

## ABSTRACT

Women's involvement in economic activities has intrigued scholars as they searched for possible explanations as to why some women choose to work and others don't. Nevertheless, given the fact that all women work, within or outside their homes and with or without remuneration, the primary issue is that of recognition of women's labour and their contributions to the process of economic and human development. The issue of invisibility of women's contributions is closely linked to the gender division of labour which has traditionally been determined by the biological differences between men and women with women's primary role being that of a homemaker and men's role being that of a breadwinner. Since much of women's work is mostly confined within the precincts of the household and is rarely exchanged for a price in the market, it is overlooked in national income statistics which takes into account only remunerative work. The fact that a significant proportion of women's work especially in subsistence economies of developing countries is unpaid hence unaccounted, causes women's work to be of lesser importance and secondary in nature vis-a-vis men's work, the implication being women's disadvantaged and inferior status within the household and in society. This lack of visibility is one of the prime reasons for less attention being paid to women's employment in policy formulations. For development efforts to be inclusive therefore, it is imperative that women are integrated into the development agenda through monetization and valuation of their non-market work contributions and increased participation in market work. Women in the hill regions show higher participation rates in comparison to their counterparts in the plains primarily due to high rate of male outmigration along with less severe gender division of labour particularly in agriculture and less prevalence of class/caste distinctions. The high work participation nevertheless does not indicate women's improved status, but reflects their drudgery and hard labour as most are employed as family farm labour rather than wage labour. Literature on relatively high work participation of women in hill regions being somewhat scarce, the present study has been undertaken with the primary objective of highlighting the significant role of women in the rural hill economy of the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal. This has been done through an examination of the nature and extent of their work in mountain farming systems by analysing (a) the gender division of labour in agriculture and domestic activities, (b) the gender differentials in time allocation, (c) gender differentials in time allocation according to size class of holdings, (d) the determinants of rural female work participation (e) the determinants of women's time allocation to agriculture, (f) women's contributions to household food

security and (g) women's access to productive resources. The present study has been conducted in the hill regions of the Darjeeling district (including Kalimpong sub-division) of West Bengal. Using multi-stage purposive and random sampling techniques and choosing one village each from the three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling Sadar, Kalimpong and Kurseong having a relatively higher proportion of agricultural workers, a sample of fifty households has been selected from each village giving a total sample size of 150 households. The households are engaged in agricultural activities either for subsistence or for commercial purposes. Analytical tools such as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), logistic regression, multiple linear regression, percentages etc. have been used to test the various hypotheses. According to the Census 2011, the district of Darjeeling occupies 3.55 percent of the total area and inhabits 2.02 percent of the total population of the state, with 47 percent of the district's population residing in the hills. The female work participation rate (WPR) in the district is 22.4 percent which is the sixth highest among the state's nineteen districts. The villages of Git Dubling Khasmahal, Sitong Khasmahal and Samalbong chosen for the present study are primarily agrarian in character, with the proportion of households dependent on agriculture as a primary activity being 70, 44 and 38 percent respectively. Most of the land holdings are marginal with the average size varying between 1.4 acres in Samalbong to 1.7 acres in Sitong Khasmahal and 2.8 acres in Git Dubling Khasmahal villages. The female WPR according to the usual principal activity status (ps) is 41.6, 52.8 and 47.8 percent respectively in Samalbong, Git Dubling Khasmahal and Sitong Khasmahal villages with a large proportion being engaged in agriculture. The study reports a predominance of female family labour in agriculture in all the villages. The results of the study indicate no prominent gender division of labour in crop production and livestock rearing as men and women equally participate in almost all activities. However, the gendered nature of household work is starkly visible with the bulk of it being performed by women with little help from men. This has also been confirmed by the results of the ANOVA test. A logistic regression analysis has been undertaken to identify the determinants of women's participation in (a) paid and unpaid work, and (b) paid work only. Controlling for other variables, women from unitary and agricultural households are more likely to participate in paid and unpaid work as family labour, with age having a non-linear effect on women's participation. While higher levels of education and unitary family structure enhance women's participation in paid activities, presence of children below the age of six, and large landholdings of the household restrict it. Factors affecting the time spent by women in agriculture have been determined through a multiple regression exercise. The results indicate that the time spent by women in agriculture increases

for married women and for those belonging to agricultural households and having larger land holdings, whereas time spent decreases with women's higher level of education and more time spent by men in agriculture. Age has a non-linear effect with time investment to agriculture increasing up to a certain age beyond which it decreases. The key role that women play in ensuring food security can be understood from their high level of participation in agriculture and domestic activities. The average participation for the three villages in crop production, animal husbandry and household activities is 53, 56 and 78 percent respectively. Despite their significant contributions to the rural hill economy, women's access to productive resources is highly unequal which is evident from the fact that only 5 percent of women have ownership of land either individually or jointly. Only 26 percent of women had loans granted in their names and 30 percent had attended training programmes. Nevertheless, 54 percent of women had membership of the self-help groups (SHGs) and 70 percent had an account in the bank or the post office. Realising women's crucial contributions to the rural hill economy, the study therefore recommends policies which would help improve women's status through their increased involvement in economic activities and inclusion of gender perspectives in mountain development policies. These may take the form of (a) new avenues for women's self employment in agriculture (b) women's higher involvement in co-operative dairy farming (c) development of handicrafts and cottage industries with higher participation of women (d) provision of micro credit, training, extension services and skill development programmes for women (e) improvement in overall social infrastructure for reducing women's work burdens.