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AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

THE RIGHTS TO LAND AND LIVELIHOOD

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AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The study aims to assess the working conditions and socioeconomic challenges agriculture workers face in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and identify potential improvement pathways. Agriculture is a significant economic activity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and employs a large proportion of the provincial labour force. Agriculture sector workers lack legal protection, making them highly vulnerable to insecure and unstable employment conditions. While the rural poor are eligible for the government's social protection programmes, all labour welfare schemes are inaccessible to informal sector workers.

The province is confronted with lower labour force participation, higher unemployment, dominant informalisation and a relatively high percentage of rural and agriculture sector employment. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's overall labour force participation ratio is 39.5 percent, significantly lower than the country's overall ratio. Agriculture workers' employment and working conditions are precarious, resulting in higher unemployment in the province and migration to different parts of the country and abroad.

The percentage of vulnerable employment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's agriculture sector is the highest among provinces. Moreover, they work for excessive hours, earn less and face work-related injuries or diseases. Although there have been improvements in decent working conditions in Pakistan over time, these are limited to the formal sector, which employs a significant percentage of the workforce. As a result, the working conditions of agriculture sector workers remain exploitative.

Being excluded from provincial labour laws, agricultural workers have experienced limited avenues for freedom of association, including the right to form and join organisations of their choosing and collective bargaining. Moreover, they have poor access to basic facilities in health and education and limited access to land, water, credit, and information. As a result, they are prone to a high incidence of poverty. The exploitative nature of some tenancy arrangements keeps the agricultural workers, mainly seasonal and migrant workers, in a state of deprivation and powerless. Moreover, their vulnerabilities are attributed to, among other reasons, the hegemony of relevant market forces, particularly in the absence of state regulation.

Women's employment in agriculture is higher than in any other sector in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but is comparatively lower than the national average. Most of them are contributing family workers. They also face wage inequality, employment vulnerability, excessive working hours, and occupational hazards. It is also important to note that irrespective of their schooling status, children in rural areas contribute to agriculture and livestock-related activities and share household chores responsibilities.

Disasters and conflict situations threaten agriculture workers' lives and livelihoods, particularly without government support. As a result, some farm workers have abandoned their profession for alternative livelihoods.

The 2018 Labour Policy intends to extend the application of labour laws to various sectors, including agriculture workers. However, there has been a lack of effort to implement these provisions in letter and spirit.

Based on the findings, the study recommends several key interventions. These include creating avenues to include farm workers' voices in public policy discourse, ensuring compliance with Pakistan's domestic and international commitments to bring agriculture workers under labour laws, improving their working conditions and eradicating child labour and sexual harassment. The study also recommends ending agricultural workers' exploitation by employers and market forces, making arrangements for equitable land distribution, ensuring women's access and ownership to land, and providing protective and remedial services to farm workers in case of violation of their rights.

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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture plays a vital role in Pakistan's economy, particularly in employing most of the country's workforce. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is no exception in this regard. Over the years, the province has witnessed significant social and economic change from conflict and climate change events. These changes have profoundly impacted the lives of agricultural workers by altering employment patterns, working conditions, income levels and access to essential services and resources. Moreover, their rights and entitlements are yet to be recognised, respected and fulfilled.

Against this backdrop, this report presents a wide-ranging analysis of the state of agriculture workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, drawing upon secondary research and fieldwork. The report examines the following key dimensions:

- Employment patterns in the agriculture sector, wage levels and working conditions of landless peasants, small-scale farmers and migrant workers.
- Level of recognition and respect for agriculture workers' rights and entitlements, including social protection, occupational health and safety measures, and prevalence of child labour and gender-based disparities.
- Land ownership patterns, tenancy arrangements, and their implications associated with the workers' lives and livelihoods, especially landless peasants, small landholders and sharecroppers.

This report presents recommendations to support evidence-based advocacy and policymaking to recognise, respect and fulfil fundamental rights and legitimate entitlements of agriculture workers in the province.

The research for this study involved conducting an in-depth review of the literature on labour protection in Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The literature review included statistical data on agriculture and employment, relevant provincial policies and laws, and other secondary sources such as research studies and reports. The information gathered was triangulated through interviews with key informants and group discussions with farm workers in different parts of the province. Furthermore, a provincial-level roundtable was organised to gather stakeholders' inputs.

This report is divided into five sections. The following section provides a brief socioeconomic profile of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while the third section gives an overview of provincial labour policies and laws. With the help of secondary data and fieldwork, the working conditions of farm workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been discussed in detail in the fourth section. The topics covered in this section include vulnerable employment, occupational hazards, gender disparities, child labour, exploitative market forces, the impact of disasters and conflict, and the absence of social dialogue. The last section presents the conclusion and recommendations.

SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, located in the northwest region of Pakistan, is the smallest province of the country by area (101,741 square kilometres) and the third largest province by population (35 million), which accounts for 12 percent of the country's total population.¹ The poverty ratio in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is estimated to be 27 percent, higher than the national average of 21.5 percent.² As expected, rural poverty is higher than urban poverty (27 percent and 17 percent, respectively) in the province. Following the 25th Amendment, seven political agencies³ and six frontier regions⁴ have been merged with the province. The merger revealed the abysmal state of human development in the province as a majority of the population in the newly merged districts live below the poverty line amidst low literacy and unemployment rate.⁵

The literacy rate in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has slightly increased from 50 percent in 2008/09 to 53 percent in 2019/20.⁶ While the male literacy rate is 71 percent, the overall female literacy rate is only 35 percent. However, there is significant rural and urban variance: 31 percent and 53 percent, respectively. Despite Pakistan experiencing uneven regional development over the years, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has continued to be ranked third on the Human Development Index (HDI) since 2006/07.⁷ Moreover, the province has the lowest gap between rural and urban HDIs compared to other provinces, and its income inequality has improved significantly between 2006 and 2019.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's contribution to Pakistan's GDP is around 10 percent.⁸ The structure of the provincial economy can be assessed by the contribution of services, industry and agriculture sectors (56.1, 24.8 and 19.1 percent, respectively) to provincial GDP.⁹ The Labour Force Survey (LFS) reveals that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's overall and male labour force participation rates (39.5 and 63.2 percent, respectively) are the lowest among provinces.¹⁰ The female labour force participation rate of 15.8 percent is very low but better than Sindh and Balochistan. Like the rest of the country, there are significant rural-urban differentials: the female labour force participation rate in rural and

urban areas is 17 and 9.1 percent, respectively. Migration to different parts of the country and abroad is widespread. A review of official registration data of overseas employment shows that the highest number of workers who went abroad between 2018 and 2021 were from Punjab, followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.¹¹ It must be highlighted that the provincial share of migrant workers in the above-mentioned period is comparatively higher than in other provinces.

Agriculture is an important economic activity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and employs a large population. In addition to growing maize, sugarcane and wheat in moderate quantity, the province is known for producing around three-fourths of the country's production of tobacco.¹² While the province grows wheat and rice, commodities critical to food security, it has to import both to meet the shortfall in production.¹³ Because of the importance of agriculture in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's economy and to address the challenges after the 18th Amendment, the Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa developed a ten-year agriculture policy in 2015.¹⁴

The policy focuses on five key areas: strengthening service delivery systems, creating an enabling environment for private sector investment, participatory technologies, upgrading the existing laws and taxes, and research and development in the sector. However, it is silent on any aspect of labour welfare at the cost of economic growth. This is problematic as the coverage of the provincial government's social security programmes is immensely inadequate for the formal sector workers—only 1 percent of male and 0.2 percent of female labour force working in industrial and commercial sectors are registered with the relevant department—and non-existent for the agriculture sector workers.¹⁵

PROVINCIAL LABOUR LAWS AND POLICIES

Overall, Pakistan's informal sector workforce, including agriculture workers, remains beyond the purview of legal protection.¹⁶ Hence, they remain heavily vulnerable to insecure and unstable labour arrangements. After the 18th Amendment, provinces have sole authority over labour laws. Since 2010, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has introduced several laws and policies to govern the formal sector labour, including the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Labour Policy 2018 and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Labour Policy 2018.¹⁷

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Labour Policy 2018 aims to promote decent work for all workers in line with international labour standards and constitutional guarantees.¹⁸ Key policy objectives include ensuring decent working conditions for all workers, addressing the issue of precarious employment and discrimination, eliminating child and bonded labour, and achieving social protection and welfare for all workers.

Moreover, the policy prioritises arrangements to improve workplace safety and health, address wage-related issues, and ameliorate women's participation in economic activities. The policy commitments also include the promotion of social dialogue, trade unionism and tripartism. However, the policy does not apply to agriculture workers as of now:

Existing labour laws are complex in the sense that they are not applicable to some categories and groups of workers. The scope and coverage of labour laws will gradually be extended to informal sector workers, workers engaged in the agriculture sector, piece-rated workers, daily wagers, home-based workers, construction workers and all categories of employments which are precarious by nature.¹⁹

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Labour Policy 2018 acknowledges that child labour 'prevails with greater extent in the informal sector and also in the agriculture sector' while noting that the extent and magnitude of child labour in the province are unknown.²⁰

As a result of this gap, the policy does not prescribe any concrete measures to eliminate agricultural child labour per se. Instead, it prioritises collaboration with research organisations to conduct research on the issue of hidden child labour within the sector.

A review of key provincial labour laws listed on the provincial labour department's website²¹ shows that these legal instruments only govern the formal sector workers and are not applicable to protect the fundamental rights and legitimate entitlements of farm workers. Government officials argue that agriculture sector workers cannot be covered under labour laws because of lacking clarity on employer-employee relations. This plea contradicts Pakistan's commitments to international labour standards, which apply to all workers, including agriculture workers.²²

While Pakistan has ratified all eight fundamental conventions, it has yet to ratify the ILO's Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention 1969, which sets international standards to secure the enforcement of national legal provisions relating to conditions of work and the protection of workers, such as working hours, wages, holidays, safety, health and welfare, and the employment of women, children and young persons.²³ Pakistan has also not ratified the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention 2001, which aims to prevent occupational accidents and diseases by controlling agricultural workplace hazards.²⁴

FARM WORKERS' EMPLOYMENT AND WORKING CONDITIONS

The overall state of labour in Pakistan can be gauged with the help of UNDP's labour development index, which is a composite index that measures achievement in the following five dimensions: employment-to-population ratio, share of labour income, skill premium, human capital, and incidence of decent work.²⁵ Though Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is ranked higher than Balochistan in the index, its performance is below par on all indicators except the share of labour income. The report, however, cautions that the growth in income is due to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's vibrant informal economy, which does not have mechanisms to protect labour rights.

The agriculture sector plays an important role in the province's economy and livelihoods because it employs almost 31.8 percent of the provincial labour force, followed by 15.2 percent in construction and 14.5 percent in wholesale and retail trade.²⁶ It must be noted that the contribution of the agriculture sector in other provinces' labour force is higher than Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The key informants attribute the issue to skewed landholdings in hilly areas and barren lands spread across the province, especially in Dera Ismail Khan, Mansehra and Kohistan. Field interviews confirm that a higher unemployment ratio in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, resulting from the lack of business and employment opportunities, is one of the factors driving people's migration to different parts of the country and abroad.

Vulnerable employment

As the majority of the country's workforce employed in the agriculture sector is engaged in own-account or contributing family work, their employment status is vulnerable.²⁷ Such workers are less likely to have formal or documented work agreements, leading to a higher chance of facing poor working conditions, insufficient social protection, and a lack of representation by trade unions or similar associations. Vulnerable employment is frequently associated with inadequate wages, low productivity, and substandard working conditions that undermine the essential rights of workers. As many as 87.8

percent of the country's workforce employed in the agriculture sector is vulnerable, with minor gender differentials.²⁸ The vulnerable employment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's agriculture sector accounts for 94.7 percent, the highest among provinces. Moreover, 99.8 percent of female agriculture workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have a vulnerable employment status, which is also the highest among provinces.

Excessive working hours

The LFS defines working 50 hours and more in a week as excessive hours worked. In this regard, 10.7 percent of agriculture sector workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reported excessive working hours.²⁹ Gender-disaggregated data reveals that 23.2 percent of women employed in agriculture, compared to 10.5 percent of men, work for long hours. According to the key informants, the agriculture sector has no concept of time-bound work, leave or vacation. Farmers must often work continuously, without breaks, throughout the entire season. They start work before sunrise and continue until after dark to meet the demands of their agricultural tasks.

Wage differentials

As per the latest LFS, the average monthly wage of agriculture sector employees is PKR 17,189, below the provincial average of PKR 24,168.³⁰ For self-employed agriculture workers, the average monthly income comes to PKR 15,661 vis-à-vis PKR 19,778 earned by self-employed workers in the province.³¹ Moreover, the data shows a high level of gender disparity as self-employed male agriculture workers earn up to 2.7 times more than their female counterparts. The monthly income of agriculture sector workers can be compared to the living wage of PKR 44,190 per month, estimated by independent researchers in June 2022.³²

During the field visits, the agriculture workers shared that it was very challenging to accurately estimate their monthly or annual income as they usually have labour arrangements with seasonal income streams. Nevertheless, they all found it increasingly difficult to sustain themselves without additional income. Some households send one or several family members to other parts of the country or abroad, where they work and live in unfavourable conditions. However, they send money to their families to support their struggle for survival.

Occupational hazards

The 2020/21 LFS data reveals that in Pakistan, 29.3 percent of agricultural workers suffered work-related injuries or diseases, followed by 19.7 percent in construction and 19.1 percent in manufacturing sectors.³³ However, only 18.2 percent of agriculture sector workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa suffered from such injuries or diseases during the reporting period. This reflects a considerably lower proportion of occupational hazards in the agriculture sector compared to the construction and manufacturing sectors (29.3 and 23.5 percent, respectively).³⁴

A closer examination of gender-disaggregated LFS data reveals that female respondents have reported fewer injuries or diseases.³⁵ However, independent studies indicate that women in agriculture remain increasingly exposed to pesticides because of their direct engagement in farming and at home by washing pesticide-soaked clothes.³⁶ Hence, it increases their risk of morbidity and mortality due to pesticide-related ailments. During field visits, key informants informed that every individual engaged in farm work would likely experience occupation-related injuries or diseases at least once a year. It often happens because of the unsafe utilisation of agricultural equipment and tools, primarily due to the absence of mechanisms ensuring health and safety in informal economy sectors like agriculture.

Denied rights and entitlements

Pakistan has a large working class with low educational attainment, inadequate skill set and irregular employment.³⁷ While decent working conditions have improved in the country over the years, these are restricted to the formal sector. In contrast, the informal sector, including agriculture, which employs most of the labour force, remains exploitative.

A review of available data and information collected from key informants confirms that workers associated with the agriculture sector in the province earn below the provincial minimum wage rate. They mostly supplement their livelihood with livestock income or remittances sent by family members from other cities or abroad. Moreover, they have poor access to health, education and physical infrastructure facilities. They are faced with a lack of or limited access to assets (land, water, credit, education, information) and hence are prone to high poverty.³⁸

While excluded from the scope of provincial labour laws, they are deprived of social protection and freedom of association, including rights to the organisation and collective bargaining, thus, can be characterised as one of the most vulnerable categories of the labour force.

The provincial government officials of labour-related departments argue that the prevalent categories of farm workers, including sharecroppers, contract cultivators, own account workers or landless peasants (either regular or seasonal/migrant workers), cannot be covered under the labour laws because of an unclear employer-employee relationship. On the other hand, the provincial government's 2018 Labour Policy aims to bring informal workers, including agriculture workers, under the ambit of labour laws.³⁹

Seasonal and migrant agriculture workers

Filed observations and interaction with key informants provided insights into the ongoing transformation in agriculture work, mainly under the pretext of cash cropping patterns across the province. For example, sugarcane cultivation in Dera Ismail Khan, fruit picking and packing in Swat, and harvesting of wheat and other farm produce in Charsadda, Swabi, Haripur, etc., have extended opportunities for seasonal and migrant work.

Seasonal farm workers migrate with or without families, live in temporary settlements established within or nearby farms, have fewer chances to access clean drinking water and other amenities, and have little or no health services in case of any injury or ailment. Moreover, they work excessive hours to make a living. Furthermore, they remain highly vulnerable to occupational hazards and various forms of exploitation. Their vulnerabilities are attributed to, among other reasons, the hegemony of market forces, particularly in the absence of state regulation.

Gender disparities

According to the key informants, women in urban and semi-urban areas usually do not go out to work due to cultural barriers. However, it is nearly impossible for rural communities to sustain themselves without the contribution of women in agricultural activities. Women's employment in the agriculture sector, which accounts for 11.6 percent, is significantly higher than any other sector in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁴⁰

It is, however, comparatively less than the national average of 15.5 percent. In national and provincial surveys, most women are characterised as contributing family workers. Compared with their male counterparts, women face wage inequality, fall under the ‘vulnerable’ category of employment, and are compelled to work excessive hours.

Participants in the group discussions in different districts confirmed that a vast majority of rural women contribute to farming and livestock rearing while also managing household chores.

The UNDP’s gender inequality index—which is calculated by, among other indicators, the labour force participation rate—for 2006–2019 shows that all provinces except Khyber Pakhtunkhwa made improvements.⁴¹

While the province has a low female labour force participation rate, the situation in its southern part is reportedly different, where women’s presence in the field is closely tied to their caste and families’ financial status.⁴² As a result, women in families with lower income levels tend to play a more significant role in external activities, particularly agriculture.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government introduced the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Enforcement of Women’s Property Rights Act 2019 to protect the rights of ownership and possession of properties owned and inherited by women.⁴³ However, despite this legal entitlement, women are often deprived to inherit property under various pretexts.⁴⁴ Delay in the legal and judicial process in this regard often renders women unable to get due share of their property and income.

Child labour

The lack of data is one of the main reasons for the difficulty in assessing the prevalence of child labour in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This gap will be filled after the publication of the province-wide dedicated child labour survey conducted in 2020/21.⁴⁵

The last such comprehensive exercise was carried out in 1996, according to which the labour force participation rate of children aged 5–14 in the province was 15.8 percent, the highest among the provinces.⁴⁶

The labour force survey is an important longitudinal data set, but it only

captures data on persons of or over the age of 10. The labour force participation rate for children aged 10–14 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa gradually declined from 8.7 percent in 2009/10 to 4.4 percent in 2017/18.⁴⁷ However, the most recent LFS report has revealed that this rate has increased to 5 percent.⁴⁸

The 2019 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Multi Indicator Cluster Survey informs that 6.4 percent of children aged 5–17 were found to be involved in economic activity with marginal gender differentials (6.5 percent male versus 6.2 percent female).⁴⁹ The survey found significant child labour in rural areas compared to urban areas (6.8 and 3.8 percent, respectively). The highest proportion of children involved in economic activities belonged to Bannu, Hazara and Mardan divisions (8.7, 7.6 and 7.2 percent, respectively). Key informants verified that both out-of-school and children attending school in their free time contribute to agriculture and livestock-related activities and share responsibilities in doing household chores.

Landholding size

There is a deficiency of up-to-date secondary information on agriculture landholdings, as the last agriculture census was held thirteen years ago. The 2010 agriculture census informs that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has the highest number of subsistence farmers⁵⁰ among the provinces, as 95 percent of landowners possessed farms under 12.5 acres.⁵¹ The distribution of farm area among small and large landholdings was highly skewed in the province: small landholdings (with less than 5 acres of land) and large holdings (12.5 acres and above in size) constituted 81 and 5 percent but operated around 30 and 25 percent of the total farm area, respectively.

It is generally accepted that the size of landholdings and access to information play an important role in accessing agricultural credit from formal and informal markets. Empirical research in two rain-fed districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa found that small farmers who do not approach banks consider the latter's credit acquisition procedures 'complex and time-consuming.'⁵² The study concluded that small landholders with lower income, information asymmetry and fewer assets are likelier not to get credit from banks.

The dominance of large farm owners leads to severe inequalities, which is one of the significant obstacles for small-scale farmers, whether they are

owners, sharecroppers, contract cultivators or peasants. It makes it difficult for them to cope with disasters, pest attacks or market challenges. Moreover, unequal land distribution in Pakistan has increased tenancy arrangements such as sharecropping which is disadvantageous to the poor.⁵³ As a result, poverty incidence among landless and small farmers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been higher than in Punjab and Balochistan. Moreover, key informants in all areas confirmed the presence of landless agriculture workers with varied labour arrangements, including sharecropping, contract cultivation and daily wage or piece-rate basis.

Exploitation by the market forces and other actors

During the group discussions, farm workers complained about the government's inability to protect them from exploitation by market forces. A sharecropper in Haripur explained that market pressure compelled farmers to sell their grown tomatoes for PKR 10 per kg last year, while consumers could purchase the same produce for PKR 50 per kg. He added that, during the previous season, they sold their wheat crop for PKR 2,200 per 40 kg, while just six months later, they purchased wheat flour for PKR 4,500 per 40 kg.

Upon enquiry, farmers said that although they grow enough wheat, they sell their produce to clear outstanding debt and fulfil other household requirements. The situation highlights the issues of exploitation faced by farm workers at the hands of market forces. They sell their produced commodity at lower rates and then have to purchase it back at a relatively higher rate, leading to further financial burden and exploitation.

One of the reasons for exploitation is the issue of information asymmetry in a largely unregulated market. A recent research study looked at this issue from the point of view of agricultural extension and 'decisions to purchase inputs for the adoption of agricultural innovations for sustainable agricultural land use in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.'⁵⁴

The research findings are illustrative of outcomes in an imperfect competitive market: farmers were not satisfied with the input prices and quality provided by the private sector. Moreover, information asymmetry in input markets has an adverse effect on the adoption of innovations and land productivity.

In field interviews, small farmers complained that they often have to purchase agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers and pesticides from the market at a relatively high price. The high cost of inputs and the sale of their produce at relatively lower prices decreases their due share of income. It further exacerbates their financial burden.

According to the key informants, peasants, sharecroppers, or contract cultivators follow the traditional route to deal with the landowners who always have the upper hand in decision-making. As a result, the former always remains uncertain and anxious during the entire cropping season regarding unfavourable weather conditions, market fluctuation or any disaster. For example, the participants in group discussions in Swat shared that landless and small farmers, especially sharecroppers and contract cultivators, paid a heavy price during the 2007 displacement and 2010 floods, as they could not recover their losses or protect themselves against landowners' exploitation. Consequently, most small farmers lost their income and assets and faced challenges restarting their work.

Impact of disasters and conflict

It has now been established that climate change significantly impacts the frequency, intensity, and distribution of various natural disasters. According to a research study that examined Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's weather data from 1980 to 2010, climate change makes the province susceptible to extreme temperatures, flooding, drought, and landslides.⁵⁵ The researchers concluded that intensified rainfall in the province resulted in flash floods which caused massive human and material loss.

Farm workers in Dera Ismail Khan, Swat and Charsadda informed the author that they faced huge losses due to natural disasters but remained unable to get any relief from the government. For instance, the 2022 floods damaged numerous parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Apart from a considerable loss of lives and infrastructure, it destroyed crops on over 107,220 acres of land.⁵⁶ However, some key informants termed the government's support insufficient regarding loss compensation. A small farmer in Saidu Sharif shared that he has not received any help from the government to rebuild his farm's protection wall damaged in the 2010 floods. This has rendered some of his farmland unusable and resulted in a significant decline in his annual income.

Group discussion participants in Tirah Valley in the Khyber district shared that they have faced problems since the beginning of military operations against militants. Initially, military movement, heavy shelling and bombing damaged their crops and other livelihoods. Secondly, many farm workers died or were disabled by becoming victims of the Taliban or the military's firing or shelling. At the time when military operations intensified, people left behind their houses, crops and livestock and moved to safe places. It resulted in wiping out their income and asset base. The majority of the Tirah Valley's farmlands are still no-go areas. The multiplicity of these issues, coupled with meagre government compensation or support, has pushed the farm workers to abandon their profession and lands and opt for alternative livelihoods.

Absence of social dialogue

Trade union membership remains significantly low in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as only 0.4 percent of the labour force are trade union members.⁵⁷ However, these estimates represent the formal sector, whereas the concept of trade unionisation stands missing in the entire informal sector, including the agriculture sector. Various difficulties confront agricultural labourers, including vulnerable employment, unfavourable working environments, child labour, occupational hazards, etc. This can be improved if farm workers form and join an organisation for recognition of their rights and rightful benefits. According to the ILO:

Freedom of association means for workers to form and join an organisation, to freely express opinion, to meet, to strike and to demonstrate for their rights. It applies to the workers regardless of the type of contract or economic sector. These include migrant workers, short-term workers, small holders, self-employed workers, and covers, naturally, both men and women. The government, under the national (or sub-national) legislation, should grant the right to freedom of association to, inter alia, employees working in farms regardless of their status and nature, small and medium-scale growers, self-employed and waged agriculture workers and rural workers.⁵⁸

Despite a rich history of peasants' struggle for their rights and entitlements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as the Hashtnagar movement of the 1970s, it

has been observed that the entire agriculture sector workforce is unorganised across the province. Moreover, no civil society organisations or trade unions are engaged exclusively in farm workers' rights struggle. However, a few political organisations are establishing and strengthening their footprints among rural communities. These include Jamaat-e-Islami's Kissan Board in Charsadda, Mazdoor Kissan Party in Nowshera and Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek in Haripur. However, they have been unable to create an impact so far.

Key informants from all the visited districts shared that agriculture workers are largely invisible in the government's policymaking processes as no one seeks their input on poverty, agriculture and rural development. Urban-centric civil society organisations, including media, bar associations and trade unions, do not prioritise workers' rights agenda. These conditions are not conducive for the farm workers to organise themselves or build alliances with civil society actors for their rights and entitlements.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that the agriculture sector dominates employment and the rural economy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, workers in this sector—landless peasants, small farmers, sharecroppers, contract cultivators, and migrant and seasonal workers—face high poverty incidence. Pakistan’s working class, especially agriculture workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, lacks education, skills and alternative opportunities and, as a result, falls behind in health, life expectancy and income levels.

Despite sectoral dominance, agriculture workers are plagued with precarious employment and working conditions such as higher unemployment, dominant informalisation, high exposure to occupational hazards, and wage differentials. Additionally, vulnerable employment leads them to job insecurity and low productivity.

As farm workers are excluded from the scope of existing provincial labour laws, they are deprived of social protection, freedom of association and other entitlements. Moreover, they are exposed to exploitation by market forces, prone to suffer the challenges of landlessness, natural disasters and conflict.

The study also confirms the prevalence of child labour in the agriculture sector. The female labour force, mainly characterised as contributing family workers involved in the sector, are relatively more vulnerable than their male counterparts. Moreover, they lack control and ownership of their income and assets.

Since the devolution of labour governance subject under the 18th Amendment in 2010, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has not taken any concrete action to protect the rights of informal sector workers, including agriculture sector workers. While the announcement of the 2018 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Labour Policy is an important step taken by the government, the policy does not have any remedial measures to uplift the conditions of farm workers.

Recommendations

The following set of recommendations has been outlined keeping in view the ILO's decent work framework and the challenges faced by the agriculture sector workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

- Keeping in view the dominating agriculture sector employment in relation to dynamics of the rural economy and high incidences of poverty in the agriculture sector, the government should create avenues to include farm workers' voices in public policy issues, particularly with regards to rural development, poverty reduction as well as in labour rights protection initiatives. The government must ensure the true representation of the working class and farm workers in all policymaking platforms, including provincial and national assemblies. The government must also introduce reforms in the local government system to enhance the role of labour councillors to improve the conditions at the grassroots level.
- In the backdrop of dominating but precarious agriculture sector employment in the country and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the government should ensure compliance with relevant constitutional obligations and international labour and human rights commitments. Given that Pakistan has already ratified eight core ILO conventions, the government should also ratify all agriculture-related ILO conventions. The government must bring agriculture workers under existing labour laws to improve their conditions of work and employment. The government must also ensure the effective implementation of existing labour laws and policies.
- Considering the farm workers' vulnerability to economic shocks, natural disasters and conflict situations, the government should extend all social protection and labour welfare programmes to agriculture workers.
- Keeping in view the continued exploitation of agricultural workers by market forces and other actors, the government should make effective institutional arrangements for price regulation of farm inputs, services and products as well as engagement relations between landlords, peasants (regular or seasonal workers), migrant workers, sharecroppers and contract cultivators.

- To discourage informal sector money lending, the government must also ensure the easy availability of bank loans to small landholders. The government should also implement effective land reforms so that the landless can acquire agricultural land.
- The government must take substantive measures to protect the rights of women agricultural workers, including their right to inherit and own property and control their income and assets. Also, strict measures should be taken to protect them from discrimination and sexual harassment.
- Pakistan's federal and provincial human rights mechanisms, such as the National Commission for Human Rights and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Directorate General of Law and Human Rights, should develop and implement strategies to protect the rights of agriculture workers. Federal and provincial women and child rights commissions should play their role in preventing discrimination against women and child labour in the agriculture sector work.

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