



Economic role and its impact on mountain women's strategies for the future

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Summary

In the mountain ecology, the woman is the pivot of the family for livelihood security since small landholdings and poor economic conditions cause men to migrate in search of economic gains. Therefore, women perform multiple roles as farmers and child bearers holding the family together through a variety of overlapping activities, which account for the much debated invisibility of both women's paid and unpaid work. An examination of the workload of women engaged in multifarious activities showed unacceptable workloads, improper postures, the lack of technology, poor work environment, lack of training, poor nutrition and stress to the cardiovascular and muscular system of the body leading to impaired health status, inefficiency, drudgery, and stress.

This paper attempts to document a complete picture of mountain women's work profile, economic role, and contribution through market, non-market and household production, their status in the family, community, and household development due to women's economic role and contribution, as well as the resultant drudgery and impaired health status of women. These issues have been overlooked at the national/international levels and need to be recognised and appreciated by policy-makers, administrators, and society to bring about an attitudinal change and shift in policies from an overdrive of welfare issues to equity as partners.

The author stresses the need for attention to be paid to identify women's roles, i.e., paid household production (dairy, weaving, etc.), household, and agricultural work and to impute value to all her dimensions of work because the support derived from her multifarious involvement generally provides the

very basis of survival for her family. The increased contributions of women are considered to be essential preconditions for improving woman's status, household development, and well-being. Mountain women from low family income groups are generally engaged in 'petty occupations' that make a substantial contribution to the total family income.

Migration of men and the economic indispensability of women empower the hill women to make decisions and accord them higher status. Women's economic activities contribute to mountain households' housing conditions, family health status, food quality, calorie intake, consumption expenditure, and savings and material possessions. Although the economic role and contribution of hill women have a positive impact on her status in the family and society, including the improved health status of children and other family members, this same economic role for a hill woman is a result of heavy workloads, drudgery, stress, and poor health. The economic role of mountain women also has a negative impact on their health status, as revealed by an inventory of their drudgery-prone activities in home, farm, allied and market work spheres, health status, and the ergonomic cost of work according to various parameters.

An inventory of all household, farm, allied, and other occupations undertaken by mountain women was taken in three zones of Himachal Pradesh, consisting of a representative sample of 900 randomly-selected mountain women respondents to identify drudgery-prone activities in a hierarchical order in all major work spheres by employing various parameters, techniques and formulae, i.e., time spent, frequency of performance, degree of difficulty, and drudgery index.

Result Highlights

- Inventory of drudgery-prone activities carried out by mountain women in household work
- Inventory of drudgery-prone activities carried out by mountain women in farm and allied activities (dairy and tea plucking)
- Physical characteristics of respondents
- Health status of mountain women
- Postural analysis while working in drudgery-prone tasks (angle of deviation of backbone from normal)
- Impact of improved technologies on the heart rate and health status of women

The study also looked at women's economic role and contribution to productive activities, both within and outside the household, whether paid or unpaid. It will be measured in the present study in terms of

- time spent by women in performing non-market productive work, which will be quantified in monetary terms; and
- money received through participation in market work.



In this study, 'economic role' is synonymous with economic contribution.

A descriptive type of survey design was selected for this study. A multi-stage purposive cum random sampling method was followed to select the study area, villages, households, and the ultimate sample of respondents, i.e., 100 employed and 100 unemployed. The data were gathered personally using a pre-tested interview schedule and time observation record sheet to cross-validate the time recorded by the interview method. The information was pooled and analysed. Two approaches were employed to estimate the economic role performed by respondents.

- Market Alternative Individual Function Cost Method (MAIFC)
- Opportunity Cost Method

The Market Alternative Method is an accounting technique that uses the cost of purchasing comparable services in the market to determine the value of non-market work time, i.e., the time spent by respondents on each task such as meal preparation and agricultural operations. Allied activities such as weaving of shawls etc for household consumption are valued at market wages, i.e., minimum wages fixed by the Government of Himachal Pradesh for these services. Hourly wage-rates so assigned were applied to the amount of time spent by the respondents in performing each task, and this provided the value of non-market work of all respondents. The economic role/contribution of non-employed respondents was the same as calculated above, and for employed respondents it included their earnings from market work also. The opportunity cost method equates an individual's value of work in non-market activities to the value of alternative activities that are precluded by performing non-market activity.

The findings showed that the monetary value of various non-market tasks was higher for non-employed than for employed respondents. The findings depicted that the mean monthly monetary valuation of non-market work (based on the MAIFC method) was estimated to be Rs. 602.10 for employed and Rs. 896.10 for non-employed respondents. The actual mean monthly income of employed respondents from market work was calculated to be Rs 1380.76. The economic contribution of respondents through participation in market and non-market activities was estimated at Rs 1982.86 for employed and Rs 896.10 for non-employed respondents.

According to the data, the minimum monthly value of non-market work for employed respondents was estimated by MAIFC at Rs 602.10 and by the Opportunity Cost Approach at Rs 620.12, as employed respondents spent less time than non-employed respondents in non-market work. Although both methods are appropriate in the prevailing context, the Opportunity Cost Method can be replicated over a period of time without showing any bias that may be reflected in the MAIFC method by imputing values of wage earners, which may be giving lower value to household work.

A comparison of the results obtained from MAIFC and the opportunity cost methods showed that the value of the time devoted by respondents to non-market work as calculated by the former was lower than that derived by the latter method. The nature of household activities is determined by the nature of economic activity prevailing in that area. These households were generally poor and the household activities undertaken were simple. Thus, the market alternative valuation reflected the earnings of unskilled/semi-skilled workers in that area.

Last, the study assessed the contribution of women through real income (time spent in non-market productive work) and/money income (through gainful employment) in raising the level of consumption of goods and services by household members, which can be considered an indicator in development achievement. In the present investigation, the following primary and secondary indicators were selected to determine household development of sample households.

Primary indicators

- Housing conditions including quality of construction, availability of facilities such as drinking water, electricity supply, and maintenance of the house.
- Family health status was monitored for all family members as well as immunisation of children.
- Food adequacy per consumption unit in terms of calorie requirements was compared with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) standards (1993).
- Expenditure was assessed on the basis of per consumption unit.

Secondary indicators

- Leisure time available to respondents

The source of power and status may be in the nature of work participation, i.e., economic role performed by women. Status of women was assessed on the basis of selected indicators after critical review of literature and according to prevailing conditions in the mountain context.

General indicators included

- age at marriage,
- training received for household production and gainful employment,
- leisure time availability,
- observation of tradition and culture,
- help received in performing various tasks,
- extent of freedom, control over and use of money, and
- authority for distribution and supervision of work at home.

Decision-making was considered to be a strong determinant of woman's status, therefore almost equal weightage of scores was given to decision-



making and other general indicators. Appropriate categorisation and scoring was carried out for each indicator to quantify status, and the level of status as low, medium, and high was categorised according to the range of scores so obtained, i.e., 17 to 51.

The co-coefficient of determination of this model was 58.961%. All explanatory variables turned out to be statistically significant at 0.01 level ('t' value in parenthesis). When employment status of women, age of respondents, economic role of respondents, marital status of respondents, family type, and education of respondents were considered as determinants of status of tribal women, the linear effect of determination was found to be 58.961%.

A larger number of tribal women from low family income groups were engaged in market work and contributed a substantial percentage to the family income.

- Employed respondents performed a greater economic role (both market and non-market).
- Early marriage was common and no variation in age at marriage was revealed due to employment status.
- Migration of men and economic indispensability of women empower them to make decisions.
- Employed women enjoyed more authority in delegation and supervision of work at home.
- Decisions related to personal matters of women were male-dominated. Farm decisions were not affected by employment status and were taken jointly.
- In spite of active participation of tribal women in decision-making, they still gave importance to men's opinions, as male superiority was a way of life.
- Visible economic contribution due to women's employment accorded them higher status than that of non-employed women.

Conclusion

The economic role of mountain women accords her better-developed households and higher status in the family and society costing her poor health due to overwork of drudgery-prone tasks. The cost benefit ratio of the whole scenario of mountain women's lifestyle emphasises a need to break this vicious cycle for better options within the existing given system of society and governance. It is imperative to reorient the mindsets of policy-makers as well as stakeholders for strategic interventions for sustainable, holistic development and empowerment of mountain women in terms of gain in knowledge, skills, and application of technology. The author suggests the following options.

- I. Assessment of indigenous knowledge and prevailing management practices of farm and family systems in mountain sub-systems

- II. Identification of gaps in existing farm family practices and technologies in a particular eco sub-system.
- III. Supplementation of gaps in existing management practices and technologies in specific eco sub-systems
 - a) Transfer of existing appropriate practices and technologies within similar eco sub-systems
 - b) Improvement in existing practices and technologies through incorporation of the following:
 - relevant improved household, agricultural, and animal husbandry practices suitable for hill ecology;
 - developing, designing, testing, and application of drudgery-reducing technologies in the area of all work spheres in the mountain area for women to lessen the overload, and for ease, efficiency, and output; and
 - training and skill improvement of relevant and sustainable enterprises in a mountain scenario.
- IV. Establishment of linkages of family, community, and village governance within similar eco sub-systems
- V. Development of modules for farm families in specific zones of the mountain ecology for replication to all mountain areas

