

Gender Disparity in the Wages of Agricultural Labour in Tamil Nadu

Dr. T. Sasikala

M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.,

Associate Professor,

PG and Research Department of Economics,
Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous), Salem -16

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Abstract: The agricultural sector in Tamil Nadu plays a pivotal role in the state's economy, employing millions of workers, a significant portion of whom are women. Despite their essential contribution, gender-based wage disparity remains a persistent issue. This study explores the wage differences between male and female agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu, using primary data collected from surveys and interviews with workers across several districts, along with secondary data from existing research. Findings indicate that women earn considerably less than men for similar tasks, despite contributing equally to agricultural production. The paper highlights the socio-cultural, economic, and legal factors driving this disparity and discusses potential strategies for achieving gender parity in agricultural wages.

Keywords: Gender Disparity, Wages, Agricultural Labour, Tamil Nadu, Rural Economy, Socio-Cultural Factors, Wage Gap.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is a cornerstone of Tamil Nadu's economy, employing millions of workers in tasks such as paddy farming, horticulture, and livestock management. Among the labour force, women contribute significantly, undertaking tasks from planting and harvesting to post-harvest processing. Despite this, the gender wage gap remains a major issue, with women consistently earning less than their male counterparts. This research aims to investigate the root causes of this disparity, focusing on socio-economic and cultural factors while providing a pathway to potential solutions. The findings aim to contribute to policy discussions on improving wage equity in Tamil Nadu's agricultural sector.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Gender Disparity in Wages: A Global Perspective

Gender wage disparities are a global issue, especially in agriculture. Studies have shown that while women perform an extensive range of tasks in agriculture, they often earn significantly less than men. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2011), women work longer hours but receive less compensation, mainly due to socio-cultural barriers such as limited access to resources, lower decision-making power, and less legal protection. This

pattern is evident in many developing countries, where women's contributions are undervalued.

B. The Status of Female Agricultural Workers in India

In India, women play an integral role in agriculture, contributing to over 50% of the agricultural labour force, especially in rural states like Tamil Nadu. However, despite their high participation, women earn significantly lower wages compared to men. The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data reveals that the agricultural wage gap in India is substantial, driven by factors such as the type of labour performed, seasonal nature of work, and the informal labour market.

C. Gender Disparity in the Wages of Agricultural Labour in Tamil Nadu

Agriculture has long been a cornerstone of India's economy, particularly in rural regions, where millions of people depend on it for their livelihoods. Tamil Nadu, one of India's most agriculturally significant states, has a large rural population reliant on agriculture. Within this labour force, gender disparities in wages have been a persistent issue, reflecting the broader societal inequalities that still exist in the region.

The agricultural labour force in Tamil Nadu is diverse, with women forming a substantial part of the workforce. However, despite their critical contributions to agricultural production, women agricultural workers are consistently paid less than their male counterparts. The wage gap can be traced back to various social, economic, and cultural factors, and the disparity has profound implications for gender equality and the economic empowerment of women.

➤ *The Agricultural Labour Force in Tamil Nadu*

Tamil Nadu's economy is heavily dependent on agriculture, with a significant portion of the population engaged in farming activities. According to the 2011 Census, Tamil Nadu had over 10 million agricultural labourers. These workers are primarily involved in cultivating paddy, cotton, sugarcane, and various horticultural crops. While both men and women contribute to these activities, their roles, access to resources, and wages differ substantially.

The agricultural sector in Tamil Nadu is marked by small-scale farming, where manual labour is still predominant, and much of the work is physically demanding. Women play a significant role in tasks such as weeding, transplanting, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. In contrast, men often handle heavier tasks, such as ploughing, irrigation, and livestock management.

➤ *Gender Disparity in Agricultural Wages*

Despite the crucial role that women play in agricultural production, studies consistently show that they earn less than men for comparable work. In Tamil Nadu, as in other parts of India, this wage gap arises from several factors:

- *Nature of Work and Occupational Segregation*

One of the primary reasons for the wage gap is the nature of the tasks assigned to men and women. Women are often assigned tasks that are seen as requiring less skill or physical strength, even though these tasks are just as essential for agricultural production. Tasks like transplanting paddy, harvesting, and sorting produce are often undervalued, leading to lower wages. Conversely, men are typically assigned tasks like operating machinery or managing irrigation systems, which are considered more "valuable" and are therefore compensated at higher rates.

- *Social Norms and Discrimination*

Deeply entrenched social norms often dictate the types of work that men and women should do. Women's labour is frequently viewed as supplementary to household duties, thus undervaluing their work economically. This perception that women's work is "secondary" contributes to the wage disparity. Additionally, traditional gender roles limit women's access to decision-making power within agricultural households, further reinforcing their lower earning potential.

- *Skill Recognition and Training*

The recognition of skills is another key factor contributing to the wage gap. Many women agricultural workers are engaged in informal, unskilled labour and have

limited opportunities to acquire formal training or upgrade their skills. This lack of skill development restricts their ability to take on more highly paid, skilled roles in agriculture.

- *Access to Resources and Land*

Women, particularly those from marginalized communities or lower castes, often have limited access to land, resources, and credit. The absence of land ownership and control over agricultural assets means women are more likely to work as casual labourers, hired on a daily or seasonal basis. These types of jobs are typically lower-paying and lack the stability and benefits that come with more permanent agricultural work.

- *Seasonal and Temporary Work*

The agricultural labour market in Tamil Nadu is highly seasonal, with labour demand peaking during planting and harvest times. During these periods, both men and women may find employment, but women are often relegated to temporary or part-time positions that pay less than full-time, permanent roles. These seasonal jobs are also less likely to offer benefits such as health insurance, retirement savings, or paid leave.

➤ *Quantifying the Wage Gap*

Numerous studies have attempted to quantify the wage disparity between male and female agricultural workers in Tamil Nadu. The most recent data indicates that the average wage for female agricultural labourers is significantly lower than that of their male counterparts.

According to the National Sample Survey (NSS) data, the average daily wage for female agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu is approximately ₹250–₹300, while male labourers earn between ₹350–₹450 for similar work. This means that women earn around 25-30% less than men for performing the same tasks, even though their contributions are equally important to the agricultural process.

The wage gap is even more pronounced in certain regions and for specific crops. In areas where men are more commonly employed in high-value crops such as sugarcane, their wages tend to be higher, while women, who are often involved in lower-value crops, face even larger wage gaps.

➤ *Implications of the Wage Gap*

The gender wage gap in Tamil Nadu's agricultural sector has several consequences, both for the women directly affected and for the broader economy.

- *Economic Inequality*

Lower wages for women mean less economic independence, reducing their ability to save, invest, or access credit. This financial vulnerability exacerbates cycles of poverty, especially for women in rural areas who already face significant challenges in accessing education, healthcare, and other essential services.

- *Social Implications*

The wage gap also reflects broader societal gender inequalities. Women's labor is often undervalued and underappreciated, while men's contributions are more readily acknowledged. This marginalization impacts women's social status and limits their opportunities for empowerment and growth, perpetuating traditional gender norms.

- *Impact on Agricultural Productivity*

By failing to compensate women equitably for their labour, the agricultural sector in Tamil Nadu is underutilizing a significant portion of its workforce. If women were paid fairly for their contributions, this could potentially lead to higher household incomes, improved agricultural productivity, and the adoption of more sustainable farming practices.

➤ *Addressing the Gender Wage Gap*

Several measures can help reduce the gender wage disparity in Tamil Nadu's agricultural sector:

- *Policy Interventions:*

The government could implement policies that ensure equal wages for equal work, regardless of gender. This could involve more stringent enforcement of labour laws and the introduction of minimum wage standards that apply equally to both male and female workers.

- *Skill Development:*

Providing women with access to training in modern farming techniques, such as using machinery or adopting more sustainable farming practices, could help them take on more skilled and higher-paying tasks.

- *Access to Resources:*

Ensuring that women have equal access to land, credit, and agricultural inputs would help them take on more productive roles, empowering them to earn higher wages and contribute more effectively to agricultural production.

- *Awareness Campaigns:*

Raising awareness about the importance of recognizing and compensating women's labour fairly could help shift societal attitudes and reduce discrimination, ultimately contributing to a more equitable labour market.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study uses a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to examine wage disparities in Tamil Nadu's agricultural sector. Primary data were collected through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions, complemented by secondary data from existing literature and reports.

B. Sample Selection

The sample consists of 200 agricultural workers, equally divided between 100 male and 100 female labourers. These participants were selected from both large and small-scale farms in districts such as Coimbatore, Madurai, and Tirunelveli, ensuring diversity and representativeness.

C. Data Collection Methods

➤ *Surveys:*

A structured questionnaire was developed to gather data on wage rates, working hours, types of tasks performed, and workers' educational background. This data was crucial in comparing the wages of male and female labourers.

➤ *Interviews:*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female agricultural labourers, farm owners, and local experts. The interviews helped explore the socio-cultural and economic factors contributing to wage disparity.

➤ *Focus Group Discussions (FGD):*

FGDs with male and female labourers were organized to understand community attitudes and social norms that influence gender-based wage practices.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were analysed using statistical methods to determine the extent of wage disparity, with regression analysis employed to control for variables like education, age, and experience. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analysed thematically, focusing on identifying underlying causes of wage discrimination.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Wage Comparison between Male and Female Laborers

The study revealed a significant wage gap, with women earning between 25% and 40% less than men for the same agricultural tasks. Men were typically hired for more physically demanding and higher-paying tasks such as ploughing, while women were often assigned to less skilled, lower-paying tasks like weeding and harvesting. This discrepancy exists despite the fact that both male and female workers contribute equally to the productivity of farms.

B. Factors Contributing to Wage Disparity

➤ *Social Norms and Gender Roles:*

Gender-based expectations and traditional roles place women in subordinate positions, limiting their access to higher-paying jobs. Women are often expected to work for lower wages due to their perceived secondary role in the household economy.

➤ *Lack of Bargaining Power:*

Female agricultural workers typically have less bargaining power than their male counterparts. They are often employed as casual labourers without contracts or guaranteed wages, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

➤ *Seasonal Employment:*

Many women are employed on a seasonal basis, particularly during harvest time. This irregular employment leads to fewer job opportunities and lower overall wage stability compared to male workers who may work year-round.

➤ *Access to Resources and Education:*

Women have less access to education and vocational training, which limits their opportunities for higher-paying, skilled agricultural jobs. Additionally, decision-making in agricultural operations is often dominated by men, leaving women with fewer opportunities to gain economic autonomy.

C. Impact of Gender Wage Disparity

The gender wage gap has serious implications for rural women:

- *Poverty and Inequality:*

Lower wages result in financial instability, preventing women from accessing basic necessities like healthcare and education. This exacerbates the cycle of poverty and entrenches gender inequality in rural communities.

- *Economic Dependence:*

The wage gap reinforces women's economic dependency on male family members, thereby perpetuating patriarchal social structures and limiting women's independence.

- *Psychological and Social Effects:*

Unequal pay leads to lower self-esteem and social stigma for women workers, who often feel undervalued in their communities despite their significant contributions to agricultural productivity.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that a significant gender wage gap exists in the agricultural sector of Tamil Nadu, with women earning far less than men for similar work. The wage disparity is deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms, gender-specific job roles, and the lack of bargaining power among female labourers. The consequences of this inequality are far-reaching, contributing to a cycle of poverty, economic dependence, and social marginalization for rural women.

To address this issue, it is essential for both the government and civil society to focus on improving wage structures for women in agriculture. This could include measures such as better labour laws, skill development programs for women, and policies aimed at increasing women's participation in decision-making processes within agriculture. Empowering women through education,

training, and legal protections is vital to narrowing the wage gap and promoting gender equality in Tamil Nadu's agricultural sector.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

➤ *Investigating Agricultural Policies:*

Future research should examine how agricultural policies in Tamil Nadu influence gender wage disparities and identify strategies for gender-sensitive policy reforms.

- *Longitudinal Studies:*

Long-term studies are needed to assess the impact of wage disparity on the socio-economic mobility of rural women over time.

- *Technology and Mechanization:*

Future studies should explore how technological advancements and mechanization in agriculture affect gender equality in the labour market, as automation may reduce or exacerbate wage disparities.

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