

WORKING PAPER

WORKING PAPER NO.44
SEX DISCRIMINATION IN FARM WAGES

Leela Gulati

Centre for Development Studies
Ulloor, Trivandrum 695011
(India)

115382

CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES



WORKING PAPER NO.44

SEX DISCRIMINATION IN FARM WAGES

Leela Gulati

Centre for Development Studies
Ulloor, Trivandrum 11

November 1976

SEX DISCRIMINATION IN FARM WAGES

Sex discrimination in wages is not just an Indian fact of life. It obtains in most parts of the world, whether developed or undeveloped.

Discrimination is practised largely in two ways. One is to pay less to women for the same type of work and the other is to restrict them to low paid unskilled jobs and deny them access to better paid jobs. The first is an open form of discrimination and is usually justified on grounds of so-called productivity differences between men and women. For the second type of discrimination, the usual argument advanced is that there are only certain tasks which women can best perform. These so-called female jobs or tasks are also the ones carrying low wages.

There is also a third form of sex discrimination in wages which probably obtains largely, if not only in under-developed countries. In this case, whatever the jobs women are employed for, they are employed for fewer hours, days or weeks, so that the quantum of work women get in a year works out to less than that of men.

Thus wage discrimination based on sex takes on several forms. It may occur in the form of (a) differentiation in wages for the same work, (b) job restrictions or (c) reduction in the quantum of work. Usually the wage discrimination that exists in any country^{is} in some amalgam of the forms enumerated above.

For the purpose of this paper we restrict ourselves to agricultural labour which is the single largest avenue of employment open to working women in India. According to 1970-71 census, two out of every five working women (as defined in the census) are engaged as agricultural labourers.

Also this paper concentrates on the analysis of the situation obtaining in 1970/71 on the basis of the wage data collected in the 25th round of the National Sample Survey. Information on female farm wages is available, however, for three earlier years, 1950-51, 1956-57 and 1964-65 which enables us to see the trend in wage differentials based on sex over a period of 20 years. Table I gives male and female money wage rates

Table I. Average Daily Money Wages of Agricultural Labourers

States	Daily money wages (in paise)							
	Female				Male			
	1950-51	1956-57	1964-65	1970-71	1950-51	1956-57	1964-65	1970-71
All India	68	59	95	142	109	96	143	200
Uttar Pradesh	105	65	93	159	118	92	110	200
Madhya Pradesh	51	59	86	132	79	76	111	190
Bihar	111	74	120	190	126	91	139	200
West Bengal	104	98	136	188	166	143	181	200
Orissa	49	55	89	134	72	80	133	190
Assam	148	115	170	292	190	154	221	300
Andhra Pradesh	63	55	85	149	97	87	121	200
Tamil Nadu	59	48	84	150	97	84	139	200
Kerala	79	70	123	224	126	128	218	400
Maharashtra	66	55	77	131	101	87	147	200
Karnataka	57	55	79	149	90	84	121	190
Rajasthan	94	61	109	188	123	98	176	200
Punjab	134	122	145	348	184	198	213	400
Jammu & Kashmir	-	-	150	-	-	-	193	-
Gujarat	-	-	109	165	-	-	147	180
Haryana	-	-	-	271	-	-	-	400

Sources: Cols 1, 2, 5 and 6 Report on "The Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry 1956-57. Figures given are for casual workers. Cols 3 and 7 India Labour Statistics 1968, Labour Bureau, Simla Figures given are for agricultural labour households. Cols 4 and 8 The National Sample Survey -25th Round: July 1970-June 1971. Figures given here relate to agricultural labour households. (-) denotes information not available.

for the four years 1950-51, 1956-57, 1964-65 and 1970-71. Table II illustrates female wage as a proportion of corresponding male wages for the same years. In the analysis that follows an attempt has been made to identify the three forms of discrimination mentioned above in relation to female farm workers not only at the all-India level but also, as far as possible, at the level of ^{the} States.

Open Wage Discrimination: Female farm wage has been lower than male farm wage throughout the twenty-year period, 1951-1971. On an average, female wage was roughly two-thirds of the male wage throughout; though it appears that the relative female wage was slightly lower during the fifties than during the sixties. As far relative inter-State disparities they were not much wider in the fifties than the subsequent sixties. In no State, however, did the female wage fall below 45 per cent. of the male agricultural wage. At the same time, in no State was it higher than 90 per cent of the male wage prevailing at any one point of time.

It can be seen from Table II that we can classify the States into two groups, those with female farm wage of less than two-thirds of the male wage and those with female wage exceeding that cut-off point. In the first group fall Kerala (55%), Maharashtra (60%), Rajasthan (63%) Haryana (60%), Tamil Nadu (63%) and Uttar Pradesh (66%). In the second group fall Punjab (63%) Andhra Pradesh (71%), Orissa (73%), Assam (77%), Mysore (79%), Madhya Pradesh (80%), Bihar (84%) and Gujarat (89%). The percentages given in brackets are of female wage in relation to corresponding male wage in 1970-71.

Two hypothesis may at least be offered in order to explain inter-State disparities in the relative female farm wage differential (ie. as proportion of the corresponding male wage). One is that the more abundant the supply of female labour in a State, the lower is the relative wage of women in that State. This is based on a straight forward supply-price relationship where under given the demand, an increase in supply depresses the price of a commodity. Thus an abundant supply of female farm labour should depress the female relative wage. The other hypothesis seeks to explain the disparities in relative female wage in terms of absolute level of male wage. Thus if the male wage in a State is high, the relative female wage taken as a proportion of the male wage would tend to be lower. I have tried to test both the above hypothesis and found more support for the second hypothesis.

Ester Boserup subscribes to the view that "the abundant supply of female labour keeps women's wages very low in relation to men's wages" Following Boserup, therefore, one would expect that the female relative wage should be lower, the higher is the participation of women in agricultural labour in a State. I have attempted, therefore, to correlate the sex composition of the agricultural labour in different States (which should reflect the participation of women in this occupational group) with relative female farm wage but got results which did not clearly support this proposition. The rank correlation between the two works out to be negative, but not significant, N being only 0.26

It should be added, however, that when one ranks the States in the ascending order of female farm wage in absolute (money) terms and correlates that with sex composition of agricultural labour (here the States are ranked in descending order), the correlation one gets is positive and significant, r being 0.67.

However, this only means that in the States with abundant supply of female farm labour the tendency is for the female money wage to be lower than that in the States with less abundant supply of female farm labour. It does not follow that the abundant supply of female farm labour depresses female farm wage considered as a proportion of male farm wage.

This brings us to our second hypothesis about the possible link between the male money wage and the relative female wage in agriculture. It is worth recalling that earlier in this paper States were classified into two groups, those with female farm wages of less than two-thirds of the male wage and those with female farm wage above two-thirds of male wage.

Interestingly, excepting Maharashtra the other five States in the first group rank among the top half with regard to money farm wage for female labourers in 1970-71. Of course, even in the second group we have States like Punjab and Assam which rank high with respect to male farm wage in money terms. The result still is that the overall rank correlation between inter-State male farm wage in money terms and the relative female wage is negative but only moderately significant r being 0.46 significant at 10 per cent level. However, the rank correlation between male farm wage and wage differential, both in money terms is highly significant, r being 0.83. Thus it would appear that there is a strong tendency at least for the absolute difference in money wages between males and females to be high in the States where male money wage is high.

Thus our results show that inter-State disparities in relative female farm wage are correlated not to supply of female labour but to the level of male wage.

It was noted however that in the States with abundant supply of female labour the tendency was for the female money wage to be lower than in the States with less abundant supply of female labour. Could it not be argued, therefore, that possibly the abundance of female labour, instead of depressing altogether the female farm wage depresses also the male wage, so that the relative female wage (i.e., female wage as a proportion of male wage is not so low).

Female tasks:

So far, I have spoken of the differences in wages between male and female agricultural labourers without drawing any distinctions between one type of farm operation and another. In actual practice, however a distinction is always drawn between various types of major agricultural operations, each carrying its own wage. Moreover, as was pointed out at the very outset, wage discrimination against women might well take place by restricting them to low paid operations.

Now it is generally believed that women are best suited for certain agricultural operations. Could this, by any chance, mean that there are some agricultural operations for which women might by virtue of their special aptitude be able to command a better price than men? Or is it only meant to say that while some agricultural operations are open to women others are not and that "productivity-wise" there is hardly an operation for which women could command a higher price than men? The reality in Indian agriculture appears to be closer to the latter position. It may be true that some operations are strenuous and women can't cope with them adequately but there are many other jobs women can do equally well if not better, but they do not seem to be even paid adequately, let alone equally.

Table II: Female Wages as a Proportion of Male Wages

States	Percentage of women's wage to men's wage in			
	1950-51	1956-57	1964-65	1970-71
All India	62.4	61.5	66.4	63.6
Uttar Pradesh	89.0	70.7	84.5	65.7
Madhya Pradesh	64.6	77.6	77.5	80.4
Bihar	88.1	81.3	86.3	84.4
West Bengal	62.7	68.5	75.1	76.4
Orissa	68.1	68.8	66.9	73.2
Assam	77.9	74.7	76.9	77.4
Andhra Pradesh	64.9	63.2	70.2	70.9
Tamil Nadu	60.8	57.1	61.2	63.0
Kerala	62.7	54.7	58.3	54.6
Maharashtra (Bombay)	65.3	63.2	52.4	59.5
Mysore	63.3	65.5	65.3	78.8
Gujarat	-	-	80.9	83.7
Rajasthan	76.4	62.2	61.9	63.2
Punjab	72.8	61.6	68.1	70.9
Jammu & Kashmir	-	-	78.1	-
Haryana	-	-	-	65.1
Coefficient of variation	.539	.402	.527	.507

Table III: Female Wages as a Proportion of Male Wages for Important Agricultural Operations

Weeding	..	60.7	59.0	61.3
Transplanting	..	62.1	62.8	61.8
Harvesting	..	62.6	62.4	65.5

Source: Indian Labour Year Book, 1969, Labour Bureau, Simla.

Thus in agriculture while an operation like ploughing is regarded as very much of a male job, operations like weeding, transplanting and harvesting were open to women in practically all the States. However, ^{all-}for/most all the States the female wages for these three operations are lower than the corresponding male wages. Unfortunately, the available data from the 25th round of H.S.S. do not throw any light on operation-wise farm wages for 1970-71. Information is available, however, on operation-wise farm wages for men and women for the earlier three years, which shows that female wages for these three operations are lower than the corresponding male wages (Table III). On an average, the deficiency in female wage was of the order of one-third of male wage.

So, in Indian agriculture at least, the discrimination in farm wages has existed against women not really in the form of denial of access to better paid operations - male ploughing wage is not higher than the male wage in weeding, harvesting, or transplanting which are open to women. The broad position in India has been that for practically any farm job that a woman is employed for, her wage is lower than that of the male doing the same job. Thus inspite of the fact that farm operations are separately classifiable for purposes of wages, discrimination against women takes on the open form and not the subtle form we are now speaking about. It is important to remember, however, that even if tomorrow it were possible to not only legislate but also enforce equality in male and female wages, sex discrimination could still sneak in so long as a distinction is drawn between various farm operations for purposes of wages and better paid farm operations are closed to women.

Quantum of Employment:

A reference was made above to wage discrimination through reduction in the quantum of work or employment. Even when the same wage rate is payable and paid for men and women, discrimination in the quantum of work can create disparities in earnings, but along with a differential wage rate it accentuates the discrimination gets further accentuated.

It can be observed from Table IV that in 1950-51, 1955-56 and 1964-65, female agricultural labourers in India got work for a fewer days than male agricultural labourers. Thus in the fifties, not only were female farm wages lower than male farm wages in India but also the quantum of work available to female farm labourers was less. Women seemed to get work for between 60 per cent to 70 per cent of the number of days that men were employed. Thus with not more than 66 per cent, of male wage on average and only 70 per cent of the quantum of work the average yearly female earning from farm labour would work out to well under 50 percent of the male earnings.

Unfortunately information is not available on the quantum of work which male and female agricultural workers got in the 1970-71. But if one goes by the information for the year 1963-64 female earnings during the 60's was no higher, when related to male earnings from agricultural labour, than during the fifties. There is no other evidence to show that the relative employment position on the farms could have distinctly improved for women in the second half of the sixties.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that discrimination against women has been writ large on the Indian farming scene. This discrimination we have noted, operates largely through, straight forward discrimination in wages.

Table IV: Quantum of Employment of Female Agricultural Labourers in Agriculture as a Proportion of Men

Agricultural operations	1950-51	ALL-India	
		1956-57	1964-65
Wage employment in agriculture	63.4	71.2	68.7

Source: Indian Labour Year Book, 1969, Labour Bureau, Simla.

The more subtle form of discrimination which usually takes on the form of denying access to the disadvantaged class to the better paid jobs without any formal differentiation between male and female wage rate does not appear to be the characteristic feature of the Indian farming scene. Added to open wage discrimination is, of course, the reduction in the quantum of work. If what obtained in the fifties in this latter regard held good in the sixties, the discrimination through this method too could be quite substantial. The overall picture that one gets, therefore is of substantial as well as persistent discrimination against the female farm labourers. The ultimate result is, perhaps, that the average female farm worker earns even now less than half of what the average male farm worker earns during the course of a year.

This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 Licence.

To view a copy of the licence please see:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>