



The Hands That Feed Us: Struggle of Women Agricultural Workers in Punjab

CONTEXT OF THE CASE

Pakistan is the fifth most populous nation in the world. Both directly and indirectly, 70 per cent of its working force is employed in agriculture, with the majority located in rural areas¹. Agriculture is one of the most crucial industries in Punjab, with nearly two-fifths of its population engaged in the agricultural sector, most of whom are women. The Government of Punjab, however, is yet to formally recognize the role of women agricultural workers. Regardless of their invaluable contribution to the agricultural labour force, women agricultural workers remain vulnerable to starvation, gender-based discrimination, violence, exploitation, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse. They lack legal protection and receive lower wages compared to their male counterparts in rural areas². Pakistan's patriarchal culture stems from a mix of legal, political, cultural, and economic factors. Taken together, all these can negatively impact the lives of women. Women agricultural workers are substantially underrepresented in agriculture sector. Gender inequality prevents women from accessing opportunities for advancement, perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes, and impedes Pakistan's overall development.

To raise awareness and foster a better understanding of the challenges experienced by women agricultural workers, AwazCDS-Pakistan conducted a rights-based analytical and qualitative study entitled 'The Hands That Feed Us.'³ The study explores the socioeconomic, legal, gender, and political empowerment of women agricultural workers in Punjab. It also provides recommendations for policymakers and other relevant stakeholders. The study conducted in-depth interviews in the Punjab province with the following: 1) the Punjab Social Protection Authority (PSPA); 2) the Provincial Assembly of the Punjab (MPA); 3) the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR); 4) the Social Welfare Department (SWD); 5) Agriculture Department Director Rahim Yar Khan; 6) Labor Department Director Rahim Yar Khan.

In addition, it conducted five focus group discussions, which included 36 women and 24 men. The participants highlighted the following problems endured by women agricultural workers: unjust wages; bonded labour; lack of access to healthcare, unsafe working conditions; and a lack of knowledge and understanding of laws and policies relevant in the protection of their rights.⁴

Political leadership perceived such difficulties as a result of cultural norms despite government stakeholders expressing concerns over Punjab's lack of human resources and monitoring procedures for assuring compliance with policies and regulations. Overall, the study seeks to raise awareness about the plight of women agricultural workers and to advocate for their rights at all levels.

KEY FACTS AND FINDINGS

AWARENESS OF LAWS AND POLICIES

All participants were unaware of laws regarding women protection such as the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women Act 2014. Likewise, they were unaware of other governing policies protecting the rights of women agricultural workers.



NATIONAL IDENTITY CARDS (NICs) AND VOTING RIGHTS



As per the focus group discussions, all women and men have NICs and exercise their right to vote, but rural women cannot vote of their own volition or preference. Lack of political awareness, landlord or caretaker influence and undue pressure from political representatives were some of the reasons cited.

INCOME DISPARITY

In Punjab, cotton picking is considered a job for women, but they are paid a meagre PKRs 150 to 300 per day or 1,000 PKRs per acre. They received an average monthly income of less than 10,000 rupees as compared to men, who earn 20,000 rupees even when they contribute more work hours. The average seasonal income of WAWs during the harvesting season is around 5,000 to 6,000 PKR per month. In terms of crop share; it is the bare minimum for meeting the annual wheat needs of one family. The women in urban areas are engaged in other informal work arrangements such as sewing clothes or dishwashing. They believe that their present income does not improve their economic plight.



ACCESS TO MARKET AND LOCAL BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES



WAWs in Punjab who do kitchen gardening do not sell their vegetables at the market, but share it among relatives. The vegetable markets are usually male-dominated. The overall environment to sell products in markets is not favorable for women in terms of accessibility and opportunities

INHERITANCE

Despite participating community members being low-income earners, they testified that women do not receive an inheritance. The only exception is dowry.



EARLY MARRIAGES AND DOWRY



Early marriages are common among girls in the target communities. Girls between the ages of 12 to 15 are usually married off. Meanwhile, boys between the ages of 15 to 18 are forced into formal relationships. Dowry is among the major reasons why families take loans from landlords.

WORKING HOURS

Men do not work on Fridays. Meanwhile, women do not receive any maternity leaves, medical relief, sick leaves, and holiday pays. Women have to work from dawn to dusk. The situation is even worse for pregnant and lactating women, as they are forced to work right until they are about to give birth. They must also return to work a week after childbirth.



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT



Some women faced violence at home and in the fields. Mostly at the hands of their very own family members. In addition, some landlords abuse workers and trample upon women's rights. Such cases often go unreported due to bonded labour. Other difficulties endured by women agricultural workers include harassment; the lack of mobility; and the lack of sanitation and childcare facilities.

GIRLS' EDUCATION

Rural women in Punjab are mostly illiterate due to early marriages, conservative cultural codes, and a lack of access to formal education. Most women have no choice but to rely on informal learning, their own experiences, or traditional knowledge. The latter, however, may be outdated. Rural men said that they are unable to send their daughters to school due to bonded labour and a lack of resources. Since schools are far from home, families need to allot money for transportation; however, not everyone can afford this.



HEALTHCARE



Women in rural areas are often neglected. They do not receive proper nutrition. Women expressed concerns over the lack of accessible healthcare services. They also highlighted the long distance between their homes and healthcare facilities; the unavailability of caretakers; and the scarcity of resources. In Punjab, women cotton pickers experience health complications due to the excessive use of pesticides. The lack of safety equipment during spraying season results in skin allergies and diseases, breathing complications, and other health-related problems.

1. Pakistan's Median Age." n.d. World Economics. Accessed December 16, 2022. <https://www.worldeconomics.com/Demographics/Median-Age/Pakistan.aspx>.
 2. Maria Faiq Javed, Atif Khan Jadoon, Ayesha Malik, Ambreen Sarwar, Munazza Ahmed & Saima Liaqat. (2022). "Gender Wage Disparity and Economic Prosperity in Pakistan." Cogent Economics and Finance 10 (1): 10-17.
 3. <https://awazcds.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Hands-That-Feed-Us-Struggles-of-Women-Agricultural-Workers-Rights-in-Pakistan.pdf>
 4. Aziz, N., Khan, I., Nadahrajan, D., & He, J. (2021). "A mixed- method (quantitative and qualitative) approach to measure women's empowerment in agriculture: evidence from Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Pakistan." Community, Work & Family, 1-24

'We get only one day off if we are sick or if someone dies and wages are not paid for off days.' –
Woman Agricultural Worker, Punjab

COMMON PERCEPTION AND RECOGNITION



Women participants expressed disappointment at how men lack a positive perception of women's rights and recognition of their contributions. As a result, women are forced to shoulder every burden. Women take care of the men, their children, their homes, and the fields.

SUPPORT REQUIRED:

Female interviewees emphasized that seeds and low-cost inputs could help initiate home-based gardening and subsistence farming, which can help address the economic plight of women agricultural workers. They also suggested that interest-free loans could help alleviate poverty and improve women's social mobility. The men, on the other hand, believe that an increase in daily wage could help them address their household needs.



To the National Government of Pakistan:

- To respect and preserve the dignity of women agricultural workers, the government must acknowledge and recognize the participation and contribution of women's informal work in the household, the community, and at the national level.
- Develop and coordinate protocols and strategies for providing general leaves and paid sick days as well as education and healthcare for women agricultural workers.
- Create an enabling environment for women agricultural workers in Pakistan in line with ILO Convention 87, which ensures the rights of freedom of association and protection

To Provincial Ministries and District Departments:

- Formulate policies to encourage the participation of rural women and recognize their work as formal employment.
- Formulate strategies to develop laws, acts and regulations that support women agricultural workers.
- Ensure rural women's right to decent work and rewarded equitably in terms of their contribution.
- Ensure fair compensation in line with the provincial minimum wage announced by the Ministry of Finance.
- Provide high-quality seeds to women workers, along with low-maintenance modern tools and gadgets which are necessary for increasing the production and income.
- Increase market access and linkages to women agricultural workers for value chain strengthening, in Punjab Provinces.
- Plan capacity-building and awareness raising programmes for women agricultural workers. This must incorporate legal provisions and complaints mechanisms.
- Provide agricultural financing for subsistence farming to improve the livelihoods of women, particularly among women-headed households.
- Agriculture policies should be reviewed with a gender lens to engage more women in agriculture extension services, input supply and access to finance.

To the Ministry of Human Rights:

- Invest in research to deeply explore the root causes of the marginalization of women agriculture workers. This could assist policymakers in devising an evidence-based response.
- Investigate grievances by women agriculture workers and develop mechanisms to address such concerns.
- Increase interventions in rural areas so that women agricultural workers could access the services of different commissions including those concerning human rights and the status of women.
- Educate more women agricultural workers on relevant laws such as the Inheritance Law' Women Protection Law, and policies regarding sexual harassment in the workplace. Such laws and policies should be implemented everywhere, including rural settings.

To the Trade Unions and Civil Society Organisations:

- Conduct advocacy at national and provincial levels to protect the rights of women agricultural workers.
- Campaign at the grassroots level to fight against inequality and injustice.
- Play an intermediary role between the Government of Pakistan, the ILO, relevant UN bodies, and women agricultural workers to ensure legal recognition and protection for their work.
- Monitor the situation and circumstances of women agricultural workers on the ground. Urge the authorities and the private sector to protect women's labour and human rights.
- Advocate for decent working environments and minimum wages equal to their male counterparts and in line with labour laws.

To the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls:

- Initiate dialogue with the Government of Pakistan, urging it to follow international human rights norms to ensure decent working environments for women agricultural workers.
- Conduct a country visit to Pakistan to further understand the situation of women and girls in the agriculture sector, specifically in the Punjab Province.

Recommendations

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