

# ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN WORKERS IN RUBBER PLANTATIONS - A CASE STUDY

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Plantation work is a sort of specialised agricultural work and is therefore more familiar to women with rural background. In the course of time, family became the unit of recruitment. A study undertaken by Dr. V. Haridasan, Dy. Director (Economics) regarding the economic status of women workers in Rubber Plantations, reveals that the economic status enjoyed by women is not bad compared to other category of women workers. The literacy level of women workers and their husbands is also comparable to the general standard in the state. In this article the author also analyses the various aspects of the socio-economic status of the women workers in plantations.

various forms of rubber after processing in the factory.

Land clearing and soil preparation are done mainly by male workers. In the maintenance of nurseries and planting, both men and women workers are employed. Large number of women have customarily been employed for weeding. But technological change is affecting their employment in some plantations, where chemical weedicides are used. Men and women are employed for manuring, while more men are engaged in plant protection and tapping. In the factory very few women get employed while employment of women is virtually nil in the office.

## Introduction:

The main plantation crops of India are tea, coffee and rubber. An estimated one million workers are employed in these crops. Tea and coffee are beverages, while rubber is an industrial raw material of strategic importance. They occupy around a million hectares in India. An important feature of plantation industry in India is the employment of large percentage of women in them compared to other forms of organised industry. Although plantations are a form of agriculture, they are organised on the lines of industry for management and control, even though there is a growing sector of small holdings in them.

There are some reasons for the higher percentage of employment of women. In the first place plantation work is only a special kind of agricultural work and is therefore more familiar to women with rural background. In the olden days when plantations were developed, workers were recruited and brought to the plantations from distant places. In the course of time their families also joined them, and gradually the family became the unit of recruitment. The family employment is more common in tea and

coffee than in rubber. The rubber plantations employed around 2 lakhs workers at the end of 1984. The percentage of employment of men, women and children in the rubber plantations is shown in Table I.

Table-I. Percentage Employment in Rubber Plantations

Year	Men	Women	Children
1944@	72	24	4
1961@	69	30	1
1984†	64	36	Insignificant

## Nature of work in rubber plantations:

The work carried out in the rubber plantations can be classified under three major heads: field operations, factory operations and office work. The bulk of workers are employed in the field: the factory provides work to a few and the office still fewer persons. The main operations carried out in the field are clearing and preparation of land, maintenance of planting material-nurseries, planting, weeding, mulching, manuring, pruning, plant protection and tapping. Tapping is the operation by which latex is collected from the rubber tree. The latex is converted into

## Plantation wages:

Plantation wages are higher than the wages of agricultural workers, but less than those received by workers in mines, industry or administration. Within the plantation, factory workers are better paid than tappers or field workers. In India Equal Remuneration Act has abolished wage differentials between men and women, when the work is identical. Minimum Wages Act has prescribed statutory wages for rubber plantation labour. Both time rate and piece rate are in vogue in rubber plantations.

Piece rate wages are generally paid to tappers, while time rate is common in the field and factory.

## Findings of the study

With the above background, a study was undertaken in April/May 1985, taking the entire women workers in the Central Experiment Station of the Rubber Board at Chethackal in Pathanamthitta District of Kerala to evaluate the economic status of women workers. The reference period of the study was the financial year 1984-85 and the number of women workers employed in that plantation was taken as at the end of March 1985. The details were collected in a questionnaire after personal interview of the women workers.

There were 157 women workers in the plantation. Out of that 110 women workers were engaged in the field and the remaining workers as tappers. The plantation had a total labour force of 361 at that time. The sex ratio of men and women being 57 per cent and 43 per cent respectively. The percentage of women workers is slightly higher in this plantation than the industry's average. The 157 women workers consisted of 124 married women, 11 divorcees, 15 widows and 7 unmarried persons.

Age distribution of women workers is shown in Table II.

Table-II. Age Distribution of Women Workers

Age group	No. of women workers	Percentage
Up to 20 Years	4	2.5
21 to 30 "	61	39.0
31 to 40 "	65	41.5
41 to 50 "	25	16.0
Above 50 "	2	1.0
Total	157	100.0

Eighty per cent of women workers belonged to the age group 21 to 40 years.

With the highest level of literacy in Kerala among the Indian states, it was inevitable that the women workers too had reasonable level of education.

The literacy level is shown in Table III.

Table-III. Literacy Level of Women Workers

	No. of women workers	Percentage
Illiterates	19	12
Can read and write	3	2
Primary and below	86	55
Above primary, up to S.S.L.C.	49	31
Total	157	100

Table III shows that 86 per cent of women workers had attended school and there was a good percentage of workers who studied upto high school level.

Out of the 157 workers, 150 were women with families and 143 had children. The number of children in the 143 families is shown in Table IV.

Table-IV. Children per Family

	No. of women workers	Percentage
1 to 3 children per family	108	76
4 to 6 "	30	21
Above 6 "	5	3
Total	143	100

The average children per family was 2.8 and the average members per family was 5.1.

Age distribution of the children is shown in Table V.

Table-V. Age Distribution of Children

Age (Years)	No. of children	Percentage
5 years and below	78	20
6 to 10 "	81	20
11 to 15 "	80	20
Above 15 years	161	40
Total	400	100

Of the 400 children, 191 were studying in schools and other institutions. Table VI shows the details.

Table-VI. Education of Children

	No. of children	Percentage
Below primary level	57	30
Above primary, up to S.S.L.C.	109	57
Above S.S.L.C.	25	13
Total	191	100



Twenty five students or 13 per cent were studying in post-SSLC classes, most of them in colleges.

The majority of husbands of the 124 women workers too had education.

Table-VII. Education of Husbands

	No. of Husbands	Percentage
Illiterates	8	6.5
Can read and write	7	5.5
Primary and below	68	55.0
Above primary up to S.S.L.C.	40	32.0
Above S.S.L.C.	1	1.0
Total	124	100.0

The employment position of husbands is show in Table VIII.

Table-VIII. Employment Position of Husbands

	No. of Husbands	Percentage
Unemployed	15	12
Agriculture & Allied workers	60	48
Employees of the same Plantation	43	35
Other employment	6	5
Total	124	100

It will be seen that 88 per cent of husbands were employed and that a sizable percentage was employed in the same

plantation. The income of husbands and the women workers including the wives is shown in Table IX

Table IX Monthly Income

Monthly Income	Men (Husbands)		Women workers (including wives)	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
No income	15	12	Nil	Nil
Up to Rs.200 per month	20	16	91	58
Rs. 200 to 300	49	40	20	12.5
Rs. 301 to 400	3	2	1	0.5
Above Rs. 400	37	30	45	29.0
	124	100	157	100.0

Nine children were also earning and contributing to the family kitty. The average income of the 150 families was Rs. 574 per month and the average

expenditure was Rs. 555 and the expenditure formed 97 per cent of the income. The percentage of expenditure on different heads is shown in Table X.

Table X. Percentage Expenditure on Different Heads

Heads of expenditure	Rs.	Percentage
Food	416.70	75.0
Clothing	43.73	7.9
Firewood & Light	12.32	2.2
Education	21.40	3.9
Medicine	20.90	3.8
Travelling	14.47	2.6
Cinema	5.75	1.0
Others	20.20	3.6
Total	555.47	100.0

Out of the 157 women workers 47 were permanently employed and therefore had subscribed to Provident Fund and 33 husbands had also subscribed to P. F. Ten women workers had subscribed to chit funds as well.

131 women workers lived in the houses belonging to them or their husbands while ten women workers were provided with houses by the plantation and the remaining 16 women lived in rented houses. Of the 131 own houses, 39 were tiled and the remaining thatched.

Information on family planning was also collected from the women workers during the study. Of the 124 women with husbands, 90 (72.5%) were following permanent methods of family planning. Of these forty six women workers and 44 husbands of women workers underwent sterilisation operations.

## Conclusion

The broad finding of the study which reflects the situation in the rubber plantation industry in Kerala is that the economic status of women workers is not bad compared to other category of women workers. The literacy level of women workers and their husbands is high and is comparable with the general literacy level in the State. All children in the age group of of five and fifteen years are going to schools, where education is free. There is also a conscious effort to limit the size of the family and this is reflected in the large number of families adopting family planning.

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