both activity and decision participation they remained unimportant with 0.38 and 0.33 index value ($U = 6.00$, $p > 0.28$). However if all the activities under all the domains were taken into consideration the activity and decision index was at around 50 per cent level and decision participation was significantly higher (index= 0.53) than activity participation (0.43) with Mann-Whitney U-value of 60 which was significant at 5 per cent level. It may be due to the fact that the farmers' wives especially from a higher stratum did not actually participate in direct labour activities of the farms and many farm works were undertaken by hired women labour.

CONCLUSION

Agriculture is directly tied to issues such as economic independence, decision-making abilities, agency and access to education and health services and this manner has created externalities such as poverty and marginalization and compounded issues of gender inequality.

Much of women's work remains invisible because most of their work is not remunerated. The farmers' wives are engaged in all sorts of household and outside tasks and also participate in decision making as assistants and suggestion providers of their farmer husbands in all sectors. Although they perform lion's share of household activities but they are neglected in financial matters in both handling it and making decision regarding it.

The true empowerment of women would happen when they will be consulted more on financial matters and be financially independent.

Thus there is a strong and genuine need to empower women through actual participation and consultation in household financial matters for accelerating the

development of rural community and the nation.

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