

# Agricultural Women Workers in Varying Agricultural Activities of Mewat District: A Household Level Analysis

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**Abstract:** Women play a significant role in agricultural development and its related fields. Their involvement differs with the nature and variations in agro-production systems. In the broader sense, women's contribution in socio-economic development is two fold i.e. in the home and outside the home. Women's participation exhibits certain unique features across the country. They are workers, labourers, cultivators and producers besides performing various activities of the household that are taken as unproductive. The actual picture, however, of the women's contribution and work for their family is not recognized. Women agriculture labourers and cultivators play an important role in agriculture as associates of a farmer's family. Women's role in agriculture has not brought to light this aspect and this is a major lacuna. An attempt has been made in this paper to evaluate women's participation in agricultural activities at the micro level by considering the entire Mewat district as a case study. The study also makes it clear that the women workers have contributed a lot in farm operations but their role in decision making seems nothing. The research findings suggest that women workers should be given equal importance to male workers in society.

**Key Words:** Agricultural Development, Agro-production, Cultivators, Farm Labour

## Introduction

In rural India, women are considered the backbone of food security at the household level. They play a vital role in agriculture and allied activities and make a notable contribution to the rural economy. Their involvement differs with the nature and variation in the agro production system. In a broader sense, the contribution of women is two-fold i.e. within the home and outside the home. Within the home, their responsibility as wife, daughter, sister and mother cannot be ignored. Women act as the caretakers of family members and fulfill their requirement for food. Outside the home, women take an active part and work with men in the agriculture sector. They are involved in seed sowing, plantation of crops, weeding, processing of crops protection of crops, harvesting, threshing work and storage of crops. Except for irrigation, levelling and ploughing in cultivation, all other works are done by both men and women. This is more so in the case of small and marginal farm families and also in areas where agriculture is not much mechanized. The present study attempts to evaluate women participation in agriculture at a micro-level by taking Mewat district as a case study. The following discussion gives a comprehensive understanding of this selected district.

## The Field Work Area

The district of Mewat was created on April 4, 2004, from Gurgaon district by excluding the area of Ferozepur Jhirka, Punahana, Nuh and Hathin tehsils. On its North-East is the Palwal district of Haryana while on the south, the district shares its boundary with the States of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan (Fig.1). Mewat is largely comprised of plain and undulating topography. Inconsistency in the topography of the district is evident from the presence of small patches of land with the hilly terrain of the Aravali mountain. Physiographically the area is divided into two parts - upland and low land. There is little scope of cultivation of the upland rocky areas, with an undulating rough surface. Mewat is a cultural region rather than an administrative unit and the

people of Mewat are known as Meo's or Mewati. Mewati is a widely spoken language in this area. Muslims are the largest ethnic group in Mewat district which are about 87.4 percent and Hindus are the smallest ethnic group making up only 12.6 percent of its total population. Mewat district had a total population of 1089263 according to the 2011 census of India. Mewat district had the highest decadal growth rate of 21.15 percent among all districts in the State in the last decade. The population density of the district is 723 persons per square kilometer. The sex ratio of the district is not as depressing as compared to the whole State on an average. The overall sex ratio of the district was found to be 906 females per 1000 males which is more than the State average i.e. 879. Mewat had a literacy rate of 54.08 percent in 2011, with male and female literacy rates of 69.94 percent and 36.60 percent, respectively.

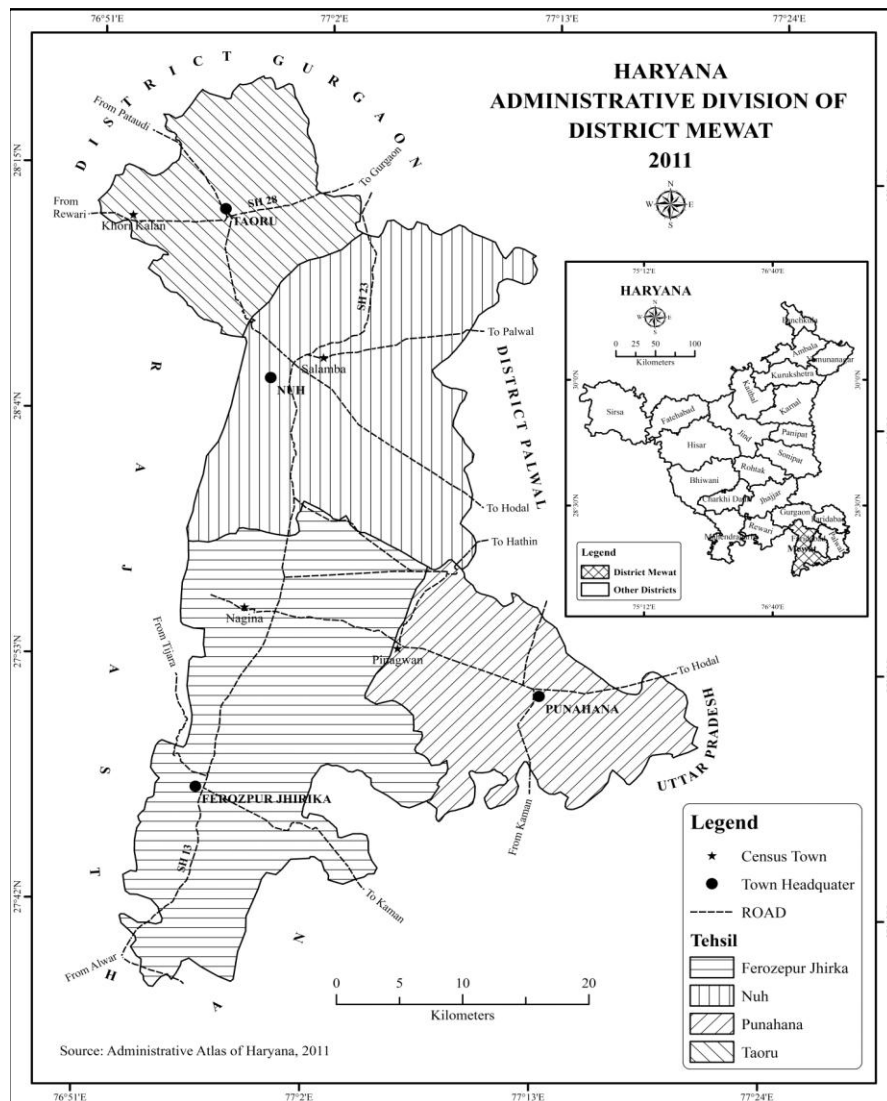


Fig. 1

### Characteristics of Respondents

The socio-economic profile of women is a significant in determining their status. Therefore, an effort has been made to evaluate the general profile of women workers through indicators such as personal character, religion, literary, socio-economic and other aspects of their life. It begins by describing the basic background

of women including age, marital status, education, religion, caste, type of family, family size and occupation of the family. The data from field survey shows that the age of sample women varies between 15 to 60 years. The majority (61 percent) of respondents were in the middle age cluster chased by young age (26 percent) and old age (13 percent) groups. The main reason for the low share of old age women in agriculture work was not that they are getting aged, rather it is because their children get married at an early age and daughters in law work in fields while elders work at home. Most of the women respondents (86 percent) were married. Among those who were married, most women got married at a young age (14-18 years) and all had arranged marriages. Since the education level of the sampled respondents was related to reading and writing skills, it was imperative to know the educational status of the respondents of different age categories. The highest grade of education attained by respondents was also asked. It was found that the educational level of the women agricultural workers was particularly low. Three-fourths (74 percent) of the respondents were illiterate. About 14 percent acquired education up to primary or basic education while 8 percent had passed only the middle school. Only 4 percent have passed the secondary or senior secondary examination. The proportion of literate respondents was only 26 percent. There were many reasons for girls not attending schools such as non-availability of middle or high school nearby, shortage of girl friendly infrastructure, shortage of female teachers and the presence of the Madrasa for religious teachings. Religion and caste data indicates that while maximum women respondents belonged to the Muslim community, only 10 percent of the respondents belonged to the Hindu religion.

### Various Farm Activities and Women

Women in rural areas play an important role in farm activities but their contribution is hardly recognized. Overview of data and observations from the field showed that on an average, respondents were working on their agricultural land and were also experienced in performing agricultural labour. The data presented in Table 1 shows the involvement of women farm workers in different farm operations such as ploughing of land, sowing, transplanting, fertilizer and manure application, weeding, irrigation, using plant protection measures (insecticide and pesticides), harvesting and binding of crops, shifting of production to the threshing floor, threshing, clearing of field, grain drying, storage and marketing of crops. The participation of women in different agricultural activities varied from 0 to 100 percent. It was the highest in harvesting, drying and storage of grains and the lowest at zero in the marketing of crops. Analysis of data indicates that the highest involvement of women was observed in operations namely harvesting and shifting of crops to threshing floor (100 percent).

Similarly, the involvement of women was found to be 100 percent in activities associated with harvesting and threshing. These operations are labour intensive and have to be finished in minimum time due to uncertain weather conditions. Storage and cleaning of grain were the sole responsibility of women and accounted for 100 percent engagement of all women whether they were working on their farm or working in farms of others.

**Table 1**  
**Mewat District: Participation of Respondent Women Agricultural Workers**

Sr. No	Farm Activities	Frequency	Percentage
1	Harvesting and Binding of Crops	200	100
2	Shifting of Production to Threshing Floor	200	100
3	Threshing	200	100
4	Drying of Grains	200	100

5	Storage	200	100
6	Weeding	200	90
7	Clearing of Field	200	90
8	Gap felling	142	71
9	Manure Application	100	50
10	Fertilizer Application	96	48
11	Irrigation	96	48
12	Ploughing of Field	42	19
13	Leveling of Field	42	19
14	Using Plant Protection Measure (insecticide and pesticides )	42	19
15	Sowing	42	19
16	Transplanting	24	19
17	Marketing	0	0

### **in Different Farm Activities**

Source: Field Survey, 2015

The next most important work carried out by them was weeding and clearing of fields for the preparation of land for the next sowing. Around 90 percent of all female agricultural workers were occupied in weeding and clearing o fields. The role of hired labour was absent among the small and marginal farmers due to poor economic condition. Women of these households were employed in almost all activities to save production costs. Women contribute greatly to irrigating and application of fertilizers, whereas, in other parts of the State, this work was considered solely a male responsibility. Analysis of the data showed that involvement of the women in farm operations like irrigation (48 percent), fertilizer application (48 percent) and manure (50 percent) application was moderate and more than one-third of work in each of these activities was done by them. In manure and fertilizer application work females usually assist male members in fields. Sometimes, they do it solely if the husbands or other males were not available at home. It happens many times because the main occupation of males in our study area is driving and they stay out of home for a longer part of the year. Data observation indicated that a low proportion of women is there in farm operations like ploughing, sowing of seeds, plant protection measures and marketing. The extent of participation of women in farm activities like ploughing, sowing and plant protection measures (insecticide and pesticides) was less than 20 percent.

### **Factor Impacting Women's Occupational Structure in Agricultural Activities of Mewat District**

The status of women in society or family was a very complex issue and difficult to define. It is important to know the economic, infrastructural, social and cultural characteristics of a particular region because these features decided the occupational arrangement in that region. In the present study, the analysis of data on various aspects like literacy rate, size of land holding, family size, type of family, caste, unavailability of non-farm employment, social traditions and incidents have been done to understand the status of women working in agricultural activities in the study area. Some of the major factors are discussed below:

#### **Educational Status**

Mewat district had the lowest literacy in the country and the issue is further complicated because of the inflexible socio-cultural mindset of the inhabitants. The literacy rate for women in the study area of Mewat is 36.60 percent which was far below the state and national average. The educational status of this area was dented by insufficient educational facilities coupled with low teaching standards and the absence of adequate livelihood resources. Student enrolment was specifically influenced by factors like insufficient teaching staff,

poor infrastructure at school, lack of awareness, preference of religious education, the distance between house and school, and various other factors. These factors appear to discourage eligible girl children from their enrollment in school. The situation was also worse for many girl children for whom it was considered that education was not required for them. Same is true of the respondents because most of them were illiterate or having very low level of literacy.

### **Land Holdings Size and Low Level of Mechanisation**

The landholding size in this area was very small. Nearly 90 percent of the farmers from the district fall in the category of marginal and small landholdings. The average size of landholding in Mewat was 2.18 acre as compared to 5.97 acres for the whole state (Directorate of Agriculture Census, Haryana, 2015). Women's contribution under such a scenario was very important mainly for marginal and landless farm households. This had been found true for our women respondents. The district had an insufficient number of farm equipment and machinery particularly land laser leveller, zero tillage machine and seed cum fertilizer drills. Most of the work on the farm was done manually except ploughing of fields and sowing which is done with the help of tractors. In the absence of modern technology, a huge amount of labour was required to carry out farm operations. Women were the cheapest and most rapidly available labour due to low wages and lack of alternative employment. Women from marginal farm families were found to be willing to work even under poor working conditions to support their families financially. These women were supplementary earners and their labour work was temporary.

### **Household Size**

Family size along with household explained the class, status and economic background of society and family. In the study area, due to the prominence of the Muslim population, the size of families was large. The size of the population of children was at the top compared to other parts of Haryana. Factors that manipulate the family size include religion, health, education, spousal income and sex of children. When it came to the size of our respondent's families, field data revealed that they had an average family size of 7 to 9 members. The large size of the family came with associated hardship as these families had a poor living standard. It was not possible to run the livelihood of a large family by a single earning member with limited land resources. In this kind of condition, women of the household had to work as agricultural workers to help her husband to earn wages to meet the daily requirements of the family.

### **Cropping Patterns are Labour Intensive**

The cropping pattern of an area also affects the work participation of an area. Crops like paddy, cotton, mustard and bajra required more labour than wheat. Main crops of Mewat district were mustard, 'gawara' and 'bajara'. All these crops required a large number of workers at the time of harvesting and post-harvest season. But owing to the low economic conditions of farmers and the small size of landholdings, agriculture was less mechanized. Most farm operations were performed manually which necessitated a large amount of labour and this requirement was fulfilled by women from the marginal and small farmer's families. This was also a significant consideration in the high proportion of women's participation in farming activities.

### **Higher Sex Ratio:**

According to the 2011 Census, the sex ratio of Mewat district was the highest in the entire Haryana State, with the availability of 906 females per 1000 males. The first reason was, that they never go in for the prenatal investigation of the child and secondly they believe that children were a gift from God. Most women were illiterate and had no skills. This also resulted in the greater availability of women for agricultural activities. Male members either look for employment in the non-agriculture sector or lease in land from others. If their husbands moved to non-agriculture occupations then they had to look after their land in the absence of their husband. On the other hand, if their family continued with cultivation and leased land from others then they

assist their family on the farm to reduce farming costs. In both cases, they contributed by doing hard work at the farm throughout the year.

#### Conclusions

Agriculture retains a foremost place in the economy of the region by engaging 58.9 percent of workers in cultivation and agricultural labour. Only a small proportion of respondents were working on their land and their families were better placed economically. Such respondents had no compulsion to work as agricultural labourers. But a larger proportion of respondents were working on their land as well on land which had been leased by the family. Many were working as agricultural labourers on the land of others.

Poor literacy rates, poverty and non-availability of employment outside agriculture were major factors working behind this high percentage of women in agriculture. The core problem was that they shoulder 90 percent of the responsibility in a family with limited rights and little decision making power in the family or elsewhere. The contribution of women in farm activities was still not recognized and not counted in formal activities although they provide important productive labour in farm activities.

Women's capability to enhance awareness on the use of the latest technology in agriculture, acquisition of information and processing should be recognized. They should be made aware of the extension programs on agriculture development. They should also be given the right to land so that they can avail credit and input facilities for farm activities. To improve the status of women agricultural workers, their wage rates should be reasonably good and equal to the male workers. This would give them immense self-confidence and empower them socially as well.

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