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. 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.

Since the research, Pakistan’s political landscape has been rife with turmoil. The ousting of former Prime Minister Imran Khan in August 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 imprisonment2 and the return of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif3 from self-exile, have marked the ongoing parliamentary and political unrest.

This turmoil has worsened the country’s economic health. With inflation skyrocketing to around 40 per cent,4 unemployment costs soaring, 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 lifeline5 in preventing the country’s economic collapse. However, the government’s measure of raising electricity and fuel subsidies and imposing a fuel tax6 as per the condition of the IMF loan further added to the inflation and was seen as a violation of people’s economic rights.7 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— instrumental in addressing corruption—suffers from insufficient resources, high corruption levels, and political interference, thereby raising grave concerns about its impartiality and efficacy. Furthermore, the political instability and the arrest of Khan served as a pivotal moment, triggering unprecedented public demonstrations that were characterized by restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and association on the media, and the suppression of opposition. All these challenges are fostering a sense of hopelessness among the citizenry.

At the same time, the socialist governments in China and Saudi Arabia, post-2022, have enabled Pakistan to become a beneficiary of some crucial lifelines,8 especially with regards to the economic and financial aspects. Pakistan’s economic political and economic instability, however, is rife with turmoil. The ousting of former Prime Minister Imran Khan’s Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party in August 2022 was a significant event that demonstrated the weakening of political and economic institutions. The judiciary again struck a severe blow to the credibility of democratic institutions. The judiciary, for instance, postponed to February 2024 the trial of former Prime Minister Imran Khan via a no-confidence motion in Parliament. These protests not only increased the violence and instability but also revealed the rise of populism,jeopardising Pakistan’s long-term stability as well as the future of its democratic institutions. 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 39.6 per cent in 2022, marking in an additional 25 million people falling below the poverty line. This has prompted discussions on taxing the ‘sacred cows’ of the military and political powers to reduce the financial burden on these vulnerable groups.9 This taxation could have a disproportionate impact on the earnings of rural agricultural workers, especially women, as landlords might implement tax cuts, thereby amplifying the financial burden on these vulnerable groups.

The pre-existing challenges of political polarisation, economic hardships, and security concerns are now compounded by intensified civil unrest. Pakistan’s struggling economy and the worsening financial deficit have contributed to the increase in inflation rates. The inflow of foreign remittances has slowed, further exacerbating the country’s economic problems. The political instability and uncertainty have also affected the country’s economic growth prospects. Pakistan’s long-term stability, as well as the future of its democratic institutions, are at stake. Pakistan’s economic position has worsened, with the country heavily reliant on financial assistance received from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—an international financial institution—which is considered by some as a significant lifeline in preventing the country’s economic collapse. However, the government’s measure of raising electricity and fuel subsidies and imposing a fuel tax as per the condition of the IMF loan further added to the inflation and was seen as a violation of people’s economic rights. Pakistan has also received assistance from other key bilateral partners such as China and Saudi Arabia.

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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 acknowledgment 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—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 for institutional 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.