

RESEARCH PAPER

Analysing the livelihood options of rural women in Theni district

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in the Theni district of Tamil Nadu with the general objective to find out the changes in livelihood pattern of the rural women. Three blocks that had maximum number of tanks viz., Periyakulam, Andipatti and Bodinayakanur were selected. Two villages were purposively selected from each of the block. These villages had tanks that were functioning to the extent of supporting the livelihood of SHG women considerably. Accordingly, six representative SHGs were selected drawing members of one SHG from each of the selected villages. All the members of the selected six SHGs constituted the sample for the study. Thus, the total sample size of the study is 102 SHG women. The respondents were interviewed personally by a well-structured interview schedule. The results of the study revealed that 39.22 per cent of rural women were pursuing occupation in service sector, 35.30 per cent in agriculture.

KEY WORDS : Livelihood options, Rural women

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Agriculture and allied sector is unique because of its diversity and location-specific requirements, necessitating adaptation of technologies to a range of agro ecological conditions. Earlier it was subsistence farming, where a farmer produced whatever quantity was necessary to sustain his farm and family. With the advancement of technology, there are lots of changes in the society and its waves are reflected in the agricultural sector also. A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living (DFID, 2000). Livelihoods are the sum of ways

in which people make a living. The idea of livelihood security embodies three fundamental attributes viz., the possession of human capabilities, access to other tangible and intangible assets and the existence of economic activities. The interaction among these attributes defines what livelihood option an individual pursues. Rural women play a critical role in the rural economies of both developed and developing countries. In most parts of the developing world they participate in crop production and livestock care, provide food, water and fuel for their families, and engage in off-farm activities to diversify their families' livelihoods. To understand the situation of rural women, it is necessary to examine the full diversity of their experiences in the context of the changing rural economy, including their position within household and community structures; the gender division of labour; their access to and control over resources; and their participation in decision-making. Rural women are not a homogeneous group; there are important differences among women in rural areas based on class, age, marital status, ethnic background, race and religion (Women, 2000 and Beyond, 2008). A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets,

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and provide net benefits to other livelihoods locally and more widely, both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the long and short term (Chambers, 1995). Kolavalli (1995) found that the local organizations play a key role in conflict resolution regarding the disputes based on distribution and allocation of water. Thinakaran (1997) stated that apart from traditional uses of irrigation, washing, bathing, fishing, grazing, brick kilns and cultivation with receding waters an innovative new use was introduced during 1960 by the forest department. It was the raising of tree in the tank bed and it has come to stay in a big way of its multi various benefits. According to UNDP (1997), sustainable livelihoods could serve as an integrating factor that allows policies to address 'development, sustainable resource management, and poverty eradication simultaneously'.

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base' (Carney, 1998). Leading proponent Ian Scoones (1998) of IDS proposed a modified definition of SL as A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base.

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks maintain or enhance its capabilities or assets while not undermining the natural resource base (DFID, 1999). Nanda (1999) defined SHG as a "Homogeneous affinity group of rural poor voluntarily formed to save small amounts out of their emergent credit needs and revolving their resources among the members, both for consumption and small production, at such rate of interest, period of loans and other terms, which the group may decide. Such group may be informal or registered and should not have a membership of more than 20 if they were to be registered". Abhas (2000) defined SHG as a small, economically homogeneous affinity groups of the rural poor voluntarily coming together to save small amounts regularly which are

deposited in a common fund to meet their emergency needs and to provide collateral free loans with terms decided by the group at market driven rates. According to Mohanan (2000) SHG is a voluntary association of a homogeneous set of people, either working together or living in neighborhood, engaged in similar line of activity, working with or without registration for the common good of the members. The minimum number of members to form as SHG is five while maximum is 20 and it will have convener or other office bearers, president and secretary, elected by the group and all members have to meet regularly every week, every fortnight or every month, in a specified place at a stipulated time, as decided by group. Members discuss their problems and during this meeting they collect their small savings and these savings are used to meet the credit requirements of the members. A self help group is a collection of people who have common problems that cannot be I; solved individually and have therefore, decided to form a group and take joint action to solve the problems. The group may be known by different names in different places. Some of the terms used are Sangha, Samooh, Mandal, Sangham etc. depending upon the legion (Nath, 2000).

Sustainable livelihood is inextricably linked with the environment as the poor are both an agent and victim of environmental damage. About half of the world's poorest people live on marginal lands, with no recourse but to keep depleting the resources on these or to use other vulnerable areas (DFID, 2000). Ellis (2000), "A livelihood comprise the assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital) the activities, and the access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household." Livelihood strategy is a set of activities that are pursued by households to generate means of survival Ellis (2000), and to reduce vulnerability, poverty, food insecurity, and other negative outcomes. Pasteur (2001) reported that, livelihoods of the poor can never be understood in any one-track logic - be it economic, social, technical, cultural or political. The livelihood systems are made up of very diverse elements which - taken together - constitute the physical, economic, social and cultural universe wherein the families live. According to Pasteur (2002), livelihood security encompasses food security, social security and psychic security. Each one of them has some basic minimum threshold level to achieve and maintain and also must be pursued in a balanced way. According to FAO/ILO (2005) report, the extent to which a livelihood is sustainable is determined by the interaction of several forces and elements such as; livelihood assets and activities, vulnerability and coping strategies, policies, institutions and processes, and livelihood outcomes. Women's increased access to paid employment and independent cash income in some areas can positively affect intra-household dynamics and the perception of women's roles

in society. Many women, particularly younger women, have found that independent sources of income give them the confidence to question traditional views of rural women's roles both in the household and in society, and to challenge gender biases in access to resources.

Objective of the study :

- Analysing the livelihood options of rural women in Theni district.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Theni district of Tamil Nadu, with a total sample size of 102 rural women to analyse the livelihood options pursued by the rural women, to identify the constraints to follow agriculture as livelihood option as well as to find out the factors supporting non-farm activities as livelihood options. The data were collected from the individual women respondents through personal interview with the help of a structured interview schedule. The data collected was analysed using percentage and co-efficient of relevance.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study as well as relevant discussion have been presented under following heads :

Livelihood options pursued by the rural women :

The livelihood options of rural women depicted a clear picture about the percentage of rural women directly depending on agriculture or other sectors for their livelihood. It is obvious from the Table 1 that majority of the rural women were not depending on agriculture. In fact service sector provided employment to majority of people. This could be related to the declining area under agriculture in the rural area. The industrial sector also employed a considerable percentage of women in rural area (19.61%). This might be due to much attractive offers from industrial and service sector, both in terms of opportunities as well as regular and continuous income. In rural area, old age rural women were still pursuing agriculture as their source of livelihood, but this included those retired people who go back to agriculture as their time spending activity for old age.

Constraints to follow agriculture as livelihood option :

Constraints to follow agriculture (Table 2) as livelihood option were studied and ranking of these constraints was also done. Co-efficient of relevance was used as the criteria of ranking. The constraints were categorized into five groups, such as access to resources, access to information, access to market, economic factors and risk factors. In the first category *i.e.* access to resources, labour and land resources were ranked

as first and second by rural women. In the second category *i.e.* access to information, information regarding crop protection methods and scientific planting methods were ranked first and second. In the third category *i.e.* access to market, stable price and market availability for the produce was ranked first and second. In the fourth category *i.e.* economic factors, regular income and profit were given rank first and second. In the last category *i.e.* risk factors, marketing risk and production risk were given rank first and second. If we consider the overall co-efficient of relevance, access to labour resources was given highest co-efficient, followed by regular income and profit.

Lack of labour availability at reasonable rate was one of the main reasons why people were reluctant to continue agriculture. The labour rate was highest in Theni with a male labour a day costing Rs. 150 to 200 and a female labour a day costing Rs. 100 to 150. There was labour shortage, even at this high rate. Educated youth were not ready to work as agricultural labourer, even amidst big problem of unemployment. Fragmented land holding was also a major problem, which restricted one to go for extensive farming. Timely availability of credit had become another problem, making farming the most difficult enterprise. Keeping in mind the increased cost of inputs as well as low and unstable price of farm produce, farming had become an unprofitable enterprise, which could not guarantee regular income to the farmer. All these factors in combination forced the rural population to discontinue farming as livelihood option and divert to other sectors.

Factors supporting non-farm activities as livelihood option :

To get a clearer picture about the livelihood options of rural women, factors supporting the non-farm activities were also studied and the results are given in Table 3 shows that satisfied work environment and lesser risk were two factors which majority of rural women agreed upon as factors supporting the non-farm activities as their livelihood option. Better social status was agreed by 33 per cent of rural women. Skill and education were the two factors having the least agreement by rural women.

The major factor, which supported non-farm activities as livelihood option, was the satisfactory work environment provided by industrial and service sectors. This was obvious with the working conditions and facilities available in service and industrial sectors as compared with agricultural sector. Moreover, these were not much physically exerting jobs. Women found the opportunities in industrial and service sectors suitable to their educational qualifications and hence satisfying for them. Also these were lesser risk jobs, as there was a regular income guaranteed as salary and other perks. Also the employment in service, industrial or business sector placed one in a better social status.

Conclusion :

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Table 1 : Distribution of rural women based on livelihood options			
Sr. No.	Livelihood options	Number	Percentage
1.	Agriculture	35	35.30
2.	Industries	20	19.61
3.	Business	5	4.90
4.	Services	40	39.22

Table 2 : Constraints to follow agriculture as livelihood option as perceived by rural women		
Constraints	Co-efficient of relevance	Rank order
Poor access to resources		
Labour	0.82	1
Land	0.53	2
Capital/credit	0.52	3
Seed/planting material	0.41	4
Machinery	0.40	5
Irrigation water	0.20	6
Fertilizer	0.12	7
Poor access to information		
Crop protection methods	0.66	1
Scientific planting methods	0.21	2
Mechanization	0.19	3
Improved crop varieties	0.15	4
Post-harvest technology	0.13	5
Poor access to market		
Stable price	0.43	1
Market availability	0.15	2
Poor economic factors		
Regular income	0.76	1
Profit	0.62	2
Risk factors		
Marketing risk	0.57	1
Production risk	0.51	2

Table 3 : Factors supporting the nonfarm activities as perceived by rural women		
Sr. No.	Factors	Rural women (%)
1.	Skill	15.00
2.	Education	21.00
3.	Availability of opportunities	26.00
4.	Better profit/ income	27.00
5.	Satisfied working environment	71.00
6.	Better social status	33.00
7.	Lesser risk	56.00

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