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An Investigation in to the Status of Women Headed Rural Non-Farm Enterprise and its Impact on the Rural Economy: A Case Study of Dhubri District of Assam

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Abstract

Rural agricultural women are silent workers and major contributors to rural economy. Their economic contributions are often appreciated but not widely recognized. The purpose of the study was to make the participation of rural agricultural women in non-farm activities and their contribution in generating non-agricultural income. Data were collected from a sample of 10 villages out of 132 villages from the selected Block. The obtained data were analysed by using percentage, ratios and pie chart.

Key-point-Non-farm activities, women workers.

1.1 The Genesis of the Rural Non-Farm Sector: The reduction of rural poverty is one of the most important goals of the developing countries as the majority of population lives in rural areas and its dependence on agriculture almost as an exclusive source of livelihood has been a matter of serious concern for the policy makers in the countries. The World Bank estimates more than 70 per cent of the world poor live in the rural areas. Various strategies have been formulated to address this concern, and among the major ones is rural employment creation. It is a well known fact that agriculture or farm sector has always been viewed as the core of economic growth of developing economies. It accounts for a large share of the GDP of these countries and it represents a major source of foreign exchange, supplies the bulk of basic food and provides subsistence and income to the large rural population. But this sector is now unable to provide additional job opportunity in the rural areas due to certain constraints. The notable constraints' are the small size of the holdings, insufficient capital, inadequate farm infrastructure, defective farm marketing, poor prices of the farm products etc. It is therefore essential to focus on broader spectrum of the rural economy, not just on agriculture but on alternative job avenues. The development of various non-farm activities, as for example, offers great potential for creating additional rural jobs and hence for stimulating the further growth of rural economies. The rural non farm economy is a very important part of rural Asia. It accounts for a large proportion of the total rural employment and total rural income. This will continue to increase over time. From the point of view of rural development, rural non-farm enterprises provide important sources of

employment and income to women as well as to the poor small and landless farmers. Promoting this type of enterprises will therefore help to raise employment and income, especially of the poor. Moreover, it can improve the distribution of income in the rural areas (Onchan, Tongroj, 2004).

1.2 The Rural Non-Farm Employment: It is very difficult to identify nonfarm activities in rural areas due to variations in definitions. The World Bank (1978) in its publication also mentioned the difficulties in presenting a clear cut classification of agricultural and non-agricultural activities or rural, urban categories due to lack of well established and consistent set of definition. Literature of Rural Non-Farm Sector lacks a common definition regarding the non-farm employment. Lanjouw and Lanjouw (1995) define the RNFS as incorporating all economic activities in rural areas, except agriculture, livestock, fishing and hunting. Thus, RNFS includes activities like handicrafts, mining and quarrying, household and non household manufacturing, processing, repairs, and construction, trade, transport and communication, community and personal services in rural areas. However, according to Saith (1992), RNFS needs to be defined in a broader framework to capture all aspects of rural diversification. Thus, auxiliary activities like fishing and aquaculture, dairying and animal husbandry poultry rearing and bee keeping should be included in the RNFS. NSS data show the percentage of rural workforce employed in different gainful activities, or the share of rural workers in total workforce; there is no indication whether employment is in urban, semi-urban or rural areas. Thus, according to Saith (1992), the RNFS should include all economic activities which display sufficiently strong rural linkages, irrespective of whether they are located in designated rural areas or not.

1.3 Growth of Rural Non-Farm Employment: Empirical evidences from a large number of countries all over the world show that rural non-farm activities are becoming important sources of employment and income generation for large majority of rural people. Shahid (1996), Barkat-e-Khuda (1985), Varma and Kumar (1996), Ahmed (1987), Gustavo and Daidone (2010), Davis Benjamin ed al. (1998), Bakar and Jalil (2011), Islam Nurul (1997). In India several studies have been conducted to identify the growing importance of the rural non-farm sector and the studies show a positive response. Tandon (1990), Suresh (2003) and Jha (1992), Chandrasekher (1993), Sindhu and Toor (2002), Mahendra (2001), Brajesh (2000), Punia, Kaur and Punia (1991), Jha (1992), Srivastav (2008), Bhattacharya (1998), Ray (1994), Chakraborti- Kundu- Nandi (2011).

1.4 Motivation behind the Diversification of the Rural Non-Farm Employment: The role of rural non-farm sector as a potential vehicle to provide a gainful employment opportunities and poverty reduction in rural areas has been well recognized (Lanjouw and Lanjouw, 1995: Datt and Ravallion, 1996: Ravalion, 2000: Hossain, 2004). The expansion of RNFS is often being driven by two processes (a) demand push and (b) distress push. Actually, poor rural people take advantage of opportunities in rural non-farm economy. This motivation is regarded as the demand pull diversification. Demand pull diversification occurs in case of any increase in the demand for rural products resulting from increase in income of rural households and increased demand from urban areas. Among the pull factors

the major motives are higher return in labour in RNFS, higher return on investment in the RNFS, low risk as compared to farm activities etc. On the other hand, some poor people are pushed into non-farm sector due to lack of opportunities in the farm sector. This type of motivation is called the distress-push diversification Mehta (2002). In the distress segment the major motivations are geographical isolation, low quality of human capital, resource scarcity, incidence of natural disaster, rural indebtedness etc. Literature supports the argument that the growth of RNFS is demand pull phenomena where the backward and forward linkages of farm sector are strong with non-farm sector. This is called interlinkage hypothesis (Mecharla; 2002). However, it becomes a distress driven phenomena where the farm sector growth is stagnant and RNFS employment acts as a form of residual sector in the rural areas. This is called residual hypothesis (Vaidyanathan; 1986).

1.5 The Research Problem: In the year 1983, the old Goalpara district was divided into four separated districts and Dhubri is one of those. Dhubri district is bounded both by interstate and international border, i.e., West Bengal and Bangladesh in the west, Goalpara and Bongaigaon districts of Assam and Garo Hills district of Meghalaya in the east, Kokrajhar district in the north, Bangladesh and the state of Meghalaya in the south. This district over the past decades has undergone very high decadal population growth, modest degree of urbanization and low industrial base. This district has been chosen for the study because it is a poverty oriented district of Assam. This district stood in second rank in respect of the BPL family (75.03 percent) next to Goalpara district (75.25 percent BPL family). The district is much less urbanized than Assam as a whole. 86 percent of the total population of the district live in rural area. (As per 2011 Census Report). So it is predominantly rural in nature. As this part of Assam is not much developed in respect of industry, commerce, transport, education, etc., the process of modernization has not yet started functioning effectively. This part has still, more or less retained in its traditional rural structure. Dhubri district is positioned (0.214) at the bottom in the HDI list of Assam with considerable lags in the development procedure of the district (Source: Human Development Report, GOI, 2003). There is ample scope for the development of the non-farm based enterprises on the basis of factor endowments available in the district. In the rural areas a large number of non-farm based activities are carried out. Some of them are traditional and some of are modern activities. The traditional non-farm based activities include handloom, weaving, rope making, cane and bamboo works, gold and silver works, terracotta, *kulila*, etc. These industries provide subsidiary employment to good number of people in the rural areas. Some of these industries are organized and managed by National and State level award winning artisans and craftsmen. Meanwhile, a number of modern non-farm based activities are also coming up in the district. Such as electronic goods repairing, DTP and PCO/ SIM recharge centre, computer training, private school, modern transport services, various modern manufacturing sectors etc. With the growth and development of these non-farm based industries, many poor families have been able to raise their income and improve their standard of living. This subsidiary occupation promotes the habits of thrift and investment among the poor families in the rural areas of the district. In the district economy the contribution of the primary sector has been continuously falling from 50.46

percent to 34.19 percent from the year 1994-95 to 2007-08. The contribution of the secondary sector was only 17.93 percent in the year 1994-95 which became 23.87 percent in 2003-04 but in 2007-08 it came down to 17.72 percent. The most significant fact is that the contribution of the tertiary sector has been continuously rising from 31.61 percent in the year 1994-95 to 48.09 percent in the year 2007-08. Thus in spite of a backward district the contribution of the service based activities increases year after year.

1.6 Objectives of the Study:

The primary aims of the study are given below:

1. To study the socio-economic profile of the women agricultural workers.
2. To study the extent of knowledge and interest of the women agricultural workers regarding adoption of modern technologies.
3. To find out the basic problems faced by the women agricultural workers in the study area.
4. To suggest some policy options to solve those problems and to utilize the potentialities.

1.7 Methodology: The study was conducted in the western part and a border district of Assam, i.e., Dhubri district. This district has been chosen for the study because it is a poverty oriented district of Assam. This district stood in second rank in respect of the BPL family (75.03 percent) next to Goalpara district (75.25 percent BPL family). The district is much less urbanized than Assam as a whole. 86 percent of the total population of the district live in rural area. (As per 2011 Census Report). For the study purpose we selected Chapar-Salchocha Development Block under Chapar-Salchocha sub-division of the Dhubri district of Assam. In this sample Block there are altogether 132 villages (as per 2011 census report). In the next step, 10 villages have been selected at a random from the selected Block. At the last stage, we have done the activity mapping work, here information has been collected from village headmen, however, for reliability of the data, cross checking has been made with the discussion with few elite persons in the villages, like school teacher, NGO workers, BDO officials, local politicians and social workers etc. The total number of women agricultural workers in the sample villages has been found to be 87.

1.8. Data Collection: The study is based on both primary as well as secondary information. A district level analysis of the pattern of workforce restructuring in Dhubri district has been undertaken from the Population Census data for the period 2011. Other secondary sources data from NSSO, Economic Census and sector specific reports of the Government of Assam has also been utilized to understand the extent, types and quality of employment in the rural farm sector. The field study has covered only female respondents without any discrimination of age, occupation, caste and religion. The data collection was accompanied during 2016.

1.9 Analytical Framework: Data collected in the field study have been first analyzed using common statistical tools like ratio, percentage, averages etc. In the process of these

analyses, some objectives and research question of the study have been fulfilled. More specific analytical tools and methods have been used as and when required.

1.10. Limitations of the Study: During the field study, we have faced a number of problems from the respondents, which has taken additional time in furnishing field work. The major problem we have faced was the majority of the respondents were either illiterate or less educated and incapable to understand the questions asked by us while few of them were not giving much importance because there was no advantage from such study. Few of the respondents were annoyed with us as they were assuming us Government agents. We also found lack of awareness among the respondents due to their poor economic condition and massive illiteracy. Some respondents also tried to provide wrong information, which was detected through counter questions during filling up of questionnaire.

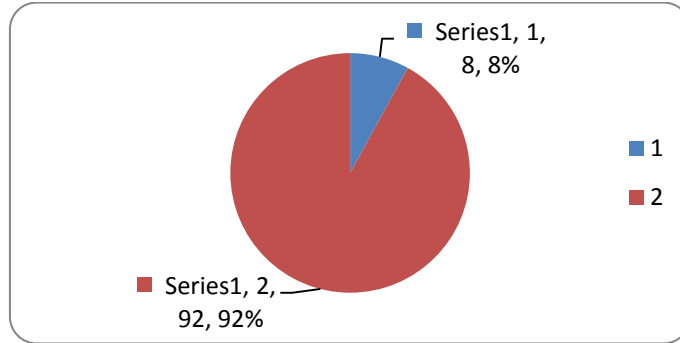
1.11. Findings of the Study:

1.11.1. Nature of Operation: The nature of operation explains whether the activity is seasonal in nature or not. From the field study it is clear to us that 80 per cent of the respondent's farm activity is seasonal in nature and remaining 20 per cent activity is permanent in nature. Thus one may comment that the major portion of the farm activity in the district is seasonal in nature.

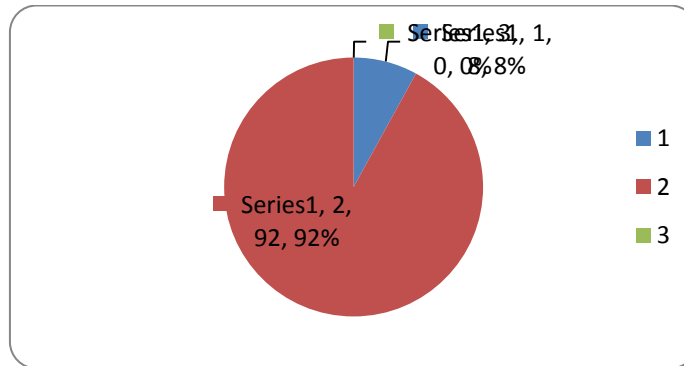
1.11.2. Organization of Farm Sector: In order to describe the classification of farm sector, information collected in the field survey regarding the nature of labour used for running the farm sector. The structure of the farm sector has been classified in to two broad categories (1) own account business (which is run by the women and her family member only) and (2) establishment category (using at least one not more than five hire workers). Here 80 percent farm activity is run by the family members of the women respondents. On the other hand 20 percent is established type of activity.

1.11.3. Age of the Respondents: Age wise distribution of respondents shows that 54 per cent respondents belong to the age group 31-40 years, 23 percent to the age group 41-50 years, 16 per cent to the age group below 30 years and only 7 per cent to the age group 50 and above years.

1.11.4 Educational profile of the Respondents: It was observed in this study that 20 per cent of the respondents are primary passed and 80 percent are illiterate. The percentage distribution o the respondents by their education levels is shown in pie diagram-1

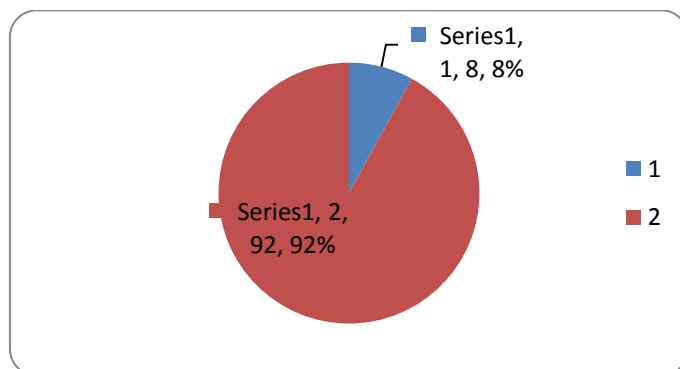


1.11.5. House Structure: Pie diagram-2 shows the house structure of the respondents. It can be deduced from the diagram that majority of the respondents (70 percent) have Kutcha house structure while only 2 percent of the respondents have pucca house structure. The house structure of the rest respondents belongs to semi-pucca structure (28 percent).



Drinking Water facility: The study reveals that 50 percent of the respondents did not have any regular water supply facility in their houses. Remaining respondents said that they have their own water supply sources like deep well and hand pump.

1.11.6. Land Ownership: The pie-diagram-3 shows the land ownership of the rural women agricultural workers. The diagram indicates that only 8 percent of the rural women agricultural workers have their own land while rests all are landless workers.



1.11.7. Working Days (weekly): Table (5.1) gives information about working days of rural women agricultural workers in a week. The table reveals that only 4.00 percent of worker gets work for all days while 35 percent and 24 percent get work only or 4 days and 5 days respectively in a week. About 32 percent workers are engaged only or 2 to 3 days while only 2 percent gets work for only one day in a week. The average working days of rural women agricultural workers are recorded 4.23 days in a week.

Table (5.1) Working Days Weekly (in Percent)

No of Days	Percent
1	2.00
2	12.00
3	20.00
4	35.00
5	24.00
6	3.00
7	4.00

1.11.8. Working Days (Yearly): Table (5.2) shows the number of working days of workers in a year. The tale reveals that 50 percent of the workers work from 121 to 180 days followed by 31 percent working tor 61 to 129 days. The lowest percentage (1 percentage) of workers works for 301 to 360 days while 3 percent of them work for 361 days and above. The mean working days of the rural women agricultural workers is 143.29 days in a year.

Table (5.2) Working Days Yearly (in Percent)

Days	Percent
Up to 60	5
61 to 120	31
121 to 180	50
181 to 240	9
241 to 300	2
301 to 360	1
361 and above	2

1.12. Suggestions and Policy options:

- 1 It is suggested that the state govt. should reformulate its agricultural policy to boost up the productivity of the crops on sustainable basis to increase employment opportunities or the women workers.
- 2 To removal of work overload, work simplification methods should be evolved by the agricultural scientists and be introduced with simple mechanical aids whenever possible.
- 3 The technology should be indigenous and easily available to women.

- 4 The nutritional status of working women should be given much impotence in the family.
- 5 New agricultural technology should be spread over through the information technology to the rural masses.
- 6 The govt. should also promote cottage industries and village handicraft which will provide employment opportunities to the women workers.
- 7 Macro policies are equally important in helping the poor women workers. Inflation must be under controlled. Economic growth also important if the govt. wants to allocate more resources to have productive employment.
- 8 There must be a check on increasing population through different control methods because it is not possible to provide employment to the increasing population in the rural areas.
- 9 Illiteracy is also one of the major hindrances of the rural labour.

1.13. Conclusions: In our society, where economic power rests with the men, convention decreed that women's place is in the home, and that her husband's words are the law. They share the duties and responsibilities o maintaining their families on more than equal term with their men-folk but because of low visibility of their contribution, they are not regarded as equal partners in development process in spite of legal equality. Women are the cultural victims in our society which provides superiority to men and instutionalises deprivation to women. Though, they play dual roles, but patriarchal family system forced them behind the four walls o the house. This limits their mental horizon and they are considered incompetents to make major decisions. In traditional rural society, the women have been playing a distinctive accepted role in arm sector. On the basis of the study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Knowledge levels of the respondents have no association with their educational status regarding farm and animal husbandry.
2. Role of women respondents in animal husbandry operations have been affected by household income.
3. Women workers do not spend their income without the decision of their husband or male members of the family.
4. All the respondents belonged to lower income group households and they did not have their own land for cultivation.
5. The respondents are highly interested in using modern techniques; therefore, steps should be taken for their training.
6. Primary education should be provided to the respondents through adult education campaigning.

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