



Gender-based Livelihood Decisions among Tribal Agricultural Laborers in Wayanad District of Kerala, India

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural workers are among the most overlooked in rural India, facing low income, irregular employment, and harsh working conditions that impact their health. Many belong to scheduled castes and tribes, facing social marginalization and limited opportunities. Their lack of organization further weakens their ability to demand better conditions and rights. In Kerala, the *Paniyas* are the largest tribal community, mainly residing in Wayanad. Mostly landless or marginal landowners, they depend on agricultural wage labour for survival. Gender inequality is widespread, with women often receiving lower wages and facing unstable work conditions. This study conducts a comprehensive gender analysis of decision-making among tribal agricultural labourers, using a modified procedure developed by Paul (2014). The study analyzed 120 households, selecting 60 male and 60 female tribal agricultural labourers at random. The study found that 68.33% of male respondents lacked

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control over decisions related to borrowing, such as loan sources, repayment, and amounts. In contrast, 36.67% of women reported full control in these areas. Notably, none of the men had authority over savings or capital transactions, while 63.33% of women independently decided on savings, including the amount and source. Overall, decisions on household management, child care, and finances were mainly made by women, often followed by joint decisions. Men's involvement was limited, largely due to a perceived lack of interest in family matters. The data highlights women's key role in managing household and family affairs, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive policies that support their contributions. These findings offer valuable guidance for interventions aimed at uplifting tribal agricultural laborers, ensuring gender considerations are effectively addressed in practice.

Keywords: Tribal labourers; gender analysis; decision making; livelihood.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whenever farming is undertaken, the most pressing issue expressed by farmers is the availability and wages of agricultural labourers. These workers play significant roles in farming, particularly hired labourers who are largely involved in crucial activities that make up the bulk of production processes. This situation is common in almost all Asian countries, especially in India. Through employment generation and labour markets, agricultural labourers are a major factor in the sustainability of cultivation. However, these workers are often barely recognized and usually fade into the background (Yadav et al., 2021).

According to the National Commission on Labour, "an agricultural labourer is one who is basically unskilled and unorganized and has little for their livelihood other than personal labour." Agricultural labourers constitute the most neglected class in India's rural structure. Their income is low, and employment is irregular. Since they possess no skills or training, they have no alternative employment opportunities. Socially, many agricultural labourers belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, making them a suppressed class. They are not organized and cannot fight for their rights (Sarin & Gopalakrishnan, 2022). Due to all these reasons, their economic conditions have failed to improve even after four decades of planning.

In Kerala, the *Paniyas* are the largest tribal community, primarily located in the Wayanad district. Mostly landless or marginal landowners, their survival depends on agricultural wage labour. Socio-economic development indicators show they lag significantly behind other tribal and non-tribal communities. Due to economic and social disadvantages, they struggle to secure government jobs or education, leading to high

dropout rates. Renowned for their reliability in agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, the *Paniyas* are skilled in manual agricultural operations, including coffee plantations and growing tubers and vegetables. However, changes in land use, competition from non-tribal labourers, and mechanization have diminished their employment opportunities, increasing poverty and malnutrition. These changes also impacted their access to wild edibles, crucial to their diet.

Government efforts have fallen short due to the *Paniyas'* limited assets in human, social, natural, and financial capital. Specific interventions are needed to build these assets, promoting collective efforts and enhancing human resource capacity to improve their livelihoods. Women labour holds special significance in agricultural work, particularly among tribal communities. Women constitute a major portion of tribal agricultural labourers, playing a crucial role in rice farming operations such as transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and winnowing. In tribal societies, women are vital due to their hard work and central role in the family economy and management. The tribal woman's independence, influence over the traditional productive system, home, family, and maybe even life are all at risk because of this process of transformation (Shukhija & Mishra, 2022). Even with industrialization, women remain essential, collecting minor forest produce, working in industries, households, and construction to support their families. They spend considerable time gathering fuel wood, lac, honey, silk cocoon, medicinal herbs, and fruits, often selling any surplus, blurring the line between household and commercial activities.

Tribal women in India are hardworking than tribal men and they contribute significantly towards their family income but their income generating

sources are limited. Low income necessitates more hands in labour as a result they are reluctant to send their children to formal schools. Moreover due to general low level of education their awareness level is also low and so they tend to ignore the basic conditions of health (Chatterjee, 2014).

It was reported that gender discrimination is prevalent among tribal labourers and women are forced to work for lower wages (Sachana & Anilkumar, 2017). They are unaware of their relative poverty and, they were oblivious to their developmental needs. The major constraints identified in the case of females were, inaccessibility of support from government, unequal wage structure, crop damage due to animal attack, domestic violence, and alcoholism (Balakrishnan *et al.*, 2018).

Although tribal women play a crucial role in supporting household income, there is a lack of gender-disaggregated data to quantify their economic contributions compared to men. The study touches on educational barriers but does not explore gender disparities in school dropout rates or the long-term consequences of child labor. Health awareness is generally low among tribal women, yet the study lacks specific insights into their health challenges and access to healthcare. Moreover, the voices and lived experiences of these women are absent, limiting the depth of understanding. While government support is said to be inaccessible, the study does not examine specific policy gaps or failures in implementation. Issues like domestic violence and alcoholism are acknowledged but not analyzed for their impact on women's mental health and economic participation. Additionally, the role of women in agricultural decision-making, land rights, and access to credit remains underexplored. The regional focus on Wayanad restricts broader generalization, and no comparative insights from other tribal areas are provided. The study also overlooks intersectional differences among tribal women based on age, sub-tribe, or marital status. Finally, there is little attention to skill development, technological empowerment, or livelihood diversification, which are vital for sustainable economic upliftment.

A comprehensive gender analysis of decision-making among tribal agricultural laborers can highlight the issues faced by tribal women laborers, particularly in the Wayanad district. This study aims to shed light on these challenges and identify potential solutions. The findings from this

gender analysis are expected to serve as valuable guidelines for planned interventions aimed at the upliftment of tribal agricultural laborers, ensuring that gender considerations are effectively addressed and implemented at the field level.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was confined to the Wayanad district of Kerala, chosen for its significant tribal population and status as the homeland of some of the most primitive and smallest tribal communities on the Indian mainland. Wayanad has the highest tribal concentration in the state, making it an ideal location for this research. To conduct the gender analysis of livelihood status in decision-making among tribal agricultural labourers, a modified procedure developed by Paul (2014) was employed. The study randomly selected 60 male and 60 female tribal agricultural labourers from different households, resulting in a total of 120 households being analysed. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics affecting the livelihoods and decision-making processes of tribal agricultural labourers in the region.

Decision-making is operationally defined as the ability of an individual to make decisions on various situations and issues related to home, budget, children, finances, and socio-religious matters. It was measured using a three-point continuum scale: full control (scored as 3), partial control (scored as 2), and no control (scored as 1). For men, if their spouse made the decision in a particular area, a score of 1 was given. If both male and female jointly made the decision, a score of 2 was given, indicating partial control. If the man had full decision-making power, a score of 3 was assigned. Similarly, for women, if their spouse made the decision, a score of 1 was given. If the decision was made jointly, a score of 2 was given, and if the woman had full decision-making power, a score of 3 was assigned. The gathered data were scored and analyzed using frequency, percentage, descriptive statistics, and graphical representation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The decision-making abilities of male and female tribal agricultural laborers were studied and described in areas such as home management, household budget, child-related decisions, borrowing loans, savings and other capital transactions, and socio-religious obligations (Table 1).

Table 1. Gender analysis on decision making

Decision related areas	Men (n=60) (Per cent)						Women (n=60) (Percent)					
	Full		Partial		No		Full		Partial		No	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Home management												
Cooking a particular food	0	0.00	0	0.00	60	100.00	56	93.33	4	6.67	0	0.00
Construction of a new house	33	55.00	27	45.00	0	0.00	14	23.33	32	53.33	14	23.33
Repairing and renovation of existing home	33	55.00	27	45.00	0	0.00	13	21.67	32	53.33	15	25.00
Household budget												
Amount spent on consumption (Food grains/ Milk, meat, tea, coffee etc./ Fruits & vegetables)	8	13.33	22	36.67	30	50.00	39	65.00	21	35.00	0	0.00
Purchasing necessary items (Buying clothing / household items/ household durables)	8	13.33	22	36.67	30	50.00	20	33.33	31	51.67	9	15.00
Expenditure on health care for family members	6	10.00	34	56.67	20	33.33	42	70.00	18	30.00	0	0.00
Expenditure on festivals & special occasions	9	15.00	33	55.00	18	30.00	36	60.00	24	40.00	0	0.00
Child related												
Deciding on the age of schooling	6	10.00	22	36.67	32	53.33	43	71.67	10	16.67	7	11.67
Level of education	6	10.00	15	25.00	39	65.00	28	46.67	9	15.00	23	38.33
Type of institution (Government, Private)	6	10.00	20	33.33	34	56.67	37	61.67	12	20.00	11	18.33
Marriage age of son/ daughter	3	5.00	11	18.33	46	76.67	11	18.33	25	41.67	24	40.00
Amount to be spent on marriage expenses	20	33.33	29	48.33	11	18.33	43	71.67	17	28.33	0	0.00
Borrowing loans												
Decision on taking loans	5	8.33	14	23.33	41	68.33	22	36.67	20	33.33	18	30.00
Sources of loans (Banks/ money lenders/ friends & relatives)	5	8.33	14	23.33	41	68.33	22	36.67	20	33.33	18	30.00
Decision on repaying	5	8.33	14	23.33	41	68.33	22	36.67	20	33.33	18	30.00
Amount to be taken	5	8.33	14	23.33	41	68.33	22	36.67	20	33.33	18	30.00
Savings and other capital transactions												
Deciding on saving	0	0.00	0	0.00	60	100.00	38	63.33	5	8.33	17	28.33
Amount to be saved	0	0.00	0	0.00	60	100.00	38	63.33	5	8.33	17	28.33
Sources of savings (Banks/ SHGs/ Chit fund companies)	0	0.00	0	0.00	60	100.00	38	63.33	5	8.33	17	28.33
Socio- religious obligations												
Attending marriage/ birth/ death ceremonies	14	23.33	39	65.00	7	11.67	17	28.33	42	70.00	1	1.67
Attending religious functions	14	23.33	39	65.00	7	11.67	14	23.33	42	70.00	1	1.67
Kind and amount of charity/donations to be given	14	23.33	39	65.00	7	11.67	17	28.33	42	70.00	1	1.67

It was observed that none of the male respondents had decision-making authority over cooking particular foods. However, the majority (55%) had full decision-making power regarding the construction of a new house and the repair or renovation of an existing home. In contrast, a significant majority (93.33%) of female respondents made decisions about which food to cook each day. Additionally, about 53.33% of women had partial decision-making authority concerning the construction of a new house and the repair or renovation of their current home. These findings highlight distinct gender roles in decision-making among tribal agricultural laborers, with men predominantly making decisions about significant household changes, while women manage daily household tasks. These verdicts bring into line with the studies by Rani & Singh (1983) and Bhattacharaya & Murmu (2019).

Regarding budgetary practices, decisions on the amount to be spent on food items were mostly in the hands of women. It was observed that 65% of the female respondents had full control over decisions related to food expenditure. When it came to purchasing necessary items, half of the male respondents had no decision-making authority, while half of the female respondents made these decisions jointly with other household members. Additionally, three-fourths of the women had full decision-making power regarding healthcare expenditure for family members. These findings align with a study by Hussein *et al.*, (2023), which reported that women predominantly make family healthcare decisions. Decisions related to expenditures during festivals and special occasions were mostly made jointly by both men and women. This data underscores the significant role women play in managing household finances, especially in areas critical to daily living and family well-being. The study highlights the gendered nature of financial decision-making among tribal agricultural laborers, with women taking a leading role in everyday budgetary practices and healthcare-related spending.

Most male respondents had no decision-making authority regarding their children's age of schooling, level of education, type of institution, and age at marriage. However, most reported that decisions regarding the amount to be spent on marriage expenses were made jointly with female family members. These findings align with a study by Hussein *et al.*, (2023) which found that men often led decisions regarding children's marriage issues. Fathers/ male guardians are the

primary decision makers as to when a girl gets married and to whom.

In contrast, most female respondents had full control over decisions related to their children's education and upbringing. This includes determining the appropriate age for schooling, the level of education to pursue, the type of educational institutions to attend, and the age at which their children should marry. Women also played a crucial role in managing daily and significant expenditures, including those related to their children's needs. This disparity highlights the gendered dynamics of decision-making within tribal agricultural households. While men tend to share authority in major financial decisions, such as marriage expenses, women predominantly manage decisions about their children's education and upbringing. This underscores the pivotal role women play in shaping their children's futures and the overall well-being of their families. Efforts to support these communities must consider these dynamics to create effective, gender-sensitive interventions.

It was reported that more than half (68.33%) of the male respondents had no control over decisions regarding borrowing loans, choosing the source of the loan, repayment of debts, and the amount to be borrowed. In comparison, women demonstrated greater decision-making ability in these areas, with about 36.67% of female respondents having full control over loan-related decisions. Interestingly, none of the male respondents had decision-making authority regarding savings and other capital transactions. In contrast, a majority (63.33%) of female respondents made individual decisions about savings, including the amount to be saved and the source of the savings. This indicates a significant gender disparity in financial decision-making, with women playing a more prominent role in managing savings and loan activities. These findings highlight the critical role women play in the financial management of tribal agricultural households. Women not only have significant influence over everyday household expenses but also take the lead in critical financial decisions such as borrowing and saving. This suggests that empowering women through financial literacy programs and providing them with more resources could further enhance the economic stability of these households. The data underscores the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in financial planning and support for tribal communities to ensure that both men and women can contribute effectively to their family's financial well-being.

Table 2. Analysis of variance between decision making and gender

Source of Variation	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F-value	P-value	F-critical value
Between Groups	6840.3	1	6840.3	287.2882	2.10E-33*	3.921478
Within Groups	2809.56	118	23.80989			
Total	9649.86	119				

NS: Non-Significant, *: significance at 0.05 level

Table 3. t-test for decision making and gender

t-grouping	Men	Women
Mean	13.91	29.01
Variance	20.04	27.57
Observations	60	60

The study showed that the majority of both men (65%) and women (70%) respondents participated in decisions related to socio-religious obligations, such as attending marriage, birth, and death ceremonies, religious functions, and determining the kind or amount of charity or donations to be given as a family. However, only a small percentage of men (23.33%) and women (28.33%) had the ability to make individual decisions regarding socio-religious activities.

In the total sample, decisions regarding household management, child-related matters, and financial activities were predominantly made by women, often followed by joint decisions. Men played a lesser role in most household decisions, largely due to their perceived negligence towards family matters. It was reported that among the poorest households, women showed a greater tendency for spending household cash on food-items as compared to the maleheaded households (Kamath, 2015). Overall, the data underscores the significant role women play in managing both daily and critical aspects of household and family life, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive policies that recognize and support women's contributions to family and community well-being.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted between men and women tribal agricultural labourers with respect to the decision making. From the Table 2, it was revealed that the P-value (2.10E-33) was found to be significant at 0.05 per cent level of significance. This showed that there exists significant variation between means of decision making and means of any one gender, which means either tribal men or women agricultural labourers had better decision-making abilities.

To know the degree of variation between decision making ability among genders, t-test was performed at 0.05 per cent level of significance (Table 3). The results showed that women had greater individual decisions than men. It was noted that readiness of women members to take up most of the family affairs within their ability makes them better decision makers than men.

The results mentioned earlier in the form of frequency and percentages were in accordance with the statistical test (ANOVA) performed. The vital participation of women in decision making about home management, household budget and financial obligations might be the major reasons for higher resource control and decision-making power among women labourers. It was also found that they had better choice in family affairs like child preference, education requirement, occupation etc.

Addictions to alcohol and other drugs were major issues among male tribal agricultural labourers, leading to unhealthy lives, domestic violence, family breakdown, child neglect, loss of income, and early mortality. This placed a heavy burden on their spouses and children, forcing women to take on most family responsibilities. A gender-based division of labour, both paid and unpaid, exists in nearly all societies, with the nature of work differing by place and time (Tinker, 2009). Therefore, economic, and cultural analyses must consider class, race, and other structural variables alongside gender. Addressing poverty and malnutrition among tribal agricultural labourers requires building human resource capacity and creating an environment that supports the accumulation of capital assets to sustain their livelihoods. By challenging

traditional gender roles, we can foster healthier and more balanced relationships within households' activities. Both genders have been treated equally in both financial and household decision making activities (Acharya, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

To enhance the allocation of productive resources between men and women, tribal agricultural labourers should receive targeted education and training. Encouraging women to engage in income-generating activities and creating a foundation of essential assets and resources for them can significantly increase their access to and control over productive resources, thereby improving their overall quality of life. In this context, the establishment of self-help groups (SHGs) among tribal women aims to promote savings and capital transactions. SHGs provided a means for women to aggregate monthly savings into amounts that formed the basis for small internal loans (Kocher *et al.*, 2022) These SHGs provide a platform for women to pool their resources, access microcredit, and invest in small businesses or agricultural ventures. Additionally, the mission offers vocational training tailored to the needs and skills of tribal women, enabling them to enhance their livelihoods through diversified income streams. Moreover, SHG initiatives are designed to inculcate leadership and decision-making skills among women labourers. By empowering women with the knowledge and skills necessary to manage their finances and make informed decisions, these programs help build confidence and autonomy. This holistic approach not only improves the economic status of women but also strengthens their role within the household and community, fostering gender equality and sustainable development in tribal areas. The current approach may not fully account for deeply rooted socio-cultural barriers that hinder women's sustained engagement in income-generating activities, such as patriarchal norms, mobility restrictions, and time poverty due to household responsibilities. Additionally, the effectiveness of SHGs and vocational programs may vary across different tribal communities, and there is limited empirical evidence on their long-term impact on asset ownership, income growth, and gender dynamics within households. Access to markets, digital literacy, and infrastructural support also remain underexplored in this context. Future studies should conduct longitudinal and comparative analyses to evaluate the sustained impact of these

interventions across various tribal regions. Furthermore, integrating participatory research methods to capture women's lived experiences and incorporating intersectional perspectives will offer a more nuanced understanding of how caste, age, education, and marital status intersect with tribal identity to shape access to resources and empowerment outcomes.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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