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SUMMARIES OF GROUP DISCUSSION

Subject I

Women in Agriculture and Rural Development

Rapporteur: J.V. Meenakshi*

The group discussions on women in agriculture and rural development yielded important research insights in four major areas. These are: determinants of labour demand and supply; labour productivity and wages; the use of time-utilisation surveys; and gender, empowerment and intra-household inequality.

Determinants of Female Labour Demand and Supply

The group discussion began by focusing on the factors underlying the apparent increase in female labour use per hectare noted by many of the studies. The decrease in the size of operational holding on an average; changes in cropping pattern towards crops which are more intensive in the use of female labour; the withdrawal of children from agricultural labour necessitating a higher participation by women; a higher aggregate labour demand of new technology, were some of the possible factors discussed. Further, it was noted that the impact of any new technology was to mechanise operations typically performed by men; thus while male labour use per hectare remained unchanged, that of female labour had increased. It was suggested that a careful disaggregation of these various factors should be attempted to obtain a better understanding of the sources of change.

It was also noted that the increased labour demand for women was perhaps not an all-India phenomenon. The National Sample Survey statistics suggest that the workforce participation rates for women have been fairly volatile over time. It is possible, however, that inclusion of the category 'subsidiary economic activities' may result in a consistent increase in their participation rates.

A lively discussion took place on whether the evidence from micro-studies was consistent with a backward-bending labour supply curve. The observation that labour use per hectare declines with the size of holding (although there are exceptions to this stylised fact) could be explained by:

- The lower labour intensity in larger farms overall.
- A different crop-mix on larger farms that implies lower labour demand than that on smaller farms.
- The inaccurate labelling of many activities performed by women as 'unproductive' which may be more of a problem in larger farms: for example, the amount of time spent on preparing meals for hired labour - likely to be substantial in large farms - is often unaccounted.
- For reasons associated with status, women may not wish to report work.
- Labour-leisure choices.

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It was suggested that studies should attempt to quantify these factors.

Productivity and Wages

The group noted that labour productivity was rarely computed in the micro studies. The limited evidence suggests that if anything, labour productivity of women is *greater* than that of men in several operations. This would argue against the mechanical use of fixed conversion factors to convert female labour use into 'per-male' equivalents (for example, 1 female labour unit = 0.75 male labour unit); more evidence on this is required.

The existing data in various micro studies is rich enough to permit a refined calculation of the average and marginal productivities of labour by gender. In this context, the issues relating to the valuation of labour time were also discussed. The participants felt that while as far as possible the concept of opportunity costs be used to make such valuations; however, the use of prevailing wage rates to capture the opportunity costs of women who are *not* in the labour force may be inappropriate.

The group also examined the implications of productivity differentials for the perceived gender bias in wages. The notion that 'hard agricultural operations were performed by men' or that 'women were unwilling to perform physically arduous tasks' was challenged. It was suggested that wage differentials appeared to be declining over time, at least in northern India. In part this could be attributed to the contracting out of several operations, wherein wages are determined for each specific task, irrespective of who performs them. To the extent that wage differentials persist, however, it is necessary to isolate the extent to which these may be explained by economic factors as against socio-cultural biases. The role of minimum wage legislation to mitigate such differentials should also be explored.

It was suggested that a workshop may be held under the auspices of the Society, to explore how some of these questions could be analysed. Selected participants could be invited to present their data and share ideas on methodology and perform the requisite statistical exercises. The outcome of the workshop is envisaged a series of papers on a common theme.

Perspective of Time-Utilisation Studies

The methodology afforded by time-utilisation surveys, which involve a complete accounting of the time spent by women in the System of National Accounts - (SNA), extended-SNA-and non-SNA activities; its advantages and potential disadvantages was examined in some detail. In addition to help account more completely for women's work and productivity, such surveys allow for an examination of labour-leisure choices, and also permit an exploration of the reasons that women are unavailable for additional work. Used, perhaps, in conjunction with Rapid Rural Appraisal techniques, these could have important consequences for the design of effective interventions. It was suggested that the Society should try to obtain a copy of the Instruction Manual for conducting time-utilisation surveys (used in the Pilot Surveys in six states) and make it available to interested researchers. It was also suggested that the possibility of adding another component to the Cost of Cultivation surveys, which already contain a comprehensive labour-time disposition schedule, should be explored.

Gender, Empowerment and Intra-household Inequality

Questions relating to the ability of women to make independent decisions - in matters relating to crop production, control of family income, and so on - were also taken up by the group. It was noted that women's participation in decision-making was not commensurate with their contribution to the generation of family income, with men exercising pre-emptive options in all market-mediated activities. The evidence from Uttarakhand was apparently paradoxical: with high education and high labour force participation rates going hand-in-hand with low decision-making ability. It was suggested that the process of making decisions should be distinguished from the outcome of the decision; and that care should be taken in how such questions are posed. Further, that a distinction should also be made between factors *enabling* empowerment and the *realisation* of autonomy that empowerment engenders. It would be useful to examine whether control over cash income, to which women have more direct access in the case of livestock products than for crop output, is at all an important enabling factor. The latter process - that of realisation of autonomy - is contextualised by social taboos and customs and is less amenable to policy intervention.

It was also noted that as family incomes increased, women's perceived autonomy declined, almost as if incomes and autonomy were treated as substitutable. The group felt that this contradiction be resolved in further research.

Another recommendation was to examine the welfare implications of the changing conditions of the labour market for rural women. This would involve a different methodological approach, but some exercises would be relatively easy to implement. For example, it is necessary to examine whether the lack of autonomy/market access was reflected in consumption inequalities *within* the household, placing women at a relative disadvantage *within* the family. As a rough and ready measure, anthropometric indicators could be used to examine whether gender differences in the extent of malnourishment were greater in more vulnerable households. Other methodologies for documenting such inequalities could also be employed.