

## Livelihood Options of Rural Women in Kerala: A Critical Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

*A study was conducted in the Idukki and Ernakulam districts of Kerala with the general objective to find out the changes in livelihood pattern of the rural women, in context of increasing rate of urbanization. Two villages were selected randomly from each district respectively by random sampling method. Eighty respondents were selected at random from each village, which was again divided into two categories, viz., old age group (> 40 years) and young age group (20-40 years). Thus the total sample size constitutes 160 respondents. The results of the study revealed that 36.25 per cent of rural women were pursuing occupation in agriculture service sector, 13.25 per cent in industrial sector and 30.25 per cent in the service sector.*

**Key words:** Livelihood options, rural women

Agriculture and allied sector is unique because of its diversity and location-specific requirements, necessitating adaptation of technologies to a range of agro ecological conditions. Earlier it was subsistence farming, where a farmer produced whatever quantity was necessary to sustain his farm and family. With the advancement of technology, there are lots of changes in the society and its waves are reflected in the agricultural sector also.

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living (DFID, 2000). Livelihoods are the sum of ways in which people make a living. The idea of livelihood security embodies three fundamental attributes viz., the possession of human capabilities, access to other tangible and intangible assets and the existence of economic activities. The interaction among these attributes defines what livelihood option an individual pursues.

Households combine their livelihood resources within the limits of their context and use their institutional connections to pursue a number of different livelihood options. Such options can include various types of production and income generating activities. Thus, each

household can have several possible sources of entitlement, which constitute its livelihood. These entitlements are based on the endowments that a household has and its position in the legal, political and social fabric of the society (Drinkwater & McEwan 1992). The sustainable livelihood approach assumes that any development intervention for the rural people should be congruent with their existing livelihood options and ability to adapt. A livelihood security analysis should determine the livelihood options portfolios that different individuals pursue and the factors that determine them. Livelihood options of the respondents were also studied.

### METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Ernakulam and Idukki district of Kerala, with a total sample size of 160 rural women to analyse the livelihood options pursued by the rural women, to identify the constraints to follow agriculture as livelihood option as well as to find out the factors supporting non farm activities as livelihood options. The data were collected from the individual women respondents through personal interview with the help of a structured interview schedule. The data collected was analysed using percentage and coefficient of relevance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION :

Livelihood options of rural women consisted of farming (agriculture) and non farm activities (industries, business and service). There were four different options, which rural women were pursuing for their livelihood. Apart from these, income from foreign countries also accounted as an important livelihood option of some of rural women. Constraints to follow agriculture as livelihood option and factors supporting the non farm activities were also studied. The results are given hereunder.

Table 1. Distribution of rural women based on livelihood options (N=160, n1-n4 = 40)

Options	Women in each category (%)				
	PUY	PUO	RY	RO	Av.
Agriculture	25	39	36	45	36.25
Industries	25	10	13	5	13.25
Business	3	2	1	2	2
Services	37	30	30	24	30.25
Foreign sources	10	19	20	24	18.25

PUY = Peri urban young, PUO = Peri urban old,  
 RY = Rural young, RO = Rural old,  
 Av. = Average,

*Livelihood options of rural women :* In case of peri urban young group, 37 per cent of rural women were pursuing occupation in services sector, 25 per cent of rural women each in agriculture and industrial sectors. Only three per cent of them had business as livelihood option (Table 1). In case of peri urban old group, 39 per cent of rural women had agriculture as livelihood option, ten per cent in industrial sector, 30 per cent in services sector and two per cent in business sector. Regarding the livelihood option of rural young group, 36 per cent of rural women had agriculture as source of livelihood, thirteen per cent had industrial sector, 30 per cent had services sector and mere one per cent had business sector as source of livelihood. With respect to rural women in rural old category, 45 per cent of them still follow agriculture as source of livelihood, five per cent had industrial sector as their source of livelihood, 24 per cent of them had livelihood source in service sector and two per cent had business sector as source of livelihood. In the entire four categories above ten per cent of the women depend on money from foreign countries through the family members migrated to those countries.

The livelihood options of rural women depicted a clear picture about the percentage of rural women directly depending on agriculture or other sectors for their livelihood. It is obvious from the Table 1 that in peri urban area, majority was not depending on agriculture. In fact service sector provided employment to majority in peri urban area. This could be related to the declining area under agriculture in the peri urban area. The industrial sector also employed a considerable percentage of women in peri urban area (25% and 10% in young and old groups, respectively). This might be due to much attractive offers from industrial and service sectors, both in terms of opportunities as well as regular and continuous income. In rural area, old group rural women were still pursuing agriculture as their source of livelihood, but this included those retired people who go back to agriculture as their time spending activity for old age.

Table 2. Constraints to follow agriculture as livelihood option as perceived by rural women (N=160)

Constraints	Coefficient of relevance	Rank order
<i>Poor access to resources</i>		
Labour	0.91	1
Land	0.64	2
Capital/credit	0.64	3
Seed/planting material	0.51	4
Machinery	0.45	5
Irrigation water	0.25	6
Fertilizer	0.22	7
<i>Poor access to information</i>		
Crop protection methods	0.76	1
Scientific planting methods	0.31	2
Mechanization	0.29	3
Improved crop varieties	0.25	4
Post harvest technology	0.23	5
<i>Poor access to market</i>		
Stable price	0.55	1
Market availability	0.27	2
<i>Poor economic factors</i>		
Regular income	0.88	1
Profit	0.83	2
<i>Risk factors</i>		
Marketing risk	0.69	1
Production risk	0.63	2

*Constraints to follow agriculture as livelihood option:* Constraints to follow agriculture (Table 2) as livelihood option were studied and ranking of these constraints was also done. Coefficient of relevance was used as the criteria of ranking. The constraints were categorized into five groups, such as access to resources, access to information, access to market, economic factors and risk factors. In the first category i.e., access to resources, labour and land resources were ranked as first and second by rural women. In the second category viz., access to information, information regarding crop protection methods and scientific planting methods were ranked first and second. In the third category of access to market, stable price and market availability for the produce were ranked first and second. In the category of economic factors, regular income and profit were given rank first and second. In the last category i.e., risk factors, marketing risk and production risk were given rank first and second. If we consider the overall coefficient of relevance, access to labour resources was given highest coefficient, followed by regular income and profit.

Lack of labour availability at reasonable rate was one of the main reasons why people were reluctant to continue agriculture. The labour rate was highest in Kerala with a male labourer a day costing Rs. 150 to 200 and a female labourer a day costing Rs. 100 to 150. There was labour shortage, even at this high rate. Educated youth were not ready to work as agricultural labourer, even amidst big problem of unemployment. Fragmented land holding was also a major problem, which restricted one to go for extensive farming. Timely availability of credit had become another problem, making farming the most difficult enterprise. Keeping in mind the increased cost of inputs as well as low and unstable price of farm produce, farming had become an unprofitable enterprise, which could not guarantee regular income to the farmer. All these factors in

combination forced the rural population to discontinue farming as livelihood option and divert to other sectors.

Table 3: Factors supporting non farm activities as perceived by rural women (N=160)

Factors	Rural women (%)	
	Agree	Disagree
Skill	25.00	75.00
Education	28.00	72.00
Availability of opportunities	34.00	66.00
Better profit/ income	34.00	66.00
Satisfied working environment	84.00	16.00
Better social status	41.00	59.00
Lesser risk	77.00	23.00

*Factors supporting non farm activities as livelihood option :* To get a clearer picture about the livelihood options of rural women, factors supporting the non farm activities were also studied and the results are given in Table 3. Satisfied work environment and lesser risk were two factors which majority of rural women agreed upon as factors supporting the non farm activities as their livelihood option. Better social status was agreed by 41 per cent of rural women. Skill and education were the two factors having the least agreement by rural women.

## CONCLUSION

The major factor, which supported non farm activities as livelihood option, was the satisfactory work environment provided by industrial and service sectors. This was obvious with the working conditions and facilities available in service and industrial sectors as compared with agricultural sector. Moreover, these were not much physically exerting jobs. Women found the opportunities in industrial and service sectors suitable to their educational qualifications and hence satisfying for them. Also these were lesser risk jobs, as there was a regular income guaranteed as salary and other perks. Also the employment in service, industrial or business sector placed one in a better social status.

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