

## One Year Later

# The Hands That Feed Us: Struggles of Women Agricultural Workers in Pakistan

### Introduction

In August 2022, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and Awaz Foundation Pakistan: Centre for Development Services (AwazCDS) undertook field research to assess the challenges faced by rural women agricultural workers (WAWs) in Pakistan's Rahim Yar Khan district in Punjab and Sukkur district in Sindh.

The research drew insights from focused group discussions attended by over 120 participants as well as direct individual interviews with 15 participants. Both men and women from both communities participated. In addition, semi-structured interviews were also held with representatives from district and provincial government authorities, agricultural departments, and provincial and national legislators associated with agriculture and women's rights.

The research report—titled 'The Hands that Feed Us: Struggles of Women Agricultural Workers in Pakistan'—was launched in Islamabad in December 2022. It identified a spectrum of challenges faced by rural WAWs and provided recommendations for policymakers and government stakeholders. It also evaluated the efficacy of governing laws and policies in supporting WAWs and identified platforms for them to advocate for their rights.

The research revealed that WAWs in both districts faced similar challenges, emphasising pervasive problems concerning their socio-economic, gender, legal and political empowerment across Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> These include issues of inadequate and unjust compensation, bonded labour, limited access to healthcare facilities, and a lack of legal awareness. These were compounded by Pakistan's feudal, patriarchal, and conservative societal structure, which then exacerbated gender disparities and led to unequal compensation, lack of recognition, and limited access to financial and technological resources.

WAWs' restricted access to the public sphere—in particular, the markets—only worsened Pakistan's already existing income inequality. The research report underscored the need to address such gender disparities, push for decent working conditions, and guarantee equitable opportunities and rights for all WAWs.

Since the research, there have been developments in the human rights and labour rights situation of WAWs in Sindh and Punjab provinces. To capture these developments and changes, community members and local organisations from the two provinces were asked to participate in a survey.

The survey served to document any efforts made to capacitate the communities to better understand and advocate for their rights. This one-year later brief marks the continuation of our efforts since the research mission. It provides an updated account of our interventions and their impact, contextualising them within Pakistan's evolving socioeconomic and political crisis.

<sup>1</sup> "The Hands That Feed Us: Struggles of Women Agricultural Workers in Pakistan." 2022. FORUM-ASIA and Awaz CDS. December 23, 2023. <https://forum-asia.org/?p=37731>



## Context

Since the research, Pakistan's political landscape has been rife with turmoil. The ousting of former Prime Minister Imran Khan via a no-confidence motion in April 2022 triggered a series of crises that have led to political and economic instability in the country. The crisis began in 2022 when the opposition joined hands and submitted a no-confidence motion against Imran Khan's government in the National Assembly. Recent developments, including Imran Khan's imprisonment<sup>2</sup> and the return of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif<sup>3</sup> from self-exile, have only exacerbated the ongoing parliamentary and political unrest.

This turmoil has worsened the country's economic health. With inflation skyrocketing to around 40 per cent<sup>4</sup>, unbearable costs of living, and a staggering decline in economic growth, public discontent has surged, placing Pakistan's economy in an unprecedentedly precarious position. The country heavily relies on financial assistance received from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—an international financial institution—which is considered by some as a significant lifeline<sup>5</sup> in preventing the country's economic collapse. However, the government's measure of removing electricity and fuel subsidies and imposing a fuel tax<sup>6</sup> as per the condition of the IMF loan further added to the inflation and was seen as a violation of people's economic rights.<sup>7</sup> Pakistan has also received assistance from other key bilateral partners such as China and Saudi Arabia.

The economic crisis, compounded by political uncertainties, had stirred widespread civil discontent. Although not new, corruption allegations have once again struck a severe blow to the credibility of democratic institutions. The judiciary<sup>8</sup>, instrumental in addressing corruption—suffers from insufficient resources, high corruption levels, and political interference, thereby raising grave concerns about its impartiality and efficacy. Transparency International Pakistan<sup>9</sup> ranked the judiciary and police among the country's most corrupt sectors, with little trust in anti-corruption entities like the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). In Sindh province, the education sector was declared as the most corrupt. Meanwhile, in Punjab, the police were found to take the lead.

- 2 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-ex-pm-imran-khans-jail-extended-for-two-weeks-lawyer/article67302393.ece>
- 3 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/21/pakistans-ex-pm-nawaz-sharif-back-from-exile-ahead-of-elections>
- 4 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-inflation-stays-above-40-for-second-week-in-row/articleshow/105499826.cms?from=mdr>
- 5 <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/pakistan-imf-3-billion-agreement-8694508/>
- 6 <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/pakistan-further-removes-fuel-subsidies-win-imf-funding-finmin-2022-06-15/>
- 7 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/29/epic-pakistan-floods-show-need-climate-action>
- 8 <https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/corruption-an-inherent-element-of-democracy-in-pakistan/>
- 9 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2390359/police-judiciary-top-most-corrupt-in-pakistan-survey>

Imran Khan's arrest on corruption charges sparked nationwide protests in May, escalating violence and instability, threatening the country's long-term stability and democratic future. Although the protests subsided after Khan's bail, the government's aggressive crackdown on dissent was troubling, with 3,500 individuals arrested in Punjab province<sup>10</sup> and numerous leaders of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party imprisoned. These protests not only increased the violence and instability but also revealed the risk of institutional implosion<sup>11</sup>, jeopardising Pakistan's long-term stability as well as the future of its democracy. Such mass protests were unprecedented. In fact, the last time Pakistan had witnessed such protests was in 1971 when its eastern region was separated to form Bangladesh.

Despite appearing seemingly calm these days, Pakistan still grapples with ongoing mass protests, societal unrest, and increasing poverty levels. The poverty level climbed to 39.4 per cent<sup>12</sup>, resulting in an additional 12.5 million individuals falling below the poverty line. This has prompted discussions on taxing the 'sacred cows' or traditionally exempt sectors such as agriculture. This taxation could have a disproportionate impact on the earnings of rural agriculture workers, especially women, as landlords might implement tax cuts, thereby amplifying the financial burden on these vulnerable workers.

The pre-existing challenges of political polarisation, economic hardships, and security concerns are now compounded by intensified civil unrest. Pakistan's struggles with economic difficulties and governance deficiencies have persisted for years, yet the arrest of Khan served as a pivotal moment, triggering unprecedented public demonstrations. Civil liberties have dwindled, with restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, a direct assault on the media, and the suppression of opposition. All these challenges are fostering a sense of hopelessness among the citizenry. Such problems have also negatively impacted Pakistan's civic space, especially since the crackdown against human rights defenders (HRDs), civil society organisations, and journalists has been intensifying. One example is the detention of human rights activist Imaan Zainab Mazari on 20 August 2023 for her speech criticising the military.<sup>13</sup> Another example is the case of Hooran Baloch, a woman human rights defender, whose home was raided on 27 November 2023.<sup>14</sup> These are just a few of the many cases of reprisals and harassment endured by HRDs in Pakistan.

Pakistan has also faced climate-induced humanitarian disasters, such as extreme flooding, in the past year.<sup>15</sup> The 2022 flood, submerging one-third of the country, has killed over 1,500 people and displaced more than 33 million,<sup>16</sup> exacerbating long-standing health, social, and economic inequities among vulnerable groups such as women and children.

Amid these challenges, the national elections were postponed to February 2024.<sup>17</sup> For the people, the election offers a glimmer of hope. However, doubts loom over the transparency and fairness of these elections. Imran

Khan's arrest and the unlikelihood of his participation in the upcoming election, the ensuing protests, and subsequent government crackdowns on the PTI have only brought more anxiety to the public. To ensure the country's stability, there must be transparent elections free from military influence. Likewise, decentralisation must take place to further empower local governments.

## Survey Findings

### Empowerment through representation

Following the research, AwazCDS facilitated the formation of eight Women Agriculture Worker Councils (WAWCs) in Sindh and Punjab provinces between June and July 2023. This strategic move was a step towards the formal representation of WAWs. The selection of the council was democratic and electoral in nature, with members appointed through a voting system. The council has provided a structured platform for WAWs to collectively voice their concerns, advocate for their rights, and actively participate in decision-making processes. Simultaneously, the District Advisory Panel (DAP) was established to amplify the voices of WAWs. Composed of expert stakeholders—such as development institutions, labour experts, media advocates, and social activists—the panel serves to highlight the issues faced by WAWs through pertinent stages and decision-making forums. Both the council and panel play crucial roles in representing the voices and interests of WAWs and in shaping policies.

A male respondent from the non-government organisation (NGO) sector in Sukkur noted that the councils were better equipped to advocate for the rights of agricultural workers and have been successful in forming partnerships with local and national organisations to lobby for policy changes and gender equality. WAWCs, along with the formation of two DAPs, have facilitated a more inclusive and impactful approach towards addressing their concerns. WAWC members have been trained on how to better communicate the issues faced by WAWs with agricultural and labour departments, the media, government authorities and elected representatives. These platforms encourage WAWs to collectively assert their rights.

On 15 October 2023, a District Advocacy Forum on the International Day for Rural Women was held in Sindh and Punjab provinces. The forum raised awareness of the rights and obstacles faced by WAWs.

Research findings were converted into comprehensive and easy-to-understand policy briefs tailored for Sindh and Punjab provinces. For wider dissemination, these were made available in both English and Urdu. These were distributed among relevant stakeholders, including the WAWs themselves, local community leaders, government authorities, NGOs, and development organisations.

Continuing our advocacy efforts, several community gatherings, workshops and forums were organised by Awaz-CDS and FORUM-ASIA to improve people's understanding of the nuanced gender-based challenges encountered by WAWs. Likewise, such events facilitated discussions on how such issues can be addressed. Active involvement of communities and regular engagement with political leaders can create lasting impact and change.



### Empowerment through capacity-building initiatives

Between August and September 2023, two capacity-building initiatives—a training session and a workshop—were organised to empower WAWs and the broader community in the Punjab and Sindh provinces. These sessions were tailored to nurture their capabilities to safeguard their fundamental rights and cultivate advocacy skills for systemic and policy changes. Both initiatives saw remarkable turnout (260 women). The sessions encouraged women to drive transformation within their respective communities.

A WAWC member from Punjab province underscored the importance of these sessions: 'The capacity building sessions and training have been instrumental in equipping me with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively address the challenges faced by women in agriculture. We have learned about leadership, advocacy, sustainable farming practices, and legal aspects of our work. They have helped me become a more effective advocate for our community.' Similarly, another WAWC member from Punjab province echoed the sentiment, highlighting the impact of this training: 'The training has taught me how to effectively organize and lead a community.' She shared that the training was eye-opening and incredibly empowering for her, stressing how it could start a ripple effect for her community.

Meanwhile, WAWs from Rahim Yar Khan district resonated with these sentiments, expressing feelings of empowerment and newfound confidence. One of the respondents highlighted that the training provided her with enhanced communication and networking skills, instilling the confidence to speak up for herself and others in public. Another respondent also acknowledged how she felt more informed and empowered to advocate for herself and her community following the training.

### Progress and persisting challenges in securing socioeconomic and political rights for WAWs

Given Pakistan's current political situation, the caretaker government and local administrations have not taken overt steps to improve the economic and social well-being of WAWs. However, since the release of the research report, there have been some positive developments concerning the rights of WAWs. One notable progress is the heightened awareness and advocacy efforts dedicated to advancing the rights of WAWs. Workshops, advocacy forums, and the establishment of WAWCs have made positive contributions to effectively empowering WAWs. The WAWs themselves noted that they are now more informed about their fundamental rights and are more keen on promoting gender equality.



- 10 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1070475-over-3-500-arrested-in-punjab>
- 11 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/pakistan-dangerous-crossroads>
- 12 <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/pakistans-economic-model-is-world-bank-issues-warning-as-95-million-fall-below-poverty-line-11695469521937.html>
- 13 <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-arrests-rights-activist-pashtun-leader/32555992.html>
- 14 <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/police-raid-residence-woman-human-rights-defender-hooran-baloch>
- 15 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/28/world/asia/pakistan-flood.html>
- 16 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/12/pakistan-rights-besieged-amid-political-turmoil>
- 17 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/2/pakistan-to-hold-delayed-elections-on-february-8-electoral-commission-says>





### **Political and legal engagement in support of WAWs**

In Rahim Yar Khan district, political leaders—notably Khwaja Muhammad Idris, the Provincial Vice President of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)—have committed to integrate support for WAWs within their party manifestos. Meanwhile, the legal community—under the leadership of Muhammad Ahmed Kanju, Advocate General Secretary of the District Bar Association—has pledged pro bono legal assistance to rural agricultural women. Such political and legal engagement stands as a vital resource for women, enabling them to navigate legal and political systems and overcome barriers that impede their access to justice.

Advocates like Syed Khalil Bukhari have also been actively pushing for land allocation for women in Punjab, drawing inspiration from the case study of Thar, where the government of Sindh has announced the distribution of more than 200,000 acres of land among landless agricultural workers, including WAWs in almost all of Sindh’s districts under the land grant policy. The scheme aims to reduce poverty, provide better access to basic livelihoods, and ensure food security among women. Similarly in Punjab, these advocates strive to give land ownership to women who have historically and generationally contributed to agriculture—particularly in animal husbandry—to ensure that they are economically empowered and can provide security for their future generations.

### **Continuing challenges**

Amidst these positive developments, it is important to note that WAWs still continue to face several hindrances to the realisation of their socio-economic rights.

Among rural women, limited land ownership remains a big hurdle, stripping them of economic security and autonomy. This constrains their ability to invest in agriculture and secure their families’ future. Low wages also make it difficult to bear their everyday expenses. Despite the growing collective voice of rural women, their contributions to agriculture and the economy at large are not given its rightful acknowledgement within statistical surveys, resulting in inadequate policy support. Organisations like AwazCDS, the Jaag Welfare Movement, and the Nari Foundation have ardently advocated for this long-due recognition through awareness campaigns.

Though there is progress in terms of awareness, advocacy, and political engagement, many issues are yet to be resolved such as land ownership, low wages, lack of recognition as well as other indirect broader concerns like the privatisation of education and inaccessible healthcare facilities. To effectively address such problems, sustained efforts and robust policy implementation across the nation are very much needed.

### **Fair compensation**

There has been no significant progress concerning the fair compensation of WAWs in line with the national minimum wage. The prevailing low wages and inadequate gendered compensation received by WAWs pose a serious challenge to the economic security and the overall well-being of these women. Similarly, no tangible steps have been taken to ensure decent working conditions, the provision of sick leaves, accessibility to education for WAWs and their children, and workplace safety for WAWs. All these unresolved issues exacerbate the cycle of poverty among these women, restricting their ability to access essential services such as education and healthcare for themselves and their families. This

perpetuates women’s socio-economic vulnerabilities. Addressing the issue of inadequate compensation is a step towards recognising the invaluable contributions of WAWs and ensuring their economic stability and access to their fundamental rights and freedoms.

In addition, there has been no explicit initiative from the government to formulate laws, acts, or regulations in favour of WAWs. Policies ensuring WAWs’ fair working conditions, equal wages and opportunities, and better-protected freedom of association are yet to be seen. Although there have been instances where certain politicians have pledged their support for women in their party manifestos, such pledges are merely an acknowledgement of the need to address the challenges faced by WAWs. They still do not represent a tangible move to give WAWs their due recognition.

### **Conclusion**

The future for rural women in agriculture holds immense promise.

WAWs share a collective vision for a transformative future, where they are self-reliant, confident, and their contributions are duly acknowledged. This extends to nurturing communities that flourish both economically and socially—with women at the forefront. This commitment—coupled with recommendations stemming from research, extensive discussions with WAWs, and the ongoing collaborative efforts of NGOs and civil society—holds immense potential to drive substantial change in the lives of WAWs.

As highlighted in this brief, there have been some strides made in the structured representation and advocacy for WAWs; however, significant gaps still persist in addressing crucial issues such as fair compensation,

improved working conditions, and land rights. There is an urgent need for sustained advocacy with parliamentarians despite the country’s current political turmoil and the presence of a caretaker government. There is a great need to institutionalise reforms that safeguard the rights of WAWs and further provide them with equitable representation in order to combat the deeply entrenched, systemic, and patriarchal challenges prevalent in Pakistan’s agricultural sector.