

Punjab plans create few rural jobs: Study

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CHANDIGARH: The farm-centric central and state policies are inadequate to promote rural employment in Punjab, for women especially, independent research at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh has concluded.

Programmes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) don't help much, while the dependence on cities leads to urban-rural inequalities and the exclusion of those who can't travel. Research economists Ashapura Baruah and Indervir Singh's study of rural women's job participation in Punjab is part of the policy series of Punjabi University's centre for development economics and innovation studies in Patiala.

The researchers say that even if these policies could achieve a high growth in the agricultural sector, the accompanying higher mechanisation is unlikely to generate jobs year round in the villages. Punjab's rural households get just 31 days of work under MGNREGS. Even if the government could achieve the target of 100 days' work, it will be just one-third of the year. Migration and daily commute to the cities also cannot solve this problem, since it's hard for the village women to leave home for work.

Women lost more

The government's Covid-19 plans have done little to find rural women some jobs. Focused on creating growth in the urban formal sector, the policies ignore women's working conditions as well.

The Covid-19-induced shortage of labour for paddy cultivation in Punjab has given mechanisation a big push and, perhaps, lowered the demand for farm hands permanently. Rural women, with little skills to fit into any sector except agriculture, will be affected the most. In the lockdown, they lost 20% more jobs than men. National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO-2019) found that the women's workforce of rural Punjab had earned far less in the year 2017-18 as well. Even self-employed and regular paid women earn 35 to 70% less than rural men.

Guarantee doesn't work

Among all relief packages, additional money for MGNREGS is the lone measure for rural employment. In the financial year 2019-20, the job guarantee plan delivered 48.4 days of work to each covered household for a cost of Rs 68,020 crore. This money can add only 28 days of work, while the benefit is likely to be smaller for Punjab.

In the year 2019-20, Punjab received 1.1% of the total money for 2.1% of India's rural population. It provided for 31.2 days of work to each covered family, 36% below the national average. The study says: "Assuming a similar allocation, 100% utilisation, and no additional job-seeking household, even 18 more days will be optimistic estimate for all that extra

money, as given the state of economy, it is unlikely that no new household will seek work under MGNREGS.” Moreover, the extra money is temporary, with no effect on sustaining jobs and women’s income.

The way forward

For a sustainable solution, the study recommends focusing Punjab’s economic policy on creating infrastructure and businesses in the villages. It calls for quick clearance to the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in these areas and preference to the industries that hire women.

The businesses that use unskilled and semi-skilled labour after short training may like to invest in the villages if they get infrastructure and incentives. Policies like increasing the work hours from 8 to 10 are likely to discourage women’s employment. The study says the governments are using the same set of policies to fight the economic fallouts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite being partners in Punjab economy, women continue to get a raw deal from the planners.