Female Agricultural Labourers in Rural Punjab: Present Status and Problems

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ABSTRACT

The present investigation is an attempt to find out the present status and problems of female agricultural labourers in rural Punjab. The present study was conducted in the villages of three districts namely Ludhiana, Moga and Roopnagar of the Punjab state. A sample of 90 rural farm women labourers in the age group of 20-45 yrs who were involved in various agriculture operations was selected for this study. A self structured and pre-tested interview schedule was used to collect the information required to fulfill the objectives of the study. In depth interviews were conducted by the investigators and both quantitative and qualitative data was generated. Apart from interviews, field observations were also made to observe the farm activities of women. The data collected was analyzed by using simple mean frequencies and percentages. The results revealed that the participation of female labour was found to be more in the activities such as storage, manual harvesting, picking of vegetables animal dung collection and its disposal, drying and cleaning of grains and weeding. The other activities in which female labour is hired are winnowing, transplanting, threshing and raising nursery for seedlings. Low wages, drudgery prone labour, dual burden of work and family, musculo-skeletal problems are the major problems faced by women labourers. Awareness level of women regarding the drudgery reduction implements was found to be very low and use of these tools was found to be negligible. It was found that time management, shyness from male trainers, difficulty in reaching training centres, illiteracy, restrictions from home and family were the major obstacles perceived by the women for their participation in the trainings on new technologies The education level of women and the family income was found to be positively associated with their awareness level regarding the new technologies. The age and the family size were negatively associated with their awareness index.

Key words: *Female labour, Agriculture, Problem, Drudgery reduction tools;*

Women are the backbone of agricultural workforce and are a vital part of Indian economy. Over the years, there is a gradual realization of the key role of women in agricultural development and their contribution in the field of agriculture, food security, horticulture, dairy, nutrition, sericulture, fisheries and other allied sectors. Women are active partners in farming and undertake management along with men. There are certain unit operations in production agriculture in which women dominate in production agriculture, post harvest management and agro-processing. The 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 (*Singh, 2003*). Punjab is one of the most progressive states on the agriculture front. Agriculture being a family activity, women had contributed significantly to the agricultural development of the state. But today with agricultural production having reached its peak, the scenario in rural Punjab is different from what it was a decade or two back (*Sidhu et.al, 2005*). The operations once performed by female members of the family are now being carried out by hiring female wage laborers. The women of lower socio-economic status families work as wage laborers in farms of the big farmers and perform the operations such as weeding, hoeing, grass cutting, picking etc. They have been intensively involved in agriculture and its allied fields. Now–a –days the poorer the farm household the greater

is their contribution in agriculture. The share of women labour force in agriculture is expected to be 55 per cent by 2025 AD (*Singh, 2012*). Women's contribution to the farm sector has been ignored and inadequately understood. In our economy, very few scientific attempts have been made to examine the actual participation of female labor in crop production and other subsidiary activities at the farm level while developing and disseminating appropriate agricultural technologies for the small and marginal farmers, proper understanding of gender issues becomes all more important. If it is overlooked, then the adoption of new agricultural technologies is likely to be very low. In view of the above discussion, the present study was planned with the following objectives:

i. To study the type of activities performed by female labourers in agriculture and allied fields.
ii. To find out problems faced by the women labourers at work.
iii. To study the awareness and adoption of drudgery reduction tools in agriculture among women.
iv. To find out the constraints faced by women for their participation in the trainings.

METHODOLOGY

The present investigation was conducted in the villages of three districts namely Ludhiana, Moga and Roopnagar of the Punjab state. A sample of 90 rural farm women labourers in the age group of 20-45 years who were involved in various agriculture operations was selected for this study. A self structured and pre-tested interview schedule was used to collect the information required to fulfill the objectives of the study. The interview schedule comprised both open and closed ended questions. In depth interviews were conducted by the investigators and both quantitative and qualitative data was generated. Apart from interviews, field observations were also made to observe the farm activities of women. The data collected was analyzed by using simple mean frequencies, percentages and coefficient of correlation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 reveals that the storage of grains is an activity in which women participation is 100 per cent .The participation of female labour was found to be more in the activities such as manual harvesting (93.3%), picking of vegetables (95.6%), animal dung collection and its disposal (94.4%). Similar findings have been reported by *Singh et.al. (2004). Sharma et al. (2002)* found 100 per cent participation of women in dung collection and cleaning of animal sheds. 88.9 per cent farm women labourers participated in grading and thinning (83.3%). In drying and cleaning of grains and weeding their participation was found to be 80 per cent and 87.8 per cent. The other activities in which female labour is hired are winnowing, transplanting, threshing and raising nursery for seedlings. The findings of the present investigation are in agreement with the results reported by *Srivastva et al. (2012)* and *Mrunalini et al. (2010).*

Table 1. Participation of female labour in farm activities

Farm activities	No.	%
Raising nursery for seedling	40	44.4
Transplanting	50	55.6
Weeding	79	87.8
Thinning	79	83.3
Manual Harvesting	84	93.3
Picking of vegetables	86	95.6
Threshing	20	22.2
Winnowing	50	55.5
Drying and cleaning of grains	72	80.0
Grading	80	88.9
Storage	90	100.0
Animal dung collection and its disposal	85	94.4

Table 2. Problems faced by women at work

Problems	No.	%
Safety at farm	40	44.4
Drudgery prone labour	80	88.9
Low wages	86	95.6
Lack of access to technology	72	80.0
Dual burden of family and work	82	91.1
Unhygienic conditions at farm	70	77.8
Musculoskeletal problems	75	83.3

The data presented in the Table 2 reveals that low wages is the major problem reported by 95.6 per cent of the female workers. Women work longer and harder than men but even then they are paid less as compared to men. The detailed discussion with the farmers revealed that they also prefer women as agricultural workers. Due to increasing cost of production farmer feels that he can squeeze the labour costs by using lower paid women workers. Women also reported that usually the male members of the family migrate to other places for better paid work but they are forced to accept the

lower paid work in the village itself as they cannot migrate as easily as men. The findings are in agreement with the results reported by *Lal and Khurana (2011).* 88.9 per cent of the women feel that their work involves lot of drudgery. They do monotonous and back breaking work, come in direct contact of soil, water and harmful chemicals. They face hardship while transplanting paddy because of continuous bending of the back and standing in muddy water for longer hours. 83.33 per cent women also reported musculo-skeletal problems due to the physical stress during work. *Suthar and Kaushik (2013)* also reported musculo-skeletal problems among female agricultural workers caused by overuse or misuse of muscles, bones and nerves. About 91.1 per cent women feel overburdened with family responsibilities. They are supposed to attend to all the domestic work, to look after the children and other members of the family along with the work at farm. Similar results have been reported by *Aggarwal et.al. (2013)* Women also revealed that they had to perform large amount of unpaid work like collection of fuel wood, making of cow-dung cakes which does not gets any recognition. Unhygienic conditions (77.8%), Safety at the farm (44.4%) and lack of access to the technologies are the other problems reported by the women.

Table 3: Awareness about drudgery reduction tools

Tools	No.	%
Protective gloves for Bhindi plucking	42	46.7
Weed hand hoe	39	43.3
Improved sickle for harvesting rice	35	38.9
Maize Sheller	32	35.5
Vegetable ring cutter	18	20.0
Pedal operated paddy thresher	0	0.00
Revolving peehri for milching of animals	0	0.00
Animal dung collection trolley	26	28.9

All the tasks performed by female labour in agriculture are time consuming and full of drudgery. Many improved implements and machinery are developed to reduce drudgery and physical exertion. In the present day context, when agricultural labourers are not available in time, the role of farm mechanization has become very much important in doing various field operations. Use of farm machinery not only helps in doing the operations in time, but also makes agricultural activities cost effective. In this study, we tried to assess the awareness of farm women labourers about these drudgery reduction tools. It is learnt from the data presented in Table 3 that 46.6 per cent of women were aware about the protective gloves used for plucking bhindi followed by wheel hand hoe 43.3 per cent, improved sickle for harvesting (38.9%) and maize sheller (35.5%). Awareness regarding the pedal operated paddy thresher and the revolving *peehri* for milching of animals was found to be nil. Only 28.9 per cent were aware about the animal dung collection trolley. The detailed discussion with the women revealed that awareness regarding the improved tools was more among those women who have attended the trainings at Krishi Vigyan Kendras. However it was observed that use of these tools was almost negligible.

Table 4. Constraints faced by women for their participation in the trainings

Reasons	No.	%
Management of time between work, home and training	80	88.9
Feel shy from male trainers	75	83.3
Difficulty in reaching training centres	78	86.7
Restriction from home	40	44.4
Feeling uncomfortable with male participants	55	61.1
Illiteracy	62	68.9

Women have restricted social privileges, little or no access to education, training and technology. In this investigation an attempt has been made to find out the constraints faced by women for the participation in the training programmes. A perusal of the data presented in the Table 4 reveals that time management (88.9%), shyness from male trainers (83.3%), difficulty in reaching training centres (86.7%) were the major obstacles perceived by the women in their participation in the trainings on new technologies. Women revealed that they have to carry the dual burden of domestic work and labour work. After doing all this work very less time is left for participation in the training programmes. 68.89 per cent women feel that they are illiterate, so they are not eligible for the trainings, 61.1 per cent women feel uncomfortable with male participants. 44.4 per cent women have to face restrictions from their home and family. The detailed discussion with the women revealed that generally the male members or elderly women in the family avail the opportunity to attend these trainings.

The data in the Table 5 presents the relationship

between the socio-economic status and their awareness index regarding the new technologies in agriculture. It is clearly evident from the data that the knowledge level of younger women is more as compared to the elderly women. The higher is the age, lower is the awareness index. There is a positive relationship between the education level of women and their awareness level. Knowledge level of women regarding the various drudgery reduction tools was found to be positively associated with family income and negatively associated with the size of the family.

Table 5. Relationship of socio-economic status of women with their awareness index regarding drudgery reduction tools

Relationship between	(r)
Age and their awareness index regarding drudgery reduction tools	-0.671
Education and their awareness index regarding drudgery reduction tools	0.424
Income and their awareness index regarding drudgery reduction tools	0.594
Family size and their awareness index regarding drudgery reduction tools.	-0.386

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the results that the participation of female labour was found to be more in the activities such as storage, manual harvesting, picking of vegetables animal dung collection and its disposal, rying and cleaning of grains and weeding. The other activities in which female labour is hired are winnowing, transplanting, threshing and raising nursery for seedlings. Low wages, drudgery prone labour, dual burden of work and family, musculo-skeletal problems are the major problems faced by women labourers. Awareness level of women regarding the drudgery reduction implements was found to be very low and use of these tools was found to be negligible. It was found that time management, shyness from male trainers, difficulty in reaching training centres, illiteracy, restrictions from home and family were the major obstacles perceived by the women for their participation in the trainings on new technologies. The education level of women and the family income was found to be positively associated with their awareness level regarding the new technologies. The age and the family size were negatively associated with their awareness index.

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