

## TAPPING LABOUR SHORTAGE AND THE STALEMATE IN FEMALE LABOUR PARTICIPATION: A DISAGGREGATE LEVEL ANALYSIS OF RUBBER SMALLHOLDER SECTOR IN KERALA

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One of the major constraints faced by the rubber smallholder sector in Kerala is the growing shortage of rubber tappers. Increasing female labour participation is considered as one of the better options to address this issue. The present analysis reveals that the share of female labour in the total workforce of rubber tappers in the state was 7.5 per cent with notable regional variations. The study shows that the continuance of the lower female labour participation in the smallholder sector is more than a supply side issue with important socio-economic and region-specific aspects. Analysis of age and caste compositions of rubber tappers, tapping tasks and wage rates did not reveal any significant entry barrier for female rubber tappers across the regions. However, the unique socio-economic milieu encompassing tapping job in the smallholder sector, especially the smaller size of holdings, appears to be the critical barrier in ensuring adequate supply of female labour. Hence, any long-term policy has to consider the multi-dimensional aspects of the issue for promoting group approaches rather than implementing *ad hoc* measures for addressing the shortage of rubber tappers.

Keywords: Female tappers, Labour participation, Labour shortage, Rubber tappers, Smallholder sector, Tapping job

### INTRODUCTION

At the farm management level, one of the major constraints faced by the rubber smallholder sector in Kerala is the growing shortage of labour for harvesting the crop. Tapping is a labour intensive operation and accounts for 84 per cent of the total labour requirement during the mature phase (Burger *et al.*, 1995). Concerted efforts of the Rubber Board to address tapping labour shortage in the smallholder sector, which accounts for over 90 per cent of the total area

under natural rubber cultivation in the state, through a number of schemes such as tappers' training schools, tappers banks, welfare schemes for tappers and training people from North East India to be deployed in Kerala for NR harvesting had yielded only limited results. Technically, the labour shortage for harvesting rubber in the smallholder sector has been primarily perceived as a supply side issue in relation to the most popular tapping system, *viz.*, alternative daily tapping, with its

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