



The Role of Rural Women in Family Welfare: Education, Agriculture, and Cultural Norms in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the role of rural women in enhancing family welfare through their participation in both agricultural and non-agricultural activities. The data for this research were collected through primary sources, specifically using questionnaires. The study focuses on identifying the factors influencing women's employment and their contributions to welfare in the livestock, handicraft, and agricultural sectors. The findings reveal that personal factors such as marital status, number of children, and education significantly and positively impact women's employment levels. In contrast, factors such as family support and property ownership do not appear to significantly increase women's participation. The results indicate that rural women are more actively involved in agriculture compared to other sectors, which is consistent with prior research. The study suggests that future research should adopt a comparative approach with a broader scope to provide more comprehensive insights. The findings of this study can inform policymakers, helping them design targeted strategies for empowering women and enhancing their participation, while considering the specific social and relational dynamics in rural areas.

1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of gender and economics originates from theoretical frameworks that remain underdeveloped within the field of economic sociology. However, with the incorporation of concepts such as utility and benefit, the significance of women's role in the family economy has gained increased scholarly attention (Camerer, 2011). Established theories on the role of women in family welfare emphasize two distinct aspects: the availability of household resources and the allocation of those resources. Regarding the first aspect, while it has been shown that women generally possess fewer resources than men due to factors such as limited experience, education, and access to technology, they are nonetheless more effective in resource allocation (DeGraff & Bilsborrow, 1993). Women's contribution to managing the family economy is not limited to child-rearing and nurturing responsibilities. Their involvement in social and economic activities plays a pivotal role in enhancing the overall management and efficiency of household resources (Zeinivand, 2014). World Bank research on coastal regions of Africa emphasizes the essential role of women in the agricultural sector, with women responsible for nearly 93% of diverse agricultural activities (WB, 2009). In contrast, reports on women's participation in Afghanistan's rural labor market indicate one of the lowest rates globally, with only 19% of women engaged in the workforce (Leao et al., 2017).

Women form the essential pillar of rural economies; however, this critical demographic is often relegated to low-status, labor-intensive roles, accompanied by disproportionately low wages and limited benefits (Junussova, 2019). Despite their substantial contributions in labor reproduction and household management, there has been little corresponding advancement in their social standing or recognition (Vafa'i & Torkarani, 2015). According to the International Labour Organization's reports in Afghanistan, the average daily wage for rural women is 87 Afghanis, compared to 289 Afghanis for men (Dasgupta, Anhal, & Bhatnagar, 2019).

In traditional societies, men assume significant responsibilities in fulfilling the family's needs, while women are primarily engaged in managing the household, child-rearing, and collecting water and firewood (Jabeen et al., 2020). In such societies, men perceive that by performing these roles, they uphold their honor and dignity (Beath, Christia, &

Enikolopov, 2013). It is important to recognize that the decision-making process, agency, and bargaining power of women are closely linked to their property rights, as well as their social and familial environment and public policies (Hamidzada, 2019).

In Afghanistan, the majority of rural women simultaneously carry out both household and agricultural-livestock duties. Due to traditional and socio-cultural barriers, they are unable to engage in work outside the home, which impedes the realization of their potential. As a result, they face limitations in areas such as education, autonomy, asset control, and family decision-making. This situation highlights the fact that the success of nations is closely tied to the status and advancement of women, not only because they constitute half of the population but also because their progress positively influences the entire country (Yasmin & Ikemoto, 2015).

2. METHODOLOGY

The statistical population of this study consists of the villages within the administrative units of Pulkhumri, Dahna-e-Ghori, and Dushi in Baghlan province, with rural women as the units of analysis. Based on the NSIA, the total population for this study was 150 individuals. To estimate the sample size, Cochran's formula was applied, resulting in a sample size of 107 participants. Data were collected through questionnaires and a series of interviews conducted within the selected communities. It is important to note that the research areas were chosen using simple, accessible cluster sampling. Furthermore, the validity and reliability of the variables were evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, utilizing SPSS software for the analysis, and the results are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: CRONBACH'S ALPHA TEST RESULTS

SAMPLE SIZE	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
47	0.850

2.1. Introduction of the Model and Research Data

The data analyzed in this study, focusing on women's participation and their welfare role in families, were prepared using a standardized questionnaire and examined through two separate equations. The research community comprises four villages in Pul-e-Khumri and Doshi Districts of Baghlan Province. These villages were selected through simple cluster sampling. Given the uncertain population in these villages, estimating the variance was challenging. Therefore, the sample size of 107 was determined using the Cochran formula. Due to technical and cultural challenges, not all questionnaires were collected; however, data were successfully gathered through interviews with 101 respondents. The first model evaluates the factors influencing rural women's employment, estimated using the Poisson distribution. The second model assesses the welfare effects of women's participation, estimated using the Ordered-Probit model. It should be noted that the study's data are cross-sectional and ordinal. Initially, descriptive statistics were discussed, followed by inferential analyses.

2.2. Model 1

This model examines rural women's employment status and factors such as age, number of children, education level, husband's income, and family wealth, which determine women's share of work or employment. The dependent variable (EP_i) includes job categories (farmer, livestock raiser, laborer, artisan, employee in non-governmental organizations) and other options based on variable characteristics. For instance, the education level variable (edu) encompasses illiterate, primary school, high school, and bachelor's degree levels. The age variable includes individuals aged 15 to 55, divided into four age groups. The husband's income and family wealth variables are considered external factors.

$$EP_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 y_i + \alpha_2 edu_i + \alpha_3 c_i + \alpha_4 in_i + u_i \quad (1)$$

2.3. Model 2

This model examines the welfare impact of women's economic activities. The dependent variable is family economy, estimated based on explanatory variables such as livestock raising, farming, and handicrafts.

$$Y_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 x_i + \alpha_2 x_i + \alpha_3 x_i + u_i \quad (2)$$

Where: Y_i is Women's income (dependent variable), α_i is model parameters indicating the influence of each independent variable on the dependent variable, and x_i is independent variables (livestock, farming, handicrafts)

3. Model Estimation

3.1. Descriptive Results

Based on the findings of this study, married women who make up the majority of the sample are predominantly characterized by low levels of education or complete illiteracy. Their employment is mainly confined to labor-intensive and low-status occupations. In contrast, unmarried women tend to have higher education levels and are generally engaged in lighter work. This pattern is consistent with previous research, which has often categorized women's roles in the workforce as secondary (Ghosh, 2003). Education is a significant determinant of women's employment opportunities, as highlighted in numerous studies. For instance, Marina Hamidazada (2019) clearly illustrates that lower education levels diminish the potential of rural women, pushing them toward hidden and unpaid labor. The welfare participation of women is particularly prominent in agricultural activities (approximately 50%), livestock farming (30%), and handicrafts (20%). These roles encompass various demanding tasks such as milking, dairy production, weeding, firewood collection, spinning, and other labor-intensive activities. Additionally, empirical studies widely assert that ethnic behaviors and tribal cultures in rural areas, in conjunction with the wealth of households, significantly influence the type of labor whether strenuous or lighter women are engaged in (Ziaee, 2019).

3.2. Inferential Results (Normality Test, Correlation, and Spearman's Correlation Coefficient)

Given the non-parametric nature of the questionnaire variables, normality tests were conducted. Subsequently, the correlation coefficient was used to analyze relationships between variables. The results show weak to moderate correlations. For instance, marriage, the number of children, and the husband's income have an indirect relationship with women's employment and women's education, and fewer children significantly increase employment opportunities.

TABLE 2: SPEARMAN CORRELATION COEFFICIENT

VARIABLE	Internal Factors	External Factors
EMPLOYMENT	Marriage	Education Level
COEFFICIENT	-0.19	0.324
SIGNIFICANCE	0.849	0.001

3.3. Model Estimation

3.3.1. Poisson Regression Estimation

The Poisson distribution was used to estimate women's employment factors. This method is suitable for count-dependent variables (0 ,1 ,2 ...). The Wald test result (-0.066588) confirms the Poisson model's suitability.

TABLE 3: POISSON REGRESSION RESULTS FOR MODEL 1

VARIABLE	Probability *	Z-Statistic	Coefficient
AGE	0.0981	-1.654300	-0.124929
NUMBER OF CHILDREN	0.0196	2.334711	0.157144
HUSBAND'S INCOME	0.8163	-0.232294	-0.011603
EDUCATION	0.0032	2.947502	0.238281
WEALTH	0.5844	0.546970	0.084327
INTERCEPT	0.5034	0.669226	0.278102

*Indicates (5%) level of significance

Variables such as age and husband's income negatively influence women's employment, while other variables have positive impacts.

3.3.2. Ordered-Profit Model Estimation

The Ordered-Profit model was used to assess the welfare impact of women's economic activities (farming, livestock, handicrafts) on the family economy.

Table 4: Ordered-Probit Model Results

Variable	Probability	Z-Statistic	Coefficient
Farming	0.0360	2.096974	0.490923
Livestock	0.2977	-1.041403	-0.167680
Handicrafts	0.3712	0.894186	0.110976

As observed, Table 4 evaluates the family welfare model influenced by the three primary activities undertaken by women within the household. According to the table, the final effects of the model indicate that a one-unit increase in women's agricultural income significantly enhances family welfare, exceeding the average impact. Women have contributed to a probable welfare improvement of over 160%.

This estimation demonstrates that women involved in agricultural or farming activities have had a substantial effect on the family economy. With a 95% confidence level, women have established an economic relationship, creating a 49% likelihood of enhancing welfare levels. However, livestock farming has shown no positive impact; instead, its negative effect indicates no meaningful relationship with family welfare. Additionally, a one-unit increase in income from handicrafts can result in an 11% rise in family income.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Economic participation of women, particularly in disadvantaged areas such as rural regions, remains a critical and complex issue that has prompted both domestic and international researchers to investigate various factors, including motivational drivers, barriers, challenges, participation rates, and the overall welfare impact of women's involvement. Despite the broad range of perspectives on the factors influencing women's participation in global research, the findings of this study indicate that women engaged in agriculture, especially those with more children, can make a more substantial

contribution to family welfare. While the widespread participation of women in agricultural activities aligns with findings from international studies, the number of children in households as a motivational factor for business participation does not correspond with global research. In contrast, other studies have suggested that childbearing often hinders mothers' employment, particularly in physically demanding roles (Joshil, 1996; Waite, 1976).

Furthermore, based on the findings of this study, which focused on the welfare impacts of women's economic participation, previous research has predominantly concentrated on the occupational factors influencing women in rural Afghanistan. Although the role of a husband's income or family assets did not show a significant relationship in this study, it has not been utilized as an independent variable in other research.

The field study faced significant challenges in data collection due to cultural constraints, inadequate resources, incomplete responses, mistrust of the researcher, and access issues. However, the findings demonstrated that education had the most substantial impact on women's employment opportunities. The research further revealed that, with 60% of women being illiterate or semi-literate, they are predominantly engaged in low-return activities, such as firewood collection and washing, as opposed to more productive tasks like dairy production. These results are consistent with similar studies (Saida, Samani, & Poursaeid, 2017). Additionally, while the contribution of women's income from handicrafts appears marginal compared to agricultural activities, the relatively lighter, cleaner, and more accessible nature of such work leads to greater participation from educated women. This observation is supported by research that establishes a correlation between the lower status of jobs and the manner in which labor is supplied (Jabeen et al., 2020).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to assess the contributions of rural women to family welfare, recognizing their often invisible labor. The findings indicate that rural women, through their hard work, particularly in agriculture, significantly contribute to their families' well-being. As women age, they show a decreasing interest in external employment, preferring to stay at home, and this tendency is further amplified by higher education, which opens up more career opportunities for them.

However, the cultural norm of childbearing remains an unavoidable and essential factor for women, and any deviation from this norm may be culturally stigmatized. It appears that the income from a husband's earnings, inheritance, or family assets has no substantial impact on women's participation in employment.

These results suggest the need for a fundamental shift in how women's labor is perceived, particularly in rural settings. Additionally, improving access to resources, awareness programs, and increasing educational opportunities for rural women could greatly enhance their economic participation.

6. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

▪ Practical Recommendations

Local institutions can establish skill development workshops to enhance the empowerment of rural women. Cultural and economic development organizations in rural areas should focus on creating participatory institutions to improve women's access to resources and markets. Additionally, cultural awareness campaigns aimed at shifting traditional mindsets toward gender equality should be considered as a key national and local policy in rural regions. National organizations can provide increased support to rural women by strengthening infrastructure and offering essential services. International institutions should prioritize financing and providing technical support for development and entrepreneurship projects, as well as facilitating access to global markets and offering technological training to enhance women's employment opportunities. Cooperation and coordination among local, national, and international organizations, particularly with the capacity to effect meaningful changes in the economic, social, and cultural conditions of rural women, will lead to positive outcomes, especially when policies are crafted based on the specific needs of each region and focused on sustainable empowerment.

▪ Research Recommendations

In addition to broadening the scope of research and geographical areas, it is crucial to systematically examine the ethical, cultural, and spousal dynamics that influence women's participation and its subsequent impact.

Future studies could adopt a comparative approach, evaluating the variations across different regions of Afghanistan to underscore the regional differences and their implications for women's economic participation.

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Authors Contributions:

Author 1 (First Author): Conceptualization of the research idea, design of the study, data collection, data analysis, and drafting of the manuscript.

Author 2 (Second Author – Supervisor): Academic supervision, critical feedback, guidance throughout the research process, and final approval of the manuscript.

Author 3 (Third Author – Colleague): Literature review support, manuscript review, editing, and language refinement.

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