

Gender and Poverty in Rural Bihar

Summary and Conclusions

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**Department of Women and Child Development,
Government of India**



INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

IAMR Building, Third Floor

I.P. Estate, Mahatma Gandhi Marg

New Delhi – 110002

Phones : 3358166, 3321610/ Fax : 3319909

Email - ihd@vsnl.com

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This study is based on a primary survey of 820 rural women from twelve villages belonging to six districts of Bihar, three each from north and south Bihar. This survey provides a rich source of detailed primary data on critical aspects relating to women's lives and status. The regional, caste and class aspects have been considered by categorizing the entire sample data for analysis across these criteria. The six districts chosen as representative parts of north and south Bihar enable regional and district level comparisons. The classification of the entire sample into class categories based on their asset holding position and a separate caste based categorization that occupies special significance in any rural area, but most certainly so in the context of Bihar provides a glimpse of the institutional aspects influencing social and economic processes operating therein. Its significance lies in the fact that no other source other than such studies provides such insights. The secondary sources of data concentrate more on economic categories and do not dwell much upon the intricate social stratification and the hierarchies therein, which are of immense importance in assessing or understanding women's situation both within and outside the household. The reason why most studies have to depend on secondary data sources is that it enables trend analysis. Primary surveys often face this problem that they are not comparable to other data and therefore, assessment over time is made impossible. One of the major advantages of this study is the fact that this is a re- survey of villages. The earlier survey carried out in 1981-83 provides information for most of the parameters included in this 1998-99 study. This enables comparison over the last two decades of the twentieth century, the

period wherein tremendous rural transformation, socially, economically and politically has been witnessed.

The questions addressed in this study are: how have women's lives been affected over the span of these two decades? Has the rural transformation in social, political and economic spheres meant increasing empowerment for women? Are their health and other survival needs met? Does poverty determine women's economic participation? Can women access public and private resources better? Are women in a position to enhance their capabilities, and skills both educational and occupational? What levels of income autonomy prevail in women's lives? Do women now participate more in decision making? Can women exercise control over their bodies? What position and status do they occupy within the household?

The introductory chapter (Chapter I) of this report provides the conceptual framework and the methodology used for this study. A detailed account of the types of households and respondents with their number in the sample has been presented in this chapter. Since the present study is based on the re-survey of households from 12 villages, this study more or less follows the same methodology as was adopted in the earlier study. The detailed of the methodology adopted in the earlier study has been presented in Annexure of this chapter.

Chapter II presents the profile of all the twelve surveyed villages. The village profiles are a pictorial image of the location of households, public amenities, such as drinking water sources, schools, health centers, etc. Issues that emerge from these profiles on changes in agriculture, employment as well as attitudes of respondents are considered to understand the nuances of the gender dimensions of poverty.

The socio-economic characteristics of the women respondents and the sample households are presented in Chapter III. In this chapter a comparison over 1982 of some of the socio-economic characteristics of sample households has been presented. A brief account of the caste-class linkage and economic status in terms of land and asset holding of the sample households have also been presented in this chapter. We have seen in this chapter that women maintain a low socio-economic profile in comparison to their male counterpart particularly in terms of demographic patterns, literacy, land endowments, asset holdings etc.

Gender dimensions of work and labour market participation, which also deals with women's access to different survival needs, is dealt with in Chapter IV. Several types of gender discrimination prevalent in the labour markets is clearly spelt out in this chapter. First, Because of the many social and customary restrictions, women's work participation rate is very low in rural Bihar. This is particularly true in case of higher castes and class households. However, the women participation rates increase drastically when secondary occupation is also taken onto consideration. This shows that although most of the women are involved in a number of economic activities, their status is treated as non-workers primarily because of their involvement in domestic works. The chapter also draws the conclusion that the work status of most of the women has been casual and over the years casualisation of women workers has increased much faster than their male counterpart. The declining patron-client relationships has more affected the women workers. Second, In terms of employment women workers are at receiving end. Most of the employment available to women workers is residual in nature. In view of the growing unemployment situation in rural areas, male members grab most of the employment

opportunities and women are left with accepting lower quality of jobs. The low educational and skill endowment of women workers is also an important handicap for their occupational mobility. Apart from work and employment there is also sharp gender bias in terms of wages and remuneration to women workers. The wage discrimination is sharper in non-agricultural activities as the wages in agricultural sector in itself is suppressed in general.

Rural Bihar is characterised by acute poverty. However, amidst abject poverty there is also high sex discrimination. This gender dimension of poverty is presented in Chapter V. In this chapter we have seen that among the poor households women headed households constitute a fairly large proportion. We have also seen that there is also intra-household discrimination over sex in terms of consumption expenditure and frequency of meals taken. The chapter clearly spells out that with the increase in the ratio of female to male members in households the consumption expenditure falls sharply. This is more so if we consider in terms of consumption expenditure on quality food items. Besides this, during the time food shortage it is the female member of the household, who escapes meals more frequently in favor of male members of the households.

In chapter VI, women's access to and control over different public institutions and resources, and their impact on women's lives is all detailed out. In this chapter we can see that women has comparatively less access to education, health and other public institutions and rural infrastructure. The less access to different public institutions adds to the hardships in the life of women. It has been shown in this chapter that, provision of educational and health institution for women improves their human resource endowments substantially. Women's access to other infrastructural facilities such as

access to drinking water, fuel, etc. has also been presented in this chapter. Although women participation in labour market is lower in comparison to their male counterpart their involvement in these domestic activities is substantially higher in comparison to that of the males.

Chapter VII of the report presents a detailed account of freedom of women's physical mobility, and their role in decision-makings. In rural Bihar there are several kinds of social and customary restrictions over the physical mobility of women. The situation is more serious incase of higher caste and class households, where women are simply not supposed to participate in economic activities. However, over the years, the physical mobility of women has increased and today higher proportions of women are allowed to participate in different works. As far as women's decision-making is concerned this has also improved substantially over the years. A larger proportion of women are now applying their political rights, and spending their own earned money independently. But there is still very little independence in terms of several domestic decisions within the house. Finally, some conclusions of the study and few recommendations are made in the last chapter (Chapter VIII).

Policy Recommendations

Socio economic characteristics of the sample households reflect a clear caste, class nexus in rural Bihar. While changes in the education and health status of the households occurred on a moderate scale among all segments, SC, ST and minorities continue to be most deprived sections. It is to be noted that on many indicators, the changes are marginal over the past two decades. This is very disappointing as several development programs and

schemes addressing socio economic conditions have only marginal impact on the core indicators within the state.

Specific policy suggestions in this regard would be to concentrate on certain indicators that have a direct bearing on the status of women. In any analysis on the status of women, age at marriage assumes significance as it is intrinsically related to the educational privileges in particular and predominant socially ascribed roles and autonomy attributed to women.

Education & Literacy

Literacy and adult education appears to be the key interventions to address both the status and position of women. Innovative implementation of literacy programmes, especially through institution building of women may be an effective strategy that can be implemented by the government. Several NGOs working in the field have demonstrated the viability of women *sanghas* or self-help groups in addressing the issue of literacy.

There is a need to address the functional literacy needs of women in order to enhance their participation in economic and social spheres.

Girl child education assumes importance in the context of gendered-poverty of Bihar. There is a need to address the infrastructure deficiencies and human resource requirements to enhance girl child participation.

As most of the non-participation or drop-out of girls occur due to lack of education facilities, there is a need to develop methodologies to identify the schooling needs in rural areas and respond to the demand. School mapping exercise through community participation is needed in order to create a demand system for school education. It is found to be a very highly motivating experience for the rural communities to be involved in the school mapping exercises.

Government has to ensure/guarantee education facilities when the demand for school facilities comes from the communities. There is also a greater need to enhance the facilities within the schools so that girl child can participate in a more effective way.

Access to water, fuel and other fodder are important determinant in terms of participation of girl child in education and schooling activities. In most of the surveyed villages such an access is negligible and hence girl child education is not visible.

Health Care

Bihar shows a decimal picture in terms of health indicators. While there is a marginal improvement, as the data from the villages reveal substantial progress is needed in order to achieve the goals of health for all.

Mother and child health, occupational health, working with adolescent girls in order to have behavior change is few important interventions needed in the health sector. There is also a need to address the health and nutrition status of children and mothers as the data reveals very low health status. Immunisation, though universal in most villages is still an area of concern in terms of quality of service.

Substantial investments are required to improve the health infrastructure. Access to health care has to be improved substantially with an effective referral system to the specialized hospitals.

Cost of health care is another aspect, which needs the attention of the government. There is a need to adopt rational drug policies and also improve the quality and performance of the public health systems so that commercialization of health systems can be avoided.

Health awareness and interventions in emerging issues like HIV are needed in rural Bihar as the health status is very low in the sampled villages. There is a role for NGO sector in this field, which needs to be encouraged.

Improved access to public and private sources for health and other social aspects remains an important issue in rural Bihar.

Work participation

Women's work participation is an important indicator reflecting the status of women. There is great scope for formation of women self help groups so that woman are recognized as economic agents and also improve the status within the family.

Employment opportunities, income generation activities may focus on women so that their participation can be increased and also the gender relations can be altered due to higher economic independence and value for women's work. Still the "triple burden" that women are engaged with remain an issue of further interventions. There is a need to work with men in this respect in order to address position of women within the families.

Work place harassment and violence are important aspects that need to be addressed in order to improve women's work participation. Coupled with these social security measures aimed at women workers, like insurance, employment security and old age benefits are important interventions that the government has to take and also encourage private employers to practice.

Women self help groups and income generation activities and micro enterprise promotion would be important strategies to address the work participation and economic empowerment of women. These have to be complemented with interventions that would reduce the workload of women.

Women's workload and drudgery are two aspects that need to be addressed in order to improve the women's status and also address the health related aspects. Technological solutions for women's drudgery need to be introduced so that woman will be able to undertake activities with less physical drudgery. Agriculture related activities and mechanization of some of the operations are necessary. There is a need to encourage innovations and also implement pilot projects in this direction.

While several economic interventions are proposed, discrimination based on caste and gender aspects has to be recognized and efforts have to be made to arrest such discrimination..

Conclusion

The developmental problems faced by women in Bihar, be it low levels of sex ratio, literacy, education, nutrition, work participation rate and high levels of mortality, morbidity, with marginal participation in the public life, it needs to be analyzed from the perspective of gender. This perspective is based on the understanding that it is the patriarchal ideology that governs the interaction between the two sexes in their private and public lives with stereotyped images and roles set for the two genders. Adherence to this ideology results in women being treated as the inferior gender, primarily concerned with reproductive roles and restricted to the private sphere of a man's life, and hence for the larger society. For a rural agrarian society like in Bihar, the gender ideology is overarching the cultural, social, political and economic spheres and unless systematic short term and long term programmes are designed to loosen the stronghold of this, there can only be peripheral impact on women's deprivations.

A gender perspective to development of women, besides attitudinal changes and changes in the institutional and economic arrangements, necessitates as an entry point. It is invariable ought to be a critical mass of women in the spheres that are restricted hitherto for women. This is significant for Bihar from a policy perspective that the state needs to create conducive environment for this critical mass of women to enter the social, political and economic spheres. Any policy suggestion, therefore need to be geared up towards this goal.

The key challenges that the newly formed Bihar face remains: empowering the vast majority of women in Bihar to access basic services and exercise basic rights who have been consistently deprived due to their gender. The improvement in the situation of women is imperative for the future of Bihar as no state, especially, one as underdeveloped as Bihar can afford to waste the capabilities of half of its population.

