

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Involved in Agricultural Labour in Ramanagara District: A Sociological Study

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ABSTRACT

Women agricultural labourers in India's rural areas encountered substantial socio-economic difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Ramanagara district of Karnataka, women agricultural workers experienced substantial job cuts, lower wages, increased responsibilities for unpaid care work, and limited access to support programs. Their substantial influence on agricultural production and food security was drowned out by their predominantly hidden labour. This sociological examination, of a descriptive kind, explores the impact of COVID-19 on the challenges faced by female agricultural workers, using data collected from 300 participants. The study, emphasizing the connection between socio-economic factors and pandemic effects, suggests policies designed to recognize and improve the welfare of female agricultural workers.

Keywords: COVID-19, Women Agricultural Labourers, Invisibility of Labour, Gender Inequality, Occupational Change, Ramanagara District.

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute a significant portion of India's rural labour force and are pivotal in agricultural activities, including planting seeds, soil management, harvesting crops, post-harvest processing, animal care, and ensuring family nutrition. Regardless, a substantial part of their labour is unpaid, underpaid, and statistically unacknowledged. Conventional views of gender frequently view women's agricultural work as an extension of household responsibilities rather than as economically productive activities. Agriculture remains a vital income source in rural India, where women play a substantial role in the farming workforce. Female farmhands are actively engaged in ploughing the soil, sowing seeds, inserting seedlings, controlling weeds, harvesting crops, shelling nuts, caring for animals, and managing produce post-collection. Although their substantial contribution to agricultural production and food security for families is well-established, their labour tends to be overlooked, undervalued, or omitted from official records and public policy. This scenario is usually called the lack of women's labour in agriculture, underscoring the oversight in economic, social, and institutional settings regarding the value women add through their productive activities.

The pandemic made these inherent inequalities more pronounced. Nationwide lockdowns impacted farming, reduced paid employment chances, disrupted market access, and increased unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities among women. Numerous female farmworkers experienced employment declines, suffered financial insecurity, and were limited in their access to governmental assistance programs.

The research conducted by Chauhan (2021) explored the rise in unpaid domestic and care-related tasks performed by women in India as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. The findings suggested that women were disproportionately affected by the lockdowns, seeing an increase in domestic duties alongside diminished financial prospects. The study reveals that women's contributions, whether economic or caretaking, were often undervalued during the pandemic, highlighting the invisibility of women's work. Deshpande reviewed national data to study the effects of the first wave of COVID-19 on India's formal and informal labour sectors. The

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findings indicated that there was an increase in the unpaid domestic labour whereas the opportunities for women in their professional lives decreased, pointing towards a widening of gender-based inequalities during the pandemic. Mondal, Sreenita and Valerio, Erika (2024), This systematic review synthesised evidence from studies across India and concluded that women in agriculture experienced greater employment loss, increased unpaid labour, reduced food security and limited access to productive resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gender-sensitive interventions for long-term recovery were among the strategies highlighted by the authors.

Research Gap

The scholarly analysis shows that COVID-19 exacerbated gender disparities, lowered women's employment, boosted unpaid caregiving tasks, and underscored women's absence from agricultural labour. There has been a shortage of empirical research conducted in the Ramanagara district of Karnataka regarding women agricultural labourers. Researchers have employed descriptive cross-tabulations and primary survey data to investigate respondents' viewpoints. Therefore, the ongoing examination of 300 agricultural workers seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the effects of COVID-19 on the marginalization of women's agricultural labour. As for its impacts on jobs, workplace changes, and social assistance within the regional context.

The Ramanagara district in Karnataka stands out due to its economy predominantly anchored in the rural area, where agriculture and associated activities typically provide employment to a substantial part of its population. Seasonal wage jobs, livestock farming, and other casual earning activities serve as the primary income generators for agricultural workers in the region. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many women faced employment losses, pay cuts, financial insecurity, and limited access to government assistance programs and social support resources. Despite women's substantial contributions to agricultural production and household support, their labour often went unnoticed in domestic settings, the labour force, and official records.

Ignoring women's contributions, the social structures continue to exhibit a patriarchal dominance and embedded inequalities. Segregation based on gender in the workplace, an unequal allocation of productive resources, and limited participation in decision-making. Feminists argue that women's work, both in generating wealth and in nurturing life, is frequently undervalued, largely due to the assumption that it is simply part of homemaking, not as economically beneficial activity. The exacerbated structural inequalities during the pandemic were underscored by an uptick in unpaid caregiving labour, coupled with diminished paid employment opportunities and restricted access to social protections.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the socio-economic traits of female rural labourers in the Ramanagara region.
2. To assess the influence of COVID-19 on employment, wages, and daily life reliability.
3. To investigate the link between women's absence from farming and the unrecognized domestic work during the pandemic.
4. To assess the accessibility of government aid programs.
5. To analyze the changes in job roles after the pandemic.
6. To propose strategies for enhancing acknowledgment and social support for female farmers.

Research Methods

The current investigation utilizes a descriptive research methodology to examine the effects of COVID-19 on the reduced visibility of female agricultural workers in the Ramanagara district of Karnataka. The descriptive method is considered appropriate because it enables a structured breakdown of the socio-economic characteristics of female farmers. Assess how the pandemic has affected their primary sources of income and

delve into their perspectives on the recognition of their work. The research utilizes a cross-sectional methodology, with data primarily derived from field studies conducted among female subjects.

Study Area

The inquiry was conducted in the Ramanagara District of Karnataka, a predominantly rural region where agriculture and its related activities form the cornerstone of daily life for its inhabitants. This district encompasses four taluks: Ramanagara, Channapatna, Kanakapura, and Magadi. Women occupy a pivotal role in agricultural endeavours such as sowing, seedling insertion, hoeing, picking, post-harvest processing, and animal husbandry. A substantial part of contributions, both economically and socially, goes largely unnoticed.

Sample size and Techniques

The study comprised women agricultural labourers residing in selected villages within the Ramanagara district; these individuals were engaged in seasonal farming roles before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examined a sample of 300 women who were agricultural labourers. The data set was judged sufficient for studying socio-economic conditions, employment patterns, occupational changes, and the participants' opinions regarding the lack of visibility of their work during the pandemic.

A multi-stage sampling approach was employed. Initially, villages from different taluks across the Ramanagara district were selected to ensure geographical diversity. During phase two, families involving female agricultural workers were identified via the assistance of village elders, local groups, and community-based organizations. The process concluded with respondents being selected from identified households using simple random sampling.

Sources of Data

Data collection primarily involved: structured interview schedules, personal interviews, field observations, and informal chats with participants. The discussion included elements like demographic information, employment status, income brackets, household responsibilities, and shifts in careers. Access to welfare and views regarding women's unacknowledged contribution to agricultural labour.

Several sources were utilized, encompassing Government of India documents, Government of Karnataka reports, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, National Sample Survey (NSS), Census of India, and Reports by the National Commission for Women. Various scholarly works on gender, agriculture, rural livelihoods, and COVID-19, such as books, journals, dissertations, and other sources, are published.

Result and Discussion

The pandemic intensified already existing gender inequalities by decreasing agricultural employment opportunities, lowering wages, increasing unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, and limiting access to governmental support programs. Despite carrying out productive and reproductive duties, women's contributions were frequently overlooked in official contexts. As a consequence, it became evident that women's labour in agriculture was undervalued during the pandemic.

Thorough comprehension of these issues requires the use of descriptive cross-tabulation in analyzing the responses of 300 female agricultural workers from the Ramanagara district. Cross-tabulation serves as an efficient descriptive statistical tool for examining relationships between various variables. This enables the assessment of respondents' socioeconomic characteristics alongside the consequences of the pandemic on employment, wages, work activity, career transitions, public assistance availability, and perspectives regarding women's recognition.

Table 1: Age and Loss of Agricultural Employment during COVID-19

Age Group (Years)	Severe Employment Loss	Moderate Employment Loss	Low Employment Loss	Total
18-30	22	24	14	60

31–40	35	18	7	60
41–50	38	16	6	60
51–60	31	20	9	60
Above 60	19	26	15	60
Total	145	104	51	300

The research showed that women in their early to mid-50s experienced the highest decline in agricultural jobs as a result of the pandemic. This group made up the backbone of the agricultural workforce and depended primarily on daily wages. Among younger participants, there was an increased propensity to seek casual jobs outside the agricultural sector, while older women evidenced a comparatively smaller effect on employment due to their historically lower labour participation rates prior to the pandemic.

Table 2: Educational Status and Awareness of Government Relief Schemes

Educational Level	Aware	Not Aware	Total
Illiterate	22	68	90
Primary	40	50	90
Secondary	49	26	75
PUC and above	34	11	45
Total	145	155	300

Achieving high levels of education significantly influenced one's perception of government assistance programs. Women with secondary and higher education were more aware and used relief measures more frequently than the illiterate respondents. The research shows that higher literacy levels lead to better access to information, public services, and institutional support.

Table 3: Family Type and Increase in Unpaid Domestic Work

Family Type	Increased Domestic Work	No Change	Major	Total
Nuclear Family	126	39		165
Joint Family	88	47		135
Total	214	86		300

Several female participants indicated an increased volume of unpaid household and caretaking responsibilities throughout the pandemic. Regarding women in nuclear families, it was reported that they carried a heavier domestic load since they had less familial assistance for household duties.

Table 4: Occupational Status after COVID-19

Occupational Transition	Respondents	Percentage
Continued Agricultural Labour	98	32.7
MGNREGA Employment	72	24.0
Livestock Rearing	48	16.0

Petty Business	36	12.0
Domestic Work	27	9.0
Tailoring and Home-based Work	19	6.3
Total	300	100.0

The study revealed that diversifying occupations became a notable strategy for securing livelihoods following the pandemic. While one-third of the respondents continued agricultural work, many others sought employment via MGNREGA, livestock rearing, small-scale trading, domestic duties, and home-based businesses to compensate for lost income.

Table 5: Access to Welfare Schemes and Economic Recovery

Access to Welfare Schemes	Improved Livelihood	No Significant Improvement	Total
Received Benefits	92	38	130
Did Not Receive Benefits	54	116	170
Total	146	154	300

Women who were recipients of government assistance fared better in overcoming their difficulties than those who did not engage with welfare programs. Despite some respondents' complaints about limited relief access, it underscores the need for enhanced targeting, awareness, and effective implementation.

Respondents noted that agricultural women workers experienced greater invisibility during the pandemic. They observed that even as they preserved agricultural output, cared for livestock, ensured household food safety, and carried out unpaid domestic labour, these contributions went largely unrecognized by family members, employers, and public bodies.

The survey respondents outlined the key points as follows:

- A decline in agricultural wage labour was observed during the lockdown.
- There has been an increase in unpaid tasks associated with domestic and caregiving duties.
- The assessment of salaries against male farm labourers.
- Problems with obtaining governmental assistance and benefits.
- Ignoring women as capable agricultural labourers.
- Greater dependence on male relatives economically.
- Supporting household income through low-paying informal work as career shifts.

A considerable number of respondents underscored that forthcoming rural development strategies must formally recognize women as agricultural labourers. Ensure fair wages for comparable roles, bolster social security benefits, and expand access to funding and training programs. Boosting employment prospects via the MGNREGA and related sectors, along with offering robust assistance during public health crises, can indeed greatly enhance the community's well-being.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the cross-table described showed that the visibility of women agricultural labourers in the Ramanagara district was significantly decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Women faced substantial negative impacts including job losses, decreased earnings, increased unpaid care responsibilities, and restricted access to social benefits, unevenly. A key adaptive strategy was occupational diversification, yet gender disparities endured. The findings underscore the necessity of gender-sensitive farming approaches, enhanced labour recognition, equitable remuneration, reinforced social assistance, and inclusive rural development initiatives. To improve the economic and social standing of female agricultural workers.

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