

FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY: A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RURAL AREAS IN INDIA

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The study, using the data from the Census of India, 1971, attempts to analyse the spatial variations in female participation in economic activity in rural areas of the states of Punjab, Haryana, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. The southern states in general show a higher rate of female participation than the states in the northern region. Female participation-rate is remarkably low in the rural areas of Punjab and Haryana and high, in other states. Female workers are generally confined to primary sector. It is tried to explain the variations in female participation, drawing selected economic, demographic and socio-cultural variables. It is observed that the non-economic factors emerge as the most dominant ones in determining female participation in work.

A relatively new but potentially powerful theme emerging within the field of geographical research is the question of women and feminism. In other social science disciplines this question has been vigorously, and sometime more aggressively put forward, "yet the degree to which geography remains untouched by feminism is remarkable and the dearth of attention to women's issues explicit or implicit plagues all branches of human geography"(4).

The questions pertaining to women's economic contribution have received scant attention. In spite of the fact that a large number of women participate in out-door economic activity, their economic role is hardly recognised. This is due to the traditional middle class perception of the women's primary role to be confined to the home and the family. Inevitably this view of the women's role has penetrated the scholarly circles. To a large extent, these scholarly perceptions draw their sustenance from the peculiar lack of historico-cultural and geographical perspective to the problem, in an overwhelmingly male-dominated society. A large body of research on women's economic activity, which has accumulated over years, appears to be based on grossly aggregative analysis overlooking the important regional and sub-regional differences.

Based on data obtained from the Census of India, 1971, the present study attempts to analyse the spatial variations in female participation in economic activity in rural areas of the states of Punjab, Haryana, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. These areas are characterised by immense variation in their economic, social and cultural make-up. The case of rural women was considered significant for two reasons. First, it is the rural women who actually form the bulk of the working women. Secondly, the urban women have received greater attention from the social scientists largely due to their greater 'visibility' (3).

The study was undertaken with a limited objective of developing an insight into the nature and extent of female participation in work in rural areas in different regions characterised by varying levels of development within disparate social and cultural milieux. Secondly, the study attempts to examine some of the popular explanations generally offered in the allied social science disciplines with regard to female participation in economic activity.

At the international level, the variation in the extent of female participation in economic activity among different countries is amazingly high. However, when such comparisons are made certain patterns become quite clear. First, more females are "economically active" in the industrialised countries than in countries which are predominantly agricultural. Secondly, countries with socialist economies show a higher worker-rate for females than those with capitalist economies. Thirdly, the work-participation rate of females in the Muslim countries is incredibly low. Lastly, the non-Muslim-African countries show a very high proportion of "economically active" female population. In the last category, are also included countries with strong "female farming traditions" (1).

Although female participation in economic activity in India is one of the lowest in the world (13.2 per cent in 1971), the variation in the participation-rate at the state-level, corresponds by and large to the international pattern. An important feature of the state-level data in India is what seems to be the north-south divide in the extent of female participation in economic activity. The southern states in general show a higher rate of female participation than the states in the northern region. Such a pattern led Boserup to conclude that the West Asian cultural influence was strongly visible in the northern part of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent. It was only marginal in the southern part. Nevertheless, this explanation seems to be impressionistic in nature and lacks empirical validity.

The work-participation rate of females in the rural areas of Punjab and Haryana is remarkably low and is marked with a high degree of consistency at the district level (Fig. 1). It is important to note that this region has seen an unprecedented growth in agricultural productivity along with a rapid development of productive forces. In the remaining three states viz., West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, the variation in the extent of female

participation in economic activity at the district level is of a high order (Fig. 1).

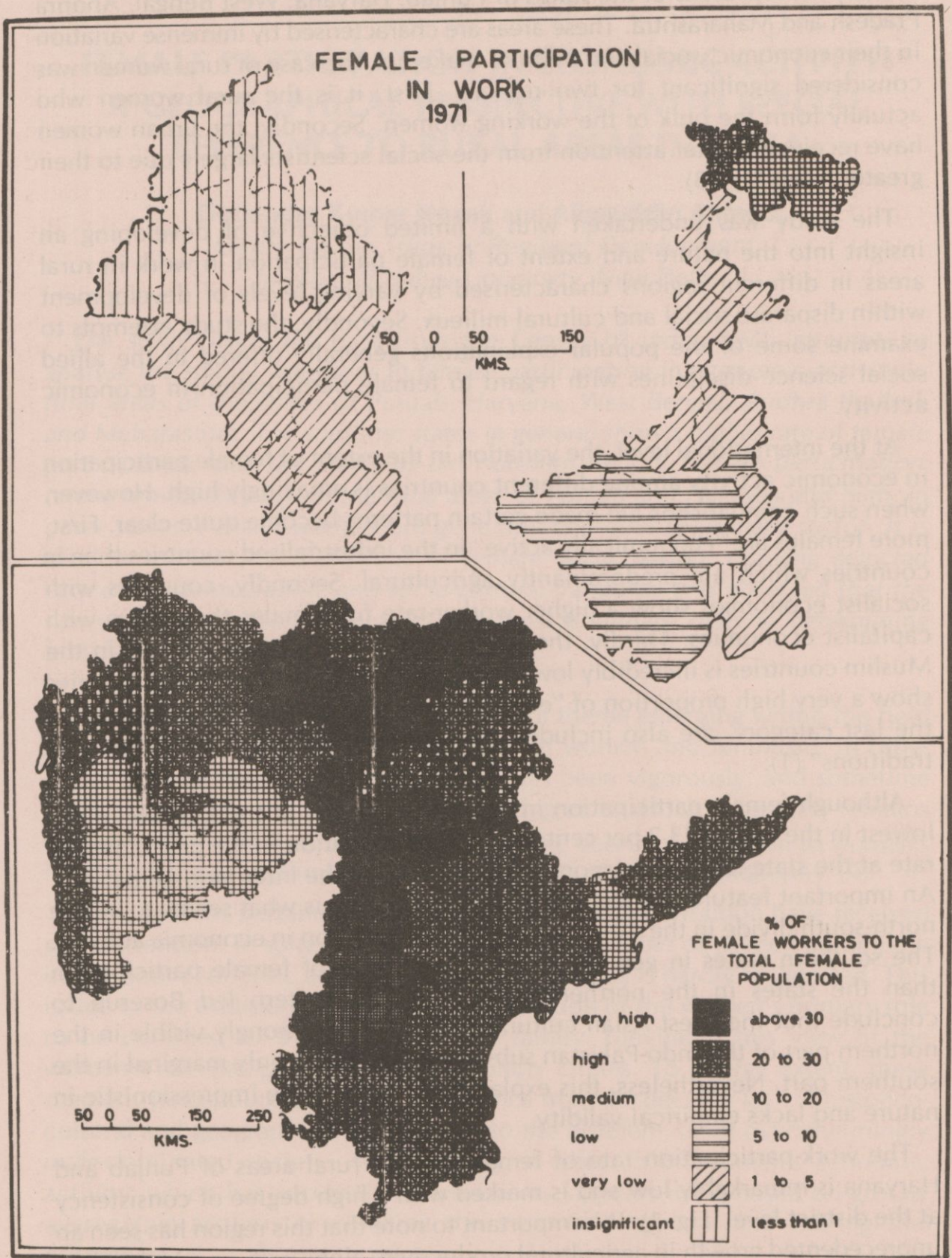


Fig. 1

An attempt has been made to identify the nature of variation in female participation in work using data for a selected number of villages from the states under study. The village-level analysis may unravel the role of economic and cultural factors in a direct and positive way. The pattern at higher aggregative levels tends to conceal variations which are so pronounced at the village-level. A study of villages in sample taluks shows that the female participation-rate is equal to or higher than the male participation-rate in quite a number of villages. Further, there are states (such as the Punjab and Haryana) where female participation is extremely low, but within such states there are villages having very high participation of females in work. On the other hand, states having very high participation of females (such as Maharashtra) in economic activity are characterised by pockets of villages where the level of participation is just negligible. Analysis of female participation at different levels refutes the generally held view that women are confined to household chores — a generalisation which derives its strength from analysis at broader aggregative levels and from studies of social groups seen in social isolation. It is felt that geographers with their specialised training, can provide necessary correctives to such generalisations often made in other social science disciplines.

The other question of primary importance is the structure of female work-force. It was observed that the female workers are generally confined to the primary sector and most of them are classified by the Census as either cultivators or agricultural labourers. Unlike their male counter-parts, the female workers display little diversification in terms of industrial categories. However, it is observed that the areas characterised by low female participation rate are more diverse in industrial composition as well. Examples can be drawn from all the states chosen for the study.

It has been further observed that female participation is positively associated with non-wage earning categories of work, such as 'cultivation' or 'household industry' in which the females are self-employed.

Still more important is the question related to the explanation for wide variations in female participation in economic activity. It is note-worthy that the variations exist irrespective of the fact that there is little variety in the age-structure of the female population as is evident from the data at the district level. The task of explaining variation in female participation is, therefore, enormous and complicated. Unlike male participation the female participation in work is influenced by social customs, taboos, prevalent value system and social practices which vary over socio-geographic space. Women's biological and reproductive roles are very complex. Thus any unilateral explanation would be unrealistic. For this analysis a number of variables have been chosen which are likely to influence the female participation-rate. The economic variables include: agricultural productivity, modernisation and mechanisation of agriculture, irrigation and structure of work-force etc. Sex-ratio, level of urbanisation, and child-woman ratio have been considered

as important demographic variables. Similarly, variables such as the share of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the total population and literacy and marital status of women have been considered in the socio-cultural sphere. With the help of simple correlation and step-wise multiple regression analysis, the influence of these variables on the female participation patterns has been studied. The main findings may be summarised as below:

As far as the economic factors are concerned, the income of the household and the level of irrigation and modernisation in agriculture seem to be negatively correlated with the female participation-rate. However, the degree to which such factors affect the participation-rate varies with the overall level of development of the state concerned.

In the demographic sphere, sex-ratio, urbanisation and the child-women ratio emerge as the most important variables affecting female participation-rates. While sex-ratio, in general, is positively associated with female worker-rate, urbanisation is negatively associated. Contrary to general impression, the child-women ratio is not negatively correlated with female participation-rate.

In the socio-cultural sphere, the share of depressed communities such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes is positively associated with female participation in work. However, the relationship is not universally tenable and cannot be taken for granted. The marital status of women, which is generally considered to be a constraint on female participation in work, does not operate as a negative factor. On the other hand, the presence of a large proportion of widowed/separated/divorced women shows a positive association with the female participation-rate. These women are supposed to be economically independent because of the social conditions in which they live. The level of literacy in all the regions shows a negative relationship with female participation.

Finally, it has been observed that the non-economic factors emerge as the most dominant ones in determining female participation in work. However, no general conclusion can be drawn in this regard as the states with low agricultural productivity (such as Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra) show a relatively greater influence of economic variables on female participation.

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