



Feminization of Agriculture Labour Market in India: A Theoretical Explanation

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Abstract

Phenomenon of feminization of the agriculture labour market has been evident in Indian states. Feminization of agriculture labour market is welcome in so far as it supplements the household income of poor and low income families, taking them out of abject poverty besides constructively helping women to be more empowered. Although constructive consequences of feminization of labour market are reckoned as a sign of development favourable towards the structural transformation of an economy, the 'quality' aspects of feminization in terms of increase in real wage rate, other social security supports deserve to be fathomed.

Keywords: *Feminization, Transformation, U Hypothesis, Surplus Labour, Productivity,*

General deceleration in the agriculture sector owing to the continues neglect of the sector in the post-reform policy period coupled with the emergence of a relatively remunerative non-farm sector activities especially in rural areas has led to the phenomenon of feminization of the agriculture labour market in India. The institutional intervention at the hands of the Governments to revitalize the agriculture sector has also attracted women to fill the vacuum created by the exit of their male counterpart from the farm sector(Garikipati, 2006). Feminization of agriculture labour market is welcome in so far as it supplements the household income of poor and low income families, taking them out of abject poverty besides constructively helping women to be more empowered(Pearce, 1978). Although constructive consequences of feminization of labour market are reckoned as a sign of development favourable towards the structural

transformation of an economy, the 'quality' aspects of feminization in terms of increase in real wage rate, other social security supports deserve to be fathomed. In this background, this paper attempts to bring forth some burning questions associated with the feminization of labour market in India. The paper is structured to provide a theoretical explanation of the trend and to delve into the data in support of the feminization trend in the agriculture labour market.

Theoretical explanation of the Feminization of Agricultural Labour Market

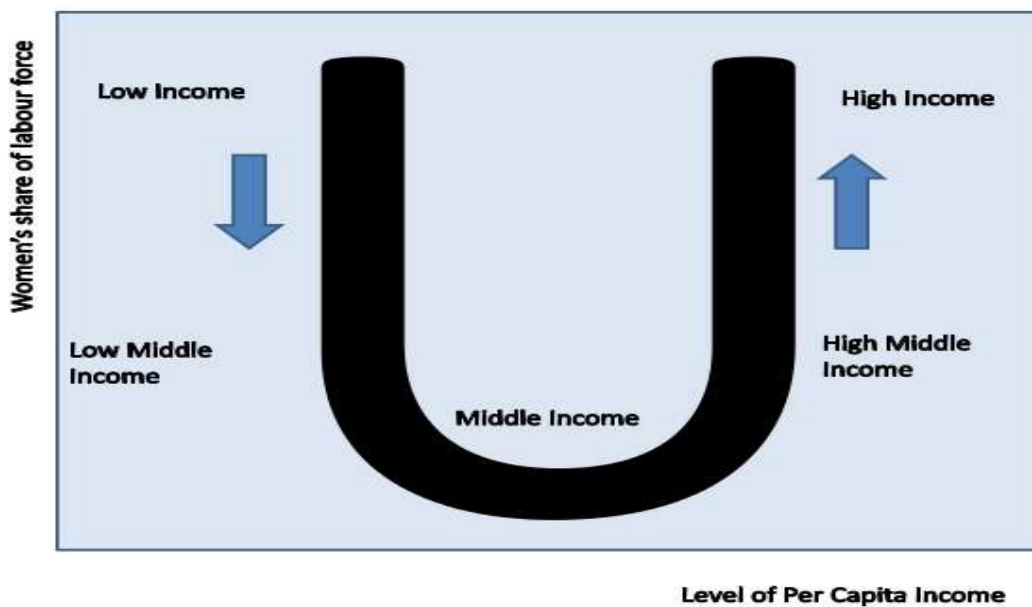
Let us look at what the theory tells about the feminization of farm labour market. Quite obviously, feminization has to do something with the structural transformation of an economy. As it is well documented, an economy is supposed to pass through three broad stages of structural transformation. In the first stage, the structure of the economy appears in such a way that that the share of agriculture or primary sector dominates in national output compared to other two sectors viz. the manufacturing and service sectors. In the second stage, the economy experiences industrialization primarily riding on the surplus labour coming out of the agriculture sector, leading to the domination of the industrial output, and in the third stage the service sector starts overtaking both the agriculture and industrial sector in terms of its contribution to the national output. In India, this kind of structural transformation in terms of a decline in farm output and a consequent secular increase in non- farm sector particular the service sector is said to have been taking place in recent years especially in the post reform period.

Now let us discuss what it has to do with the feminization process. In the first stage of the predominance of the agriculture sector, the number of women engaging in the farm sector would be high. This happens because the low wage that the men earn from the agricultural work would be insufficient to run the family. Therefore, to supplement the income of the breadwinner, women may be forced to enter the labour market to earn whatever little they could. In other words, here the additional income effect of the participation in the labour market drives up the feminization trend in the agricultural labour market. Another reason for this is the proximity of the work place, that is, women don't have to move away from their houses to engage in work as most of the agricultural land lie beside their homestead, and more particularly family labourers engage predominantly in homestead farm operations, enabling women to engage in agricultural operations without affecting the time for their household chorus.

Now as the economy starts industrializing, men find more remunerative opportunities in the manufacturing sector, resulting in the movement of men out of the farm sector (Guy, 199). The increase in wage rate that the men receive from the manufacturing sector would prompt women to withdraw themselves from the comparably less remunerative farm sector and focus much on the household responsibilities. Another reason for decline in feminization at this juncture is the difficulty that women face in moving out of the houses as the industrial sites would be far away from their houses. In other words, the increase in household income due to the increase in the wage rate of men working in the manufacturing sector would tempt women to substitute work with more leisure time. This substitution effect would result in reducing the participation of women in the labour market, leading to a decline in the trend of feminization.

Contrary to this, as the economy shifts itself from the manufacturing sector to the service sector in the third stage, feminization generally is likely to increase as women find more remunerative job opportunities opening up in the service sector. This would force them to substitute their leisure time with work (the substitution effect). Moreover, the service sector jobs appear to be more female friendly in many respects forcing women to engage more in this sector even if the remuneration is low. Further, better transportation and communication facilities would be a stimulant for women to keep themselves away from their houses to engage in the service sector. To put it briefly, in low income countries which are at the first stage of transformation, feminization would be high, and in middle income countries which are subject to industrialisation, feminization would be low, and further in high income countries where service sector dominates, again feminization would be high. This association between feminization and the pattern of economic advancement could be presented in the form of feminization 'U' curve (Figure No1).

Figure 1 Feminization 'U' Curve



The downward sloping portion of the feminization U Curve depicts the declining women participation in labour market consequent on increase in economic growth measured in terms of continues jump in the level of per capita income. The plateau portion of the Curve, on the other hand, illustrates the lower limit of the falling tendency of feminization process thanks to the progress of industrialization and the consequent opening up of gainful employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector. In other words, the additional income effect, as discussed above, is said to be operating when the economy slides down along the feminization U Curve while 'substitution effect', the substitution of work by leisure, is operative along the plateau portion of the U Curve. The fast enhancement in economic growth represented by the hike in the level of per capita income and its fallout on the labour market in terms of growing participation of female workforce is shown along the upward sloping portion of the feminization U Curve. Needless to say, the positive substitution effect, the effect of substituting leisure with work, is evident from the tendency of U curve to slide up along its path.

Coming to the feminization in the agriculture sector in India, these trends appear to be highly relevant. Although the feminization U Curve is illustrative of the general trend occurring in the labour market as fallout of the movement in economic growth epitomized in the hike of the level of per capital income, the underlying implication of this on the specific trend in the feminization of labour market could be easily discerned. As discussed in the preceding part, it is evident that when the economy is at the early stage of development, registering a low economic growth and securing a low Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the economy would probably be more agriculture dependent. At this stage, unequivocally, the main source of livelihood and employment opportunities would be the farm sector, where, naturally, even the women, who are likely to be engaged in work due to the low real wage that their male counterpart may earn, find employment opportunities. As a result, the trend of feminization would be high at this stage of development thanks mainly to the growing presence of women in the agriculture oriented economic activities. Further, when the economy enters into the second stage of development where industrialization takes place, the feminization rate declines and consequently the 'surplus labour' from the agriculture sector would be drawn to the industrial sector owing to the increase in real wage rate offered by this sector. At this stage, of course, agriculture market too experiences a downward trend even in the participation of women in farm centric operations. But, when the economy climbs up the ladder of development riding on the indomitable force of the progress in the service sector oriented enterprises, women at large start participating in newly created jobs by the service sector, increasing feminization rate. It is quite interesting to note that at this stage, women participation in the farm sector would also be high, although not at the pace at which it gets enhanced in the service sector, thanks to the institutional intervention of the government to promote women engagement in the farm sector purposively to fill the void created by the movement of men out of the farm sector. Mellor, an agricultural economist, is of the view that in the third stage of agricultural transformation which comes along with the progress of service oriented enterprises, institutional intervention is indispensable to ensure the availability of labour in the farm sector. In fact, this is what the government has been implementing in India in the form of encouraging women groups including Self Help Groups to engage actively in the farm centric operations.

What does feminization mean for growth?

Feminization *per se* does not necessarily propel growth process of an economy nor does it significantly play a dominant role in reenergizing the impulses of growth. Nonetheless, feminization that qualitatively reshuffles the system by way of making perceptible changes in the life and real income of the women and thereby the household itself may be said to be growth fuelling in true sense. The question that raises eyebrows is whether the feminization that is said to have been skyrocketed in certain vital areas of the society and economy has the real potential of being a game changer in the present world or not. For instance, there shall not be any differences of opinion in the fact that education sector especially the primary and secondary education in India and Kerala has witnessed increasing number of women teachers in schools and secondary education institutions. Surely, from the point of increasing women participation, this trend can be truly called a feminization trend. But the real question is whether such an increasing presentation of women

in the service sector jobs like education has lead to any kind perceptible change in the socio economic condition of women at large. Studies have shown that in many institutions men take decisions that affect the course of life of the poor and marginalized women.

The following table presents the increasing trend of feminization in the agriculture sector in India. Comparing the census 2011 with that of 1991, it is evident that 1991, 39 per cent of the total agriculture labourers continued female while the same figure go increased to 43 per cent in 2011 (Table No.1)

Table 1 Feminization in Indian Agriculture Sector

Category/Census	1991			2011		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Workers	129.0(73)	48.9(27)	177.9(100)	165.5(63)	97.6(37)	263.0(100)
Cultivators	85.8(80)	21.8(20)	107.6(100)	82.7(70)	36.0(30)	118.7(100)
Agriculture Labourers	43.2(61)	27.2(39)	70.3(100)	82.7(57)	61.6(43)	144.3(100)

Source: Census Data

Figure are given in Million and Number in Parenthesis is the percentage of the respective total.

Gender Gap in Land Ownership

A serious concern that may impede the process of feminization of the agriculture sector in India has been the growing gender gap in the ownership of agricultural land. As we know, ownership of agriculture land has been proved to be effective not only in enhancing women empowerment but also increasing the productivity of agricultural land that the women operate. But in India, although women constitute 42 of agriculture workers, it is worrisome to note that they own just 2 per cent of the cultivable land. This serious gender gap in the ownership of agricultural land has the potential to threat the pace with which feminization takes place in the farm sector in India.

Conclusion

Thus it is obvious that the increasing trend of feminization in the agriculture sector shows a silent transformation of agriculture labour market in India. Feminization *per se* does not necessarily propel growth process of an economy.

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