Household and Agricultural Activities Participation among Landless Laborers: Gender Dimension

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Abstract: This paper focuses on questions related to division of labor by gender both for paid and unpaid work. The nature of specialized work done by women and men differs across the globe. In the present paper, a few case studies of men and women from the lower caste and landless agricultural laborers have been presented to depict their work pattern and day – to - day activities. The gender roles of men and women within a social context are effected by social environment and economic compulsions. The paper describes how work is distributed among men and women in production and unproductive work activities in the three villages selected for study which are from Punjab region of India.

Keywords: Gender roles, agricultural activities, division of work, household activities, daily routine

Introduction

In every human society since the dawn of civilization, women have been assigned certain roles such as wife, mother and daughter-in-law, based on gender specific division of labor. In traditional societies, women were almost confined to such gender roles. Generally they had no other role to play as the members of a community outside the home. They were expected to be totally obedient, self-sacrificing, and dependent while performing their gender roles. As Dube (1963) maintained, “In the traditional system a wife, had to obey her authoritarian and dominating husband. She had to regard him as her master and should serve him faithfully. The husband is superior, the wife is his subordinate.” (Dube, 1963:141)

Women were expected to satisfy the needs of their family members in their different roles, particularly as a house wife’s. As Indra (1955) writes, “She was to spend the whole day in considering matters entirely related to the house, was particularly to be attentive to the needs and desires of her lord-always subordinating her own comforts and convenience to his.” (Indra, 1955:30-1)

The likes and dislikes of women were totally neglected in relation to their role performance. They were only expected to perform according to the taste and will of their parents, husband and in-laws. Women were socialized in such a manner that they had strictly to accept and follow certain myths associated with their gender roles.

Gender role ideology encourages women to accept unequal workloads at home. Traditional role ideology defines childcare and housework as women’s responsibility while the role of men is defined in terms their being the family breadwinner. Consequently, women are unlikely to question arrangements which coincide with perceptions of men’s and women’s natural roles. Women may perceive the division of domestic labor as satisfactory if their partners are working outside. In other words, women may be satisfied if they see their partners contributing economically to the household in ways other than by performing domestic tasks.

Review of literature

Case studies typically examine the interplay of all variables in order to provide as complete an understanding of an event or a situation as possible. This type of comprehensive understanding is arrived at through a process known as thick description, which involves an in-depth description of the entity being evaluated, the circumstances under which it is used, the characteristics of the people involved in it, and the nature of the community in which it is located. Thick description also involves interpreting the meaning of demographic and descriptive data such as cultural norms and mores, community values, ingrained attitudes, and motives.

This is a practice derived from legal studies where a case is an event or set of events involving legal acts from the study of which the student derives both the principles and the practice of the law relevant to the case. In sociology, case study method is a holistic treatment of a subject whereby through the detailed examination of one instance information about a class of entities of which this is one may be obtained. (Bhushan 1989: 21)

“Case study is a method of exploring and analyzing the life of a social unit- be that unit a
person, a family, institution, culture group or even an entire community.” (P.V. Young, 1960: 229).

“The case study, then, is not a specific technique. It is a way of organizing social data so as to preserve the unitary character of the social object being studied” (Goode and Hatt, 1952: 331)

However, the pattern of gender division of labor varies in accordance with the socio-economic status of families. Mencher (1982) in a study of predominately landless households in a sample set of villages in Kenda in Tamil Nadu region demonstrated that women work for long hours, contributing all of their incomes for their household’s maintenance in the context of substantial poverty. Majumdar (1979) has maintained that while the economic roles of upper class women within agricultural societies are confined to processing the storage of agricultural products within the home, the landless lower class women are engaged in work labor and suffer from over- extended work days, poverty, malnutrition and perpetual insecurity.

Before describing the case studies in detail it is necessary to consider the productive and social roles of Punjabi rural women in the present socio-economic context. Generally, in the Punjabi families the role of women in agricultural activities has been quite insignificant as compared to the males. Moreover, the percentage of female workers is much higher in urban areas as compared to rural areas. However, most of the females are engaged in household work and that is why the proportion of ‘other female workers’ is the highest in Punjab as compared to other states of India. The lesser extent of female participation in agricultural work can be explained in terms of the unfavorable attitudes towards sending females to the fields, especially the unmarried girls as well as women belonging to groups of the higher socio-economic status. A number of studies like those of Sandhu (1976), Sethi (1982), Aggarwal (1989), Abbi and Singh (1997) and Rastogi (2000) have highlighted the withdrawal of women from agricultural activities, the under evaluation of various tasks performed by women, lower proportion of female workers in specified populations (F.L.P rates), socio-economic discrimination of women etc. however, most of these studies pertain to women of socio-economic groups of higher status.

Recently, there have been attempts to capture some of the evidence on unpaid work by women, through time-use surveys. These in general show not only that a very substantial amount of women’s time is devoted to unpaid labor, often at the cost of leisure and rest, but also that such unpaid labor may actually be increasing over time, especially in the past decade.

Methodology

In the present paper, a few case studies of males and females from the lower caste and landless agricultural laborers have been presented to depict their work pattern and day – to - day activities regarding agricultural and household chores in the villages under study namely Ditupur, Lang and Sular Gharat of Patiala District of Punjab. The data for the study was gathered using sociological, participatory, observational techniques. The houses those were ranked in the category of landless laborers were taken into account for in depth study. The sample was taken from same strata. The work patterns of every member of the household was taken into account including men, women and children. Informal interview, case study, and group discussions were used to generate information regarding the problem. Time to time observations were also done to find out gender roles.

i. The main objective of the study was to grasp and describe the gender division of labor as it exists in the different strata of agricultural households in the Malwa region of Punjab.

ii. The gender division of labor was studied in terms of time allocation for work and leisure for men and women.

iii. An attempt was made to ascertain if disparities exist in the way work is distributed between gender groups.

Division of Labor

Every human society is stratified on the biological basis i.e. of males and females. In every society there is some sort of division of work distributed among men and women. All societies have some division of labor based on age and sex but with the development of industrialization the division of labor becomes far more complex which affects many parts of the social cultural system. Life is generally organized around an implicit “social contract” Two of its components, the gender contract and the employment contract define the current division of family and labor market roles. Within the “gender contract”, women assume the bulk of the family care and domestic functions, while men are ascribed primary responsibility for the family’s economic or financial wellbeing. The “employment contract” reinforces this division of labor by defining as its norm the sole breadwinner and life-long employment. The social contract conflicts with the new reality of men and women’s lives. The division of labor by gender refers primarily to the segregation of paid and unpaid work between women and men in private and public life.
public life. This division reflects the traditional division of women’s work being often invisible and therefore undervalued in national accounts, and under-represented in the labor market.

In low economic households there is scarcity of food and other daily needs. They have to fulfill their needs by working hard in and outside home. They are always indulged in wage labor to fulfill their needs. Both men and women are indulged in labor work in the fields to earn their livelihood. During the plantation season maybe harvesting or sowing they work hard and put lot of time and effort. Both of them work in landlord’s house and the fields as well. They are paid in cash and kind as well time to time for their activities performed in the landlord’s house and fields.

**Gender division of labor:**

The division of work roles and tasks into those considered by any cultural system to be most suitable for men and most suitable for women is referred to as gender division of labor. The division of labor between women and men depends on the socioeconomic and cultural context, and can be analyzed by differentiating between productive and reproductive task. Productive tasks refer to work undertaken by either men or women to produce goods and services as well as the processing of primary products. Reproductive tasks refer to child bearing and the different activities carried out in what is called the “care economy”; namely, the many hours spent caring for the household members and the community, for fuel and water collection, food preparation, child care, education and health care, and care for the elderly. Women’s involvement in both productive and reproductive tasks means that they invariably work longer hours per day than men do. Women’s activities are often unpaid or take place in the informal sector not covered by labor legislation. As a result women’s work is also often excluded from national employment and income statistics.

**Division of Work in agricultural activities**

Men did most of the work in wheat and paddy cultivation with the help of agricultural laborers and by using tractors. Women were busy preparing food for the laborers and carrying food and water to the fields. In addition, they did some vegetable cultivation. Activities carried out by women in agricultural field are of sowing, weeding and transplanting of crops.

Men spent on an average three times as much time in cultivation and farm- work as compared to their wives. Much of paddy cultivation was done by hired laborers. When children grow up, it is especially the males who relax while the children share some of the duties with them. The households were also evaluated according to social status. Men of higher status had more land and spent time supervising the hired laborers. Their work was less heavy, but their total working time was about the same as that of less well-to-do farmers. The data reveal that most of the pre - harvesting operations, were carried out by men specially ploughing, sowing, watering and fertilization. The use of machinery is confined to the males but some of the task like weeding or removing stones from the field, winnowing, cleaning and storage of grains are done by women. On the other hand, tasks like ploughing, sowing, watering and fertilization are carried out by servants. Harvesting and threshing of wheat crop is shared by hired labor and the landlords.

**Case studies of Males**

The activities of males in the farm include irrigation of fields during the day and night as well, bringing in the fodder and feeding animals, cleaning the cattle shed, participating in agricultural activities like sowing, manuring, harvesting and threshing of crops etc. On an average they spend 10-12 hours in a day and even longer in the peak season.

They work as an agricultural laborer. Their day begins at 5 a.m. in the morning. According to them in summers they have to work more as compared to winters. In the months of June- July the transplantation of paddy is carried out so they had to put in hard labor. They firstly ploughs the fields and prepares it for transplantation of paddy. Due to electricity crisis in Punjab during the paddy season, sometimes they have to stay in the fields at night also, so that whenever there is electric supply, they can start the submersible to irrigate the fields.

In the morning firstly they goes to the landlords’ house and feeds the animals. Sometimes they have to cut the fodder for feeding the cattle. After having tea they leaves for the fields at around 6 a.m. and performs the field activities like ploughing, leveling the land with the help of tractors and then they take their morning meals which come from the landlord’s house it generally includes roti with lassi and pickle. After that they water the fields for paddy transplantation if the electricity is there then he immediately switch on the pump otherwise they had to wait for the electricity. After watering the fields they again ploughs the fields with tractor and then transplantation of paddy is carried out. They have to water the fields every day as this crop needs lot of water for good yield. In the afternoon they come back to the landlord’s house for mixing and
chaffing the fodder for the cattle and has food over there. They also gives bath to the cattle, sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the evening. Then again leaves for the fields and works there. Around 7 p.m. he go back to their house.

**Case no. 1**

Ishar Singh also works as a agricultural laborer in the fields. He wakes up at 4.30 a.m. in the morning. Firstly he goes to the landlord’s house. There he feeds the cattle and gives them a bath. He cleans the cattle shed and after that he takes tea in the house and leaves for the fields. In the fields he works for the preparation of land for cultivation. He waters the fields and sprays the chemicals to remove weeds from the fields. When the landlord ploughs the field with the tractor he follows him for the removal of extra stones or weeds from the fields.

> Kehra araam, kehri chaan, asi tan saara din khetean vich marde han. Khetan de kaman de naal –naal zimindaran de gharan nu vi jana painda hai, othe jaa ke vi kam karne painde han, bus aukhe sokhe guzara ho janda. Eh soch ke sabar kar laida hai ke kadi tan rabb saadi vi sunuga te saanu vi thoda bahuta araam miluga. (We work in the fields for full long day; we do not have any time for taking rest. While working in the fields we also go to the landlord’s house and work there also. One day God will listen to our prayers and we will also get some time for rest).

**Case no. 2**

Pammi works as an agricultural laborer in the fields. He is paid in cash as well as kind after harvesting. His day begins at 5.30 in the morning. He takes tea in the house and leaves for the fields. In the fields he works for the preparation of land for cultivation. He waters the fields and sprays the chemicals to remove weeds from the fields.

At the end of the talk he said: “mera tan sara din kheton de zimindar de ghar de kaman vich hi nikal janda hai. Bas sara din eho dhand pitde raedae tan jo chaar paise hath vich aa jaan te ghar da guzara hunda rave jinni zindgi ditti hai rabb ne isse taran hi nikal jaani hai.” (My whole day is spent in the fields as well as in the landlord’s house. We work just to get some money so that daily needs get satisfied. The whole life which has been given by the almighty will pass this way only).

**Case no. 3**

Baldev works as an agricultural laborer during the harvest of wheat and paddy and also during transplantation of paddy. Besides this, he works as a construction laborer. When asked about why he is working in the fields and as well as agricultural labourer he said: Ik passé kam karan naal guzara aukha hunda hai, naale kheton vich kam karan naal lod vehele sardar oori maddad vi kar dende ne (By working on one side needs are not satisfied and the other reason is that at the time of the need they help us also).

His day begins at 5.30 in the morning. He milks the domestic cattle which is kept to meet the family needs only. Then he takes breakfast and leaves for his work by 7.30 a.m. There he has to work whole day which lasts for 8-9 hours. Then by 6.30 in the evening he comes back home. On his way back home he takes liquor, sometimes on the way to home and sometimes at home. He told that whenever he drinks his wife fights with her he commented this way:

> Tivian tan har vehele ladan nu tayar hi rehndian han, sharab pee lo tan bas jiven khan nu pai jandian ne, ehna nu ki pata ke saanu aanadian nu kinian pareshamian hundiaen asi tan sirf apni thakan uttaran nu pee laide par ehna nu samajm hi nai aundi. (Ladies are always ready to fight if we drink then they come to eat. They do not know about us that how many tensions we have. We drink just to get some relief but they do not understand). His wife was sitting beside she immediately replied on what he said: bibi ehna nu tan gallan karnian hi aundian ne, sharab pee ke jehra saanu kute ne, gallan kaddde ne ohna da nai pata, asi vi tan saara din kam kardian han gharte vi, hor gharan vich vi jaaidaen, khet vich kam krida hae asi nai thakdian. Ik din roti tu ke ghar de hor kam karne pae gae tan aape hi akal tikane aa jao pher puchoon wadde laad sahib nun. (Sister they only know to gossip. After drinking when they beat us and use ill language what about that. We also work full long day in the house, and then go to landlord’s house and even in the fields we do not get tired. They will come to know only when they have to cook meals and perform other household chores then I will ask him).”

During the harvest times he takes leave from the construction work and works in the fields as an agricultural laborer. The reason behind working as agricultural laborer during harvesting season is that he gets some amount of grains which meet his family requirements during the whole year.
Case no. 4

Jeet works as a daily wager in the fields. He is 40 years old. He is paid in cash 100 rupees per day. During the time of harvesting he is also paid in kind. He wakes up at 5.00 in the morning. He leaves for the fields by 7.00 o’clock. Sometimes he firstly goes to the landowner’s house. There he prepares food stuff for cattle, clear the cowshed and shift the animals to the open space. In the fields his day is long and exhausting. He undertakes all the agricultural activities like watering of the fields, preparation of land, sowing, weeding, reaping and spraying of chemicals. When asked about his work he replied:

Apnian roz marra dian zarrotan nu poora karan lai kam tan har koi karda hai, main kehra koi vakhra kam karda han. Khetan vich dehari kar ke guzara kar laida je kite padia likhia hunda tan wada afsar lagj janda. Chalo jo meri kismet ch si oheo milna si kisse vele eh jhora zarro aundra hai ke jinni mehnat karidi ohna mehnatana nai milda guzara aukha hunda ae. Mann ch ikko khwish hai ke bache pad likh jaan te kete afsar na sai babu hi lagg jaan.

(Everyone works to fulfill his daily needs I am not alone who is working. The difference lies is that I work as a agricultural daily wager in the fields if I have also studied I must be an officer somewhere or I do have the luck as of landlord. The thing which disturbs me is that I do not get sufficient reward for the labor I put in to the work. There is only one desire that my kids must study and work in an office).

When Jeet was asked whether he helped his wife in some of the domestic chores or not he replied that whenever his wife is ill then he assists her in some of the domestic tasks like cleaning of the household and serving the food. But whenever his wife is in good health he does not undertake any type of domestic work. As regards leisure time activities Jeet mentioned that he hardly gets any spare time for such activities but whenever he finds some time he listens to radio or watches television at his friend’s house.

Household work patterns

The women of the villages under study consider themselves primarily as house wives with their roles of wife and mother being most important. They define their work in the household as connected with food, personal activities to the husband, and child care. Cooking is considered to be the main work. It is usually unpleasant and menial work and includes cleaning of the house and washing clothes, food preparation which is a necessity but most of the women enjoyed it and only a few considered it as burden. Most of the village women do not consider taking care of children as work, because they considered it the basic duty of their lives. Religious activities are also considered as their duty and essential for the peace of mind. The village women do not have any clear perception about leisure. However, many of them are of the opinion that gossiping is the best method to enjoy their leisure time.

Studies have also shown that wife’s employment is often described as secondary. The fact is that domestic work is considered as women’s primary responsibility and while husbands may be expected to help out, they are not expected to take full or even major responsibility for household work. Moreover, in each age group females spend more time on unpaid work as compared to males. Differences between age groups reflect the influence of labour force participation and the presence of young children in the family. Women’s unpaid work participation is greatest in the years when they are most likely to be looking after young children, while men’s participation in unpaid work is to a very less extent.

The major categories of unpaid work are: household work, giving care to the household members, purchasing goods and services for the household and unpaid work outside the home. Women spend more time than men on each of these activities. Females also spend more than twice the time as compared to males on giving care to other household members, predominantly the young children.

The category of household work includes a range of different tasks. The most common of these are food and drink preparation and clean-up, and indoor cleaning and laundry. On an average, women spend over an hour a day on each of these tasks except on cooking which is two and half hours a day, while men spend significantly less time. However, males spend considerably more time than females on home maintenance and slightly more time on grounds maintenance.

The daily routine of females is as follows. They get up at 4 a.m. and clean the shed of the domestic buffalo, which their families is keeping to meet the requirements of milk and allied products for their family. After milking the buffalo and feeding it, they prepare tea for all the family members. After that they prepare the meals for their husbands and children. After completing all the morning chores they also leave for their work at the landlord’s house. There, first of all they clean the buffaloes’ shed, and then cleans the house, the utensils and the clothes of the family members of the landlord. They also helps in other domestic...
chores like cutting vegetables, kneading the flour etc. After completing the domestic work they go to the fields or common land of the village to bring fodder of the buffaloes. After fetching comes back to landlord’s house and feeds the buffaloes.

In the afternoon they go back to their own home for a few hours to look after children and take a little rest. In the evening at about 4 p.m. They are back again at the landlord house where they prepares tea for all the family members. Then again cleans the buffalo shed and feeds them. After finishing work at the landlord’s house generally they go to the fields to assist their husband in some agricultural activities like weeding, transplanting, picking of vegetables, pulses etc. After spending almost the entire day in different types of agricultural and household activities they finds some time in the evening and generally spends this time in talking and gossiping with friends and neighbors.

For the services rendered at the landlord’s house they get payment both in cash and kind. Besides some monthly payment in cash and also gets grains after the rabi and kharif harvesting seasons. After the harvesting of wheat and paddy they go to the fields to collect the remains after threshing and for this work they get some quantity of grains.

Following few conversations make it clearer:

**Case no. 1**

The first case is that of Labho of village Lang. She is fifty years of age and is married to Teja Singh, who works as agricultural laborer in the fields of landlord. She works as a domestic help in the household of the same landlord in whose fields her husband works as a laborer. Prior to her marriage, Labho was also working in the house of a landlord in her parent’s village. Besides working as a domestic help in the landlord’s house she also helps in the dairy and poultry which is being run by the landlord.

In case of Labho, she used to work as a domestic help in the landlord’s house at her parents’ village as well. But she says that the burden of work was much less. During the conversation she also told that:

*Viah to pehlan zindi kafi sukhal si, kam vi ghat karna painda sit e ki fikar vi nai si hunda, par hun kam vi dugna karma painda hai, gallan vi sunnian pantian han te, mehnat vi zyada karni paindi ai. Bachian de dekh bhall di vi saari zimewari meri hai te ehnna de bhaapu dian vi zarooran da khayal roktha painda hai. Jadon bache choote si tan sara kam kale mere upper si hun beti de vadde hon karan oh mera kam vich hath wata dendi hai, jis naal mainu thoda jeha aaram mil gaya. Kadon din chadia te kadon khatam ho gaya pata hi nahi chadla. (I had to do much more work at the landlord’s house besides attending to her husband and children. As the children are grown up now, the burden of work has decreased a little, but still she feels lot of strain in doing the work as her own age has increased.)*

**Case no. 2**

Another case history is that of Swarno of Lang village. She belongs to Ramdasia caste, a scheduled caste. She is 42 years of age and is married to Baldev Singh. She has three children, two sons and one daughter. She works as a domestic servant in two houses of landlords. Her husband is an agricultural laborer but whatever he earns, he spends most of it on his drinks. He gives very little money to Swarno and according to her it becomes very difficult to manage even two square meals a day. The husband also gives a beating to her after he is drunk. Thus she is leading a miserable life. She describes her life in this manner:

*Je main kam na karan tan main te mere bache bhuikhe mar jande. Bachian khatir hi main kardi han tan jo ohna nu koi kami na mhesoo hove. Karmi de baapu sharab pee ke aksar mainu kutda marda vi ae. Paise di tangi karke main bimari vich kam kardi han zayada chutti vi vai lai sakti. Eh sab tan mere piche janam de karama da ntija ae jehra mainu is janam vich bhugatna pae rea. (If I do not take up this agricultural work, then she and her children will starve, because the husband spends a larger part of his earnings on liquor. Due to the economic hardship, even during the period of confinement on sickness, she stops work only for a couple of days and sometimes she has to work even if she has not completely recovered from her illness. She attributes her miserable condition to her karmas (deeds) in the previous birth). She says that in the present life she is performing only good actions so that she may get decent life in her next birth.)*

**Case no. 3**

Rani is a thirty three year old married woman belonging to Jheur caste. She is a Hindu by religion. She resides in Ditupur, the village of her parents. She is married to Pammi, who also resides with her in his in-laws house. She told that she is residing in her parent’s village because there is no work for her in village where her in-laws reside.
Observations and findings

The main findings based on observations and case studies related to work pattern have been summarized in ensuing paragraphs.

1) The observations during the course of study reveal that the males spent most of their time on agricultural related activities. On the other hand, the participation of females in these activities is confined to the women of lower strata as they have to participate in these activities because of economic compulsions. However, the time devoted to these activities by women is significantly lower as compared to that of men.

2) Women spend far longer amount of time on household work as compared to men. Despite this unequal distribution of work between men and women, a significant proportion of women express satisfaction with this type of division of labor.

3) The younger generation is subject to same division of household work as the older one. However, the younger women do less household work as compared to middle aged and older women.

4) Women have no right in major decision making process.

5) Women work more than men as they are contributing both in agricultural as well as household activities.

6) The findings of the present study also indicate that the women spent lesser time in sleeping as compared to the men in all the villages selected for the study.

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with work. In addition to domestic work they are also involved in productive activities in order to supplement families’ income. Thus, the females from lower strata are involved both in agricultural and household activities and consequently they have lesser time available for leisure time activities and personal care. Some of the female respondents from the lower strata have also mentioned that they are victims of domestic violence. The husbands of these females generally take liquor and drugs and under the influence of these intoxicants they subject their wives to physical torture. Some of the females also mentioned that they are fed up with their lives because of the monotonous and hard labor. But they attribute their plight to their past karamas (deeds). Some of them also pray to God that in their next birth they may be born in Jatt families.

A few case studies of males from the lower economic strata concluded that the main activities in which they were engaged into are irrigation of fields during the day and night as well, bringing the fodder and feeding animals, cleaning the cattle sheds and participating in various agricultural activities like sowing, manuring, harvesting, threshing of crops etc. On an average they spent 10-12 hours in a day on these activities and even longer amount of time in the peak season. Most of the males’ complaint of hard work and mentioned that they were overburdened with work. Due to lack of time at their disposal they do not have any time for recreational activities. Thus they feel that their life is full of drudgery.

Conclusion:-
The participation of women in various agricultural activities is necessitated by the economic compulsions. The women of the economically weaker sections of the village are compelled to participate in agricultural activities in order to contribute to the family income. Findings of the present study indicate that irrespective of the age categories the women from all the three selected villages spent significantly higher proportion of time on the other activities like taking care of children, sick and elderly. It shows that women of the economically weaker section have very limited leisure time available to them because they have a double responsibility of looking after the household work as well as participating in agricultural operations in order to contribute to the family income. The case studies of women of the lower economic strata from Lang and Sular Gharat also lend support these findings. The findings of the present study also indicate that the women spent lesser time in sleeping as compared to the men in all the villages selected for the study. Thus, the economic level of the families significantly affected the work pattern of the males and the females in all the cases. Since men and women have historically played different roles in society, they often face very different cultural, institutional, physical and economic constraints, many of which are rooted in systematic biases and discrimination.

References