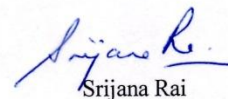


## PREFACE

Despite considerable progress achieved by nations throughout the world in terms of high growth rates and increasing levels of per capita income, a fact that cannot be overlooked is the persistence of the problem of gender inequality which exists to a greater or lesser degree in almost all the countries. In most societies women are known to occupy a position subordinate to that of men socially, economically and politically which may be considered to be an outcome of society's perceptions regarding gender roles, gender division of labour and the valuation of women's work. Women, being naturally engaged in procreation and nurturing usually participate in activities which are carried out within the vicinity of the household and are not marketed, which is the primary cause for their contributions being considered to be of lesser value and invisible in national income accounts. However, women are important agents of production since their unpaid work contributes to economic and human development in a significant way. Inclusion of women in the development agenda may thus be regarded as an important priority for achieving the goals of gender equity. Life for the women in the rural areas of the hill regions is particularly challenging due to numerous factors such as the harsh climate, inaccessibility, remoteness, lack of infrastructure etc. In addition, the movement of working aged men to towns, cities and lowland areas in search of better employment opportunities leaving behind only the women folk to fend for themselves increases their work burdens leading to their higher work participation. However, being involved predominantly as family labor rather than wage labour, the work contributions of these women are subject to statistical invisibility despite being an important component of the labour force. The present research study has therefore been undertaken in the hill district of Darjeeling in West Bengal with the primary objective of highlighting the significant role that rural women in the hill regions play for the sustenance of their households. The study is a humble attempt to bring to light the nature and extent of women's work in the study area along with a description of the constraints they face, besides also providing some suggestions for improving their conditions which will lead to an increase in individual and familial well being.

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