

Decent Work Trends and Work Life Quality among Rural Communities of District Jhang, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

In Pakistan, where 70% labor force is the part of informal economy, making sure the quality and quantity of available work can lead to poverty alleviation. Pakistan has entered into agreement with International Labor Organization (ILO) through "Decent Work Country Programme" which lays an ethical obligation to implement Decent Work Agenda of ILO. As agriculture employs 44% of labor force in Pakistan, executing decent work in this sector can contribute significantly towards poverty alleviation. Initiating decent work in agriculture requires establishment of localized standards for which a comprehensive base line of existing situation and farmer knowledge is enviable. Current study investigates the status and trends of decent work issues existing among rural communities of district Jhang, Pakistan. One hundred and fifty rural women were selected and interviewed on a standard questionnaire. Thirty percent children of respondents did not go to school due to poverty and lack of interest. Thirty percent boys were involved in dangerous work like pesticide spray and thrashing. There was no trend of written contracts while sixty percent women reported verbal contracts before starting the work, upon deviation of which, 75% women reported abusing by the owners. About 50% women reported gender based discrimination in labor and wages. Sixty one percent women knew about possible health hazards due to pesticide poisoning. There was no concept of freedom of association among the respondents. Current survey will greatly support in devising decent work programs in rural communities of Punjab Pakistan.

Keywords: Decent work, Agriculture, rural communities, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

According to World Bank, poverty can be recognized by the deprivation of economic, cultural and social rights. Creating more jobs for economic growth does not necessarily eradicate poverty but rather making sure the quantity and quality of available work can lead to poverty reduction (Anonymous 2010b).

Work is a major route for development, growth and alleviating poverty as it is the basis of the human social structure and the economy. However, sometimes, work benefits others rather than poor worker, and thereby becoming an instrument of social oppression (Anonymous 2010b). The majority (70%) of jobs in Pakistan are predominantly the part of informal economy, which is characterized by insecure conditions and inadequate incomes (Anonymous, 2009). The informal economy of Pakistan covers a heterogeneous range of

working arrangements from self-employed urban and rural workers (including home workers and contributing family members) to waged workers (ILO, 2002).

In response to this challenge, ILO has developed a Decent Work Agenda which proposes fair and sustainable working opportunities as an approach to the development. According to [ILO](#), decent work rests on four constituent pillars, which are interdependent and mutually reinforcing i.e. (i) access to productive employment and income opportunities, (ii) rights at work, particularly with respect to the core labor standards, (iii) systems of social protection and (iv) voice at work through social dialogue. The Government of Pakistan has also entered into agreement with ILO through "Decent Work Country Programme" (Anonymous, 2010).

Evidence consistently shows that agricultural growth is highly effective in reducing poverty. Every 1% increase in per capita agricultural output led to a 1.61% increase in the incomes of the poorest 20% of the population which is much greater than the impact of similar increase in the manufacturing sector (Gallup et al., 1997). Pakistan is the sixth most populated country (Population Census Organization) and the ninth largest country in terms of labour force i.e. almost 55 million workers (Anonymous, 2012). While employed labor force is about 49 million of which women constitute only 20% (10 million). Agriculture sector employs 44% of the labor force (GOP 2008).

Decent work is applicable worldwide however; the intensity of focus may vary with region, country, sector or workplace (Anonymous, 2012). The importance of decent work has so widely been accepted across the world, that it has been integrated into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with view point of eradication of poverty and hunger. Decent work can be a key instrument to end poverty and foster development for 848 million poor workers in developing countries. Besides being the part of MDGs, decent work can also make important contributions in achieving other MDGs e.g. universal education, child mortality, maternal health, HIV/AIDS prevention, stopping the pandemic, environmental sustainability (Anonymous, 2012).

Female labor force participation has been reported to have a positive and strong relationship with economic growth through change in the occupational structure and increase in educational opportunities along with the household responsibilities (Tansel, 2002; Fatima and Sultana, 2009). On the other hand, poverty has a strong women dimension. Often in the informal economies, women are frequently represented suffering from poor working conditions at job, while their role in the economic development is often under-evaluated as they undertake much 'invisible' work in the home or family. The main issues faced by women regarding work are disproportionate unemployment, occupational segregation and wage (ILO, 2009) and these issues tend to be concentrated in rural areas, where access to decent work is often a pressing issue and labor market dynamics differ from urban areas. The reason being poverty tends to be concentrated in rural areas.

Previously there are a number of empirical evidences that show the existence of child and forced labor in Pakistan but studies with special emphasis on hazardous work and occupational health and safety are poorly reported. The first step of implementing decent work is to create knowhow about it. In Punjab (Pakistan), 40% people engaged in agriculture are illiterate and this rate is even higher (68%) in women (Anonymous 2012). Illiteracy is therefore the main reason of lack of awareness of decent work among the rural workers. Before taking any initiative towards implementation of decent work, it is necessary to

establish a baseline of the current status of decent work and knowledge among the rural communities who are directly engaged in agriculture. Therefore, current study investigates different aspects of decent work issues among resource poor rural women workers of district Jhang Pakistan.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey was performed by two women Field Facilitators (WFF) of WWF-Pakistan during September, 2011. The target respondent were those native women who belonged to labor class; had no land holding; work as labor or yield sharer. The questionnaire comprised of nine main sections of decent work issues: child labor, forced labor, health and safety, contracts with employer, first aid, punishments in case of deviations from contracts, social organization, discrimination, and some other general information.

One hundred and fifty women were interviewed in six villages of Tehsil and District Jhang viz. Chak # 475 J.B, (Sayed Wala), Chak # 461 J.B, (Muraad Shah), Mauza Ghazi Shah, Mauza Koryan, Mauza Luk Badhar, Mauza Ashaba, (Kaali Maal).

The age of respondent women varied between 35-40 years while their education varied from illiterate to primary. Most of the data was analyzed in terms of percentages of respondents and averages where needed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Child labor

Out of 70% school going children, 61% went to schools in their native villages while 14% and 23% went to neighboring villages and cities, respectively mostly for higher school education. Thirty percent children did not go to school either because of three main reasons i.e. poverty (46%), unavailability of schools in native village (5%) and lack of interest in study (49%). According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 65.5% people of Pakistan are living below poverty line, as their daily income is below 2 U.S. dollars a day (Vazi & Meghani, 2010). Therefore in Pakistan, poverty is responsible mainly for engaging 70% of economically active working children in agriculture sector (Pakistan Federal Bureau of Statistics, 1996) found that job uncertainty is an important factor responsible for increased child labor besides household income, parental education and family characteristic (Barki & Fasih, 1998). Ahmed, (2012) reported that child labor can effectively be managed by increasing school enrolments i.e. one percentage increase in enrolment can reduce working hours of paid labor by almost 5% percent.

Girls contributed in three main field activities i.e. weeding, trash removal and harvesting which are not reckoned as dangerous works. On the other hand, boys performed eight different types of works including threshing, sowing, weeding, irrigation, pesticides application, fertilizer application, trash removal and harvesting (Fig 1). Out of these eight works, threshing and pesticide application is reckoned as dangerous work. Thirty seven percent boys were involved in dangerous works like pesticide spray and threshing etc. of which 28% worked without supervision of any adult. The reason being, 63% women admitted the bad health conditions of their children i.e. skin diseases (15%), respiratory diseases (10%), stomach or abdominal infections (30%) and others (43%).

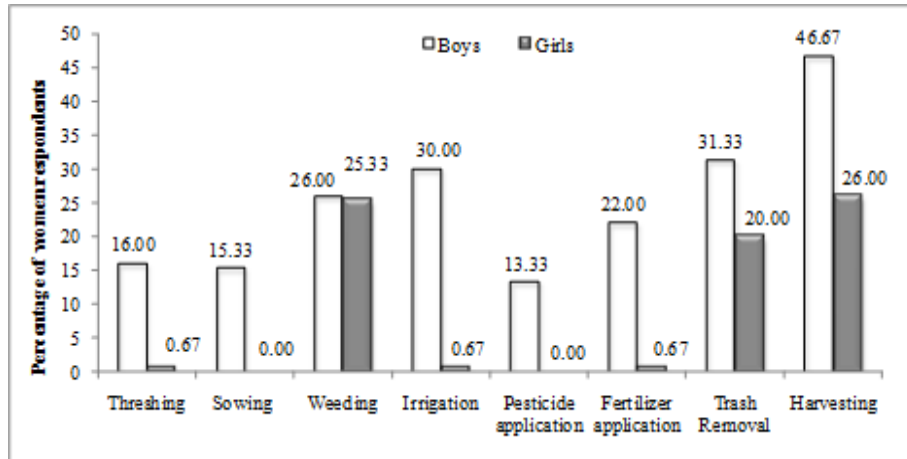


Fig 1. Type of work and its strength performed by girls and boys

Due to marked cultural differences among four provinces of Pakistan not all determinants of child labor are the same (Barki and Fasih, 1998), however, there is law (The Employment of Children Act 1991) which prohibits employment of children less than 14 years of age in sectors other than agriculture or household enterprises. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has estimated the number of Pakistani working children to be around 11-12 millions, out of which, at least, half the children are under the age of ten years (Anonymous 2008). Some policymakers have defined “child labor” as economic activities that are deleterious to the well-being of children. There are some situations where it is hard to imagine how an activity could not be harmful to well-being of the child. Thus, it is more useful to define child labor in agriculture as including all aspects of child work and then study their effects. Likewise, still there is need to define and identify hazardous works by age in agriculture sector (Edmonds and Pavcnik, 2005).

The ratio of working and non-working children was almost equal (ca. 50% each). On an average, children worked for 5.93 hours and earned 218.51 rupees a day. At micro-level, child labor is sometimes necessary in alleviating the poverty of a household in the short-run (Blunch *et al*, 2002). On the other hand at the macro-level, before the completion of compulsory education, child labor comes at a cost to human capital development as it results in low-skilled labor force (Krueger, 1996).

Vazir and Meghani (2010) suggested several options to overcome child labor e.g. creating mass awareness; advocating employment in safer vocations, integrating basic education and skill development for an educated work force and ensuring implementation of child labour laws¹¹. The Employment of Children Act 1991 has helped in reducing the employment of children immediately after its implementation (Fasih 2007).

Contracts with employers

Sixty percent of the women reported some kind of contract with employer before starting work and in 98% cases, the contracts are verbal. Out of which 71% of the women acknowledged that payments are made according to the contracts they had while 35% opposed it. Upon deviation from the contract, women are treated harshly and abusing in 75% of the cases. In few cases (23%) the owners forgive without harshness while in rare cases (1.33%) fine is induced (Fig 2).

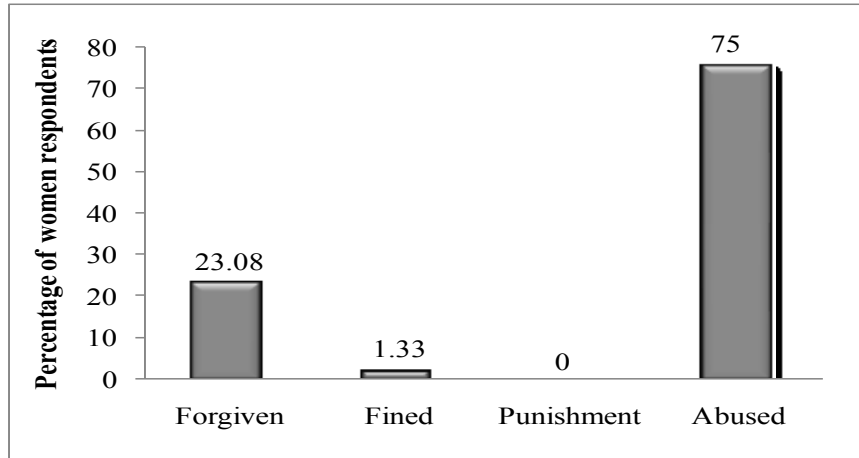


Fig 2. Response of owners upon deviation from the contract by the workers

According to article 18 of labor law of Pakistan, every employer in an industrial or commercial establishment is required to issue a formal appointment letter at the time of employment of each worker. This practice is not followed in agriculture mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, due to low literacy rate in rural areas and secondly, the demand for agricultural labor is seasonal and fluctuates with crop stage (Arif, 2009).

Discrimination and forced labor

Sixty six percent women were of the view that male labor is preferred over female labor, while 52% women reported higher male wages than the female wages. Only 15% voted discrimination in wages on the basis of caste and religion. The majority (80%) of the women worked by their own will, while 20% women were forced by their guardians (husband/parents). Half of the women, acknowledged the provision of brake time during field work.

The issue of gender wage discrimination in the labor market is persistent in Pakistan where females constitute almost half of the population and involved in production directly or indirectly. Furthermore, because women often work as unpaid family members, their participation in economic activity is not recognized. This is often because women are paid for light work in agriculture like weeding, sowing of seeds, harvesting etc. while men are paid for skillful and hard work like cultivation and machinery operation. This discrimination in wages is also because women are not paid for their working hours; instead they are paid for specific temporary task. The rising unemployment rate and concentration of females in low paying jobs affect the performance of females in the labor market (Siddiqui, 2001).

According to ILO, forced labor is any type of work or kind of service in which someone engages unwillingly and under some implied coercion a manifest threat of a penalty or oppressive measure. In this study, instead of employers the forced labor was induced by the guardians and by definition of ILO, this is also a type of forced labor.

Health, Hygiene and Safety

Drinking of boiled or treated water was not a known practice at all. In case of any health problem, 78.67% women said to have some kind of medical facility in their village. In case of pesticide poisoning, 70% women reported that patients are taken to the doctor, 27% focused on self medication and 3% women had no any option (Fig 3).

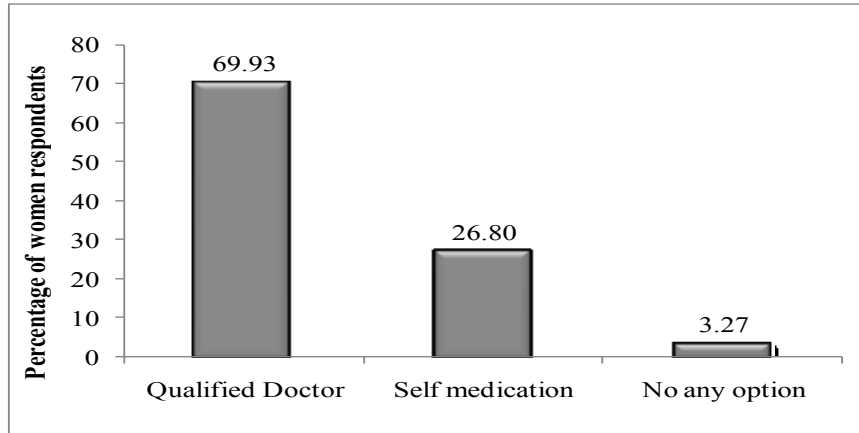


Fig 3. Response of women in case of any health hazard

The smoke from the mud stove was also known to affect the human health in many ways i.e. eye infections, headache, cough etc. Ninety seven percent women use common stove for cooking purpose while gas and cylinder were rarely used. The post insecticidal spray entrance in the field for cotton picking was properly followed i.e. 32.67% of the women after 2 days and 50% after 4 to 6 days of the insecticidal spray.

Sixty one percent of the women were aware of possible pesticide hazards. Alarmingly, 16% women were using empty pesticide bottles for kitchen purpose. Three types of human health hazards were identified while working in the field i.e. vomiting (3%), wounds (65%) and snake or insect bites (32%). About 44% women workers claimed that they were provided with medical aid in case of any health hazard, yet only 33% enjoyed the facility of registered medical practitioners in their villages.

Although the health sector in Pakistan has expanded both in qualitative and quantitative terms, yet the existing health system is not capable of providing adequate facilities for the growing population. Most of the doctors are not willing to serve in rural areas due to unavailability of basic facilities and reduced salaries as compared to the big cities/towns. Therefore, in many of the cases, dispensers and non-qualified doctors serve the purpose (Pasha and Liesivuori 2003).

On the other hand, regarding basic know how of health, hygiene and safety, there is need to build the capacity of rural women through a countrywide capacity building program. Besides capacity building, government should provide access to appropriate technology and support for community-management services.

General Information

Only a few (8%) women knew about freedom of association. None of the women was the member of any social organization, yet most of them (84%) had no any restriction of becoming the part of any social organization. Eighty five percent women supported their families by earning through field labor out of which 61% were not satisfied with their earning. Thirty five percent women supported their families by helping males in agricultural practices. None of the women grew vegetables while 84% raised animals in their homes. The additional earning from raising animals was utilized in meeting the domestic needs. They spend a significant portion of their earning i.e. 1000 to 4000 rupees monthly on fuel wood for cooking purpose (Figure 4).

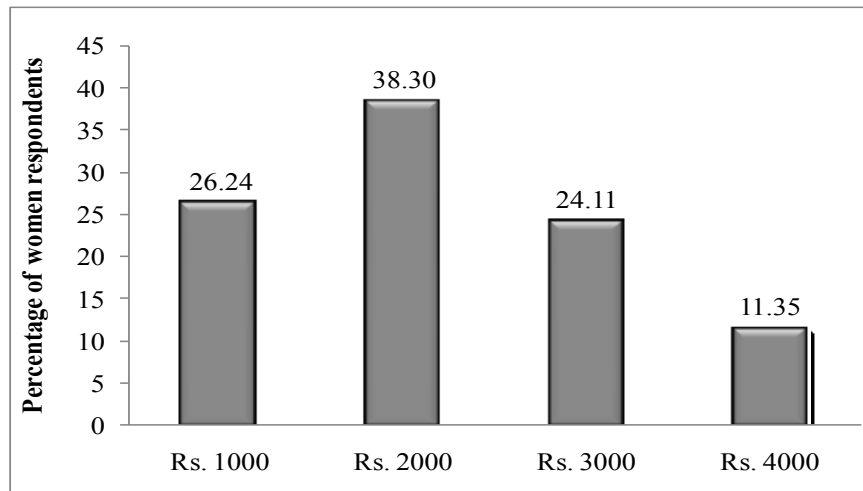


Figure 4. Monthly money spent on fuel wood for cooking purpose

The study identifies current trends in decent work in agriculture sector of rural communities of Jhang, Pakistan. Certain gaps have been identified with respect to different decent work components i.e. child labor, contracts with employers, discrimination and forced labor, health, hygiene and safety at workplace. We can generalize such conditions to most of the rural southern Punjab. Current survey will greatly support in devising decent work programs in rural communities of Punjab Pakistan.

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