

Inflation and Its Effect on Rural Women

Prof.(Dr.)Meenakshi Sharma
Professor
Department of Political Science
Hindu Girls College
Moradabad, U.P.
Email:smeenakshi140@gmail.com

Hansaveni Agarwal
Student

Abstract

Inflation has always been part of economic policy discussions in India, yet its particular effects on rural women remain understudied and largely absent from mainstream debates. This paper looks at how rising prices, especially in food and household essentials, reshape the lives of rural women in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar between 2018 and 2024. Drawing on household surveys, Consumer Price Index data, and interviews with 180 rural women from eight villages, the study tries to bridge macroeconomic data with the more personal, everyday texture of women's experiences under inflationary pressure.

What the research consistently found is that inflation affects women in ways that aggregate statistics simply cannot capture. When food prices rise, women spend more hours managing households with less money, searching for cheaper substitutes, reducing their own food intake so others can eat, and absorbing unpaid labour that piles quietly onto already stretched days. Nutritional quality drops, dietary diversity shrinks, and women's bargaining position within households weakens, particularly in landless and marginal farming families. Borrowing from moneylenders, selling small assets, and pulling daughters from school emerged as common survival responses. The effects were noticeably sharper along caste and class lines.

The paper argues that treating inflation purely as a monetary policy question misses what it actually does to people. Inflation is a gendered social process, and any policy response that ignores this reality will continue to leave rural women worse off.

Keywords

Inflation, rural women, gender inequality, food security, time poverty, coping strategies, India

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Prof. (Dr.) Meenakshi Sharma
Hansaveni Agarwal

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Introduction

Inflation statistics are, by nature, abstractions. A headline figure of six or eight percent communicates something meaningful to economists and policymakers, but it says very little about what happens inside a household in rural Bihar when oil prices shoot up three weeks in a row. For rural families in India, where most income goes directly toward food and daily necessities, even a modest increase in prices is felt immediately and physically. The margin for absorption is thin.

Among those who feel this most acutely are rural women. They are not simply passive victims of economic trends. They are the people who keep households running, who decide, often daily, what gets cooked and what gets skipped, who borrows from whom, whose meal portion shrinks so a child can eat more. This paper is interested in that daily management under pressure, what it demands, what it takes from women, and what it reveals about inequality that inflation data does not bother to record.

Between 2018 and 2024, India went through several cycles of food price instability. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains and agricultural labour. Global commodity prices rose sharply in 2021 and 2022. Cooking fuel prices remained volatile. Cereal, vegetable, and edible oil costs climbed in ways that disproportionately pressed low-income rural households. Although national-level food inflation figures showed moderation at certain points, that moderation was not always reflected in village markets or in women's experience of buying groceries on limited budgets.

Existing scholarship on inflation in India concentrates heavily on monetary indicators, RBI policy responses, and urban consumption trends. Intra-household dynamics, particularly how economic pressure shifts labour burdens and decision-making power within families, rarely appear in this literature. This study tries to address that absence by focusing specifically on rural women in two North Indian states, using both quantitative survey data and detailed interviews to understand what inflation actually does, not just to household income, but to women's time, nutrition, autonomy, and sense of security.

Four questions guided the research. How does inflation affect food consumption and nutritional well-being among rural women? In what ways does rising inflation increase their unpaid workload and reduce economic participation? What coping strategies do women adopt during inflationary stress, and how do these shape their position within households? And are these experiences evenly distributed, or do caste, age, and land ownership create significantly different vulnerabilities?

Literature Review

The economics of inflation in India has been studied extensively, but almost always from above. The dominant analytical frame treats households as unified units with aggregate consumption preferences. This framing is useful for modelling price elasticity or estimating welfare losses, but it obscures what happens inside families when resources tighten. Feminist economics has long pointed out this gap. Bina Agarwal's work on intra-household bargaining, Diane Elson's theorisation of unpaid labour as an invisible subsidy to the formal economy, and Naila Kabeer's capability-based approach to women's agency all provide conceptual tools that mainstream inflation analysis tends to ignore entirely.

The concept of time poverty is particularly relevant here. Rural women in India are responsible for cooking, childcare, collecting water and fuel, caring for elderly family members, and often contributing to agricultural work as unpaid family labour. When food prices rise, more time is required to source cheaper inputs, to prepare more labour-intensive low-cost meals, and to manage household budgets under pressure. Time poverty worsens not because of any single dramatic event but through the slow accumulation of extra hours that have nowhere to go except into women's already full days.

Research on the 2007-08 global food price crisis documented similar patterns across South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Households reduced dietary diversity, shifted toward cheaper and less nutritious staples, and cut spending on healthcare and schooling. Women consistently absorbed a disproportionate share of adjustment, reducing their own consumption to protect children's intake and increasing unpaid labour to compensate for reduced purchasing power. These findings were replicated in studies of Indian households during the commodity price volatility of 2010-12.

Caste adds another layer of vulnerability that general gender analysis tends to miss. Dalit and Adivasi women in rural India face structural disadvantages in land ownership, access to welfare schemes, credit availability, and wage labour markets. During inflationary periods, these disadvantages become more acute. Households with fewer assets have less capacity to smooth consumption, and women in these households have weaker negotiating positions when resources are under pressure.

Several scholars have noted that inflationary shocks tend to shift control over household finances toward male earners, particularly in contexts where women lack independent income or ownership of productive assets. When money is scarce and tense, the person who earns it tends to control how it is spent. This dynamic, while difficult to quantify precisely, has been observed across multiple qualitative

studies of rural Indian households and appears consistently in the interview data collected for this paper.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods design, combining household survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews. Eight villages were selected across four districts: Prayagraj and Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, and Patna and Bhagalpur in Bihar. These states were chosen because of their large rural populations, high agricultural dependence, persistent poverty levels, and documented vulnerability to food inflation. Villages were selected to include households from multiple caste groups and different landholding categories.

A total of 360 households were surveyed, with 180 women respondents serving as the primary unit of analysis. In addition, 65 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women from different socio-economic backgrounds, and 15 key informant interviews were held with village elders, self-help group leaders, and local officials. Fieldwork took place between late 2023 and mid-2024.

Sampling was conducted in stages. Districts were selected purposively based on rural population size and evidence of food insecurity. Villages within districts were selected randomly. Within each village, households were identified through systematic random sampling using voter lists and land records. Only women aged 18 to 60 who had lived in the village for at least five years were included. The final sample included women from General, OBC, SC, and ST caste groups, as well as landless labourers, marginal farmers, and small farmers.

Secondary data included rural Consumer Price Index figures from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Reserve Bank of India inflation reports, NSSO consumer expenditure data, and National Family Health Survey rounds covering the study period. Food inflation above 6 percent per year was classified as a high-inflation period for the purpose of analysis.

Key variables measured included dietary diversity scores, daily hours of unpaid domestic labour, a household agency index measuring women's participation in decisions on food spending, healthcare, loans, and children's education, and coping strategies including borrowing, asset sales, reduced food intake, and changes in girls' schooling. Quantitative analysis was conducted using Stata, with descriptive statistics, regression models, and fixed-effects panel estimation where data permitted. Qualitative interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo. Ethical clearance was obtained before fieldwork, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Results

Rural Consumer Price Index data for the study period showed average annual food inflation of approximately 5.8 percent across the eight villages, with the sharpest rise in 2022 when rates touched 9.4 percent. Cereals, edible oil, vegetables, pulses, and cooking fuel drove most of the increase. Among surveyed households, average monthly food spending rose from around Rs. 3,200 during stable periods to approximately Rs. 4,450 during high-inflation phases, yet this additional expenditure did not translate into maintained nutritional quality. Households were spending more to eat worse.

Nearly 62 percent of the women respondents came from OBC or SC and ST communities. Around 48 percent belonged to landless or marginal farming households. The average age of respondents was 37 years.

The most consistent finding across both quantitative and qualitative data was a sharp decline in dietary diversity during inflationary periods. Average Dietary Diversity Scores fell from 6.2 food groups during low-inflation years to 4.1 during high-inflation phases. Women described reducing portion sizes, dropping vegetables and pulses from daily meals, and relying almost entirely on cheaper cereals. Roughly 54 percent of surveyed households reported that at least one family member had skipped meals or reduced food intake significantly during major price increases. Regression analysis showed that a one percent rise in food inflation was associated with a 0.28-point decline in dietary diversity, holding income, caste, education, and land ownership constant. Mothers of young children showed the severest nutritional impacts.

Inflation also measurably increased unpaid labour burdens. Average daily hours spent on domestic work and caregiving rose from 6.8 hours during stable periods to 8.4 hours when prices were high. Fixed-effects models attributed approximately 1.6 additional hours of daily unpaid work to high-inflation periods. Women described travelling farther to find cheaper vegetables, spending more time cooking less expensive meals that required more preparation, and managing household finances with greater anxiety and effort. The additional burden was steepest among landless households.

Women's agency within households declined noticeably during inflationary phases. The household agency index, scored out of ten, fell from an average of 5.9 during stable periods to 4.3 during high inflation. Only 31 percent of respondents reported having a significant role in household spending decisions during high-inflation periods, compared to 47 percent in relatively stable years. Women across multiple interviews explained that financial stress led male family members to take

over control of money and spending. The shift was rarely discussed openly within households but was widely experienced.

Coping strategies were varied. Borrowing from informal moneylenders was the most common response, reported by 41 percent of households. Around 29 percent sold small assets including livestock, jewellery, or household goods. In households with school-age daughters, approximately 18 percent withdrew girls temporarily from school or increased their domestic responsibilities. Many women also increased their participation in casual agricultural labour despite poor and irregular wages. SC and ST households showed significantly sharper declines across all outcome measures compared to upper-caste households.

The qualitative interviews gave texture to these patterns. Women described inflation not as a crisis moment but as a sustained, grinding pressure. One respondent from a village in Bihar said she woke earlier than before to work in the fields and then cooked whatever was cheapest that day. Some evenings the household ate roti with salt and chilli. She did not tell her husband how tired she was. A woman from Uttar Pradesh described how her husband had become short-tempered about household expenses as prices rose. Before, she had managed small decisions in the house herself. Now he controlled most spending. Younger mothers repeatedly mentioned their children's nutrition as their central anxiety. Words that appeared across many interviews were tension, pareshani, and kamzori.

Discussion

The findings confirm that inflation, while conventionally understood as a macroeconomic indicator, functions in practice as a social and gendered process. It does not distribute its effects evenly. Within rural households, women absorb a disproportionate share of the adjustment through self-sacrificed food consumption, additional unpaid labour, and reduced decision-making power, while contributing to household survival in ways that official data does not count or reward.

The decline in dietary diversity is among the most practically significant findings. Women who reduce their own nutritional intake to protect their children's consumption are making rational household decisions under irrational structural constraints. But the health consequences accumulate. Persistent anaemia, low energy, weakened immunity, and poor maternal nutrition among rural Indian women cannot be understood separately from these daily choices made under economic pressure. Inflation is one structural driver of these chronic conditions, but it rarely appears in public health discussions framed that way.

The increase in time poverty deserves more policy attention than it typically receives. One and a half additional hours of unpaid work per day, sustained over

months of high inflation, represents a significant and invisible loss of time that could otherwise go toward paid employment, rest, education, or participation in collective activities like self-help groups or village meetings. Women's economic participation and social voice are directly constrained by the unpaid labour demands that inflationary periods intensify.

The shift in household bargaining power during inflationary periods points to something that standard capability frameworks would call a reduction in women's substantive freedoms. When financial pressure leads to male control over spending decisions, women lose not just purchasing power but also the practical ability to exercise judgment over their own lives and their children's welfare. This is especially pronounced in households where women have no independent income, no ownership of land or assets, and limited access to institutional credit.

The significant differences across caste groups are a reminder that gender is never the only axis of inequality. Dalit and Adivasi women experience inflation's effects more severely not simply because they are women but because they are women in households that have fewer assets, weaker institutional connections, and less access to the safety nets that higher-caste households can sometimes draw on. Policy responses that treat rural women as a homogeneous group will miss this.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study examined how inflation shapes the everyday lives of rural women in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar across a six-year period marked by significant price volatility. The overall picture that emerges is of women who manage households under worsening conditions, who absorb most of the adjustment that rising prices require, and whose contributions to household survival remain largely invisible in the economic data that informs policy.

Five areas of policy response follow from the findings. First, the Public Distribution System needs strengthening, both in terms of coverage and in the nutritional range of subsidised goods. Women who are rationing meals during inflationary periods need reliable access to a broader basket of food items, not just cereals. Second, women's self-help groups and collective savings networks should receive greater institutional support and access to low-interest credit, which would reduce the dependence on informal moneylenders that currently traps many households in cycles of debt. Third, investments in rural infrastructure, clean water access, reliable cooking fuel, transport, and healthcare facilities, can meaningfully reduce time poverty by cutting the hours women spend on subsistence-related tasks. Fourth, inflation-indexed cash transfers and targeted nutritional support, particularly for pregnant women and mothers of young children, would provide some buffer

against the sharp dietary deterioration observed during high-inflation phases. Fifth, better gender-disaggregated data collection on time use and intra-household resource allocation is needed as a foundation for any of the above. Women's unpaid labour and self-sacrifice cannot continue to be invisible in the data that governments use to design economic policy.

Inflation is not simply a macroeconomic problem to be managed through interest rates and monetary targets. In rural India, it enters households through the price of onions and cooking oil, through the hours a woman spends looking for a cheaper market, through the meals she skips so her children can eat. Economic policy that ignores this reality does not just fail women. It fails to understand what the economy is actually doing.

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