

RESEARCH ARTICLE

TO WORK OR NOT TO WORK: FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AMONG REANGS OF TRIPURA

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Abstract: Amidst growing concerns of declining work participation of women in India, an area of further apprehension has been the rapidly dropping work participation of women from the tribal communities. According to official data, there has been a sharp decline in women's work participation among the tribes of Tripura, and among the Reangs in particular. Reang women's work participation rate plummeted from over 56 per cent during 1961 to just around 36 per cent during 2001 and further to 35 per cent during 2011. The present paper investigates the factors associated with both farm and non-farm (salaried) employment among the Reangs. Primary data has been collected from 400 Reang women residing in twenty villages distributed over South Tripura and Gomati districts. We carry out non-parametric as well as parametric analysis, specifically, chi-squared tests and multinomial logit regressions. Nearly thirty per cent of the surveyed Reang women in their prime ages were found to be non-working. The proportion of non-working women is almost twice among those with higher education, above primary level. Women with lower education are more likely to work in both farm and salaried employment. Age is a deciding factor for work, with a statistically significant positive relationship between age and every kind of work. Other significant variables affecting the decision to work are husband's education level, household standard of living, family size, household structure and women's mobility. It points towards the distinct possibility of socioeconomic segmentation of women's occupational choices and that Reang women with higher education may not be working for lack of suitable job opportunities.

Keywords: Tripura, Women's work, Reangs, Work participation rate, Women's education.

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INTRODUCTION

Among various transformations confronting the Indian society today, the shifting nature and pattern of women's work is of critical importance. This is especially so in the case of India's tribal communities as they undergo a period of sociocultural and economic transition, with the traditional systems being gradually replaced by new ones.

While, on the one hand, the traditionally high engagement of women in shifting cultivation is being gradually diminished due to political, social, and economic reasons, new sources of employment, including salaried employment, are somewhat beyond the reach of a large proportion of tribal women. This has resulted in many women being either pushed out or opting out of work in rural areas.

The critical importance of work in the social and economic lives of tribal women can

hardly be overemphasized. But, the work participation of tribal women has been declining over time and just around 36 per cent of tribal women in Tripura were engaged in directly productive activities during 2011. The situation is much worse among the Reang tribe, a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) inhabiting Tripura.

The decline in female work participation rate (FWPR) has been more severe among them. FWPR declined from over 56 per cent to just around 35 per cent between 1961 and 2011. Even more disheartening, as noted specifically in the case of Tripura, land alienation and reduction in the size of land holdings in tribal families (for various reasons including usurpation of and distress sale of land) has meant that while men take up the task of farming the land, women either have to limit themselves to housework or seek employment as agricultural wage

labourers (Ghosh & Choudhuri, 2011; Shil & Jangir, 2021; Tiwari, 2023).

Indeed, there are distinct tendencies towards feminization of casual agricultural labour, which obviously implies lower status and lesser economic contribution as compared to situations where they could work as cultivators in their own farms. Alongside occupational change, several other changes are also afoot among tribes in general.

This has been arguably manifest in inegalitarian gender relations and stricter gender division of labour. Specifically, literature points out that the process of Sanskritization has entailed decline in the age at marriage among tribal girls, replacement of bride price with dowry, reduction in consanguineous/affinal marriages, reduced mobility, and female labour force participation (Maharatna, 2011; Xaxa, 2004). Thus, studies on the changing nature and pattern of work among Reang women are of vital importance as it has broader ramifications for the status and autonomy of women in Reang society.

As noted by Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos (1989), women's work participation, much more than that of men, has been found to be dependent on the level of economic development, marital status, household structure, religion, and cultural factors. However, most of the research, at least till recently, has been dominated by neoclassical models of labour force participation, at the heart of which is the income-leisure trade-off. Essentially, standard microeconomic models hold that an increase in wages will have an ambiguous effect on those already in the workforce.

While the increase in wages will, on the one hand, tend to increase the supply of man-hours because of the positive substitution effect (due to an increase in the price of 'leisure'), on the other, it will tend to decrease the man-hours supplied due to a negative income effect. Thus, the final effect of an increase in wages is ambiguous and depends on 'preferences'. However, the effect on those not already in the labour force is unambiguously positive, and an increase in the wage rate will bring more persons into the workforce. In the case of women specifically, potential wages have been

indexed by women's education, disincentives by family income, and other factors such as economic justification of relegating household chores to women (Killingsworth and Heckman, 1986).

For married women, especially in the case of India, as noted by Majumder (2011), in addition to a woman's own attributes, those of the husband are also important factors associated with women's work participation. The effect of husband's higher education and status is also ambiguous and can either increase or decrease woman's work participation.

To quote from the author: "Higher educational attainment of husband may loosen the social/ethical shackles on the wives, encouraging them to enter labour force. Similarly, husbands who have regular salaried jobs may encourage their wives also to do so...Men with higher educational qualifications and assured jobs may find their own income adequate enough and discourage their wives from working. They may also find it below their social status (and ego?) to let their wives work to earn." (Majumder, 2011: 3).

Be that as it may, the empirical evidence on the relation between wage rate and work participation of women specifically suggests a positive wage effect on women's work participation (see for instance, Layard and Mincer, 1985, and the literature cited therein), but not at each level of economic development. Specifically, the 'U' pattern hypothesis of women's work participation has gained much support among researchers. This hypothesis proposes that there is a decline in women's work participation rate in the economy at the early stages of growth with the decline in the subsistence sector and the inability of the nascent industrial sector to absorb all the labour thus released.

However, the trend is reversed as the demand for female workers increases at later stages of development with new opportunities and change in the composition of employment, as shown by recent studies globally including India (Chattopadhyay & Chowdhury, 2024; Rejuna et al., 2026; Sarkar & Agrawal, 2023).

OBJECTIVES

In this context, we take a critical look at the situation of Reang women's work and its associated factors. The specific objectives of the paper are

- An in-depth exploration of the bivariate associations between women's type of employment and various socio-demographic and socioeconomic factors, with special emphasis on the influence of wealth of the household.
- To assess the association of selected socioeconomic and socio-demographic characteristics with women's likelihood of being engaged in different occupational categories using multinomial logistic regression.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The Reangs are the second most populous tribe in Tripura; a state which is home to 93 percent of India's Reang people. With a population of about 1.89 lakh people, this particularly vulnerable tribal community constitutes nearly 5 per cent of total population and roughly 16 per cent of Tripura's tribal population (Registrar General, 2011). Primary data for the study was collected using a semi-structured interview schedule during 2017-18 from two districts of Tripura- South Tripura and Gomati. The schedule was administered to 400 Reang women aged 15 to 49 with at least one child using purpose stratified random sampling method.

Non-parametric as well as parametric analyses, specifically chi-squared tests and multinomial logit regression analysis have been carried out to analyze the factors associated with women's work as cultivators, agricultural labourers, and salaried individuals. The dependent variable distinguishes between four employment categories: not working, cultivation, agricultural labour, and salaried employment. "Not working" is specified as the reference category, allowing the likelihood of being engaged in each type of work to be compared with that of remaining non-working.

The independent variables included in the analysis are education of the woman, age of the woman, number of children, education of the husband, household income category,

ownership of house or land, household structure, and women's mobility. Education of the woman and education of the husband are included as explanatory variables. Household income is classified into low and high categories, with high income as the reference category. Ownership of house or land is represented by "No," with "Yes" as the reference category.

Household structure distinguishes nuclear and joint households, with joint households as the reference category. Women's mobility is classified as low or high, with high mobility as the reference category. The results are presented as Exp (β), or odds ratios. Statistical significance is indicated at the 1 per cent and 5 per cent levels, with coefficients marked accordingly.

RESULTS

Before delving into the issue of factors associated with Reang women's work participation, it would be worthwhile to look at the nature and pattern of work among Reang women as it is one of the crucial factors undergoing the most (tangible) change due to metamorphosing socio-economic structure of tribal societies.

Socio-Economic Background and Reang Women's Work

Table 1 presents the results of cross-tabulation between different types of non-domestic work performed by Reang women and various socio-economic and cultural factors assumed to be related to it. As will be noticed at once from the table, age has a significant association with work, and women in the younger age groups, especially below the age of 19 years are found to be largely non-working. In fact, we find that till about 30 years of age, a large proportion of women do not participate in the labour market.

Two factors are perhaps important here. First is that among the Reangs, young women (technically, children below 18 years of age) are rarely sent out to work and second, these are the prime childbearing years among Reangs, when childbearing and child rearing are the prime duties of a Reang mother. Hence, we witness a sharp fall in the proportion of non-working women from age 30 and nearly all women between 45 and 49 years of age are found as working in our sample. Even though the exact percentages

may not hold for the overall Reang population in Tripura, the pattern can be safely said to be representative of the broad pattern of work according to age among Reang women.

As expected a greater proportion of women with higher education are employed in the tertiary sector (11.6%) as compared to those with lesser education (5.5%) and the reverse holds true for agricultural workers. Thus, while just over 14 per cent of the Reang women with relatively higher education (middle school and above) are found to be agricultural labourers, as much as 35 per cent among those with low education work as agricultural labourers. What is perhaps more noteworthy is that the proportion of non-working women is almost twice among those with more education as compared to those with less education.

Here it should be mentioned that there could be an association between higher education and higher income so that the two factors could have confounding effects on participation in the labour force. In fact, as can be seen from the table, expenditure category of the household has a statistically significant relationship with women's work categories, and the work participation of women from relatively well-to-do households is nearly 10 percentage points less than those from poorer households.

However, we find that within each expenditure category, women with higher education participate to a significantly less extent in the workforce as compared to those with lower education. Specifically, we find that in the lower expenditure category, while just 17 percent of the women with low education are found not working, the percentage is as high as 31 per cent in higher education category. The respective figures for the higher income groups are around 20 and 37 per cent respectively (Table 2).

It points towards the distinct possibility that Reang women with higher education may not be working for lack of suitable job opportunities for them matching their skill and education levels. A similar relationship is found for husband's education and women's work as well, but the relationship is significant in the high expenditure category only. Thus, the higher proportion of non-working women among those who have

husbands with higher education could be related to social status and prestige (Table 2). Unsurprisingly, women from landed households are employed largely in the family farm as against those from landless families who are largely employed as agricultural wage labourers. Ownership of land by the woman herself has the same implication for the pattern of employment as can be seen from the table (Table 2). This underlines the critical importance of ownership of land, either alone or jointly to continue in the labour force. However, we find no significant relationship between religion and work pattern among Reang women.

Finally, household structure is also found to be significant for the pattern of employment of Reang women. Most noteworthy is that among women who belong to joint families around 42 per cent is found as not employed, while the corresponding figure for those from nuclear families is around 26 per cent. While this can possibly be due to greater domestic responsibilities by virtue of belonging to a joint family, this could also reflect lesser compulsion to work for women from joint families due to better economic standing.

As can also be seen from the Table 1, the distribution of work among different categories reveals that a substantial percentage of those found working and belonging to nuclear households are engaged as agricultural labourers. Indeed, classification of women's work by household structure and grouped by income category (Table 2) reveals that household structure has no significant relationship with work for poorer households and that the overall relationship is influenced by those belonging to the relatively wealthier section. Let us now look into the factors associated with choosing different occupations among Reang women.

Results from Multinomial Logistic Regression

Table 3 presents the main results of the multinomial logistic regression of various categories of Reang women's employment and the selected independent variables as suggested by theoretical and empirical literature on the subject cited in the first section. Thus, the independent variables included in the regression are age of woman, woman's educational attainment, number of children, educational attainment of husband,

the income category of the household, ownership of house or land (either singly or jointly by the respondent), household structure and mobility. In this analysis education and age have been treated as continuous variables. As can be seen from the

table, the reference category in the multinomial logistic regression analysis is non-working women, and the remaining categories whose probability of membership has been predicted by the independent variables are Cultivators, Agricultural Labourers and Salaried individuals.

Table 1: Contingency table of reang women's work by background characteristics, N= 400

Variables	Not Working (%)	Cultivator (%)	Agricultural Labourer (%)	Salaried (%)	Total (%)	Chi-squared (χ ²)
Women's age group (years)						
15-19	66.7	14.3	9.5	9.5	100	47.742***
20-24	35.1	40.3	19.5	5.2	100	
25-29	40.7	34.9	22.1	2.3	100	
30-34	19.8	44.2	25.6	10.5	100	
35-39	15.5	43.7	23.9	16.9	100	
40-45	22.9	37.1	22.9	17.1	100	
45-49	0.0	70.0	20.0	10.0	100	
Women's education						
Primary and below	18.6	40.7	35.2	5.5	100	30.568***
Middle school and above	35.3	39.0	14.1	11.6	100	
Relative Expenditure Category						
Low	22.9	27.5	37.4	12.2	100	33.033***
High	32.2	45.9	14.1	7.8	100	
Agricultural Land Ownership of Husband						
No	28.4	5.5	57.8	8.3	100	134.676***
Yes	29.5	53.1	7.6	9.8	100	
Religion						
Hindu	28.7	40.8	21.9	8.6	100	2.711
Christian	31.2	31.2	22.9	14.6	100	
Own house/land						
No	29.3	36.8	24.6	9.3	100	12.246**
Yes	26.9	57.7	5.8	9.6	100	
Household Structure						
Nuclear	25.8	39.9	24.2	10.1	100	8.561**
Joint	41.7	37.5	13.9	6.9	100	
Husband's education						
Primary and below	16.8	41.6	35.4	6.2	100	23.016***
Middle school	34.1	38.8	16.5	10.6	100	

1 and above						
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Source: Primary data

Note: ***significant at less than 1% level **significant at 5 % level

From Column I, it can be seen that among the various independent variables we find that the age of the woman and the number of live births turns out to be statistically significant. Thus, all other variables remaining unchanged, if the age of the

woman were to increase, she would be 5.1 per cent more likely to be engaged in cultivation rather than not working. Likewise, the higher the number of children, the more likely that she would opt to be a cultivator as compared to not working. In fact,

Table 2: Contingency table: specific variables grouped by expenditure category, N= 400

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Variable s	Not Working (%)	Cultivator (%)	Agricultural Labourer (%)	Salaried (%)	Total (%)	Chi-squared (x2)
Women's Education						
<i>Low expenditure group</i>						
Primary and below	17. 1	30.3	46.1	6.6	100	11.490***
Middle school and above	30. 9	23.6	25.5	20.0	100	
<i>High Expenditure Group</i>						
Primary and below	20. 3	52.2	23.2	4.3	100	11.946***
Middle school and above	36. 6	43.5	10.8	9.1	100	
Household Structure						
<i>Low Expenditure Group</i>						
Nuclear	21. 4	28.6	36.6	13.4	100	2.075
Joint	31. 6	21.1	42.1	5.3	100	
<i>High Expenditure Group</i>						
Nuclear	28. 4	46.4	17.0	8.2	100	8.989**
Joint	45. 3	43.4	3.8	7.5	100	
Husband's education						
<i>Low Expenditure Group</i>						
Primary and below	16. 7	31.8	43.9	7.6	100	7.029
Middle school and above	29. 2	23.1	30.8	16.9	100	
<i>High Expenditure Group</i>						
Primary and below.	17. 0	55.3	23.4	4.3	100	9.689**
Middle school and above	35. 6	43.8	12.0	8.7	100	

Note: ***significant at less than 1 % level **significant at 5 % level

increase in the number of children by one, increases the likelihood of working as a cultivator instead of not working by as much as 49 per cent. Though, there is no further supporting evidence, it would not be incorrect to surmise that women's work as cultivators (and indeed, any work) is dictated in large part by meeting the economic needs of the family.

It is interesting to observe that in the case of factors associated with women's work as

agricultural labourer as compared to not-working category, a far greater number of variables turn out to be significant, including the education of the woman and her husband, the number of children, the income category of the household and the ownership of land or house. As will be noticed at once, women choose to work as agricultural labourers as against not working based almost entirely on the weak financial position of the household, as expected.

Table 3: Factors associated with various kinds of work: results from multinomial logistic regression analysis

Independent Variables	Cultivator Exp(β) (I)	Agricultural Labourer Exp(β) (II)	Salaried Exp(β) (III)
	Reference category: Not Working		
Education of woman	0.937	0.920**	1.087
Age of woman	1.051**	1.038	1.144***
No. of Children	1.486*	1.778**	1.392
Education of husband	0.967	0.918**	1.008
Income category (Low) (Ref: High)	0.851	2.065**	2.920**
Own house/land (No) (Ref: Yes)	0.698	4.323**	1.657
HH. Structure (Nuclear) (Ref: Joint)	1.384	2.025	2.647**
Mobility (Low) (Ref: High)	0.925	0.887	0.367**

Note: ***significant at less than 1 % level **significant at 5 % level

Interestingly, age is not a significant determinant in this case. Thus, as compared to women who are not-working, those who are working as agricultural labourers belong to poorer landless households. All other variables remaining unchanged, if the income category of the woman changed from high to low, it increases her likelihood to be a agricultural labourer by more than 2 times. The effect of ownership of land is even more prominent and not owning any property increases the likelihood of being an agricultural labourer as compared to choosing not to work as one by more than 4 times!

What is most important here is perhaps the effect of higher education of both husband and wife. Increase in years of schooling of both the woman and her husband turn out to

reduce the likelihood of work participation here (it could be mentioned here that the education variable was significant at just above 10 per cent for the cultivator category also). This lends support to the argument that, at least in part, social prestige is an important factor considered in choosing to work outside home among the Reangs.

Column III presents the findings for salaried employment. It is remarkable that even though age of women, income of the household, household structure and mobility are important factors considered in the decision to work for a salary as against choosing not to work, education does not turn out to be significant. This could be due to the fact that a very small percentage of women in the sample are working for a salary (around 9 per cent) and also because the type of

salaried employment being considered here is that of lower category (health workers, Anganwadi workers, nurses and peons, primary school teachers).

Interestingly, household structure turns out to be significant only in this case, as does women's mobility. This is perhaps not surprising because as compared to working as cultivators and agricultural labourers, working for a salary is relatively a new kind of employment and non-traditional in a sense.

Thus, living in a nuclear family as against a joint family increases the likelihood of working for a salary by more than twice as compared to choosing not to work among the Reangs women. Low mobility of women increases the likelihood that the women would choose to be non-working instead of working for a salary. Finally, age is also found to be a significant factor in deciding to work for a salary as compared to choosing not to work.

Overall, the results of the multinomial regression analysis, strongly points towards the fact that while economic hardships compel Reang women to work in low paying, low prestige jobs, more educated women and those who have been married into families with higher social and economic standing opt not to work. Thus, employment opportunities matching the education and skill level of Reang women has to be increased.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There is no denying the fact that notwithstanding several development efforts and gender sensitive policies, the participation of women in India's workforce remains distressingly low. In fact, tribal societies, that was supposedly immune to gender discrimination, have been prone to similar threats to women's employment opportunities outside home.

As the present study demonstrates clearly in the case of the Reangs of Tripura, female education does not necessarily increase women's work participation. In many cases, economic deprivation of the household seemed to have 'pushed' women into workforce as agricultural labourers. Landlessness, and especially, lack of land titles to women, has been found to aggravate

the situation and push them into low quality work. This has direct consequences for women's status and agency both inside and outside the household.

As is well known and well- documented, tribal women's participation in economic life of the community has been a distinctive positive feature till now. However, it seems to be rapidly disappearing from the employment scene. In fact, Reang women's role is being more and more restricted to domestic activities as they fail to join the workforce. In this situation, it is not very difficult to envision a future where the relatively high status of Reang women passes into oblivion.

Thus, limited economic diversification in Tripura and in Reang society in particular, constrains the expansion of women's employment, particularly those whose increasing educational attainment is not matched by suitable non-farm employment. The finding that women from weaker economic background, i.e. those who don't possess land, or are economically poor, engage as agricultural labour points towards the distress-driven nature of women's work among Reangs. Therefore, there is urgent need to improve the quality of employment through better opportunities.

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