

The Hands That Feed Us:

Struggles of Women Agricultural
Workers in Pakistan



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Foreword

Agriculture sector is the backbone of Pakistan's economy as it contributes around 22 per cent in the GDP of the country per annum. The whole sector remained under federal control for policy and structural reforms until 2010, whereas provinces were responsible for implementation and delivery. After the 18th constitutional amendment in 2010, the sector devolved to the provinces for better policy reforms and management; however, food security matters are still under the control of the federation. More than 70 per cent of the rural labour class is associated with the agriculture sector, whereas around 90 per cent of them are women agricultural labourers. Neither federal nor provincial governments have ever tried to protect the rights of agricultural labourers, particularly women agricultural workers. Majority of our political leaders and parliamentarians are feudal and landlords, therefore labour laws and other social protection policies were never applied to agricultural workers at large. Society also generally discriminates against women when it comes to their socio-economic and political rights, particularly their right to health and education, equal employment, and wages, as well as life choices at a personal and professional level. They also face hate and harassment in the public and private spheres. Although, the pitiful stories of women agricultural workers in Pakistan are known to most of our political leadership, parliamentarians, government officials, human rights actors and other stakeholders, yet they are relentlessly inattentive at all times. One reason may be that these faces of inequality were never investigated and documented truly considering a human rights-based approach so that appropriate steps may be taken for the empowerment of women agricultural workers.

It was therefore decided to conduct a rights-based national analytical and qualitative study to understand the policy and practices-level gaps to assure socio-economic, legal, gender and political empowerment of women agricultural workers in Pakistan. The study provides empirical evidence of challenges and contributing factors of various forms of discrimination and inequalities with women agricultural workers, as well as suggests recommendations to address identified policy and practice level gaps. We hope the findings and recommendations of this study will be able to influence our legislatures and policymakers to review and amend laws and policies to ensure equal rights for women agricultural workers in Pakistan. We further hope that harmful practices of harassment and violence against women agricultural workers in the fields will also be curtailed.

I personally, and on behalf of AwazCDS-Pakistan thank all the contributors and facilitators, particularly colleagues from NARI Foundation Sukkur and Jaag Welfare Movement Rahim Yar Khan for their support in field related interventions of this study. We also take this opportunity to thank FORUM-ASIA and Brot für die Welt, as without their technical and financial contributions this important achievement might not have been possible.

We wish all the best to the readers and look forward to receiving feedback for improving of our work in future.

Zia ur Rehman
Chief Executive,
AwazCDS-Pakistan

Foreword

At the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), we endeavour to provide opportunities for our members and partners to highlight issues that impact vulnerable people and communities in their countries. We recognise that evidence-based research is the first step towards developing targeted capacity building and advocacy actions that can contribute to increased access to rights for marginalised populations.

In Pakistan, women agricultural workers (WAWs) are one such group who – for decades – have been struggling for equal recognition and acceptance similar to their male counterparts. Very little research has been done on the additional challenges faced by WAWs, the reasons for this discriminatory behaviour and ways to improve their treatment. As mentioned by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, ‘often, women are the seed stewards of their community, but ‘face discrimination in land and livestock ownership and in pay’. This report aims to explore this dichotomy; one that makes WAWs essential to our survival but invisible to those in power.

We hope that by exploring the intersectional vulnerabilities of WAWs in Pakistan, all of us are moved to demand that they are treated fairly, with the dignity and respect they deserve. Most importantly, I hope it urges us to ask ourselves – do the hands that feed us struggle to survive?

Omer Dawoodjee
Interim Executive Director,
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Abstract

Pakistan is the world's fifth most populous country. Agriculture, directly and indirectly, employs 37.4 per cent of the country's labour force, 70 per cent of whom are mostly located in rural areas. Not only do rural women receive fewer wages than men, but WAWs are susceptible to malnutrition, discrimination, violence and ill-treatment, including exploitation and sexual harassment. Pakistan's patriarchal culture has its roots in legal, political, cultural and economic factors that negatively impact on women. This discrimination is part of a broader landscape of systemic gender inequality in the country.

This study captures and triangulates the context and provides recommendations for policymakers and implementation bodies. The findings of the FGDs and individual direct interviews (IDIs) with stakeholders highlighted similar key challenges for WAWs, i.e., low compensation and unfair pay, bonded labour, lack of health, safety and healthcare accessibility, and lack of knowledge and awareness regarding laws and policies. Government stakeholders expressed a lack of human resources and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with existing policies and regulations, and the political leadership viewed the challenges as cultural norms and context. The recommendations have been documented to provide the baseline for advocacy and to create awareness at all levels to protect the rights of WAWs.

List of Acronyms

AF	Awaz Foundation
BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme
BoD	Board of Directors
CDS	Centre for Development Services
DG	Deputy General
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GoP	Government of Pakistan
HDI	Human Development Index
HRC	Human Rights Commission
IDI	Individual Direct Interviews
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LMIC	Low-and Middle-Income Country
MPA	Member of Provincial Assembly
NCHD	National Commission for Human Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PBS	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics
RH	Rural Households
SPA	Social Protection Authority
SWD	Social Welfare Department
WAW	Women Agricultural Worker
WB	Wage Board

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Introduction

Geography, Demography and Political Context of Pakistan

Pakistan, the second largest Muslim and the fifth most populous country in the world, is home to one of the world's youngest populations. The mean age is 23.¹ According to the 2017 census,² the estimated population stands at 207 million – 106 million males and 101 million females.³ The most populated provinces are Punjab and Sindh, with 109 million (54 million females) and 47 million (22 million females) respectively. The World Bank ranks Pakistan as a Low- and Middle-income Country (LMIC) with 1,537 USD GDP per capita income.⁴

Pakistan is geographically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, and is marked by economic disparities among its citizens. The political development of Pakistan since independence can be categorised into decades of considerable economic growth, along with political instability, leading to economic recession and low growth. The continuing adverse impacts of multi-layered challenges like political instability, low economic indicators and a poorly administered governance structure all contribute to the economic and social situation at national, sub-national and local levels. Poverty, illiteracy, corruption and terrorism are just a few national-level challenges and interrelated factors affecting the state and economy of Pakistan.

1 "Pakistan's Median Age." n.d. *World Economics*. Accessed December 16, 2022. <https://www.worldeconomics.com/Demographics/Median-Age/Pakistan.aspx>.

2 Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. n.d. "TABLE - 1 AREA, POPULATION BY SEX, SEX RATIO, POPULATION DENSITY, URBAN PROPORTION, HOSUEHOLD SIZE AND ANNUAL GROWTH RATE." <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2017/tables/pakistan/Table01n.pdf>

3 Ibid

4 "Data for Lower Middle Income, Pakistan." n.d. *Worldbank.org*. Accessed December 16, 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=XN-PK>.



Socio-Economic, Cultural Context and Human Rights of Agricultural Workers

Pakistan's economy is agrarian and contributes approximately 22.7 per cent to the total GDP. The agricultural sector is the backbone of Pakistan's rural communities⁵ with almost 60 to 70 per cent of the rural population directly or indirectly linked to agriculture,⁶ ensuring employment and income to 37.4 per cent of the country's labour force. Rural women working in agricultural fields are the biggest contributors to the informal economy, and yet their rights are not guaranteed by law. Male workers, on the other hand, are better paid, often earning more than double their female counterparts in wages.⁷ WAWs traditionally face malnutrition, discrimination, violence and ill-treatment by their partners, including exploitation and sexual harassment. Most marry at an early age and are forced to work the fields on behalf of their in-laws as bonded labourers. Limited research exists on the measurement of women's empowerment in the agricultural context.⁸

5 Zaheer, D., Zeb, A., & Khattak, S. W. (2014). "Women participation in Agriculture in Pakistan (An overview of the constraint and problems faced by rural women)." *IOSR Journal of Business and Management*, 16(2), 01-04

6 Government of Pakistan Finance Division. n.d. "Pakistan Economic Survey 2021-22 : Chapter 2 - Agriculture." https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_22/PES02-AGRICULTURE.pdf

7 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.

8 Aziz, N., Khan, I., Nadahrajan, D., & He, J. (2021). "A mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative) approach to

Problem Statement

The women in Sindh and Punjab Provinces, and in particular the target districts of Sukkur and Rahim Yar Khan respectively, are engaged in livestock management, home-based farming or working in the fields to meet their household expenses, as well as to cope with poverty. WAWs significantly contribute to household incomes through cash remuneration or crop shares. Despite this, women – especially agricultural workers living in rural areas – are faced with challenges of fundamental rights, rights to a decent work environment, gender rights and equality.

Research Objectives

Purpose: The goal of this study is to assess, identify and articulate aggravating factors associated with socio-economic, legal, gender and political empowerment of WAWs in Sindh and Punjab Provinces of Pakistan. The study generates evidence of the plight of WAWs, fuelled by patriarchal practices in the agricultural sector in Sindh and Punjab. It also suggests appropriate measures and recommendations to bridge identified policy and practice gaps, while focussing on the rights of WAWs to work, the rights to safe, secure and decent working conditions, the rights of assembly and association, the rights to social security and the rights to a healthy working environment.

measure women's empowerment in agriculture: evidence from Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Pakistan." *Community, Work & Family*, 1-24

Research Questions

Research Questions	Detailed Question and Sub-Question	Research Thematic Area
RQ1	Is the participation of WAWs and their contribution to the overall agricultural sector considered, acknowledged and appropriately rewarded in Sindh and Punjab?	Socio-Economic Status
RQ1.1	Do WAWs have equitable access to required knowledge, skills and tools to perform their roles and responsibilities efficiently, effectively and independently?	Gender rights
RQ1.2	What are the common contributing factors (challenges, barriers and enabling factors) faced by WAWs in Sindh and Punjab?	Gender rights
RQ2	To what extent do WAWs have access to legal, social and political rights in Sindh and Punjab Provinces?	Legal and Political rights
RQ3	To what extent do the governing laws, regulations and respective policies assist, support and protect the rights of WAWs?	Policy and Governance
RQ3.1	Are there any forums, platforms and potential opportunities for WAWs to raise their voice and protect their rights?	Implementation and Practices

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is limited to WAWs from Rahim Yar Khan District of Punjab Province and Sukkur District of Sindh Province, specifically the socioeconomic, gender, legal and political empowerment of the target group.



An FGD in rural Sukkar District where participants discuss the struggles of women agricultural workers



Methodology

Study Design

The objective of the study is to assess, develop and articulate the insights and factors associated with socio-economic, legal, gender and political empowerment of WAWs. It documents barriers and enabling factors regarding their rights to a safe working environment and working conditions, legal rights, political awareness and empowerment. To achieve this objective, the study used a qualitative research method. The primary impetus behind this research method is to develop a well-rounded perspective on the issue, using primary and secondary data analysis. The triangulation of gender, legal and socioeconomic status of WAWs was captured via Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Individual Direct Interviews (IDIs), both at district and provincial levels.

Sample Size and Sampling Methodology

The targeted sample size was selected based on convenient random sampling within the categorised clusters.

Data Collection

The data from WAWs and male members of the same community was collected through FGDs. IDIs were also carried out with various district and provincial government representatives of Agriculture Departments, as well as with provincial and national legislators with ties to agriculture and women's rights. Key Informant Interviews (KII) and IDIs were conducted using a semi-structured interview format.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

FGDs were organised with men and women, both in rural and urban areas of Rahim Yar Khan District, Punjab Province, and Sukkur District, Sindh Province. In total, 10 FGDs were carried out, broken down as follows:

Focus Group Discussions	Sukkur District		Rahim Yar Khan District		Total		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Total
Total Number of Focus Group Discussions	2	3	2	3	4	6	10
Focus Group Discussion Participants	24	36	24	36	48	72	120

INDIVIDUAL DIRECT INTERVIEWS – DISTRICT LEVEL

Two IDIs per district were conducted with the Agriculture and Labour Departments in both districts. The breakdown of stakeholders engaged is as follows:

Individual Direct Interviews	Sukkur District	Rahim Yar Khan District
Agriculture Department	1	1
Labour Department	1	1
Total	2	2

INDIVIDUAL DIRECT INTERVIEWS – PROVINCIAL LEVEL

Five IDIs were conducted with various stakeholders in Sindh, and six in Punjab. The breakdown of provincial stakeholders engaged is as follows:

Individual Direct Interviews	Sindh Province	Punjab Province
Deputy Secretary, Labour Department, Sindh	1	
Deputy General (DG), Social Welfare Department (SWD), Sindh	1	
Secretary, Women Development Department, Sindh	1	
Chairman, Wage Board (WB), Sindh	1	
Human Rights Commission (HRC), Sindh	1	
Social Protection Authority (SPA), Punjab		1
Member of Provincial Assembly (MPA), Punjab		3
National Commission for Human Development (NCHD), Punjab		1
Social Welfare Department (SWD), Punjab		1
Total	5	6

Quality Control and Data Assurance Mechanisms

Data Protection: The data collected was encrypted and stored to ensure transparency, with limited access to individuals outside the direct research team.

Sensitivity to Cultural Contexts: The data collection team ensured compliance and adherence to local and cultural norms and contexts.

Language: Data collection teams were selected from the target districts. FGDs and other primary qualitative data collection was done in the local language to ensure that participants comprehended the context and were able to share their experiences with ease.

Privacy and Confidentiality: The data collection team did not record the personal details of participants. The team ensured the confidentiality and privacy of individuals and groups participating in the FGDs. Personal details of participants in the KIIs and IDIs were not shared with anyone, except authorised representatives, for data quality purposes.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent: The data collection team sought verbal and/or written informed consent from participants in the target communities, i.e., WAWs, community members, and stakeholders. The time, duration and details of the FGDs and IDIs were communicated to participants.

Voluntary Participation: Participants were advised on the voluntary nature of their participation. They were also briefed that they had the right to refuse, at any time during their involvement, to respond to any questions without pressure. This commitment was communicated before the start of all FGDs and IDIs.



An FGD in urban Sukkar District where participants discuss the challenges faced by both men and women agricultural workers



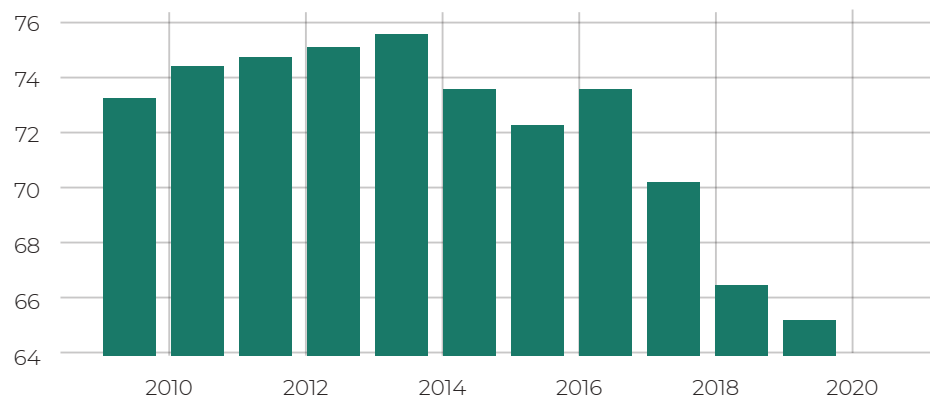
Background

Pakistan is a developing agriculture-based economy. A large portion of the population is actively engaged, directly or indirectly, in the agricultural sector.

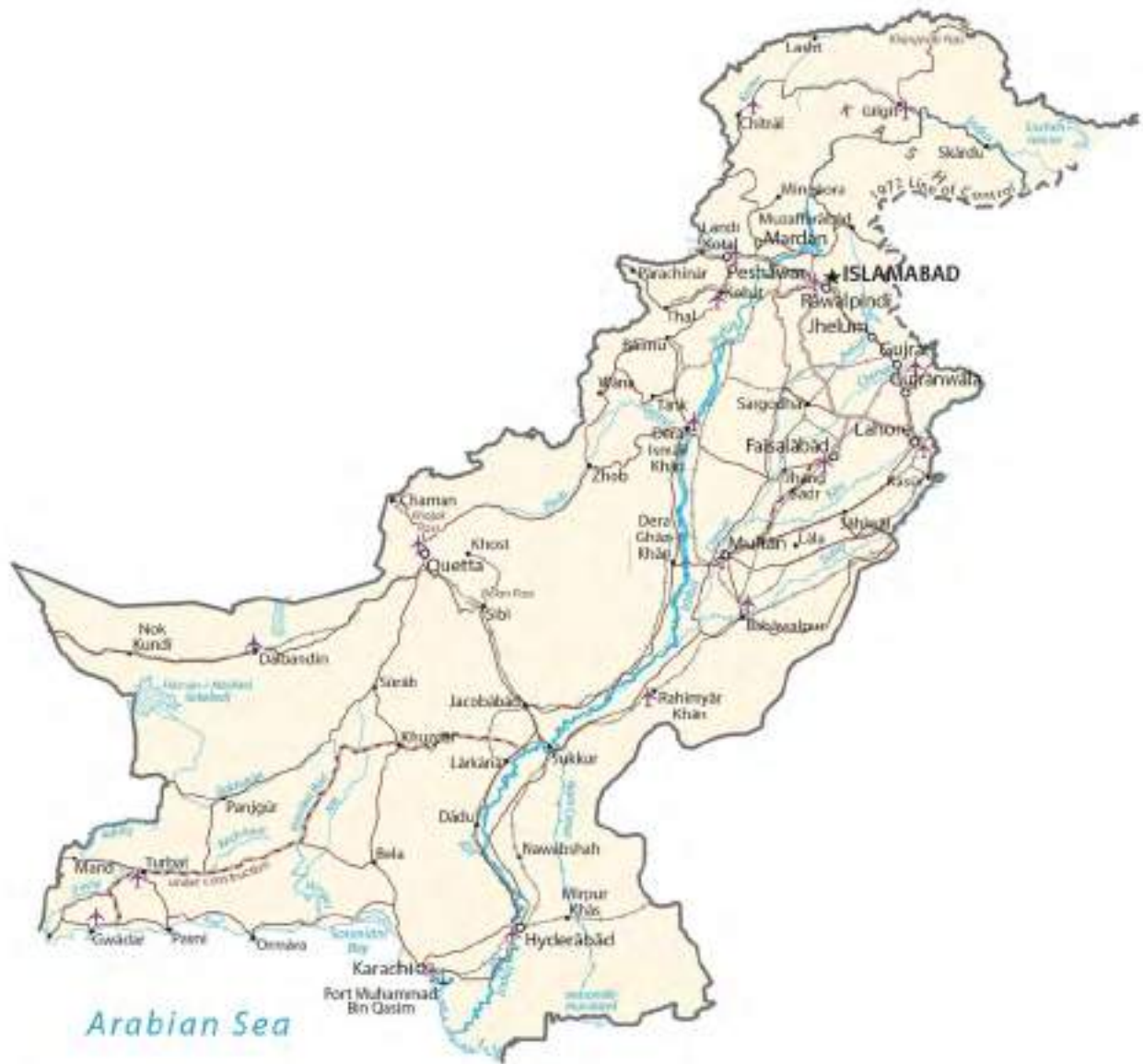
Most WAWs engage in livestock management and crop production. According to ILO, 64.05 per cent of women in Pakistan are employed in agriculture.⁹

Despite this active involvement, women have restricted access to services and opportunities as compared to men. Their exclusion relates to access to inputs (including improved seeds, agrochemicals and machinery, all essential elements for improving farm productivity), services, land ownership, livestock, technology, education extension and financial services. This scenario is further aggravated by structural discrimination by policymakers who do not recognise or promote women's participation in agriculture. Consequently, the country has failed to fully identify women as equal contributing members of society and is yet to leverage their skills.

Pakistan: Percentage of Female Employment in the Agriculture Sector (World Bank)



9 TRADING ECONOMICS. n.d. "Pakistan - Employees, Agriculture, Female (% of Female Employment)." Accessed December 16, 2022.



Political Context

According to a World Bank report, globally, most women do not have decision-making power regarding land ownership. Only 37 out of 161 countries surveyed have definite laws granting equal rights for all people to own, use and manage land.¹⁰

In Pakistan, 47.79 per cent of the overall land is agricultural. Out of this, only 27.68 per cent is currently under cultivation. While most of the population owns little to no land, women in particular are gravely deprived of their right to own property. For example, a survey in the rural areas of Punjab in 2014 showed that only 36 women out of the 1,000 surveyed households had entitlement to land ownership. Out of this, only nine had the power to sell or trade without permission from their male relatives.¹¹

¹⁰ Abbas, Mazhar. 2020. "Status of Women Land Rights in Pakistan." Daily Times. May 16, 2020. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/613448/status-of-women-land-rights-in-pakistan/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

Islamic jurisprudence and national Islamic law sanction women's inheritance of both movable and immovable property, right from pre-independence through post-independence, but the prevalent practice is to deny women access to and control over their inheritance. Since women are deprived of land ownership and must work on lands owned by their male relatives, they are barred from accessing credit, a process that requires applicants to have the ownership of land and collateral. Therefore, hardly four per cent of total borrowers (58,466 out of 1,394,189) in agricultural finance are women, according to State Bank of Pakistan statistics.

The rights of rural workers to form and join organisations of their choosing are protected by International Labour Organisation (ILO) member states. However, in Pakistan, some categories of agricultural workers have been excluded from the coverage of national laws guaranteeing the right of workers to form and join trade unions.¹²

¹² ILO. 2012. "Freedom of Association for Women Rural Workers." https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_186808.pdf

Socio-Economic and Cultural Context

Women dominate the agricultural sector as informal workers but are socially excluded from performing activities perceived as antithetical to assigned traditional gender roles. While the participation of women in crop production, livestock and dairy development, poultry, fisheries and forestry exceeds that of men, this is neither appreciated nor acknowledged due to archaic social and cultural norms. These traditional cultural practices negatively impact women's ability to increase their incomes from agriculture.

Research conducted in Southern Punjab shows that women are considered poor decision-makers and therefore should not be included in matters relating to agriculture, education and marriage. Furthermore, cropping patterns, selection of inputs, acquisition of agricultural loans, marketing of crops and utilisation of proceeds from the crops are traditionally determined by men, and women are hardly consulted in this regard.¹³

In Pakistan, mobility for girls is highly restricted and conditional to a male family member accompanying them. In such a patriarchal society, these measures are intended to prevent harm to the honour of girls and their families. But under the guise of heightened concerns for their safety and security, their mobility, and by implication, their access to education is severely constrained. Such barriers have major consequences on their empowerment later in life.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) assesses that, if provided with equal access to agricultural resources, women's farming yields can increase. By giving women the same access to agricultural resources such as credit, technology and equipment as their male counterparts, an increase in productivity in developing countries can increase by 20 to 30 per cent which, in turn, can help feed an additional 100 to 150 million people globally. The same study asserts that earning extra income would enable women to spend more on healthcare, nutrition and education for their children, investments that could produce long-term positive results for agricultural families and their neighbours.¹⁴ The situation for women in farming or those engaged in livestock – dairy or poultry farming – follows the same trend.

13 Saira Akhtar, Shabbir Ahmad, Haroon Yousaf, Asma Zafar, , and Qazi Ahmad Raza. 2018. "Role of Women in Social and Agricultural Decision-Making in the Rural Areas of the Southern Punjab (Pakistan)." SSRG International Journal of Humanities and Social Science (SSRG – IJHSS) – 5 (5) <https://www.internationaljournalssrg.org/IJHSS/2018/Volume5-Issue5/IJHSS-V5I5P106.pdf>

14 Moulabuksh, M., Zarar, R., & Shah, N. A. (2022). "ISSUES OF FEMALE LABOURERS IN PAKISTAN." Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, 5(2).

Gender and Human Rights

Since the current labour laws in Pakistan do not apply to the agricultural sector, the rights of agricultural workers are not protected under the law.¹⁵ This is especially true for seasonal workers, mostly women, as they remain barred from any legal or social protection due to their status as 'casual workers'.¹⁶

However, the Sindh cabinet has approved the Sindh Women Agriculture Workers Act (2019), which will now be brought to the provincial assembly for a vote. The proposed law recognises the rights of women workers to have a written contract, minimum wage, social security and welfare benefits, including for their children's health, maternity leave and access to government subsidies and credit, and requires gender parity in wages. It signals the first time that Pakistan will recognise the right of women agricultural workers to unionise.¹⁷

The preliminary legislation (i.e., the Sindh and Punjab Irrigation and Drainage Authority Acts) lacked any consideration for women because only those farmers who owned or had rented land could join farmer unions. Since very few women owned or own a piece of land, there is no scope for their participation in these unions. However, to show 'inclusiveness,' the irrigation and drainage authorities formed working women groups, but these groups did not have a formal say in the management of farmer organisations and decision-making. Empirical studies on participatory irrigation management in Sindh show that rarely do women serve on management committees of farmer organisations. Although the Sindh Water Management Ordinance (2002) had a few clauses on women's contribution to farmer organisations, no sincere consideration was given to women's active participation in managing irrigation.¹⁸

Water scarcity is a huge setback for the farmers in rural Sindh. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 77 per cent of these farmers are women. The Sindh Water Management (Amendment) Bill 2018 now guarantees women's representation in nearly 45,000 water course associations, more than 350 farmer organisations, and 14 area water

15 Sohail, Shafaq. n.d. "WOMEN AND AGRICULTURE IN PAKISTAN." https://sedc.lums.edu.pk/sites/default/files/user376/women_and_agriculture_in_pakistan.pdf

16 https://sappk.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/eng_publications/Alternative_Labour_Policy_for_Rural_Workers.pdf.

17 Dawn. 2019. "Sindh Cabinet Approves 'Historic' Bill Recognising Women Farm Workers' Contribution," August 25, 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1501437>.

18 Junaid Alam Memon, Bethany Cooper And Sarah Wheeler. 2019. "Mainstreaming Gender into Irrigation: Experiences from Pakistan." Water 11 (11). <https://www.mdpi.com/2073-4441/11/11/2408/htm#B10-water-11-02408>



During an FGD, women of urban Sukkar District share about the unequal wages between men and women agricultural workers

boards in the province.¹⁹ which has empowered the women working in the agricultural sector there, but such an Act is yet to be passed in Punjab and other provinces. Furthermore, the quality and quantity of research related to women's issues is not sufficient and does not meet international standards. Large-scale surveys to identify problems facing rural women in different agroecological and socioeconomic zones need to be conducted to plan and implement programmes that address the issues and constraints faced by women vis-à-vis the agricultural sector.

Furthermore, the Government of Pakistan should design an integrative system to support women farmers in all agriculture-related sectors e.g., financial services, land reforms and tenure systems, tax reforms and subsidies, technology transfer, input distribution and market access, and ensure grassroots implementation. Women's participation in community land distribution decisions should be encouraged. The provision of certified seeds and quality planting materials at subsidised rates to women farmers will also make

¹⁹ Sindh Act V of 2020, 2020 <http://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications/PUB-20-000028.pdf>

a significant difference in crop production and ensure household food security.

A comparative analysis study of international and local laws and policies about friendly working environments for the female workforce highlights the impact of weak legislation and suggests measures to improve the neglected facets of implemented laws.²⁰ Women engaged in spraying cotton also develop various kinds of skin allergies and are unable to perform their routine chores, according to a FAO report.²¹

A UN Women report from 2018 revealed that over 60 per cent of Pakistani women in the labour force work in agriculture and 60 per cent of their work is unpaid. The discrimination encountered by rural

²⁰ Ms Durre Samee Dr Farhana Nosheen Mr Haq Nawaz Khan Dr Imdad Ali Khowaja Dr Khalida Jamali Dr Parvez Iqbal Paracha Dr Shahnaz Akhtar Dr Zahira Batool Ms Zohra Khanum. 2015. "Women in Agriculture in Pakistan." <https://www.fao.org/3/i4330e/i4330e.pdf>

²¹ "Protection research study for women farmers in Pakistan by FAO PAK and PODA." n.d. Fao.org. Accessed December 16, 2022. <https://www.fao.org/pakistan/news/detail-events/ru/c/1460285/>. <https://www.fao.org/pakistan/news/detail-events/ru/c/1460285/>



Secretary of the Women Development Department of Sindh expressing her opinion on the discriminatory treatment of women agricultural workers

women is part of a broader scheme of systemic gender inequality in the country.²² Women are dominated not only by their husbands but also by male members of the family. The majority of women are deprived of their right to education.

A study conducted found that 62.8 per cent of the decisions of married women are made by their spouses, while a mere 29.7 per cent of decisions are made by the women themselves. The remaining 7.6 per cent of decision-making is usurped by family members, such as sons, siblings or family elders.

The marginalisation of women continues with inadequate representation and exclusion from national statistics. For example, women who work seasonally as cotton harvesters may not be counted in the labour force because they have not been economically active in the reference period (7 days). Similarly, women who engage in subsistence farming and animal husbandry may not be recognised as agricultural workers altogether because they do not contribute to the cash economy.

While women participate in all field and farm

22 Urooba Pervaiz, Dawood Jan, Muhammad Zafarullah and Ayesha Khan. 2018. "Women in Agricultural Decision Making: Pakistan's Experience." *Sarhad J. Agric* 28 (2). https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ayesha-Khan-47/publication/340378709_WOMEN_IN_AGRICULTURAL_DECISION_MAKING_PAKISTAN'S_EXPERIENCE/links/5e85ceb0299bf130797158fc/WOMEN-IN-AGRICULTURAL-DECISION-MAKING-PAKISTANS-EXPERIENCE.pdf

activities, their efforts mostly go unpaid. Rural women have less access to farm inputs, fewer income-generating opportunities as compared to men, and have no financial control within the household, making them dependent on men for livelihood and money. Another study undertaken revealed similar findings: women had little or no autonomy in many decision-making processes.²³ Women are dominated not only by their husbands but also by male members of the family. The majority of women are deprived of their right to education.

Pakistan's agriculture is labour-intensive, with women making a vital contribution. The women in rural Sindh and Punjab live hard and imbalanced lives. Apart from raising children, they are expected to support their husbands on the farms, take care of the animals at home and perform domestic chores as well. According to a representative from the Labour Department of Punjab Province, almost 90 per cent of the agricultural workers are women. This is due to the poverty that envelops the rural areas. According to one KII participant, the vast majority of both men and women working in the agricultural sector are illiterate.

23 Urooba Pervaiz, Dawood Jan, Muhammad Zafarullah and Ayesha Khan. 2018. "Women in Agricultural Decision Making: Pakistan's Experience." *Sarhad J. Agric* 28 (2). https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ayesha-Khan-47/publication/340378709_WOMEN_IN_AGRICULTURAL_DECISION_MAKING_PAKISTAN'S_EXPERIENCE/links/5e85ceb0299bf130797158fc/WOMEN-IN-AGRICULTURAL-DECISION-MAKING-PAKISTANS-EXPERIENCE.pdf



During an FGD, women of rural Sukkur District highlight their twofold responsibilities as both agricultural workers and home makers



Research Findings

Demographic Analysis of FGD Participants

12 men participated in four FGDs, two in each district, for a total of 48 participants. 71 per cent were between the ages of 18 and 45, and 71 per cent were married with children and families. 85 per cent were engaged in livestock or full-time farming, and 15 per cent listed their occupation as part-time or seasonal agricultural work. 48 per cent of the male participants confirmed eight hours of daily work, while 52 per cent believed that they were working more than eight hours a day in agriculture. 90 per cent of participants reported that their monthly average income was less than 20,000 PKR (90 USD).

12 women participated in six FGDs, three in each district, for a total of 72 participants. 94 per cent of them were married, and their median age was between 36 and 45 years. All women in rural, semi-urban or urban areas were engaged in the management of livestock, home-based farming or agriculture as a source of personal and family income. Only 19 per cent were working four to six hours, while 81 per cent were working at home or in the fields for more than six hours, along with household chores. 82 per cent received an average monthly income of less than 10,000 PKR (45 USD). All of the women in rural areas were not educated, whereas only 20 per cent in semi-urban or urban areas received formal education.

Gendered Analysis of Women Agricultural Workers

AGRICULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

FDG findings indicate that women are working as agricultural labourers to earn daily bread for their families. Poverty and a lack of resources were major reasons for women's engagement in agriculture. This creates an additional burden on WAWs since they are expected to work at home and in the field, but men are not expected to work at home or contribute to household chores.



Director of the Agriculture Department of Rahim Yar Khan District discusses the prejudices faced by women agricultural workers from landlords and field contractors

The traditional roles of female and male agricultural workers are different. Both in Sindh and Punjab, the men prepare land for crops, use tractors or technology to sow seeds, irrigate using canal systems, and use machines to spray pesticides. The women, on the other hand, are mostly engaged in weeding, removing waste stubble and taking care of crops, but are not allowed to harvest. The men in Sindh make crop-sharing arrangements and agreements with landlords, while the women do not. The Director of the Agriculture Department disclosed that in rural areas, only women pick cotton because it is considered a woman's job due to prevailing patriarchal mindsets.

Regressive attitudes towards women's economic participation were also noted during our interviews. According to the representative from the Agriculture Department in Punjab,

'The role of women in farming should be decreased and there should be a law limiting them from challenging work as it can have a very adverse impact on their lives.'

A local Member of the Punjab Provincial Assembly (MPA) disagreed. Women are socially excluded from activities that do not complement the assigned traditional gender roles, such as operating heavy machinery or selling products in markets. They are denied their basic rights such as owning property, access to health care, education and securing bank accounts. The patriarchal nature of society makes them unable to avail opportunities for socio-economic development.



INCOME DISPARITIES

Both men and women confirmed that women earn fewer wages than men for the same amount of work. Women sow seeds, cultivate, harvest, and gather grass for livestock; but men use machinery and equipment for agriculture work. The devaluation of women's contribution to the agricultural sector was noted during the FGDs. The men referred to women as 'an additional workforce who contribute where required'. However, this sentiment was contradicted by women FGD participants, who believed that they participate equally in agricultural activities, along with taking care of their families. 82 per cent of women FGD participants received an average monthly income of less than 10,000 PKR (45 USD) as compared to men, who earn 20,000 PKR (90 USD). The minimum wage is determined by property owners or the prevailing wage structure, which compels women to put in more hours in the field.

In Punjab, cotton picking is considered a job for women, but they are paid a meagre PKR 150 to 300 per day (1 USD to 2 USD) or 1,000 PKR (4 USD) per acre for this work. In Sindh, the wages of women vary and can be as little as 20 PKR (0.10 USD) per kilo of cotton. Women engaged in home-based gardening or kitchen farming divert their commodities and products for domestic use, and the surplus is shared among relatives at no fee. The average seasonal income during the harvesting season is around 5,000 to 6,000 PKR (23 to 26 USD). In terms of crop share, it is the bare minimum for meeting the annual wheat needs of one family. The women in semi-urban and 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.

In Sindh, women agricultural workers are paid commensurate to the hours they put in, or according to the weight (by maund, equal to 40 kilogrammes) of the produce that they collect. The Secretary of the Women Development Department in Sindh revealed that women are paid half the wages as men, even when they contribute more work hours. As stated by some interviewees, women's earnings end up in the hands of their male counterparts or male members of the family. Surprisingly, the Labour Department considers work to have been done only if the labourer works for at least eight hours. In the words of a representative of the Labour Department of Punjab Province, the WAWs work only until the afternoon, and few women in Rahim Yar Khan are engaged in agriculture due to changing cultural norms and because more girls are now attending school. He also pointed out that lately, most of the fieldwork is done by machines, with tractors preparing the land and other machinery used for harvesting. In his opinion, there are no cases of bonded labour, and the office has never received complaints from WAWs regarding compensation. While responding to questions about the support available for communities, he cited that the department lacks human resources for field monitoring, and that needs to be resolved.

The member of the Punjab Provincial Assembly (MPA) stated that it is very unfortunate that, despite contributing to Pakistan's economy and their households, women still live in poor socio-economic conditions. The Chairman of the Wage Board of Sindh took pride in the fact that the province is among the first to make amendments to labour laws to include domestic and informal workers. This notwithstanding, implementation is lacking, and wages of WAWs in Sindh still need regularisation.

The director of the Agriculture Department conceded that poor remuneration and unfair pay is a big issue for WAWs and in some instances, their work is not regarded as labour and therefore not compensated. The labour department, on its



Women agricultural workers from the rural areas of Rahim Yar Khan District talking about bonded labour arising from the loans they take during childbirth

part, refused to recognise this issue, claiming that factory workers are paid equally, but they do not have data on WAWs due to in-field limitations.

SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

The director of the Agriculture Department also admitted that many cases of harassment of women go unreported. Legally, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) should monitor such incidents, and there should be more coordination between the SWD and the Agriculture Department. However, when these concerns were raised with SWD officials, they believed that such issues ought to be dealt with by the labour department as the agricultural sector is informal. They reiterated that their mandate stops at violence against women and not discrimination in economic compensation. The Punjab MPA reported that since awareness is on the increase and social media is active, the

fields where women work are yet to transform into women-friendly environments. Setbacks like harassment, mobility and lack of sanitation and childcare facilities only add to their difficulties.

The men in the community maintained that violence against women is not a customary practice and has not been reported in the region; but the women voiced experiences to the contrary, recounting violence faced at home, at the hands of family members, and in the field. Landlords abusing the rights of women and bonded labour are some of the reasons occasioning them not to report these incidents. This cycle of involuntary silence permeates even schools, where such cases go unreported. Forced marriages are another form of domestic violence, alongside child abuse.

The Director General of the Welfare Department of Sindh divulged that the prevalence of domestic violence presently stands at 0.5 per cent. But unfortunately, the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act applies only to government departments and not



WAWs. The Secretary of the Women Development Department in Sindh specified that her department has put in place laws against domestic violence, socio-economic discrimination, acid crimes and robberies, but their implementation is a challenge and the rate of implementation is less than ideal. While CSOs like the Sindh Workers Welfare Fund (WWF) try to sensitise and raise awareness about pay discrimination and gender roles, the Agriculture Department is not involved in any such campaigns because, according to officials, they are outside their mandate.

BONDED LABOUR

Categorised as modern slavery, WAWs in Sindh work for waderas (feudal lords) or haaris (farmers). They are bound in this thralldom for two reasons:

1. The entire family is enslaved by the wadera because of his power and influence
2. To earn and provide for their families as a result of extreme poverty

WAWs are not allowed leave and must work from morning to evening, even when ill; whether or not their children are sick. They have no freedom and no rights and are not afforded any flexibility in working conditions. In contrast, the men in Punjab and Sindh confirmed during FGDs that they get one day of rest per week. Women will be found working even during pregnancy, despite not receiving fair wages. The landlord or caretaker provides advance payment in return for bonded labour or work without reward or remuneration.

INCOME SHARING AND HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES

The women workers use the cash income or crop-share they earn to meet personal and household expenses, pay for their children's education, improve their self-confidence and self-worth, and for attending weddings and funerals. The remainder, if any, serves as the only means for surviving non-working days. The family savings are used to fund



In an in-depth interview, a Member of the Punjab Assembly shares her sorrow on the marginalisation and vulnerability of women agricultural workers in a patriarchal society

marriages and other family functions. In Sindh, it was shocking to observe that males in rural areas do not work full-time, and are instead engaged in informal labour, only to squander their earnings on gambling. This alarming phenomenon further deteriorates household incomes and exacerbates already dire family economic conditions.

SELLING AND MARKET LINKAGES

While responding to questions related to selling agricultural products in the market, community members in Punjab mentioned that they do not sell at the market, but share it among relatives. Whereas, in Sindh, the women do sell the crops in the vegetable market but at a cheaper rate. The overall environment to sell products in markets is not favourable for women in terms of accessibility and opportunities. The vegetable markets are especially male-dominated societies and the general buyers in the local markets are men.

WORKING HOURS

Men do not work on Fridays. But the circumstances are different for women, both in rural and urban areas. Allowed no off days even in the event of sickness, it is exceedingly difficult for WAWs to

accomplish their daily household chores as well, which they are forced to perform at night. The situation is worse for pregnant and lactating women (PLW), who must work right until childbirth. Women giving birth in the field is not uncommon.

‘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

HEALTHCARE

Women expressed concerns over the lack of accessibility to healthcare services. When asked for the reasons, they highlighted distance, unavailability of caretakers and scarcity of resources. To compound affairs, the unavailability of safety equipment during the spraying season results in skin allergies and diseases, breathing complications and other health-related problems. In Punjab, women cotton pickers face health complications because of the excessive use of pesticides and sprays and do not have access



Director of the Agriculture Department of Sukkar District discusses issues faced by women agricultural workers such as unequal wages and harassment in the fields

to safety gear. The representative from the Agriculture Department concede that the sprays are indeed harmful; however, the Deputy General of the Welfare Department was of a different opinion, insisting that the sprays are not harmful. A representative from the Human Rights Commission of Sindh clarified that women in rural areas are neglected, and often do not receive proper nutritious diets, which results in poor health and leaves them prone to diseases. This, in turn, affects their productivity. She also expressed alarm over pregnant women being forced to carry out challenging work on farms, which is detrimental to both the women and their unborn children.

HEALTH AND SAFETY TRAINING

The director of the Agriculture Department in Rahim Yar Khan District claims that more than 50 per cent of women are engaged in agriculture, and the number is higher for crops like cotton and sugarcane. The Agriculture Department trains the WAWs on basic techniques and health and safety rules. The training is carried out through extension workers, but finding women extension workers is a challenge, despite there being a quota system to encourage the enrolment of women. Women participants in both districts also mentioned that

they use traditional handheld tools to perform their tasks, unlike men, who use machines and mechanised equipment.

Officials from different government departments confessed that there is a shortage of skilled staff and therefore do not have the capacity to ensure that all applicable laws are implemented or adhered to. Since implementation is in process, the rate of execution is far too slow.

RECOGNITION

Women participants expressed disappointment that men do not have a positive perception of women's rights and do not recognise their contributions. They are forced to shoulder every burden, take care of the men, their children and their homes, as well as work in the fields, but the men have it much easier. Women are not acknowledged for their work, according to the representative of the Agriculture Department. Pakistani women work simultaneously as mothers, household labourers and social production workers, and yet the economic value of their contribution remains underestimated.

GIRLS' EDUCATION

60 per cent of the rural men who participated in the FGDs said that they are unable to send their daughters to school due to a lack of resources, either as a result of bonded labour or the want of financial resources. Another big reason is the distance to schools, which requires money to facilitate transportation. The children enrolled in public schools often drop out, and teachers are not concerned about their education or welfare.

The findings of IDIs with key stakeholders also spotlighted similar challenges for girls' education. There are few to no educated women working on the farms. Rural women in Pakistan are mostly illiterate because of a lack of access to formal education, conservative cultural codes and early marriages. They, therefore, have to rely on informal learning and traditional knowledge – most of which is outdated – and their own experiences from agricultural activities.

MARRIAGES

Early marriages are common for women in the target communities. Women respondents called attention to the fact that girls between the ages of 12 and 15 are married off, while the men reported boys between 15 and 18 years being forced into formal relationships. Early-age or forced marriages are seen as an antidote to poverty. The girls need never be consulted, as all decisions are made by parents, particularly the mothers, and the girls are often only informed of their marriages on the wedding day. However, changing norms like love marriages and weighing boys' (but not girls') preferences are slowly changing social trends. The men, including those living in rural Sindh, denied the existence of child marriages, but exchange marriages - where one set of brother and sister marry another set of sister and brother, i.e., one family's boy and girl marrying another family's girl and boy in exchange - are a normal occurrence.

DOWRY, AN EXPENSIVE CUSTOM

As a cultural norm in Pakistan, the bride's family makes a financial settlement to the groom's family in a tradition called dowry. One of the major reasons for families taking loans from landlords is the collection of items for the wedding of their daughters. Respondents confirmed that one person's income is not nearly enough to fulfil this obligation. Therefore, to save money to afford dowry, women are forced to work in the fields, and some even end up working as bonded labourers because of the loans.

Legal and Political Rights of Women Agriculture Workers

The Deputy Secretary of the Labour Department and the Director General of the Welfare Department in Sindh agree that agricultural workers are considered unskilled labourers and agriculture is categorised under the informal sector. But despite the law being explicit on agricultural women as formal labourers, this development is still in the implementation phase. The Chairman of the Wage Board of Sindh added that an amendment has been made to the labour laws to include informal labour, but it is yet to be endorsed by the Governor for passing into law.

The Director of the Agriculture Department acknowledged that the Labour Department hardly ever monitors pay discrimination in rural areas, and instead focusses on industries in the cities. He added that there are no platforms for creating market linkages for WAWs. But with proper legislative work, it has the potential to take the form of a cottage industry.

According to the SWD of Sindh, the first step should be the Agriculture Department declaring WAWs as formal workers. The second is formalising the sector and extending facilities for formal labourers to these women. The absence of Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC) registration process among WAWs is also a major setback.

In an interview with a Punjab Labour Department official, it transpired that women are hesitant to cooperate with the Labour Department because of the dominant male workforce. It is therefore difficult to collect data or recognise their contributions. Moreover, the Labour Department considers work as legitimate labour only if it enhances commercial activity, which is near impossible for WAWs who work in the field for other people or on their pieces of land. He also confessed that the Labour Department is unable to determine whether or not women are receiving minimum wage.

NATIONAL IDENTITY CARDS (NICS) AND VOTING RIGHTS

The DG of the Welfare Department of Sindh confirmed that largely, women are now registered, have computerised NICs, and can exercise their right to vote. However, this right is usually exercised under duress. The waderas for whom they work depend on their votes to stay in power and sustain their control over the poor. The Secretary of the Women Development Department believes that the involvement of women in the election process is extremely limited. Votes have been known to

magically materialise even when women do not cast their votes.

As per the FGDs, 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.

INHERITANCE

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

‘We cannot raise our voices. Even when worried or upset, we cannot speak up. We can tell our husbands but no one else. We cannot express our plight.’ – Woman FGD Participant, Sindh

KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS ABOUT LAWS AND POLICIES

All participants were not aware of any laws or governing policies protecting the rights of WAWs.

According to the representative of the Human Rights Commission of Sindh, the laws do exist, but there is no implementation, hence a majority of people are not aware. For example, instances of unequal wages are rampant despite the existence of a law guaranteeing equal wages for time and effort. A lot of time is required to spread awareness to different departments and particularly the rural population.

BISP SUPPORT

In Sindh, women participants used to receive cash support from this programme (Benazir Income Support Programme). But after its discontinuation, no one else has come in to fill the gap.

COLLECTIVE ORGANISING

All the women corroborated that they were not aware of and are not able to form groups, committees or associations to voice their concerns through legal channels. The format and structure of such bodies are non-existent. The representative of the Labour Department in Sindh pointed out that for a trade union to exist, it is necessary to have an employer. Where there are no employers, independent workers cannot form trade unions.

SUPPORT REQUIRED

Female interviewees emphasised that seeds and low-cost inputs would help to initiate home-based gardening and subsistence farming to improve the economic plight of WAWs. Another key consideration in their upward social mobility would be interest-free loans, which would go a long way towards loan repayment to spur them out of poverty and meet their financial needs. The men, on the other hand, believe that an improvement in the daily wage will result in managing their household needs.

No budgetary quotas for women exist at the Agriculture Department. The overall budget is also insufficient. Appropriate funding will result in advancement in this regard. Even in instances where policies are in place, lack of compliance and implementation of health and safety measures remains a major sticking point. The Social Protection Authority is also a major stakeholder in this landscape, but according to officials, they have not been consulted on any policy decisions. They further reiterate that their focus is on social protection for the poor and vulnerable, not specifically women.

Punjab MPAs who participated in this research welcomed the Sindh Women Agriculture Workers Act and divulged that they are working to introduce a similar law in Punjab. However, a majority of male MPAs are potential obstacles to this development as they are part of the feudal system. Officials from the NCHR underlined the importance of such a law in Punjab, which is the biggest province in Pakistan’s agricultural economy.



A woman of Rahim Yar Khan District carrying food to feed her livestock



Conclusion

WAWs in Punjab and Sindh face similar challenges and expressed their concerns about working conditions, respect and recognition, poor compensation and remuneration as bonded labourers and the lack of support structure and services from local and district governments. On their part, government, district and provincial stakeholders shared their limitations and challenges in providing WAWs with safe working conditions and enabling environments for economic and social prosperity. While some challenges are common to both men and women who do not own land, women's nuanced gender positioning in Pakistani society – and the written and unwritten rules that accompany the weight of their roles – disadvantage them more than their male counterparts. The absence of and unavailability of financial and technical support, along with limited access to markets, results in low and limited income at the end of the season.



During an FGD with women agricultural workers in Rahim Yar Khan District, participants speak about the practice of early marriages before 18, and how girls are not allowed to choose their partner while boys can express their choice for marriage



Recommendations

The following recommendations are enlisted and aligned to increase the participation and rights of WAWs.

To the National Government of Pakistan:

- Acknowledge and recognise the participation and contribution of women's informal work at household, community and national levels to respect and preserve the dignity of women agricultural workers
- Formulate policies to encourage the participation of rural women, and recognise their work as formal employment
- Develop and coordinate protocols and strategies for general leave, paid sick days, education and healthcare for women agricultural workers
- Formulate strategies to develop laws, acts and regulations to support women agricultural workers and ensure their rights to decent work, freedom of association, equal opportunity and protection, including the right to form trade unions
- 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
- Ensure that women agricultural workers are treated fairly, rewarded equitably in terms of their contribution and compensated fairly in line with the national minimum wage announced by the Ministry of Finance
- Provide exposure to women agricultural workers through capacity-building training and knowledge sharing
- Create complementary policies and agendas that challenge underlying and inhibiting social norms to improve the status of women and their well-being

To Provincial Ministries and District Departments:

- Ensure compliance with the Sindh Women Agricultural Workers' Act (2019) and regulations
- Provide high-quality seeds to women workers, along with low-maintenance modern tools and gadgets to increase production and income
- Increase market access and linkages to women agricultural workers for value chain strengthening, both in Punjab and Sindh provinces
- Provide agricultural financing for subsistence farming to improve the livelihoods of women, particularly women-headed households
- Plan capacity-building and awareness-raising programmes for women agricultural workers at the local level, incorporating legal provisions and complaints mechanisms if any of their rights are violated
- Establish community marketing sites where rural women farmers can better negotiate and collectively increase their earnings by selling their products

To the Ministry of Human Rights:

- Invest in research to deeply explore the root causes of the marginalisation of WAWs, which will assist policymakers in devising an evidence-based response
- Investigate grievances by WAWs and develop mechanisms to address their concerns

To the Trade Unions and Civil Society Organisations:

- Conduct advocacy at national and provincial levels to protect the rights of women agricultural workers and campaign at the grassroots level to fight against inequality and injustice against them

- Play an intermediary role between the Government of Pakistan, the ILO, other UN bodies, and women agricultural workers to ensure legal recognition and protection for their work
- Undertake advocacy to ensure decent working environments for women agricultural workers and minimum wages equal to their male counterparts, and in line with labour laws
- Monitor the situation and circumstances of women agricultural workers on the ground and create pressure on the respective authorities, including the private sector, to protect their labour and human rights

To the United Nations Working Group on discrimination against women and girls:

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



Men from rural areas of Rahim Yar Khan District discuss the burden on women managing work at home and in the fields, as well as violence against women in their communities

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