Socio-Economic Problems of Agricultural Laborers in Punjab (Pakistan)

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Abstract

The development of the agriculture sector is one of the most imperative factors for fulfilling basic human needs, alleviating poverty, boosting shared prosperity, and becoming a significant contributor to national development for most developing countries. Over one billion of the world's labour force is engaged directly and indirectly in this sector, one-third of the world's workforce. Unfortunately, the laborers working in the agriculture sector face multidimensional socioeconomic problems such as poor livelihood conditions, meagre employment circumstances, long working hours, fewer rewards, unavailability of basic safety facilities, remuneration and pitiable nutrition, among others. To understand the contributing factors responsible for socioeconomic problems, this study was conducted in three divisions of Punjab province: Gujranwala, Faisalabad, and Dera Ghazi Khan. For this purpose, a multistage simple random sampling procedure was applied to approach the participants. The interview schedule was used as a tool for data collection and validated through pilot testing. The study's findings revealed that the laborers' employment conditions could have been more conducive while agricultural laborers were receiving lesser wages. The agricultural laborers have to face many health hazards. In contrast, the majority of the laborers were exploited only due to their illiteracy and ignorance about Government policies and laws related to them. Many participants reported chronic socioeconomic problems significantly associated with their working environment, amenities and available facilities.

Keyword: Agricultural Laborer, Socioeconomic Problems, Agricultural Development, Agricultural Labor Force.

Introduction

The agriculture sector is among the most imperative factors for national development and has become the major contributor to GDP for most developing countries (George et al., 2023). Agricultural development is the most powerful tool for basic human needs, poverty alleviation, boosting shared prosperity, and feeding about 9 billion people globally. Seventy-eight per cent of the world's population live in rural areas and depend mainly on farming for their livelihood, especially in developing countries of Asia and Africa (Paracchini et al., 2022). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, over one billion of the labor force of

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the world that is engaged directly and indirectly with this sector is one-third of the total workforce of the world (Khan et al., 2022; Saikh et al., 2023).

Generally, the population comprising the labor force associated with agriculture is divided into different categories by the economists like wage laborers, sharecroppers, peasants and farmers having subsistence farming (Stratton et al., 2021 & Sumberg et al., 2022). All the men and women who work in the fields, orchards, glasshouses, livestock, and primary processing facilities to produce food fibers on wages are called waged agricultural workers. These workers do not own the land on which they are working, nor do they own the equipment they use, which distinguishes them from the farmers (Sengupta et al., 2023). There are many categories of such workers due to the terms and conditions of their employment, such as permanent or full-time agricultural workers, temporary or casual agricultural workers, seasonal agricultural workers, migrant agricultural workers, piece-rate workers, or workers receiving some form of in-kind payment. These agrarian workers receive wages in cash, in-kind payment, or any other commodity (Kumar et al., 2023).

Pakistan is a developing country like all other developing countries; agriculture is one of the critical economic sectors, and agricultural labor ensures the availability of food for the entire population besides earning their livelihood (Ahmad et al., 2023). The role of agricultural laborers is very significant for the development of Pakistan as 68% of the total population and nearly 45% of the country's total labor force is associated with the agriculture sector, and it is considered agricultural labor. The agriculture sector, on the one hand, ensures the production of food while, on the other hand, it absorbs 43.5 % of the country's total labor force (Abbas et al., 2021). This sector is the major contributor to exports, as the food group alone has a share of 17.5 per cent of Pakistan's total exports. Furthermore, industrial development also depends on the agriculture sector because 60 per cent of industrial establishments in Pakistan are agro-based. This sector also provides raw materials for domestic industries like rugs, carpets, sugar, leather, footwear and food products (Pradhan et al., 2022).

Agriculture laborers play a crucial role in providing food, reducing hunger and national development, but unfortunately, the socioeconomic condition of these laborers is deplorable. The laborers working in the agriculture sector have to face multidimensional issues such as poor socioeconomic, health, livelihood, employment conditions, remuneration, education, nutrition, safety and social protection, among others (Khan et al., 2021; Rautela et al., 2022; Ewert et al., 2023). Lack of proper safety measures, long working hours, fewer rewards, unavailability of essential health and education facilities, and involvement of procedural matters make things more complicated for this sector and the laborers (Milheiras et al., 2022).

Socio-economic Conditions of Agriculture Laborers

Pakistan is an agricultural state where the agriculture sector contributes 21% to the country's GDP, and 43.7% of the country's workforce is associated with the agriculture sector (Ahmad et al., 2023). The labor force attached to the agriculture sector plays a significant role in the country's economic development, but it faces multidimensional socioeconomic problems. The labor force in the agriculture sector faces numerous social and economic issues that significantly impact their work and living conditions more complicated (Rehman et al., 2022). The labor associated with agriculture is divided into different categories by economists, such as wage laborers, sharecroppers, peasants, and farmers who have subsistence farming. Above all, agricultural laborers are exploited by their land owners, poor working environment, and bounded and forced labor due to the unavailability of comprehensive policies and social security systems regarding this specific field (Salam et al., 2021).

The government of Pakistan tried to provide a better working environment and established various labor policies in 1955, 1959, 1969, 1972, 2002, and 2010 since the creation of Pakistan (Abbas et al., 2021). All these labor policies ensure the protection of the rights of the laborers, but unfortunately, the agricultural laborers have been neglected by the government. Agricultural policies are less effective due to their poor implementation. Moreover, the majority of agricultural laborers are unaware of these policies and have to bear much vulnerability to working conditions and are exploited by different means (Khan et al., 2021; Rehman et al., 2022).

The study is going to be conducted in the province of Punjab, which is very important in Pakistan's agriculture sector. Punjab is the land of five rivers and is famous for its cultivation and different crops. The province of Punjab has ten divisions: Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Sargodha, Gujrat and Sahiwal division. All these divisions of Punjab have equal importance in agriculture and have their specific specialty in this regard. Some divisions are famous for rice, while others are important for cotton.

On the other hand, wheat, sugarcane, and maize are significant crops in Punjab. In this study, the hurdles and problems of agricultural laborers in Punjab will be highlighted and discussed. The hurdles and socioeconomic issues of agriculture laborers, employment conditions, remuneration, education, health, safety, and social protection are some of their significant problems. In this research, all these issues will be examined.

Study Objectives

- To understand the existing socioeconomic conditions of the laborers working in the agriculture sector of Pakistan.
- To explore the individual, demographic and working environment problems faced by agriculture laborers in Pakistan.
- To find out the contributing factors responsible for socioeconomic issues faced by agricultural laborers in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

Labor Theory of Value

Karl Marx advocated the labor theory of value and believed that the wages of laborers were held at the subsistence level by a large number of unemployed (Sánchez et al., 2022). The theory provides a basis for understanding the phenomenon of lower wages for laborers, and agriculture is also one of the sectors famous for low wages for agricultural laborers. Karl Marx developed theories about class conflict in society, which resulted in the exploitation of the lower class. According to Carl Marx, all working-class people are exploited by the bourgeois class (Chothodi et al., 2022). Marx argued that the ultimate source of profit, the driving force behind capitalist production, is the unpaid labor of workers. So, for Marx, exploitation forms the foundation of the capitalist system.

The Subsistence Theory of Wages

David Ricardo, with many other classical economists, advanced the subsistence theory of wages, and the present work done by these classical economists was based on the population theory of Thomas Malthus (Mekonnen et al., 2021). It held that the market price of labor would always tend toward the minimum required for subsistence. If the labor supply increased, wages would fall, eventually causing a decrease in the labor supply. If the salary rose above the subsistence level,

the population would increase until the larger labor force would again force wages down (Dudney et al., 2021).

Study Hypothesis
The study is about the socioeconomic problems of agricultural laborers, and after reviewing existing literature regarding the socioeconomic issues of agricultural laborers, the following hypothesis is constructed.
H1: Higher the level of a conducive working environment, lower the level of social problems of agricultural labor.
H2: The higher the monthly income level, the lower the economic problems of agricultural labor.

Materials and Methods
This exploratory study applied multistage sampling methods and techniques to approach the participants from target communities. The respondents for this study were male laborers working in the agricultural sector for at least one year. There are nine administrative divisions in Punjab, and all the laborers who work on the lands of others for wages are considered part of the study population. There are no exact figures about the strength of agricultural laborers in Punjab.
In the first stage, three divisions, Gujranwala, Faisalabad, and Dera Ghazi Khan, were randomly selected from the nine divisions of Punjab. In the second stage, three districts named Gujranwala, Faisalabad and Layyah (one district from each selected division) were chosen through the fish bawl draw sampling method. In the third stage, three Tehsils named Gujranwala, Jaranwala, and Layyah (one from each district chosen) were also selected using the fish bawl draw sampling method. In the fourth stage, 15 villages (five from each Tehsils) were selected using a random sampling method. In the fifth and last stage, 25 respondents from each town were chosen through a deliberate sampling method. The list of selected villages is given below.

Table 1: **Geographical distribution of study participants**

Province	Divisions	Districts	Tehsils	Union Councils	Villages
Punjab	Dera Ghazi Khan	Layyah		UC.19	Chak No.278
					Chak No. 280
			Layyah		Chak No. 281
				UC.20	Chak No.283
					Chak No. 284
	Faisalabad	Faisalabad	Jaranwala	UC. 33	109GB
					105GB
					65GB
				UC. 57	66GB
					67GB
	Gujranwala	Gujranwala	Gujranwala	UC. Mandhiala Warriach	Mandhiala Warriach
					Radiala Warriach
					Kotli Peer Shah
				UC. Lohianwala	Lohianwala
					Kot Shahan

According to the nature of the study, the researcher used a purposive sampling method to choose the respondents because most may be illiterate. They may feel reluctant to give their personal information to a stranger. In this way, the researcher first convinced the respondents and then interviewed them. Another thing is that there needs to be proper data or records of the laborers associated with farming. The researcher had to find the respondents from the proposed sampling area. So, a purposive sampling method was adequate for this purpose. A structured interview schedule was prepared according to the study's nature, objectives, and hypothesis, presenting closed and closed-end open-ended. The interview schedule covered all the socioeconomic aspects of the problems of agricultural laborers. Pre-testing of the tool was done with 39 respondents to check its validity and reliability before actual data collection. Interviews were conducted from the field in the day, and it took one month to complete 375 interviews. Various descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were applied to draw results/findings through the statistical software SPSS-22.

Results and Discussions
Descriptive Analysis
Through descriptive analysis, the researcher tries to present participants' overall geographical and demographic distribution. Descriptive statistics are used to present quantitative descriptions, which describe the basic features and mostly contain information regarding lists of numbers that represent a population. Table 2 presents the details regarding the demographic distribution of the study participants.

Table 2: Demographic distribution of the study participants

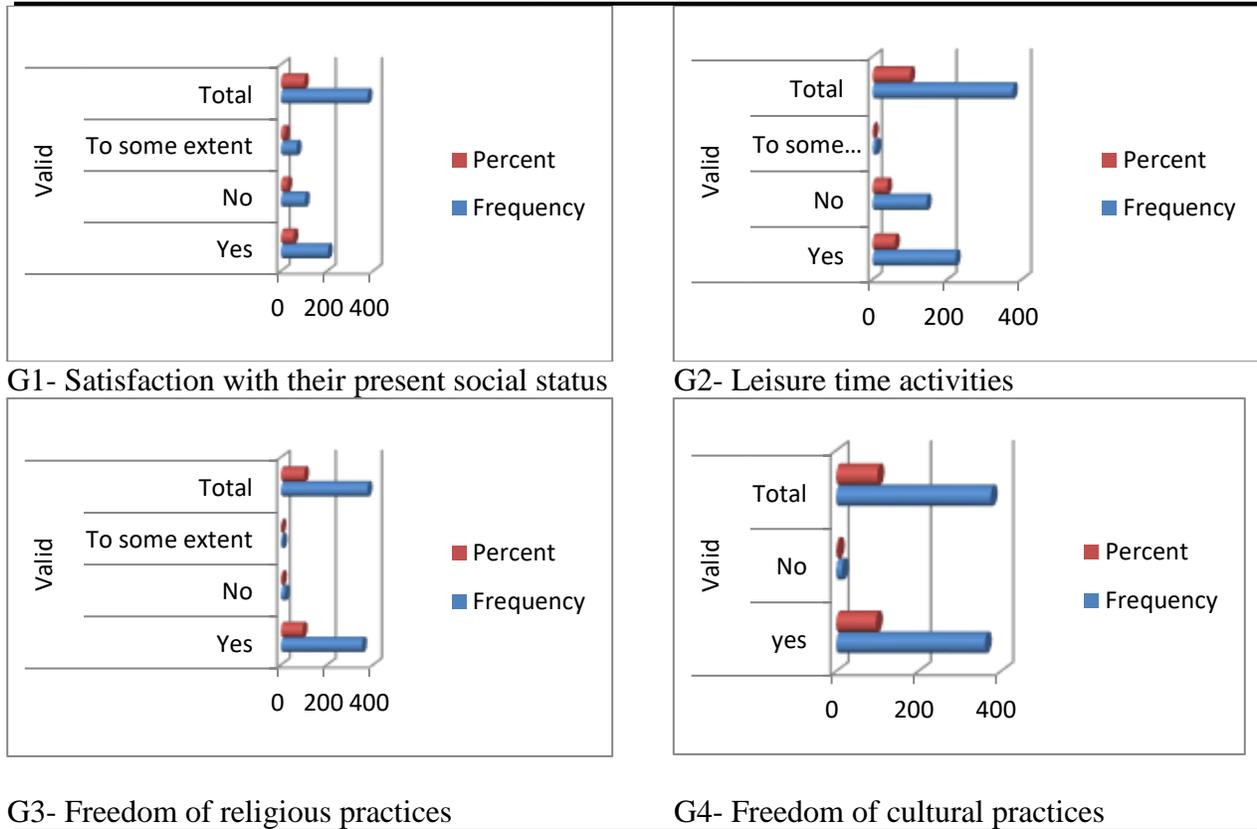| Participant Characteristics		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Living Area	Dera Ghazi Khan Division	125	33.3	33.3	33.3
	Faisalabad Division	125	33.3	33.3	66.6
	Gujranwala Division	125	33.3	33.3	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Age	Below 18 Years	14	3.7	3.7	3.7
	19 to 30 Years	199	53.1	53.1	56.8
	31 to 45 Years	135	36.0	36.0	92.8
	46 to 60 Years	26	6.9	6.9	99.7
	Above 60 Years	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Marital Status	Married	247	65.9	65.9	65.9
	Unmarried	120	32.0	32.0	97.9
	Divorced	8	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Family System	Nuclear family system	107	28.5	28.5	28.5
	Joint family system	268	71.5	71.5	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Educational Status	Literate	116	30.9	30.9	30.9
	Illiterate	259	69.1	69.1	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Table 2 indicated that the researcher selected equal participants from all selected divisions, such as Dera Ghazi Khan Division, Faisalabad Division and Gujranwala Division. Out of total, 53.1% of participants belonged from the age bracket of 19 to 30 years and 36% from 31 to 45 years of age. Similarly, when participants were asked about their marital status, a huge proportion, 65.9% was married and 71.5% living in a joint family system. The educational status of the participants shows their poor condition, as 69.1% of agricultural laborers were illiterate, which is one of the primary reasons for their socioeconomic problem.

Table 3: Working condition, environment and practices by agricultural laborer

Characteristics		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Nature of Labour	Bounded	81	21.6	21.6	21.6
	Unbounded	294	78.4	78.4	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Working Hours	8 hours	111	29.6	29.6	29.6
	9 to 12 hours	165	44.0	44.0	73.6
	Above 12 hours	99	26.4	26.4	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Monthly Income (Rs)	Less than 5000	33	8.8	8.8	8.8
	5001-10000	214	57.1	57.1	65.9
	10001-15000	120	32.0	32.0	97.9
	15001-20000	8	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Problem faced during working	Yes	354	94.4	94.4	94.4
	No	9	2.4	2.4	96.8
	To some extent	12	3.2	3.2	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Minimum wage as per Govt. policy	Yes	43	11.5	11.5	11.5
	No	332	88.5	88.5	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	
Satisfaction with work	Yes	146	38.9	38.9	38.9
	No	155	41.3	41.3	80.3
	To some extent	74	19.7	19.7	100.0
	Total	**375**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Table 3 highlighted the working conditions, environment and practices of agricultural laborers in selected areas of the study. Out of the total, 78.4% of participants reported that they do this work on their wishes and needs. A considerable proportion of participants, 69.6%, work 8 to 12 hours per day, and unfortunately, 57.1% earn only Rs 50001-10000; only 2.1% of participants reported earning Rs15001 to 20000 per month. In the central portion, 94.4% of study participants reported that they always face problems during their work regarding the requirements of work facilities. Due to their illiteracy conditions, most of the participants, 88.5%, need to be made aware of the government's minimum wage policy, and almost half of the study population, 41.3%, did not show satisfaction with their work and working environment.

Figure 1: Socio-cultural situation and practices by agricultural laborer

G1- Satisfaction with their present social status   G2- Leisure time activities

G3- Freedom of religious practices   G4- Freedom of cultural practices

Many study participants highlighted that they wanted more from their present status as agricultural laborers, as presented in Graph G1. When researchers asked them about their leisure time activities, most respondents replied that they have enough leisure activities, especially at their workplace, during rest times presented in graph G2, as most of the family members work together and spend a lot of time together. Similarly, graph G3 presents the responses regarding religious practice during working hours, and graph G4 indicates the freedom regarding their cultural activities, such as celebrating special days.

Chi-Square Test
The researcher applied Chi-Square statistics through cross-tabulation to present the distributions of two categorical variables simultaneously, with the intersections of the categories of the variables appearing in the table's cells. In this study, chi-square tests were applied to test the hypothesis and find out the association between income and socio-economic problems of agricultural laborers. The study hypothesis (H2) that the higher the level of monthly income, the lower the level of economic issues of agricultural labor was also tested through the chi-square test.

Table 4: Association between community participation in planning and user satisfaction

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	88.973[a]	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	36.132	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	.000	1	.989

N of Valid Cases	375	
a. 6 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .19.		

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.487	.000
	Cramer's V	.344	.000
N of Valid Cases		375	

It is evident from table 4 that the socio-economic problems of the agricultural laborers are significantly associated with the monthly income of the respondents and Chi-Square Value= .0001 and P-value= .0001. Therefore, the socioeconomic problems of the respondents are affected by the monthly income of the respondents and the low income of laborers creates problems for the laborers.

Table 5: Association between community participation in planning and user satisfaction

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	54.705[a]	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	67.167	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	54.277	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	375		
a. 6 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .19.			

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.382	.000
	Cramer's V	.382	.000
N of Valid Cases		375	375

It is evident from table 5 that there is a correlation between the area of the agricultural laborers and bounded labor, and the test results show a Chi-Square Value= .0001 and P-value= .0001. Therefore, the information indicates that the element of bounded labor is associated with the area, and the results of the above table demonstrates indicate that bounded labor is mainly present in Gujranwala. At the same time, this menace is also present in the Faisalabad division, and the ratio of bounded labor is smaller in Dera Ghazi Khan.

Conclusion

The existing literature (D'Annolfo et al., 2021; Feng et al., 2022; Sharma, 2023) endorsed the study findings as working conditions of the laborers were not conducive because most of the respondents worked more than 12 hours daily. Still, amazingly, their monthly income was meagre. The overwhelming majority of the agricultural laborers received lesser wages from their employers. The monthly income of the total 375 respondents was insufficient for their requirements, and most of the respondents had no other source of earning/ no time to be involved in other economic activity. They faced many social and economic problems, as defined by Peeters et al. (2021), Saravana et al. (2022) and Falconnier et al. (2023). The finding of the study shows that vast numbers of respondents are homeless and deprived of the basic facilities in their houses like kitchen, water supply and sanitation.

On the other hand, almost one-quarter of the respondents did not take breakfast, lunch and supper regularly, while more than 90% did not take any fruit daily. Most laborers were illiterate, so they were exploited due to ignorance and illiteracy (Bezner et al., 2021; Patri et al., 2022; Venus et al., 2022). The study shows that 88.5% of respondents needed to be made aware of the minimum wage announced by the government and required to learn about the government's agricultural policies. The overwhelming majority of the respondents, 97.1%, said that the condition of farming laborers is very pathetic and must be improved for their better social and economic well-being and the more significant interest of national development.

Recommendations

- The monthly income of agricultural laborers is low, and the present study suggests that the government should organize efforts to enforce the minimum wage acts in the agriculture sector.
- Agricultural laborers must be provided non-formal education to develop sensitization among them about their rights.
- Bounded labor is a curse, and as the study shows, it is found in the agriculture sector, so in this regard, the government must take all appropriate legal actions to control it.
- The government should make agricultural policies by considering the interests of the agricultural laborers.
- In case of any professional injury while performing their duty by the agricultural laborers, the affected must be given all appropriate basic facilities given to the industrial laborers.

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