

Swaminathan, Padmini : Reproductive Health from a 'Women and Work' Perspective: Issues for Consideration. Women on Track. Women's Health Studies Research Centre. July 1998. No.5.

Reproductive Health from a 'Women and Work' Perspective: Issues for Consideration

Padmini Swaminathan

The existing structural nature of women's work (domestic as well as non-domestic) has severe built-in hazards for women (reproductive and otherwise) which no amount of first rate quality of care, total coverage and/or access to health services alone can deal with.

The above also has implications for the unqualified demand being made for increasing women's wage employment because of the observed statistical correlation between increase in women's outside employment and decrease in birth rates. The question not simultaneously addressed by demographers particularly is at what costs to women's health such demographic outcomes occur.

At the outset there is need to chart out the complex nature of women's work in its entirety to highlight why 'Occupation' as understood in conventional literature and as used in the theory and practice of Occupational Health Policy and Planning, ill defines and/or excludes altogether large numbers of (working) women in third world contexts.

The sectoral break-up of occupation reveals that women make up a substantial portion of the agricultural workforce in India. Agriculture accounts for 37 per cent of Indian's GNP and employs about 70 percent of working population of the country and almost 84 percent of all economically active women. Although almost all rural women are involved to some extent in agriculture, the nature and extent of their involvement varies widely and is strongly influenced by economic status and the caste and class background of their households.

A feature particularly notable for the decade 1971-81 is the increase in the ranks of female child labour, especially when at the same time, the incidence of male child labour had gone down in rural areas. Analysing the trends in women's employment for the decade 1971-81, Nirmala Banerjee has shown, among other things, that the number

of girl workers in both rural and urban areas had increased faster in states where the workforce participation rates of women had gone up faster; further a small part of the increase in female agricultural workforce was accounted for by rural child workers for whom most of the increase in absolute numbers as well as in the proportion was concentrated in agriculture. Composition of the workforce by sex and activity according to the 1991 Census is now available and shows an increase in workforce participation rate for women between 1981 and 1991. However, unless and until an age-wise classification of the composition of workforce is made available it would be premature to clout over the increased work participation rates for women.

Taking the 'demographically' developed state of Tamil Nadu as an illustration we get the following picture:

(a) Four decades of 'development' notwithstanding, even now almost 80 per cent of female workers in Tamil Nadu as a whole are still confined to the primary sector of the economy; within the primary sector, agricultural labour constitutes the biggest category employing 56 per cent of women workers.

(b) The distribution of workers by industrial categories and broad age-group reveals that, proportionately, the percentage of female workers in the age group 0-14 years is higher than the males in the same age group in each of the industrial categories.

(c) A district-wise analysis of the data reveal that in almost all district of the state, except two or three, more than 70 per cent of the women and girl children, respectively, work either as agricultural labourers and/or cultivators. This phenomenon has a lot to do with the nature of the cropping pattern in Tamil Nadu. For the state as a whole, the area under paddy is more than 40 per cent of total area under different crops while production of paddy exceeds 50 percent of total crop production.

(d) The NSS gives some idea of the break-down of agricultural work by major operations These data show marked difference, in the relative importance of female labour between different operations. Women's labour figures prominently in transplantation, weeding and harvesting; in fact they outnumber the males in the casual labour category in the latter two operations, but are relatively less important or play a minor role in others, notably ploughing and non-manual work.

The significance of documenting the heavy concentration of women workers in agriculture, particularly in operations like weeding, transplanting and harvesting lies in the severe implications it has for women's reproductive health. One indicator of the adverse consequences of such work is the relatively high child mortality indicator for an otherwise 'developed' state like Tamil Nadu.

New technology in agriculture and particularly that relating to paddy cultivation has not touched those operations, which are performed by women, namely, transplanting and weeding. If anything, green revolution has not only led to intensive cultivation but has also increased the number of times that paddy crop is raised within an agricultural season. We have therefore a scenario, wherein even if there is a decline in numbers employed in agriculture, this does not necessarily apply to women labour in paddy intensive areas. Further, and worse, the technological modernisation of agriculture has not touched the reproductively hazardous operations performed by women labourers.

Outside of farming, the other (census) industrial categories where women are employed in significant numbers, are the 'household' and the 'other than household' category - the two together constituting the manufacturing sector. To put it differently, and more starkly, a fact that is by now well known and well documented, the majority of women employed in the non-farm sector are actually in the growing informal sectors of the economy, working either as labourers and servants or as petty producers and traders. Apart from their work being extremely time consuming and heavy, it is also the most deprived in technology and capital inputs. Technological marginalisation of female work is endemic in both agriculture and the non-agricultural informal sectors and accounts partly for the gender gap in wage rates.

Efforts to initiate discussion on quality of employment can hardly begin in a context where large sections of the population are under tremendous pressure to seek and accept any and every kind of work for sheer survival. At the official/state level, the whole issue is deemed to be taken care for by merely adding a section on Occupational Health and Safety Measures to the Factories Act. These, despite the fact that large numbers of even waged workers are not officially recorded as workers. Even if there is some sort of recognition of the presence of these women as wage workers, the status of this employment being what it is (casual, daily, temporary, etc.) precludes them from accessing most of the legally provided benefits of wageworkers. A reproductive health policy that is narrowly conceived to cover particular age groups, and/or does not also address the conditions and contexts in which women are situated and work, cannot but be sub-optimal.

There exists a fair amount of (anecdotal) literature that documents the reproductive and other health impact on women due to the nature and burden of their work. These are largely women's own perceptions of the adverse impact of their work on their health. We have very few epidemiological studies to enable us to draw any kind of causal explanation of the phenomenon of 'work and reproductive health'. Methodologically, moreover, we have a long way to go in our efforts to establish causal linkages between reproductive health and women's work given the varied nature and complexity of this 'work'.