

## **Women Participation and Development: A Case Study from Rural Punjab**

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Even though a prosperous state, Punjab has been beset with social backwardness and handicaps like lowest sex ratio since 1921. At present, it is 886 as against the national average of 935. The workforce participation of women in Punjab is ranked as one of the lowest in the country and as one having the lowest proportion of female workers to the total workers. Out of the total female workers, 21.6 per cent as agricultural labourers. It is obvious that lopsided growth of the industrial and tertiary sector in the state has affected the occupational structure and the women.

These official statistics seem to have neglected the reality of women's work in 80 per cent of the rural population in the state. These women are always seen to be engaged vigorously in familial and farm activities, home-based industrial occupation and contribution, to a great extent, to the family's economy. Women of landowning families undertake the supervision of preharvest and post-harvest operations throughout the year, shoulder the responsibilities of looking after the cattle e.g. feeding, milking, converting of milk for 'ghee' for sale and home consumption, in addition to the upbringing of the children and general maintenance of the family. During the afternoons and post dinner hours, they spin cotton to be woven into bed spreads or wrapons (khes), durries for the family and for the trousseau of their daughters. They seldom have any leisure to enjoy.

Women from the landless families work as agricultural labourers during all the seasons and in various agricultural operations. This way, they put in 10-11 hours of work per day in the agricultural fields. In cash crops like potato, rice and cotton, in particular, female labour force is found to be high. The payment in grains during harvest of wheat and rice and cash for other crops form the major part of the resources for the family's survival. They also look after the cattle which brings them an extra income from sale of milk besides improving the dietary standards of the family. Apart from shouldering the responsibility of looking after the cattle, cleaning of cattle sheds and milking of cattle, the family through their own labour from road sides, common lands and buildings of the farms facing abuse, sexual assaults and accusations by the landowners and even their hired migrant of dried twigs, vegetable roots and other fuel from the fields would cost them at an average estimated cost of Rs.3/- per day. From this, many women work with men in 'home-based' work and provide any help required by their brothers and husbands. These tasks are performed along with the usual 'women's work' such as cooking, washing utensils and clothes and upbringing of children. Their work outside the home does not permit any change in the role expectations of the family and the males. All these multiple roles of women are supposed to be a part of their role as 'ideal mothers', 'ideal wife' and this deprives her right to an independent economic status. Further

the culturally and socially defined role of woman is in direct conflict with her role as 'bread-winner' and it is customary for the woman not to seek gainful employment.

Since social, cultural and familial constraints deprive women of their freedom and mobility in the outdoor activities, they are therefore only in small numbers in the organised sector. This forces them to accept whatever work is available within the village, denying them exposure to the outside world. This is due to the fact that **women's roles and work as, workers are not considered to be primary**. Also, they are pushed into the category of secondary workers like 'helpers' in spite of their hard labour and briskness (factors acknowledged even by the landowners) at work. The landowning class prefer to employ more women as agricultural workers as they can be easily paid much less when compared with their input in terms of work. The women are employed for all types of agricultural work such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, leveling, picking, harvesting etc. They brave all severe climatic conditions like men in preharvest and post-harvest operations of rice and wheat. During peak seasons, female labour is in maximum demand and when the demand for labour decreases, it is the woman who has to face unemployment crisis. They, therefore, form the majority of the reserve force of labour. This way, their lives are one of continuous insecurity of employment within the village in the primary sector i.e. agriculture.

The women have also to bear the brunt of discrimination in wages. The principle of equal pay for equal work is not strictly adhered to in the fixation of wage rates for male and female labour in agriculture. A tendency prevails to exploit female labour because of their poor bargaining power and this fact lowers their dignity as labour. In one of the villages, when the scheduled caste agricultural women workers demanded equal wages, they were pushed back to their homes. Unfortunately, these women did not have any other alternative except to get back to the work after a few months for their own and family's survival. According to a reliable source at the government sponsored Potato Research Institute in Punjab, women agricultural labourers are neither given permanent employment nor equal wages in the institute, whereas men are enrolled as permanent ones. Women are treated as casual labourers and are paid as much less as can be.

In industries and tanneries etc., the women are rarely employed as permanent and are offered low paid jobs ignoring their skill potential. These employers appreciate women's aptitude for work in terms of discipline, honesty and high output, yet they continue to be biased against female employment. This adds to barriers in women's opportunities to work outside the village.

Since the strict socialization of a woman starts right from her early childhood to prepare and prove herself to be 'an ideal wife', 'an ideal woman' and 'an ideal homemaker', she is seldom encouraged for education and economic independence. These patriarchal attitudes and practices are reflected in the local folk songs and folk tales in the area. The woman is supposed to pass on her earnings to the male members in the family, who squander it either on gambling, and/or liquor thus leaving the 'wife or woman' totally powerless and helpless. This powerlessness and lack of control

over her own earned income results in other evils like 'dowry', 'alcoholism', 'wife-beating', 'desertion' and they have to face limitless hardships. Very seldom, they can raise their voice against these evils.

Furthermore, the landowning Jat women are hardworking but they generally work inside the home. Among the 'poor women' of upper castes like widows and those deserted, there is not tradition of working for wages in the agricultural fields and they have no alternative except to pursue upper caste occupations at home like weaving and spinning of cotton etc. They undergo lots of hardships in their lives to make both ends meet. All this happens due to lack of recognition and appreciation of women's work despite her long schedule from 4 a.m. in the morning till 11 p.m. at night. Since the cultural factors permit withdrawal of women from work, there is withdrawal from work outside the home as soon as the low caste family goes upon the class ladder and attains prosperity e.g. women whose husbands have gone to European countries or to the Middle East or have started working in the factories in the city or outside the state and earn a comparatively higher wage. In such cases, women are pressurised by their husbands and elder members of the family to confine themselves to their homes in order to emulate the ways of high caste Jat women. Thus absence of economic independence combined with illiteracy of women not only maintains the status quo in the position of women but also results in the deterioration of their condition even though they contribute equally and even more to the family's income and survival.

All these above factors make women lose their traditional skills prevent them from acquiring any skills. Acquisition of new skills relevant to the modern economy and competitive market conditions requires some training inputs. It is difficult for the married women to attain formal training outside the village because of their child care responsibilities and lack of creche facilities. In the case of unmarried girls traditional customs are major obstacles. Above all, male and the elder members of the family hesitate to send the girls and women, as it means that transport costs have to be met in going to the city. Few well-off families, who give an opportunity to the women to equip themselves with the skills only follow the normative and customary standards considered as 'suitable skills for women' by the elders and the males. It so happens that women do not attain economic independence as these skills prepare them to further enhance family consumption.

The absence of a strong economic base for women's activities has made them powerless in the statutory bodies at the village level like village Panchayats, where two women members have been given rights to hold office but are seldom encouraged to attend any Panchayat meetings or consulted in the decision-making process. Simultaneously, it is impossible for women to raise their own resources to embark upon any venture. Few women from well-off Jat peasantry class have come forward and captured the leadership, only to reinforce the status of their family. These women maintain parochial attitude towards majority of the weak and oppressed women. Thus, women at large continue to suffer from social and economic deprivation. This calls for evolving some strategies for survival and social

dignity, welfare and self-reliance and changes in the economic and social participation of the rural women.

To enable women to participate economically and socially in an effective manner requires certain pre-conditions. First, women need to articulate their own feelings, fears, needs, potential to the intervening group who must share their problems and inspire confidence in them to organise unitedly. Formation of grassroot organisations like Mahila Mandals, Cooperatives could initially provide an effective answer and solution. Through such organisations, it is possible to launch an organised activity. Grassroot organisations sponsored by the central and state developmental agencies have been in existence for quite a long time, yet these have yielded very limited results owing to the failure to recognise and measure adequately women worker's contribution in the society and national economy. Rather, women have been viewed in development in a very narrow perspective at national level and gradually it has percolated to the state and the district levels also.

Ever since the *Community Development Programme* was launched in the 50s, it was exclusively confined to increasing agricultural productivity without ushering in any change in the structure of village economy, institutions and people. This programme had hardly anything to offer to women. Later they gradually began to involve women in the field of sanitation, hygiene, better ways of living and employ them in gainful occupation such as arts and crafts within the household. These programmes were to reinforce cultural practices by helping village women to become a good and efficient wife and mother. It extended its scope by training village level women in food, nutrition, child development, kitchen gardening, poultry and extension methods. Following a set back to the women's programme, the number of village level women workers was reduced and Applied Nutrition Programme was introduced to impart nutrition education to mothers. It was implemented through women's grassroot organisations (Mahila Mandal). Then came the programme to train women, in a limited way, to store the food grains through the Farmers Training Centres. In 1975-76, a scheme was initiated to train farm women and girls in agricultural operations as well as in home science and home crafts which also did not yield any encouraging results. All these developmental schemes were formulated without realising women's productive and potential strength that her role would create in decision-making bodies. Thus community development programme also viewed women workers in narrow perspective by reinforcing cultural practice of confining women to 'home'.

Integrated Rural Development Programme aims at wider scope of involvement of women viz. (a) upgrading their skills; (b) programmes of development of poultry and cattle should involve women; (c) block level women functionaries to mobilise and activate the rural women for participation; (d) women to be included in the beneficiary oriented programme through training courses organised by farmer's training centre, Gram Sevika Training Centres etc.; (e) earmarking of funds for certain programmes of women's interest; (f) tie-up of Mahila Mandals with financial institution and services agencies for socio-economic and income generating activities and development of economically viable projects.

TRYSEM programme has been the component of the IRDP since 1980. This is to equip rural youth with necessary skills and technology to enable them seek self employment. It covers the youth (male and female) of small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, rural artisans and others below poverty line upto the limit of 40 youths in each block of the country. The scheme also aims at interlinkages with other institutions for supportive services like credit, marketing, supply of raw material, design development etc. It demands from the state governments to analyse the training at grassroot and suggest infrastructure. This programme visualizes the grant of assistance by the Central and State Governments for strengthening of training infrastructure. Mahila Mandals are one of the eligible institutions to apply for the assistance.

KVIC and social welfare department offer loans and grants for individual and collective entrepreneurship of women for income generation and also undertake responsibility of marketing the products manufactures by women through their own marketing outlets. Social Welfare Department also provides assistance for creche facilities in rural areas. Very recently, a scheme called 'Chanan Munara' has been initiated by both the central and state governments to provide funds for the construction of building of the Mahila Mandal in the village. For seeking these funds, it is a precondition for women to raise matching resources themselves. Besides these, there are various programmes which cover both men and women.

Experiences reveal that all these developmental programmes have visualised women's interests as primarily 'family oriented'. Of late only, these developmental agencies have been made to realise women's problems and interests as both economic and social. Very often, it has come out in the meetings and dialogue with the officials in the central government, that bulk of the funds allocated by the government for women are left unutilized at the end of each financial year, as the proposals for grants and assistance from women's organisations in the rural areas are received in a very small number. Working with the rural women and development machinery, various problems and lacunae have surfaced as detailed below:

Grassroot organisations are unaware of these schemes. Ignorance and apathy prevail about the content of these programmes among local functionaries like block and district level officials. This indicates that plans are chalked out without the consultations and involvement of local authorities and the intervening groups working with the rural women in action projects. Limited interaction between the local functionaries and the community members widens the gaps further. Moreover the officials are merely interested in fulfilling their quota - on paper only. Sometimes State Planning Departments fail to allocate sufficient funds for women e.g. Tajpur TRYSEM grant sanctioned by the Centre was delayed by more than a year by the state government due to non-allocation of funds for women by the planning department in the state. Above all, every now and then cuts are made in expenditure and allocation of funds for the 'women'. Some of the schemes demand grassroot organisations to raise and mobilise the local resources to apply for the

grants or assistance - an impossible task for women to do due to lack of control over resources and thus they have to plead with their men in the village to donate money. Even if the women from elite groups, who are generally the office bearers are successful in arranging some funds by persuading their men, they tend to initiate and promote the activities suited to women of their own social group. The officials are responsible for maintaining the **status quo** by helping the women from upper caste and class to capture leadership rather than protecting and nurturing the numerically strong women from landless and scheduled caste families. This has impeded democratic functioning of the grassroot organisations.

The programme of dairying or poultry tends to benefit the women from rich peasant class who with their existing facilities like land, fodder etc. are able to make use of the concessions and subsidies. The poor women due to lack of space, land for fodder and poultry are helpless to avail themselves of these opportunities. Under the Farmer's training programme, it is the farmers' wife who is being educated in kitchen gardening, storage of grains, food preservation etc. ignoring the assetless and landless women. Other economic programmes restricted to promotion of skills like embroidery, tailoring etc. are considered essential for a girl or woman by the officials in order to prepare women for post married life. Seldom are any efforts made by the officials to guide women to sue these skills for augmenting women's income for generating employment. This clearly reflects upon their 'middle class values' to confine women to 'home' only.

The officials at the block, district and state levels not only have lack of knowledge, but also do not put in any efforts to explore further funds from the financial institutions like governmental, non-governmental institutions. Very rarely, they work for identifying the products relevant to the competitive markets or feeding training inputs, credit, loans, subsidies etc. during different stages of income generating projects of grassroot organisations. The red tapism and long procedures frustrate everyone, especially the rural women who for want of knowledge about these long procedures cannot be expected to have patience to go a long way for getting the grants and loans sanctioned and get the funds released.

Above all, the policy makers do not welcome the formation of women's organisations like Mahila Mandal Federations at the state level because of their misapprehensions and fears of 'threat to men's authority'.

In view of the above, all these developmental programmes of women require a change in the focus on women's problems, women's interests, approach to women's work and better livelihood of rural women workers and thereby strengthening women's organisations. Experience has shown that these organisations in order to be strengthened at various levels for sustained improvement need initiatives by intervening agencies which can serve as channels of communication and support between the developmental machinery and the rural women. The intervening groups through their participatory approach can build an information base and provide the models of innovative initiatives. Their experiences can enable them to

learn some lessons which can sharpen the understanding for the people working for planning strategies and policies.

Punjab with its state sponsored 'women's organisation' under the women's programme of department of rural development, has an administrative structure headed by a 'Director' at the state level, 'Ladies Circle Supervisor' at the district level, 'Mukhya Sevikas' at block level and 'Gram Sevika' at village level. The state has 10,000 Mahila Mandals of which half are registered. Some of these Mahila Mandals have come up with the achievement of large number of buildings and Balwadis only. There has been the least emphasis on the income generating projects.

Tajpur was selected by the intermediary group for an income generating project few years back on the basis of findings of its earlier survey of five villages in Jalandhar district. Tajpur was one amongst these selected villages.

Tajpur was abandoned by the development department as "a Problem Village" for lack of community actions and prolonged hostility between the upper caste and the scheduled caste. It remained cut off from the development of the outside world, despite it being well connected with the city and all means of transportation. It was least activity and participation in the Mahila Mandal and even in Panchayat.

Majority of population in Tajpur comprises of economically weak scheduled caste who (men, women and children) work at home for leather and sports good industry on piece rate basis through the middle men, besides working for wages as agricultural labourers. The women have been engaged in various activities for wage. the scheduled caste women also work strenuously in 'ban-making' - a blood sucking job of beating the typical type of grass and feeding it through the food-operated machine for twisting strings meant for weaving cots. Poor women of upper castes are found continuously spinning cotton at home, which after working for few years results in diseases like T.B. or Asthama. For Tajpur women, it has always been a battle for 'survival' as these women did not have any opportunity to acquire new skills or upgrade their traditional skills in leather and sports goods in keeping pace with the fast growing leather and sports goods industry in Jalandhar and the competitive markets of leather goods.

In view of the above facts, intervening groups offered to take up Tajpur as a challenge and evolve it as a model for the department of Rural Development, Punjab, by examining why women's organisation became dysfunctional in Tajpur despite its utmost felt need of the women striving for survival. Earlier, Mahila Mandal had failed due to shortcomings and lapses in the state programme and hostility between upper and lower castes over initiation of crafts centre in embroidery and tailoring in upper caste locality. The Harijans had objected to it and as such the Centre was shifted to their locality. Since women there did not perceive any benefit accruing from it, it resulted in abrupt closure.

The intervening agency in collaboration with the department of Rural Development has been monitoring the project of Employment Generation for Tajpur women

through their own organisation. Its action has been by way of advice, information, guidance, mobilisation, stating women's problems, formation of organisation, interlinkages with the financial and marketing institutions at different stages of the project and exploring the state facilities, resources and plans to strengthen the weakest groups among women for their self-reliance.

The initial hurdle of breaking the segregation between the upper caste and lower caste groups was overcome by conducting separate meetings in their respective localities to let women spell out their aspirations, needs, skill potential, fears and problems etc. The scheduled caste women pleaded for help to enable them give up "blood sucking work of ban-making" and 'khurpa'. They expressed their desire to take up manufacture of leather and sports goods in their village itself for self-reliance by learning associated skills relevant to the modern competitive markets. Since it was difficult for women to pursue individual entrepreneurship even after acquiring skills, it paved the way for collective markets. Thus the women reconstituted the Mahila Mandal and got it registered. The activity of leather goods chosen by the women required infrastructure, space, immediate financial support, technical and managerial guidance, at their doorsteps, in view of the cultural taboos imposed on women against their moving out and also their other day to day limitations.

The intervening group in coordination with governmental, non-governmental, marketing experts, private industries in Jalandhar worked out the potential demand of items and markets for the same, inputs like funds for raw material, wage support, recurring expenditure of the leather centre at its different stages (training, production and marketing etc.). These efforts have been constantly on, to pool the resources for enhancement of employment opportunities for Tajpur women. All this helped to sensitize the officials at the state, district and block levels to the activity in Tajpur by involving them.

Their involvement is very essential, as it is the machinery of the state, which in the long run, can provide the necessary financial and other support on a large scale. The officials were convinced to 'listen' more to the women rather than 'tell them what was best for them'. Alongside, the discussion of intervening agency, state officials and officials from the Centre with the women made them to realise the significance of qualitative improvement in their skills in the modern competitive economy for their income generation.

Due to bureaucratic delays in financial assistance from the state, the intermediary group mobilized and pooled its resources for fellowships, equipment, raw material etc. to avoid disillusionment and distrust among women. The Tajpur Panchayat immediately offered its community hall to Mahila Mandal for its workplace till Mahila Mandal could have financial resources in future for its building. It promised land to Mahila Mandal, in near future, for the building also. Inputs from the state and the district administration for training cum production through Mahila Mandal in Tajpur was done at intervening agency's emphasis. The group's ultimate aim is to withdraw after the Tajpur women become strong enough to stand on their own.

The intervening organisation's involvement in Tajpur being participatory in its approach has enabled the women there to discipline themselves to organised work and follow certain procedures. It has exposed them to an environment outside the village e.g. the bureaucratic set-up and its procedures, banking procedures, markets, industries and tanneries etc. . The group has helped them to build and manage their resources, participate in decision making and to plan in the organisation etc. Mahila Mandal has been assisted in getting the grants and this Mandal is now trying for further assistance. Women have been helped to form their capital by marketing their products in the district, state and outside the state and mobilize local resources like land and hall for their workplace. They are now gradually acquiring elementary knowledge of costing, accounting, book keeping, correspondence etc. and are being trained to deal with the businessmen, officials, male community members and the Panchayat. They work hard to maintain quality control of items, explore markets of the village, district, state, and outside the state.

The women, of late, have started handling the organisational working on their own and they put in their best efforts to solve their problems, although they look to intervening group for their dependence on the problems which cannot be solved at their end. The Mahila Mandal has started attracting the women from its neighbouring villages who have been continuously asking intervening groups to guide and initiate similar projects in their villages, Visitors from government, industrial houses, development agencies and other women's organisations provide a sense of self-worth to Tajpur Mahila Mandal. The women are now gradually becoming aware of organisational provide a sense of self-worth to Tajpur Mahila Mandal. The women are now gradually becoming aware of organisational working, authority, norms, conduct of the workers and they check if anybody misuses the same for their personal benefit of intervening group has been a mixture of hurdles as well as lessons which can provide some guidelines to other action projects.

Creation of employment among the poor and illiterate rural women is a prerequisite for social and political change, as this activity can provide them with an opportunity to articulate, strengthen and to get their position recognised in the family. This can open up an avenue for their socio-political participation. Since it demands of them to follow banking procedures, correspondence with the officials and businessmen for grants, assistance and orders, accounting etc., it makes them to seek literacy e.g. In Tajpur, it is after the income generating project, the women felt the need of literacy and Mahila Mandal initiated non-formal education programme.

Such projects necessitate the developmental machinery and intervening group to provide information, facilities and implement programme at their doorsteps to develop women's ability to trust outside agencies.

Sensitization of official machinery relevant to women's interests, needs and skill potential is essential. Economically viable project must be selected according to the region's pattern of employment, product and demand. This helps in better coordination at the state level for inputs etc. the intervening organisation must

constantly work out and pursue with state and district officials for support of infrastructure, funds, consultancy to raise women's income and their self-reliance.

Continuous mobilisation by the intervening group is a must till the project achieves self-sustenance and leaderships taken over by committed women who can be trained for accounting and managerial skills. Mobilisation must involve more and more women in the organisation.

It is difficult for women to get full employment in the beginning, as they cannot be expected to shift to this work all at once. As this goal involves long-drawn process, the intervening agency must be there for quite a long time to protect and nurture their interests and solve their problems, crisis etc. Even after the agency's withdrawal. Such projects need the intervening group to equip it with multiple skills e.g. activists, researchers, management of an organisation and above all committedness to deal with any issue or problem in the field. Many of these skills grow more while working with the women.

Most of the programmes on paper cover scheduled caste. They tend to leave out the economically backward women of upper caste. In fact, group should help to break the barriers of caste and class and form the heterogeneous group which encourages better interaction between lower and upper castes. For example, organised mobilisation efforts by the intervening agency at Tajpur have been able to bring about value as women from both upper and lower castes now work together and take decisions collectively. Upper castes in Tajpur are doing away with their age-long taboo of working on leather. Simultaneously, the intervening agency must guard against the interference from elite groups of both lower and upper castes.

Besides, these women being in the organised activity have to perform their day to day activities in the family like collection of fodder and fuel, maintenance of cattle, cooking, washing etc. It becomes impossible for them to cope up with the strict formal set up of production as in factories. Taking this into consideration, both formal and informal atmosphere of work relationship should be cultivated. To quote an example, Tajpur women who once sought employment in private factory, came back to the village due to strict set up there and realised that the collective action at their village could be the only answer and solution of unemployment.

As some of the employment generation projects are compelled to go in for mechanisation to some extent, this necessitates continuous exploration of markets for sustained employment and it is for the intervening agency to guide and these women to work in this direction.

While working towards goals of social consciousness along with income generation, there must be a blend of ideological goals, organisational goals and business values.