

*Report*

# **Globalization's Grotesque Face: The Economic Oppression of Women Agriculture Workers in Pakistan**

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## **Introduction**

Pakistan's economy is firmly linked to agriculture and food production. Since the inception of the country, no real land reforms have been undertaken, and the rural elite remains a major force in controlling agricultural land. At the same time, since the 1990s the country has also followed a neoliberal agenda, through the International Monetary Fund led structural adjustment programs, and then later after Pakistan's entrance in the World Trade Organisation in 1995. The trade liberalisation agenda of the advanced capitalist countries, especially the United States, have been consistently implemented in the country. In this context, it is clear that at least two different levels of political and economic forces are present in the rural economy. There is also no doubt that Pakistan also has a strong patriarchal society, which governs the social and economic norms of society.

Women Agricultural Workers (WAWs) are a major bulwark of the Pakistani agrarian economy. However, this critical work force suffers from multiple forms of exploitations, discriminations and oppressions. The most critical element, of course, is that agricultural workers are forced in the informal sector classified as 'unpaid family worker.' According to the International Classification by Status in Employment (ICSE) an unpaid family worker is usually a person who works without pay in an economic enterprise operated by a related person living in the same household. Federal Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan has published the *Pakistan Standard Classification of Occupations (PSCO) 2015* which conforms to ICSE standards.<sup>1</sup> In essence, this classification has further cemented the patriarchal and feudal norms

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<sup>1</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan. 'Pakistan Standard Classification of Occupations, 2015', *Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan*, 2015. Accessed 5 October 2017 from [http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/PSCO\\_2015.pdf](http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/PSCO_2015.pdf)

where women's labour and their immense contribution to national production and earnings are contemptuously dismissed.

All this in the face of multitude of tasks carried out by agricultural women workers at different levels of production, which include land preparation, sowing, pruning and taking care of the growing fruits, vegetables, and crops. During harvest time they are responsible for picking, cutting or digging out the harvest, and finally stacking, loading, grading, packing and storing the harvest. Needless to state that finally it is women who at home are responsible for cooking and distributing food to their families.

However, even with round the clock contribution of women to agricultural production, they suffer from absolute negligence not only at home but also from their employers and the state. Their working hours are neither fixed nor defined. They may work from early hours in the morning or till very late in the evening, under very cold weather conditions or an acutely blazing sun. No occupational health and safety standards have been developed for them and they work under harsh working conditions, ranging from being exposed to toxic pesticides and chemicals, carrying out hard physical labor. These heroic women keep pulling out from their deep reserves of endurance just so that they can provide for their children and families.

It needs to be emphasized that agricultural women workers have particular skills for various levels of work in agricultural production. However, the state shows no appreciation or acknowledgement of the skills and knowledge of women nor for the critical central role they play in bringing food, raw material, medicines, and other much needed products to the market which maintains the daily running of our economy and society.

Given the vast number of women participating in the rural economy, there seems to be dearth on research initiatives on their socio-economic conditions. The contribution of women farmers in the rural economy is not well understood. In this context a study by Roots for Equity, a national non-government organisation, initiated a study on WAWs to determine the economic injustice faced by them as they work to generate not only food but foreign exchange as well, for the Pakistani economy. The paper in hand will present the occupational conditions of WAWs as they provide their labor toward agricultural production. In addition, the demands of WAWs for social and economic justice articulated by them during the research have also been presented.

## Methodology

The research was conducted in three districts of Sindh and Punjab each. In Sindh, Ghotki, Khairpur and Kashmore districts, and in Punjab, Rahimyar Khan, Sahiwal and Multan districts were included (Table 1).

**Table 1: Study Area**

<i>Punjab</i>		<i>Sindh</i>	
<b>District</b>	<b>Tehsil</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Tehsil</b>
1. Multan	Multan and Shujabad	1. Ghotki	Ghotki & Khangarh
2. Sahiwal	Sahiwal & Chicha Watni	2. Kashmore	Ghauspur & Tangwani
3. Rahimyar Khan	Rahimyar Khan & Khanpur. Kot Diji & Sobho Dero	3. Khairpur	

In each of the districts, six focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out with WAWs, so the paper in hand is based on 36 focus group discussions. In each FG, at least 10 and not more than 18 women participated. A checklist was generated for carrying out the FGDs.

The research focused on the work carried out by WAWs on three major crops namely, cotton, sugar cane and wheat. In Kashmore, women were not working on sugarcane fields – in that case, only information on cotton and wheat was collected.

A very basic set of questions addressed social aspects of their lives. The major focus of research was on economic aspects of the work carried out by WAWs. The issues discussed with respect to each crop were based on (a) methods used for finding work and collectives formed for working in a group, (b) method of commuting to work, work timings, number of hours worked, and rest time by crop, (c) work carried out particular to the crop, (d) mode of payment, earnings, benefits and savings, (e) working conditions and occupational hazards, (f) wage negotiations and (g) willingness to be organised as WAWs.

Focus groups were assembled using two different methods. In Sindh, an alliance of small and landless farmers namely the Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT) helped arrange focus groups in communities. In Punjab, some FGDs were arranged by PKMT members but for a majority we employed the 'walk-in' method. In other words, the research team would drive by areas where women could be seen working in the field, and ask them if they would be willing to take time out to participate in a discussion (FGD) or provide the team another convenient time for conducting a FGD. Or randomly go to a village and ask women if they could arrange a group of women to participate in a FGD. In some

instances, women were paid a small sum (Rs 100 per woman) for participating in the FGD. In each FGD 6-12 women participated. In some instances, if the FGD was being conducted in a village house more women would keep coming. In such cases, the discussion was maintained only with the women who had been given a brief on the FGD at its initiation.

Basic guidelines based on ethical issues as pertaining to the research as well as security concerns for the women were drawn for conducting the FGDs with the WAWs. These included the following:

- Explain to the FG participants who we were and why this information was being sought.
- Explain how we would use the data. What will be the benefit of the data to the group? If there were no immediate benefits to the group – be truthful and tell them.
- Don't ask the names of the participants. In patriarchal societies this can be very daunting for women as well as have risks of violence at home.
- Agree on how much time they were willing to give for the focus group. Be respectful of their time.
- Photographs could not be taken without asking for permission. And it was explained that these photographs maybe used in a publication.
- Do not tape the interview without asking their permission. Explain why taping is needed by the research team.

### **Limitations**

WAWs generally did not speak Urdu and were comfortable in their local language, which in most cases the research team did not speak. These languages ranged from Sindhi, to Seraiki to Punjabi. Immediate translation was difficult especially for the note taker who would be taking notes of the FGD. In most cases, the note taker would be chosen based on her ability to understand the local language.

Often there was an element of mistrust, and women would be afraid answering questions especially if they were about landlords, and or *munshis* (supervisors) who would be responsible for overseeing their work.

### **Women Agriculture Workers**

*Harvesting wheat:* As has been specified earlier, the economic contribution of WAWs was studied based on particular crops. This section will mostly provide information on the income and working

conditions of WAWS during one of the most difficult harvests, wheat harvest.

In the districts where this data was collected, wheat ripens from early April to May. This season is marked by extremely high temperatures, especially in Ghotki, Rahimyar Khan and Multan; areas which are known for their escalating temperatures, which with climate change have only exacerbated.

*Informal organising:* It was clear that women were not working individually as agriculture workers. There was an informal organisation of WAWS in every village on the basis of the following: extended families, caste, and/or village. In most cases, they would be led by particular woman whom they called '*wadari*'. The *wadari* was the person contacted by landlords who wanted work done on their farms. The *wadari* would then approach the women and take them to work under her supervision. There was no clear pattern for the *wadari* being given an additional wage for her supervisory role. In some villages the WAWS said that they contributed a very small amount from their wage to the *wadari* but mostly it seemed that there was no additional sum being given to her. The *wadari* also worked along with the WAWS. However, in general, she was an older woman of the village and she was in essence playing the role of an escort who was trusted by the households.

Only in the case of wheat, that the WAWS were organised by family. Mostly one male member, and all able women in the family would work together for wheat harvesting. They would be responsible for harvesting the entire area under wheat harvest, and would be paid based on per acre harvested. For sugar cane and cotton, it was more common to go with *wadaris*, especially so for cotton picking.

However, it is important to note that wheat harvest was considered one of the most important areas of work, not only for women but also for the household. A clear indication was the workforce organising for wheat harvest. Women organised themselves on the basis of their family unit. Either a nuclear family (husband, wife and children) or an extended family worked as a unit. The primary focus was ensuring food security for the household in terms of stocking wheat grains at home. Male members of the household generally not only accompanied women but also worked with them. Only in one village in Ghotki, men went for other work and did not accompany women for wheat harvest. However, for both Sindh and Punjab the consensus was that more women than men from each household went for wheat harvest.

Women considered wheat harvesting as the most difficult work. Women indicated that men forced them to work for this harvest. According to a woman in Khairpur, even women would not go for work they would face verbal and physical abuse at home from the male household members.

Generally, across Sindh and Punjab, it took at least three days to harvest one acre of wheat field if about 5-7 able workers were part of the workforce. However, it is important to note that the time varied not only by the number of people working on an acre but also the age and gender of the workforce. It seemed that even the day temperature also had an impact on the productivity of the workforce. For instance a household in Ghotki had four people engaged in wheat harvest and it generally took them two days to harvest half acre of land; according to the WAW, the heat made it difficult to work at a faster pace. In Kot Digi, Khairpur it was reported that six women and six men together cut harvest one acre of land in half a day, whereas in Sobo Dhero, Khairpur it was stated that if there were three woman, it would take 3-4 days for harvesting an acre.

Young girls and boys were often also part of the workforce. In addition, it was often reported that even elderly women in a household would be part of the work force. However, she may be designated a specific job which was to pick up the smaller fallen of pinnacles of wheat that had fallen on the ground during harvesting. In Ghotki, a woman shared that her three sisters worked together. They gave one share of their earnings to their elderly mother, and the remaining was distributed among themselves. According to her, all the sisters shared the work so that their husbands could not accuse them of giving their earnings to their mother.

*Working conditions — Landlords and their attitude toward WAWS:* Women were paid by crop. Extremities of weather such as when it was very cold or very hot did not impact the payment system. Women commented, ‘If there were extremities of weather it is possible that landlords may pay us less but never more’.

In Sindh and Punjab, women had similar opinion on the attitude of landlords. Across the workforce, WAWs were not working with a particular landlord; they worked wherever they could find work. In any particular village, women worked with at least two to three different landlords. In addition, no matter which landlord one worked with payment rates were the same for all landlords. According to the WAWs, one had to work and bear the varying attitudes of landlords. Some landlords were more polite and considerate than others while some would hurry them to work faster. In Ghotki, WAWs elaborated on the

attitude of landlords. According to them, those landlords who were considerate would remind them that it was time to take a break and eat. On the other hand, others would ask them to get to work quickly if they were eating; since they were being paid for work then why were they dallying over food. Women related such incidents from different districts. If the WAWs would be late in coming to work because of their children *munshis* would take special notice of that. They would threaten them that if work was not complete then they would deduct from their wages. In Ghauspur, Kashmir landlords would also ask women to hurry; they would be afraid that if it rained the harvest would be spoilt. In Kot Digi, Khairpur, women reported that landlords would not allow them to grow grass for their livestock, even though grass was important for the women. A woman remarked '*zamindar koe bhee acha hota ha kia? Jo mazdori hamee dae ga toe wo kia ham sae narmi sae kam lae ga? Wo toe apna farz samjh ker sakhti sae hee kam laeta hae.* (Is there a landlord who is nice? If they give us work would he deal with us with consideration? He thinks that it is a must to deal with us harshly.)' However, in sporadic incidences women also felt that landlords would deal with them politely, even they were late it was the men that accompanied the WAWs who would be admonished and not them. However, apart from verbal impoliteness women were adamant that there was no other form of abuse. According to them '*agar aisa ho toe ham kam nahi karate - humko apni izat pyari hae.* (If there was such an incidence we do not work – self-respect is dear to us)'

In Multan WAWs mentioned that some landlords would use foul language but as they had to work, women would tolerate such bad behavior. In Shujabad, Multan, women commented that the smaller landlords were much better than the bigger ones, especially in the context of benevolence. The smaller landlords were more considerate and would even sometimes give more than the specified quantity of wheat as their wage. However, the bigger landlords would be prone to give less. In Sahiwal, women elaborated on examples of 'bad landlords.' Bad landlords were categorized as those who would not give their wages in time, not provide them water for drinking or not let them feed their children. One woman mentioned that if the landlord were prone to verbal abuse they would refrain from working for him.

The WAWs from Khangarh, Ghotki, specified that sometimes *munshi* of the landlord would monitor their work. He would place his chair in the field and push them to work faster. If one would sit for a while he would ask them to get back to work. In Ghauspur, Kashmir, the WAWs also had similar opinion of *munshis* who would not even allow them to take out grass from the fields for their livestock. Or if

women would take grass from the wheat fields they would be reprimanded to be careful of the harvest so that it would not be spoilt.

In Sahiwal WAWs were working for contractors. According to them, most of the landlords lived in the city; contractors supervised their work in the fields. For them there was no difference between landlords and contractors, they had to work for all of them.

*Commuting to work:* In general, WAWs mobility patterns were found to be different not only district to district but also tehsils. In many cases, it was seen that they were quite mobile except in some areas. In Tangwani Tehsil, Kashmore, women did not travel to other areas nor did women from other areas come here to work. However, in Ghauspur Tehsil of Kashmore, some women go to the riverine belt (*kacha*) for work. Similarly, in Kot Digi, Khairpur, women were walking up to two kilometers for cotton picking. In Sobodero, Khairpur some women were going even as far as five kilometers for work.

There were no marked difference in the information on commuting to work between Sindh and Punjab. For wheat harvest, women were working in nearby areas as well as working further afield. If they had to travel further, the landlord would pay for the cost of transportation; this was reported for both Punjab and Sindh. Generally they preferred working in nearby areas and would only go far if there was no work close by. In Sahiwal, women felt that there was a lot of work in their localities even women from other villages were coming to work here. It is worth pointing out that what was considered 'close by' would often mean walking an hour or so before reaching the work site. In Sahiwal, women were going to close by villages, which could be one or two villages away. On the other hand, in Rahimyar Khan, women were often going further afield to work. Many women reported that if they had to go far a household male member or somebody trustworthy from the village would accompany them.

In Ghotki, women remarked that the tractor they would ride passed through fields where their husbands and other male household members would also be working. They felt shy about riding a vehicle in front of them so, in such cases, they preferred to walk through the fields.

Payment for vehicle cost was not always borne by the landlord. In Ghauspur, Kashmore women were going to the riverine areas for wheat harvest. They had to take a boat ride to cross the river. If 5-6 women were going together in the boat, they had to collectively pay in kind to the boat tender. The rate was six maunds (240 kg) wheat in six months or one maund per woman. In general, in these areas, if households were using these boats routinely, each family had to pay one



maund of wheat per year. If they paid in cash it would be Rs 20 for the to and fro ride. Similarly, in Tangwani, Kashmore women were paying for the tractor ride Rs 10-20, depending on the distance traveled. In some cases, male household members were also taking women to their area of work on motorbikes. In some cases the landlord would send a Suzuki for picking women up.

*Working hours:* In Sindh, the working hours for wheat harvest were shorter than that were reported in Punjab (Table 1). In Ghotki, working hours were reported between six to 12 hours per day. In Kashmore, women were working seven to 11 hours, per day. In Khairpur, the least number of hours reported were seven and the most 10 hours, per day. A woman in Ghotki reported that generally women go out for harvesting by 6:00 am; then from noon to 1:00 pm they would make the cord with which they would bind the wheat bundles, and then take a break resting for one hour. They would resume work at 3:00 pm and come home at 6:00 pm. In Khangarh, Ghotki women reported working 12 hours per day from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. While in another village, women were walking a two-hour distance for wheat harvest. They would leave around 7:00 am and arrive to work to by 9:00 am. They would finish at 5:00pm and again walk about two hours to get home. However, if the fields were close then they would work from 7:00 am to 5:00 pm.

In the Punjab districts, the working hours pattern was to go for harvesting early in the morning, and then take a break during peak heat hours – generally noon or 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm. They would eat at home and then go back to work and come home around *maghrib* which would generally be around 6:30 pm. Some of them were leaving home as early as 4:00 to 5:00 am. However, a majority were going to work in between 6:00 – 8:00 am, then with an afternoon break of two hours or so, coming home by no later than 7:00 pm. The number of hours worked ranged from nine hours to 12 hours. The longest working hours were reported from Sahiwal, where some women were even working as long as 13 hours per day, the shortest duration was six hours per day (Table 2).

**Table 2: Hours work for wheat harvest**

<i>Sindh</i>		<i>Punjab</i>	
<i>Districts</i>	<i>Hours Worked</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Hours Worked</i>
Ghotki	6-12	Multan	9-12
Kashmore	7-11	Sahiwal	8-13
Khairpur	7-10	Rahimyar Khan	8-10

*Food at work:* During the wheat harvest, women were taking half an hour to one hour off for lunch. Lunch was taken either in the field or they would go home for the mid-day meal. For WAWs, bringing lunch with them depended on two factors. One, if they were working close to their homes or not. Second, if there was somebody at home who could prepare and send them their meal. If there was somebody at home, they would make *roti* for the afternoon meal and generally send it with children. If there was nobody at home, then women would carry both the early morning food as well as food for lunch. If they were going far then they would generally carry their food with them. In many instances, women would not eat anything in the morning starting the day with only tea, and then have lunch around noon or 1:00 pm. Mostly, it was a meager meal consisting of *roti* and green chilies and onions; the research team often saw this during the course of data collection.

In nearly every focus group, the women reported that the landlord did not provide food not even water. Generally, women were very bitter on this point. In Khangarh, Ghotki, women reported an incidence where the landlord would serve tea but would deduct Rs 50 from their earnings per day. In Shujabad, Multan, a woman remarked that once she had been harvesting rice and the landlord had provided cold water but then deducted Rs 250 from the Rs 3,500 which had been her total earning. In some areas, women reported that they even brought material for preparing tea in the fields and made their own tea. Even cold water/ice was brought with them. In Tangwani, Kashmore women reported that they would bring their own *matka* (traditional water container made from clay). Only a few women reported that in some cases the landlord had provided them with food. Hindu women felt that they were discriminated about being given food. In addition, if at a '*tehwar*' the landlord would provide food, then if it were meat they would not consume it.

*Wheat harvest earnings:* Given the arduous painstaking work, it is important to understand the WAWs earnings from wheat harvest. First, across Sindh and Punjab, except in some villages in Kashmore, work was paid in kind. It was clear to see that the Pakistani semi-feudal nature of production is marked by work on food crops being paid in kind. In some villages of Kashmore, they were paid in cash or in kind, as preferred by women. However, there was a considerable difference in payments for Sindh and Punjab in the earnings of WAWs for wheat harvest by acre (Table 3).

**Table 3: Wheat harvest earnings\***

<i>Sindh</i>	<i>Punjab</i>
Ghotki 2-2.5 Maunds	Rahimyar Khan 2.5-3 Maunds
Kashmore 1-2 Maunds	Multan 2.5-3 Maunds
Khairpur 2-2.5 Maunds	Sahiwal 2.5-3 Maunds

\* from 1 acre

The more feudal nature of Sindh was obvious in data for earnings for wheat harvest. In Sahiwal, Punjab, payments were even higher than 3.5 maunds for wheat fields where the crop was not standing and had fallen on the ground due to high winds or other reasons.

Payment rates in Kashmore varied the most. In two villages in Tangwai, Kashmore the payment was 1.5 maunds per acre. In Ghauspur, Kashmore, they were paid one maund per acre. Hindu women in this area reported that they were paid lesser than Muslim women; if they protested, they were refused work. A woman stated, 'we are not happy with the 20 kilos of wheat grain per half an acre. We ask the landlord to make it 30 kilograms but he does not agree'.

In some areas, it was also mentioned that the rates were increased to one maund per acre only in the last year, before that it had been 20 kilos (half maund) per acre. In Kashmore, in a village women were paid either Rs 500 per acre or paid in kind. In essence, this means that though wheat grains were sold for at least Rs. 1,100 -1,150 per maund, WAWs were being paid for even less than a maund of wheat grains.

However, the payment per acre does not make clear the earnings of WAWs. As has been detailed above, the number of people working on one acre of land varies. In Sindh and Punjab, for cutting one acre of land women are paid at the most 80-120 kilograms (two to three maunds), of wheat grains, respectively. Mostly a group of 6-8 women could harvest one acre of land in three days. In Sindh, for the past year, on the average the daily payment received by each woman was four kilogram of wheat, which in monetary terms is Rs 132 (USD 1.2) per day. For Punjab, the payment was no more than seven kilograms of wheat or Rs 230 (USD 2.1) per day.

Based on the number of workers on an acre of land, the range of earnings were no more than Rs 170 to Rs 458 per day. For instance, a woman reported that six men and six women could harvest two acres in a day. So their total earning would be Rs 5,500 and divided among the 12

would be about Rs 458 per person. Another woman had reported that she and her husband took eight days to harvest an acre. In this case, one-day earning would come to about Rs 170 per person. It was clear that if there were more men working with them, per day earning would rise.

Except in one village in Kashmore, everywhere else women were clear that they wanted to be paid in kind. According to them, the rate of wheat grains varied by season. In Sobo Dhero, Khairpur, it was said that 'if a landlord would pay us in cash we would not work for him'. According to the WAWs, if they were paid in cash it would be more expensive to purchase wheat grains later in the year. It was also pointed out that money could be gone in a short time for purchasing other items, whereas if wheat was at home then it would last a long time and they would not worry about feeding their families. Even if there was nothing else at home, they could give children *roti* with onions and chilies. In Kashmore, it was stated that even 'if we are paid in cash we use the money to buy grains and if we need money we take an interest-based loan from the landlord'.

*Occupational hazards:* It needs to be emphasized that the meager amount of three to four kilograms of wheat is for grueling nine to ten hours of work in extremely hot, dusty environment. In the focus groups, when the WAWs were asked about health issues pertaining to wheat harvesting, they would laugh mockingly, and were very bitter and sarcastic in their comments. The working conditions during wheat harvest were considered the worst across all crops. According to them, they work without shoes and their feet are injured from the small sharp stalks (in Sindhi called *kanghri*) remaining in the ground after harvest as they work across the freshly harvested fields. According to the women, their feet would bleed from the tiny needle-like stalks. Many women would show the research team the underside of their feet, which would be like a sieve – with cuts and small minute holes in the skin. The constant use of the sickle to cut the harvest makes the skin hard; cuts from the sickle results in cuts and abrasions, as well.

The dust from the wheat as it is being cut results in allergies, especially around the eyes, chin and lips, but also across the body. Women complained of sore throat, severe body ache, back ache, headache and fever based on the extremely difficult arduous work they carry out. Skin and respiratory allergies were most commonly mentioned. As they have to sit and harvest wheat, there is pressure on their thighs, which swell and are very painful. If women had children by cesarean section, they suffered from further aches and pains and found it

difficult to work. However, few had any choice as they needed to store wheat for their household food security.

Women also reported snakebites, though these were more common in rice harvesting than wheat. In Ghotki, one woman had been bitten by a snake, and when she breastfed her infant girl, the infant started having diarrhea as well.

According to the WAWs, there is no letting of the pace at which women work, as they want to harvest as many acres of land as possible in order to maximize the grains they can take home. The wheat harvest lasts only for about 25-40 days. According to the women, there is now increasing mechanization and hence their work is being taken away, slowly but surely. In Kot Digi, Khairpur, it was reported that if only manual harvesting is done WAWs would be able to find work for 20-30 days. In Khangarh, Ghotki machines were being used for harvesting and this meant that women were only tying wheat bundles. In this case, they have only 10-15 days of work. However, this phenomenon was seen more sporadically.

In manual harvesting, women not only have to cut the wheat, but make stacks and then tie up the stacks. Women provide the cord to tie the stacks, and a vast majority will make them at home so that they don't have to buy from the market! For their hard toil they are able to collect on the average no more than five to six months of wheat grain. Consumption of course is dependent on the household size.

*Income utilization:* In Sindh and Punjab, women across all districts, reported using their income from agriculture labor by and large for household necessities. Apart from wheat earnings, the money earned from other crops such as cotton or vegetable picking, or other labor was used to buy daily food items. These included vegetables, cooking oil, sugar, tea and soap among others. According to a woman in Khanpur, Rahimyar Khan, she would spend most of her daily wage for buying sugar, tea and cooking oil. These items were using up most of their daily income. Many women were using the money for their children's milk, as well as for clothes and medicines. Some women were using the income to buy dowry items for their daughters. One woman in Shujabad, Multan, commented that she had not been able to give her daughter a big dowry and her in-laws were taunting her daughter for the meager dowry. A few reported that they were using their earnings to buy books and pencils for their children. Women often commented that though they would have liked to buy personal items, which they coveted but food for the household and other necessities were priority; after meeting household expenditure nothing was left. A woman from Sahiwal commented that if

there were only two people earning and many mouths to feed there was no chance of any savings. Another woman commented that ‘one could only wish for buying something they wanted if there was surplus income – if no income was left how could one think of buying something extra’.

The general comment was that the household men did not have ‘*pakki nokri*’ meaning they were not salaried employees or had permanent work; many were working as daily labor, or had other farm-related work. One woman had seven children and the entire household was working. The income earned by the household members contributed to looking after household expenditure. According to a woman whose husband was making a living by driving a rented donkey cart that her husband’s income was ‘*hawai rozi*’ or not predictable. In addition, her son had died of asthma, and so her income was also being used for meeting household needs. Almost all women were not using their income for their own personal needs but more toward general household consumption. This was the general sentiment across all focus groups.

However, a few women were using their income for personal items. For instance, according to one woman in Khangarh, Ghotki, her husband had three acres of land, and apart from that they were also sharecropping on another three acres. She was working on these lands as well as an agriculture worker, especially for cotton picking and wheat harvest. She did not have children (as yet) and was spending her income on herself. In one village in Khairpur, a woman had used her income to buy a gold ring for herself. Some said that if they had enough money leftover, they would use it for buying a *ralli* or some other household good or clothing. Unmarried young women and girls were using their income for themselves more than the married women. According to the women, girls would buy ‘*singhar ka saman*’ (cosmetics and other items) for personal use. However, in Shujabad, Multan it was reported that often mothers would keep the income earned by young girls. According to a woman, ‘if girls were spending their income for their parents now, ultimately it is their parents who would spend for their marriage’.

*Gains?* In Pakistan, wheat is the staple crop. *Roti* made from wheat flour is eaten at least twice a day in most homes across the country; thrice for the well-off (mostly urban) consumers who can afford the third meal – unlike the marginalized vast majority of the working class in the rural and urban centers. As has been detailed above, in rural communities, especially among landless families, women engage in wheat harvest to try and secure the year’s wheat for their household consumption.

Wheat harvesting is one crop where indeed women only work as a family unit. Ostensibly, the entire family engages in wheat harvest, going from one landlord to another trying to maximize the amount of wheat grain they can earn. In reality, in each family mostly all the women and young girls will engage in harvesting being accompanied by one or two men. Men openly acknowledge that wheat harvesting is the most difficult of all work and that women mostly carry it out. Wheat is harvested during the hottest season across Pakistan, starting in March in the southern parts of the country and finishing in June-July in the northern parts of Pakistan.

This meager amount of three to four kilograms of wheat is for grueling nine to ten hours of work is procured through intense hardship. Women Agricultural Workers want to be paid in kind – many say that they will not work for cash – as cash takes just a few moments to vanish whereas grains will keep. Such is the tale of hard-won food by women who are primarily responsible for growing and providing food for homes across the Pakistani nation! For the Pakistani society the question needs to be asked: What are the gains? The data below speaks for itself!

According to the survey conducted by National Nutrition Survey (NNS) in 2011, 43.7 per cent children under age five had stunted growth in 2011 compared to 41.6 per cent in 2001. Similarly, 15.1 per cent children were in the wasting category in 2011 compared to 14.3 percent in 2001.<sup>2</sup> According to a representative of the WFP, 'the situation has gone from bad to worse especially in Sindh where malnutrition and food insecurity among women and children has increased'.<sup>3</sup>

Key findings of National Nutrition Survey of 2011<sup>4</sup>:

- ❖ 58% of the households are food insecure.
- ❖ 18% of women aged 15-49 years are under weight.
- ❖ 31% of children are underweight.
- ❖ Nutrition status of <5 years children has shown no improvement from 46 years.

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<sup>2</sup> Dawn, '60pc Pakistanis Facing Food Insecurity'. *Dawn*, 21 November 2013. Accessed 18 Oct. 2016 from <http://www.dawn.com/news/1057489>

<sup>3</sup> Mursil Mehmood Butt, 'Food insecurity in Pakistan rises to 58%', *National Nutritional Survey*, *News Pakistan*, 11 January 2012. Accessed 18 October 2016 from <http://www.newspakistan.pk/2012/01/11/Food-insecurity-in-Pakistan-rises-to-58-National-Nutritional-Survey/>

<sup>4</sup> Z. Bhutta, S. Soofi, S. Zaidi, A. Habib and M. Hussain, 'Pakistan National Nutrition Survey, 2011'. Accessed 14 May 2018 from [http://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan\\_fhs\\_mc\\_women\\_childhealth\\_paediatr/262](http://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_fhs_mc_women_childhealth_paediatr/262)

- ❖ Anemia has worsened among both pregnant and non-pregnant women and pregnant women in urban areas suffer more iron deficiency anemia.
- ❖ Pakistan may be witnessing the double burden of under nutrition and obesity within rural and urban women of reproductive age.

Nationally, severe stunting was observed among 24 per cent of children aged 0-59 months and wasting at 17 per cent. According to UNICEF's Progress Report 2013 – 2015, *Stop Stunting*,<sup>5</sup> in Pakistan 44 per cent of children are stunted. This is the third highest percentage of stunted children in the world and means that more than 9.6 million Pakistani children have experienced chronic nutrition deprivation in uterus and/or during early childhood. At 44 per cent, Pakistan's under-5 stunting rates are much higher than the global rate.

So, what are the reasons for such an acute situation of hunger, malnutrition? According to government of Pakistan statistics,<sup>6</sup> the area under wheat harvest has steadily increased: in the year 2000-01, the area under wheat harvest was 8180.9 thousand hectares, which in 2009-10 had increased to 9131.6 thousand hectares. However, for 2010-11 year, wheat crop area shows a decrease of 2.53% over the previous year. Different reasons have been provided for the decrease which include shifting of area to cotton and sugarcane crops in irrigated tract, late crushing by sugar mills and considerable increase in potato (autumn) crop. An important reason indicated is increase in wheat crop of 8.16% over the last year, which is attributed to sowing in appropriate time and available moisture in barani tract, better weather conditions, recommended doze of inputs and use of high yielding varieties.

In stark terms, it can be stated that the country is self-sufficient in wheat production. In fact, in the past few years there is abundant wheat in government warehouses, and it is difficult for the government to sell off this stock as in the international market, wheat is available at a much cheaper rate. As is obvious from the above data, on one hand women are children are suffering from acute malnutrition but on other

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<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, 'Progress Report 2013-2015: Stop Stunting', *UNICEF Pakistan*, July 2015. Accessed 18 October 2016 from [http://www.unicef.org/pakistan/Stop\\_Stunting.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/pakistan/Stop_Stunting.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan, 'Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2010-2011.' Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan, 2010-11. Accessed 10 May 2018 from [http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/agriculture\\_statistics/publications/Agricultural\\_Statistics\\_of\\_Pakistan\\_201011/tables/Table3.pdf](http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/agriculture_statistics/publications/Agricultural_Statistics_of_Pakistan_201011/tables/Table3.pdf)



hand wheat production has risen immensely. So then who are the beneficiaries?

No doubt, the beneficiaries are the oppressors themselves, namely the feudal landlords, and a segment of the capitalist class, especially the fertilizer manufacturers.

The absolute control over land remains the crux of the problem, of course but without doubt the onslaught of globalization and neoliberal policies have worsened the situation. First, as was pointed out by women, their male household members rarely have jobs full-time employment; most of them are working on daily wage. Neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatization have had immense impact on ability of the working class to find full-time salaried employment. Majority of the rural working class work in the very poorly paid service sector in tea-stalls, roadside hotels.

Further, deregulation policies, initiated in the 1990s, have continued to escalate prices of agricultural production. The price for diesel per litre was Rs 10.99 in 1999, in 2010 had risen to Rs 75/litre and today it stands at Rs 98 per litre. Similarly, urea and DAP prices have gone up and have resulted in massive increase in agricultural production cost. In 2010, DAP prices jumped from approximately Rs 700 per to Rs 2,500 - Rs 3,200 per bag; in 2012 it had gone up to Rs 4,100; in 2017 and 2018, DAP per bag price have come down but still are in Rs 3,000 per bag range.

It needs no reminding that the dependency of farmers on agricultural chemical inputs was a deliberate market-based intervention through the Green Revolution policy in the 1960s, aggressively pushed by USAID. It was through this policy that farmers started using High Yielding Variety seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. With structural adjustment program introduced in the 1980s, and more stringently in the 1990s, the subsidy given for these inputs was reduced/taken away resulting in the skyrocketing of agricultural production immediately impacting the cost of living.

In the past few years, the government of Pakistan, with its neoliberal agenda has developed a two-pronged approach of pacifying both feudal and capitalist forces. Seemingly to show its concern for farmers, and to ensure a higher production in Pakistan's staple produce, a high support price is being offered on wheat as well as subsidized fertilizers are being provided. However, both policies support big landlords and the corporate sector.

First, the support price on wheat only benefits the big landlords, as only they have surplus wheat to sell, as well as the clout to get the *bardana* (special bags provided by the government for packing the

support price wheat) which allows them to get the advantageous support price which is generally at least Rs 200 per maund (40 kg) . The small farmers, with one to acres of land, save their produce for household food security.

Second, in the past couple of years provision of subsidized fertilizer (for both DAP and urea) is again beneficial to the big landlords, as they are the ones who buy this input with immediate cash payment. Small farmers are unable to pay cash for fertilizers, and generally pay only after the harvest. So, they get the fertilizer on loan, which is paid for at the market rate without subsidy and with an additional interest rate. The big landlords not only have huge saving on both accounts but certainly do not pass these on to either the sharecroppers they give their land to or to the agriculture labor who works on their fields. This is only too clear by the study in hand!

The second group, which is able to benefit from the subsidized price of fertilizer, is the fertilizer manufacturers themselves. Sales volume of fertilizers goes up, and manufacturers are paid the full market price of the fertilizer by the government. The profit earning capacity of fertilizer companies can be seen by their declared profits: Fauji Fertilizer Company's (FFC) profits rose 12 percent to Rs19.43 billion for the year ending 31 December 2015,<sup>7</sup> and Fauji Fertilizer Bin Qasim announced 4.06 billion profit for the year ended December 2015.<sup>8</sup> In 2015, FFC announced a profit of Rs11.78 billion in the year ended 31 December 2016.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Engro Fertilizers Limited (EFERT) announced a comprehensive profit of Rs 9.3 billion in the year ended 31 December 2016,<sup>10</sup> and in 2017 a consolidated profit of Rs11.15 billion in the year ended 31 December 2017, up 20% compared to Rs9.28 billion in the same period of previous year, according to a company notice sent to the

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<sup>7</sup> *The News*, 'Fauji Fertilizer Company earns Rs19bln in 2015', 28 January 2016. Accessed 5 October 2017 from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/94189-Fauji-Fertilizer-Company-earns-Rs19bln-in-2015>

<sup>8</sup> Azra Talat Sayeed (ed.), *Hal Ahwal*, January-April 2016, Roots for Equity, 2016, p.45.

<sup>9</sup> *The Express Tribune*, 'Corporate results: Fauji Fertilizer posts profit of Rs11.78 billion, down 30%', 1 February 2017. Accessed on 5 October 2017 from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1313172/corporate-results-fauji-fertilizer-posts-profit-rs11-78-billion-30/>

<sup>10</sup> *The Express Tribune*, 'Corporate result: Engro Fertilizers posts profit of Rs9.3b, down 37%', 8 February 2017. Accessed on 5 October 2017 from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1320829/corporate-result-engro-fertilizers-posts-profit-rs9-3b-37/>

Pakistan Stock Exchange.<sup>11</sup> The subsidies help in profit accumulation of the landed and capitalist classes but when it comes to consumption, it is a different story. It is reported that in Pakistan,<sup>12</sup>

wheat price has registered a sharp increase of more than 300 percent in last ten years from Rs400 per 40kg to Rs1300 per 40kg, registering a climb of over Rs2,250/40kg. The wheat rate in Pakistan is highest in the world as staple food is available at Rs900 per 40 kg in the world market. . . . One of the major reasons for the food-inflation remains the government's decision to increase the wheat support price by more than 300 percent in last 10 years. This high rate largely benefited big landowners, but proved fatal for the majority of people, particularly belonging to the poor and fixed income earners.

Amongst the 'majority of the people' no doubt the WAWs are one of the major categories. The constant search for wheat crop from one landlord to the other, the miles of walking, and then the arduous work on empty stomachs leaves the women, and their children suffering the brunt of the malnourishment. No doubt, high General Sales Tax ranging from 16-17% has marked this decade; these have led to surge in prices of essential items, and have impacted the low-income sectors food consumption regressively.<sup>13</sup>

There is no doubt that these abysmal statistics on hunger and malnutrition portray the reality of rural women who are facing multiple burdens of exploitation and oppression at the hands of feudal landlords, market forces and patriarchal structures at home and community.

It is well understood in mass-based farmer movements, such as Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek that the only way out of this wretched existence is genuine agrarian reform.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Express Tribune*, 'Engro Fertilizers' profit jumps 20% to Rs11.15b', 9 February 2017. Accessed on 5 October 2017 from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1629921/2-engro-fertilizers-profit-jumps-20-rs11-15b/>

<sup>12</sup> Arafreen Mohammad, 'Time to reduce Pakistan's rising wheat rate', *Pakistan and Gulf Economist*, 8 Jan. 2018. Accessed on 10 May 2018 from <http://www.pakistaneeconomist.com/2018/01/08/time-reduce-pakistans-rising-wheat-rate/>

<sup>13</sup> Haroon Jamal and Sohail Javed, 'Incidence of General Sales Tax in Pakistan: Latest Estimates', *Research Report No. 89*, Social Policy and Development Institute, June 2014. Accessed on 10 May 2018 from <http://www.spdc.org.pk/Data/Publication/PDF/RR-89.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek, *Qaumi aur sobai mushawarat barae zamini islahat*, PKMT and Roots for Equity, 2012.

### **Agricultural Women Workers' demands**

There is no doubt that agricultural women workers fully understand that they are being extensively exploited by their landlords, they are highly underpaid, they are provided no social protection, not even a glass of water, and certainly no safety measures against occupational hazards. It is indeed tragic, that even after such back-breaking work, agricultural women workers are not even deemed the dignity of being considered part of the labor class, instead they are labeled a very humiliating patriarchal term 'unpaid family helper'. If indeed international statistical systems have to be followed, why do these systems not penalize national and international economic and social institutions for such blatant human rights violations? If indeed, the years of blatant neglect, minimal spending on women's economic development and education, and general social stability have resulted in such terrible conditions where labor statistical systems are now further ignoring their economic contributions and leaving them out of formal labor categories then, it is the labor classification systems that need to be changed to ensure women's participation to be counted in economic development of the nation-state, and then of course given due economic and social benefits.

What is the role of the state in protecting and promoting their women and human rights? Where is the legislation, which is needed to ensure that these women are categorized as formal labor? Is the government concerned that that these women face hazardous work conditions? It has to be emphasized over and over again that these women are exposed to toxic chemical and pesticides daily. Not only these women, and young girls but also even the unborn children in women's wombs (in essence our future generations) are exposed to highly carcinogenic elements and other chemicals in agricultural fields.

Where is the concern in our state machinery about the millions of girls across the nation work who with their mothers in cotton-picking, wheat harvesting and a multitude of tasks in agriculture and food production? What about schooling of these girls? Why are these girls not getting an education, adequate nutrition, rest, and recreation?

No doubt, the Pakistani state must be held accountable to meet the demands that will ensure the rights of agricultural women workers. There is of course a very adequate social and economic food sovereignty framework developed which will provide development justice and gender justice to women small producers across the agrarian societies, including Pakistan. In this context, the most important and most critical element is of course equitable distribution of land to small and landless farmers, *especially women*.

At the same time, the state based on its promises for meeting the Agenda 2030 must further certain economic and social policies that will ensure delivering gender justice for agricultural women. A critical set of demands for Agricultural Women Workers is:

Recognition of Agricultural Women Workers as Labor!

Provide a Legal Framework for Delivering Just Wages!

Social Protection!

Safe Guards against Occupational Hazards!

Gender Equity!