

Challenges, Strategies, And Policies For The Empowerment Of Pakistani Women Farmers: A Qualitative Analysis With A Capability Approach

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Abstract

Women make up approximately 70 percent of the agricultural workforce in Pakistan, but their contributions are primarily unrecognized and undervalued. This study intends to explore challenges, strategies, and policies for empowering Pakistani rural farmers. The study was qualitative in nature by conducting face-to-face interviews with rural women of four districts of Punjab province, Pakistan. The participants were approached through personal contacts and a referral system (snowball sampling). Finally, fifteen interviews were conducted and data were analyzed using Nvivo Software. This study found that women were facing challenges related to education, learning and training, inheritance rights, financial empowerment, mobility, and freedom. They were also facing some kind of domestic violence and had less access to justice. Providing equal educational and learning opportunities, access to property rights, and financial independence could help in strengthening empowerment among Pakistani rural women. The study drew policy implications related to gender equality, women's empowerment through access to economic assets, education and employment, and encountering domestic violence.

Keywords: *Women farmers; women empowerment, gender equality; social justice; capability approach.*

Introduction

Pakistan is an agricultural country, and women constitute around 70% of the agricultural workforce (Begum & Yasmeen, 2011), but their contributions remain largely unrecognized and undervalued. Despite their crucial role in agriculture, Pakistani women farmers face significant challenges that prevent them from succeeding in this sector. In Pakistan, women farmers have access to agricultural loans and extension services at a rate of only 2% (ILO, 2021). This is despite the fact that women farmers earn 70% less than male farmers. The agricultural sector is the largest employer in the country and contributes 23% to the GDP (OCHA, 2022). Women also confront major social and cultural restrictions that make it challenging for them to sell their agricultural products and earn a fair income. These challenges include a lack of mobility

and access to markets (Muhammad et al., 2020; Iftikhar, 2010). Women farmers in Pakistan confront additional obstacles because they possess such a small percentage of the country's agricultural land (Muhammad et al., 2020). This restricts their freedom of choice regarding crop selection and farm management. Additionally, their productivity and profitability are impacted by their lack of access to contemporary farming methods, inputs, and information (Ishaq & Memon, 2017; Drucza & Peveri, 2018).

In order to resolve these issues, it is necessary to empower women farmers in Pakistan by figuring out their challenges, ensuring easy access to services and resources, enhancing their social standing, and increasing their decision-making power. This qualitative study seeks to explore the challenges, strategies, and policies required to empower Pakistani women farmers. The research questions are intended to investigate the most significant challenges being faced by Pakistani women farmers in agriculture and to identify strategies for overcoming these challenges to promote their empowerment.

This study contributes to the development of effective policies and strategies that empower and enhance the livelihoods of Pakistani women farmers. The empowerment of women farmers benefit not only the women themselves, but also their families and communities. It can also help attain sustainable development objectives such as gender equality, the eradication of poverty, and the abolition of hunger.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary challenges that Pakistani women farmers have to deal with if they want to do well in farming?
2. How can these challenges be fixed to empower Pakistani women farmers?
3. What are the most significant strategies and policies that the Pakistani government or other organizations need to put in place to empower women farmers?

Significance of the Study

It is very important to study challenges, strategies, and policies, for empowering Pakistani women farmers for a number of reasons. The most important thing is to figure out the major problem that keeps Pakistani women farmers from being successful in agriculture. Giving them more empowerment could have a positive effect on their families, livelihoods, and communities. Therefore, this research is crucial to solving a pressing problem and advancing gender parity in the agricultural sector. This research adds to our understanding of the barriers that women farmers in Pakistan confront and suggests strategies for overcoming them. The results of this study help policymakers, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) come up with useful ways to help women farmers. This study also helps the agriculture sector, and giving women farmers more power could help the agricultural sector be more productive, profitable, and sustainable. Also, giving women farmers more economic and social power helps them make better choices, get better access to resources and services, and improve their way of life. Overall, the study on challenges, strategies, and policies for the empowerment of Pakistani women farmers is important to promote gender equality, help achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs), help the agricultural industry, and help women gain economic and social justice.

The capability approach is a theoretical framework developed by economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum that focuses on the freedom and agency of individuals to achieve their goals and aspirations (Lira, 2019). The capability approach has several key components, including capabilities, functioning, agency, freedom, and social justice (Basta, 2016; Robeyns, 2009; 2017). Capabilities refer to the freedom and opportunities that individuals have to achieve the goals and aspirations that they value. Capabilities entail not only having access to resources or commodities but also the freedom to utilize those resources in ways that enable individuals to live fulfilling lives (Zereyesus, 2017). The second primary component is functioning, which refers to the initiatives and outcomes that individuals actually accomplish. For instance, a capability could be the ability to access healthcare, and the corresponding function could be excellent health. The third essential component is agency. It refers to an individual's capacity to make decisions and act on their own behalf. The capability approach emphasizes the significance of empowering people to exercise autonomy and make decisions in line with their own aspirations and objectives. Freedom refers to an individual's capacity to live a life they have reason to value. The capability approach emphasizes the importance of freedom as a fundamental value that enables individuals to live fulfilling lives (Robeyns, 2017; Zereyesus, 2017). Basically, the capability approach is grounded in a commitment to social justice, which means that policies and practices should aim to promote the capabilities of all individuals, especially those who are disadvantaged or marginalized (Robeyns, 2017).

Overall, the capability approach emphasizes the importance of enabling individuals to access the resources and capabilities necessary to live fulfilling lives. It is a useful framework for analyzing the barriers to empowerment faced by Pakistani women farmers and identifying policies and strategies that can enhance their capabilities and promote gender equality in agriculture.

Review of the Related Literature

Women's empowerment and gender equality was an essential topic of research worldwide. However, it got more attention in the South Asian Region, specifically in Pakistan, a male-dominated society. The situation was immensely encouraging in urban areas of Pakistan (Akram, 2018) but worsening in Pakistan's rural and undeveloped areas (Baig et al., 2018). Urban women were more empowered than their rural counterparts (Abbas et al., 2021). Ishfaq et al. (2023) said rural Pakistan women were disempowered in education and awareness compared to urban women. The differences in women's empowerment were also highlighted based on their residing provinces, as women of Punjab and Sindh were more empowered than those of KPK. Women of rural Sindh were less empowered than those of KPK in attending political meetings, accessing banks, and going to markets to sell their products (Ahmad et al., 2016).

Education and Employment

Plenty of literature established that the quality of education mattered a lot in empowering women economically (Ibrahim & Asad, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2021; Shahriar, 2021).

Through education and skills, women could be employed, paid, and mobilized (Abbas et al., 2021).

Bushra and Wajiha (2015) approved that empowered women with training and skills have utilized these skills to become financially independent and authoritative. Rasul (2014) and Akram (2018) commented that education was a significant factor that helped women become empowered in their organizational, economic, and family spheres. It was also affirmed by Abrar-ul-haq et al. (2017) that education was a major determinant of empowerment among Southern Punjab, Pakistan's women. The study also claimed that education was strongly associated with freedom of movement (mobility). Contrarily, Ahmad et al. (2016) proclaimed that the higher education level of women did not have any association with a higher level of empowerment. Baig et al. (2018) added that education was an insignificant factor affecting the empowerment of rural Pakistani women.

When it came to women's employment, surprisingly, nonworking women were more empowered than their working counterparts (Hussain & Jullandhry, 2020). In the same way, Muhammad et al. (2021) explored social and economic factors contributing to the empowerment of Pakistani women. They found that women's education, occupation, wealth index, and men's occupation significantly affected women's empowerment. It was further noted that women with higher educational levels and independent working women were more empowered and significantly contributed to their household decisions. In contrast, Baig et al. (2018) reported that working rural women had more access to household resources than their nonworking counterparts.

Women's Economic Independence

Abrar-ul-haq et al. (2017) claimed that Pakistan rural women's economic dependency restricted them from making household decisions and hampered their political participation. Abbas et al. (2021) also verified that poverty and economic dependency hampered women's decision-making powers. Gupta and Roy (2022) commented that economic empowerment was necessary to improve women's decision-making abilities and socioeconomic status. The Pakistani government and NGOs offered assistance programs for the poor and rural women.

Since the inception of Pakistan, multiple social assistance programs were explicitly introduced to support the poor and women. Now, Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) provides social protection to Pakistan's women. However, it is highly criticized for the subjective distribution of funds (Naseer et al., 2021). A similar case of financial support to the women of Pakistan by the Akhuwat was investigated by Rehman et al. (2020). It evidenced that Akhuwat, an interest-free microfinance organization, significantly and positively changed households and socioeconomic status and contributed to the well-being of women's family life.

Marital Status and Number of Children

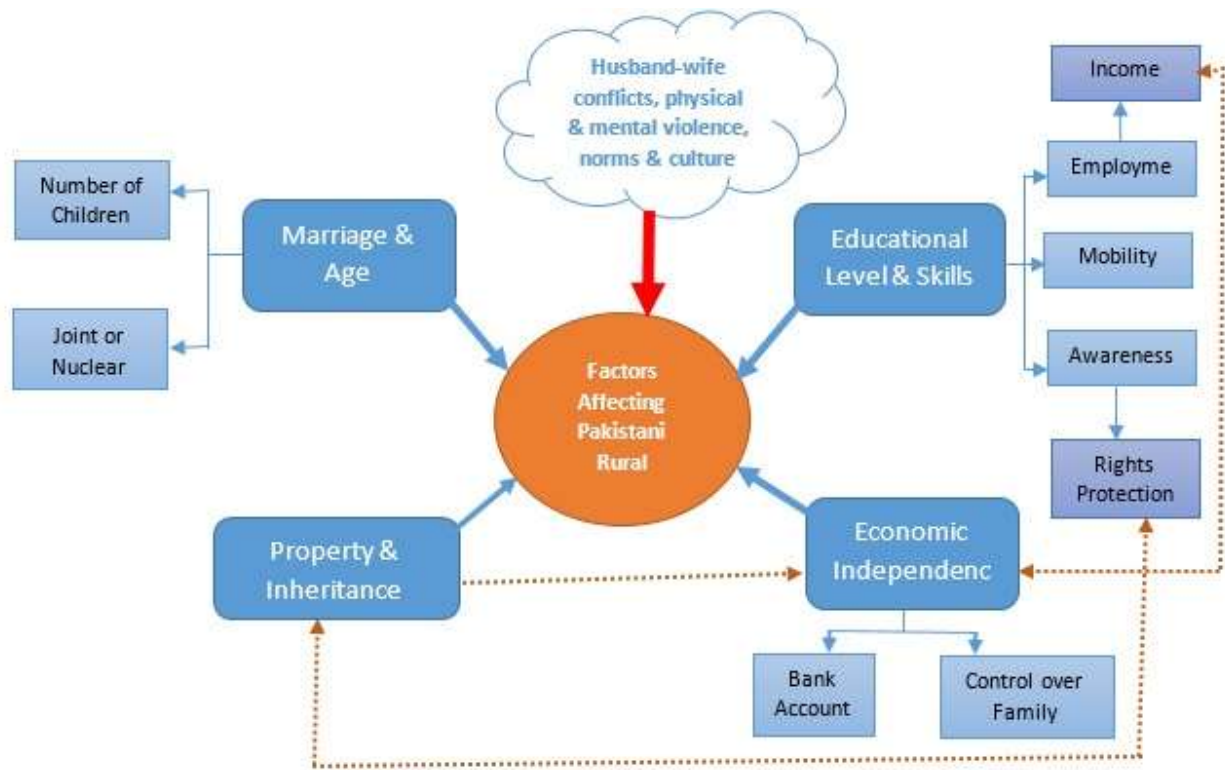
It was evidenced that women's marital status had a significant impact on the level of their empowerment, possibly because of their age and experience (Ahmad et al., 2016). Exclusively, age was also a significant factor influencing women's empowerment in household decision-making due to their seniority (Akram, 2018). Hussain and Jullandhry (2020) also found that more married women than unmarried were empowered in house-related decisions. Abbas et al. (2021) found that women having children were more empowered than those without, and

having 4-6 children made them more empowered than those with fewer children. It was also affirmed that Pakistan women’s empowerment increased with age.

In marital life, the type of family was also a significant factor heavily influencing women’s life. It had confirmed that those women were more empowered living in the nuclear family than their counterparts living in the joint family system (Ahmad et al., 2016; Baig et al., 2018).

Status of Women’s Empowerment and Influencing Factors

Hussain and Jullandhry (2020) investigated women’s empowerment among Lahore residents regarding mobility, resource control, and household-related decision. They reported that two-thirds of them had weak power and were less empowered. Most women were deprived of property ownership rights and household decisions regarding family investments and faced mobility issues. However, previously Bushra and Wajiha (2015) said that women of Lahore



were empowered enough to have education, economic participation, and a bank account.

Figure 1. Influencing factors of rural women’s empowerment

Another study by Meraj and Sadaqat (2016) explored the socioeconomic empowerment of Pakistani women by collecting data from four provinces and found that only 10 percent of women had a higher level of empowerment, while 35 percent had a lower level of empowerment. Education, age, employment category, income, area of residence, and access to household economics and social media significantly and positively affected women’s empowerment. In comparison, women’s marital status, number of children, and hijab observance significantly negatively affected their empowerment. Baig et al. (2018) claimed that those women were more empowered who had access to the media, specifically TV. However, they claimed that number of children and family type had no relationship with

women's empowerment. Rehman et al. (2020) further added after in-depth exploration through qualitative interviews that education, age, marital status, and type of family influenced women's empowerment. While Javaid (2017) found that although majority of the farmers have access to the traditional media; TV and Radio they acquired information through brochures, newspapers, and agents of pesticide companies. Ishfaq et al. (2023) found that empowerment was determined among rural Pakistani women based on their marital status, household economics, education and employment opportunities, and access to all types of media.

Choudhry et al. (2019) identified social and cultural factors affecting women's economic empowerment among Pakistani women. The descriptive analysis found that the lack of educational opportunities and access to property rights were significant factors affecting women's empowerment. Furthermore, the government failed to act upon the policies and laws in true spirit related to women's empowerment. So, Pathak and Patel (2019) observed how property rights ensured gender equality among rural women of Lucknow, India, and found that property ownership was a significant and positive factor of women's empowerment. Ishaq and Memon (2017) declared that although rural women in Pakistan significantly contribute to agricultural activities, they were not acknowledged appropriately. The women highlighted that husband-wife conflict was a significant problem in their life.

Aziz et al. (2021) explored the level of empowerment in agricultural activities among women in Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan. They reported that due to customs and norms, women had restricted access to family income, leadership, and agricultural production domains. Women could avoid their vulnerability by having access to these rights. Ahmad et al. (2016) added that household size mattered a lot as a higher household resulted in a lower level of women's empowerment and reflected male control over family income.

Disempowerment through Violence, Discrimination, and Restricted Rights

Duvvury et al. (2021) conducted a significant study based on quantitative and qualitative data to report the socio-economic impact of violence against women and girls in Ghana and Pakistan. More Ghanaian women encountered partner violence than Pakistani women. Almost one-quarter of women in both countries faced physical and psychological issues due to their partners' violence. Ibrahim and Asad (2020) took the quality of education as a factor that affected women's economic empowerment and employment discrimination. The study found a significant positive relationship between the quality of education and women's economic empowerment and a significant negative relationship between women's economic empowerment and discrimination based on employment opportunities. Abrar-ul-haq et al. (2017) found a significant gap in Southern Punjab, Pakistan, in providing employment opportunities to educated women.

Shahriar (2021) covered stories of three women from poor rural areas of Pakistan who tried to go beyond the social norms for higher education and to pursue their identity. They reported being discriminated against their gender since birth, and they were allowed to pursue higher education only if it would not affect their duties as women. Baig et al. (2018) investigated the impact of Pakistani rural women's empowerment on rural development. They suggested that self-esteem, decision-making power, and mobility freedom were significant positive contributors to empowerment.

The above-reviewed literature in the context of Pakistan depicted the overall situation of women's empowerment as not encouraging but threatening in respect of women of rural areas. There were multiple personal and professional influencing factors, including education, employment, economic independence, marital status, age, mobility, property rights, etc. Although many research studies were conducted to explore the influencing factors and determinants of women's empowerment in Pakistan (Abbas et al., 2021; Choudhry et al., 2019; Ishfaq et al., 2023), these studies were based on quantitative measures. An in-depth exploration by keeping in view the context and providing an open space to speak was needed. Hence, the current study is intended to explore the challenges of rural women's empowerment and how these challenges can be addressed.

Methods

The study was qualitative by conducting face-to-face interviews with rural farmer women who belong to four districts of Punjab, Pakistan including Kasur, Nankana Sahib, Sheikhupura, and Lahore. It was hard to approach rural farmer women to conduct interviews so they were contacted through personal references and through a referral system (snowball sampling).

An interview guide was prepared with the help of relevant literature. A panel of experts consisting of two associate professors from the Faculty of Agriculture Sciences, University of the Punjab, Lahore had reviewed the guide and suggested some modifications. These modifications were incorporated and data were collected by personally visiting the women farmers.

Only seven interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants while the remaining interviewees agreed to take notes of their interviews. Overall, 15 interviews were conducted with an average time of 30-35 minutes. The collected data were analyzed through NVivo and presented with figures and tables as appropriate.

Results

Demographic Information of the Participants

Table 1 shows the demographic details of the participants of this study. A total of 15 participants vary in their qualifications, experience, type of agriculture and geographical area took part in this study. Their qualification ranged from Bachelor's degree (P1), intermediate or FA (P2, P3), matric (P4), high schooling (P5, P6), primary schooling (P7), and the remaining were illiterate (P8-P15). It shows that they have a low level of education. The years spent working in agriculture ranged a minimum of 10-15 years to a maximum of 26-30 years, for most participants falling within the range of 10-30 years, representing a substantial level of experience in the field. Various types of agriculture practiced by the participants include wheat and vegetables (P2), fruits and vegetables (P4), wheat and rice (P5, P7, P11), and wheat, maize, and vegetables (P8, P10, P14, P15) and livestock and poultry (P1, P3, P6, P9, P13). These participants are spread across different geographical areas within the Lahore division, such as Nankana Sahib, Sheikhupura, Kasur, and Lahore itself. This diverse group of people with different qualifications, levels of experience, and farming methods gives a detailed picture of the farming sector in this region.

Table 1. Participants’ demographic details

Participant code	Qualification	Years spent working in agriculture	Type of agriculture	Geographical area (division of Lahore)
P1	BA	10-15	Livestock and poultry	Kasur
P2	FA	10-15	Wheat and vegetable	Nankhana Sahib
P3	FA	11-15	Livestock and diary	Sheikhupura
P4	Matric	11-15	Fruits and vegetables	Nankhana Sahib
P5	High School	16-20	Wheat and Rice	Kasur
P6	High School	15-20	Livestock and poultry	Lahore
P7	Primary	11-15	Wheat and Rice	Sheikhupura
P8	Illiterate	15-20	Wheat and maize	Nankhana Sahib
P9	Illiterate	20-25	Livestock and poultry	Lahore
P10	Illiterate	15-20	Wheat, maize and vegetables	Sheikhupura
P11	Illiterate	15-20	Wheat and Rice	Kasur
P12	Illiterate	25-30	Wheat and Rice	Kasur
P13	Illiterate	21-25	Livestock and diary	Lahore
P14	Illiterate	10-15	Wheat and maize	Nankana Sahib
P15	Illiterate	25-30	Wheat, rice and vegetables	Sheikhupura

Challenges being faced by Pakistani women farmers

The first question of the study was to identify the challenges being faced by Pakistani women farmers. Five major themes that emerged from the data are ‘patriarchy and domestic violence’, ‘limited access to education, learning and training’, ‘lack of rights of inheritance and ownership’, ‘finance and market accessibility issues’, and ‘poverty and marginalization’ (Figure 1).

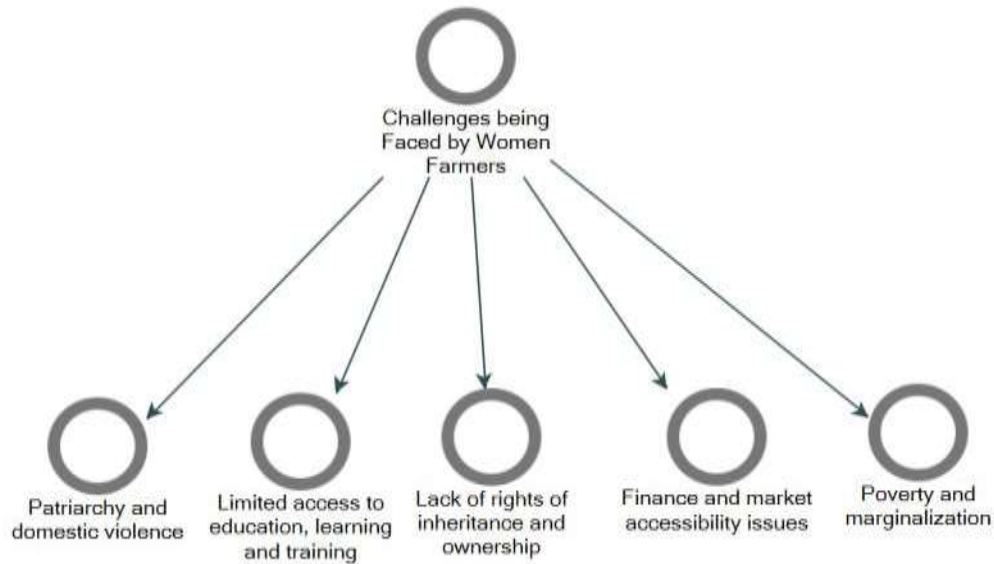


Figure 2. Key challenges being faced by Pakistani women farmers

Patriarchy and domestic violence

The patriarchy and domestic violence have emerged as the top challenges being faced by Pakistani women farmers, as 14 participants reported this fact. This theme describes male dominance, early marriages, childbearing, and the cultural expectation that daughters stay in their husbands' houses until death.

Women farmers have little autonomy and decision-making capacity in a patriarchal society. According to P3, "Men are often viewed as the head of the household and believe they have the right to dominate and govern over their spouses". P1 stated, a father tells his daughter "Don't come back from your husband's house until you die, and this diaspora grants absolute power to men, which sometimes leads to domestic violence". Similarly, another participant said, "The societal expectation of living at the father's or husband's house encourages submission and makes it hard to flee abusive situations" (P6). Another participant, P11, said, "Physical and emotional domestic abuse promotes power inequalities and hinders women's well-being and productivity". Early marriages and frequent childbirth were other challenges reported by the participants. P12 said, "My father married me in my childhood and now has eight children. My older daughter also has three children". One participant complained that men did not notice that women contribute equally to housekeeping (P13). According to P15, "A woman's responsibilities include caring for the household, bearing children, and working alongside males on farms".

Limited access to education, learning, and training

Educational and learning challenges were reported by 13 participants. This theme demonstrates Pakistani women farmers' struggles to gain education, self-development, and agricultural skills. These women farmers suffer from gender bias, poverty, cultural norms, and poor infrastructure

that impede their education. Lack of educational options inhibits their ability to learn agricultural information, current farming techniques, and entrepreneurial abilities.

Among these 13 participants, four stated that there were no schools near their houses. Three stated that their parents were unable to enroll them in school due to poverty. Two participants said that their elders did not allow girls to go to school. According to P2, "I wanted to go to university, but my brothers did not agree, as I had to go to another city. Ultimately, my father refused to let me go to university". P6 said that many people, both boys and girls, are deprived of education because of financial instability and the non-availability of schools and colleges in their villages. However, P1 highlighted the importance of education and stated, "My father supported me, and I got my bachelor's degree before my marriage. My husband supported me, and now I am running two poultry farms". She further stressed the need for education for women working in agriculture, saying that the government should provide education so that they learn about modern techniques and technologies in farming and entrepreneurial skills.

Lack of rights of inheritance and ownership

10 participants mentioned a lack of ownership and inheritance rights. This theme identifies that women farmers are not able to inherit land or assets. Gender discrimination and bias prevent women from owning land and property. Cultural and legal ramifications include marginalizing women, favoring male heirs, and denying them possession. Landlessness limits women's economic empowerment, decision-making capacity, and access to loans and agricultural inputs.

Notably, this challenge was mainly identified by the educated participants, which means the other participants were unaware of inheritance and ownership rights. For example, P1 stated, "Most women do not even question their inheritance, because they are never told of this right, they think everything belongs to men because they will take care of them". Similarly, P2 said, "One of the main reasons why women do not get their inheritance right is that our society prefers sons over daughters". One participant, P5, stated that "land issues and inheritance disputes between families are resolved through marrying with an accused girl". P4 stated that if a woman asks for it, people say, "Nobody has asked for it before; why are you asking for it". Besides, P3 had a view that this landlessness derails women's empowerment, decision-making, and further growth in agriculture and earnings.

Finance and market accessibility issues

Women farmers face financial issues, financial institution biases, and financial illiteracy challenges. These obstacles make it hard for them to invest in modern farming technology, get loans, or expand their business. Due to their lack of networking possibilities, market expertise, and middlemen who exploit their bargaining position, women farmers have challenges accessing fair and equitable marketplaces.

According to P8, whenever they need money to purchase fertilizer, seeds, or equipment, we get it from the landlord on markup. Another participant, P11, stated a similar fact: "We get money from the landlord and return that money by cutting their crops and doing other work in their fields". Whereas, P2 said, "Loans through banks and other institutions are so tough that women farmers cannot manage to get them". P9 also informed a similar fact and said, "We cannot get loans through banks or any other institutions as we do not possess

sufficient land or other resources as a guarantee". Market accessibility is also difficult for women farmers as P11 stated, "We usually sell our crops to the middleman at a lower rate because we don't have transportation or access to the marketplace". Similarly, P10 stated that "our inadequate market knowledge and lack of direct market access are exploited by agents". P13 stated that "as a high-risk group [because they don't have sufficient land or other resources as a guarantee], banks and lenders frequently hesitate to provide loans and other credit facilities to us".

Poverty and marginalization

This theme demonstrates women farmers' disproportionate poverty and marginalization in society. They confronted poverty due to gender discrimination, a lack of resources, and exclusion from decision-making. Poverty limits their access to formal education, healthcare, and basic amenities, increasing their susceptibility. Besides, cultural and societal norms keep them marginalized and hinder their social advancement.

Three participants talked about poverty and marginalization (P7, P10, and P15). They said they fight every day to make ends meet. Poverty is something we have to deal with every day as farmers. We don't have access to tools, are treated unfairly, and are left out of the process of making decisions. Getting out of the circle of poverty and making our lives better seems like a hard thing to do. According to P4, "Poverty prevents us from feeding and treating our families. Our children are malnourished, and we are unable to afford healthcare and other facilities". Similarly, according to P3, "We can't enhance agriculture productivity without land and financing. Modern agriculture technology leaves us behind. Poverty and lack of resources drag us down". Another participant further explained this issue and said, "We are restricted to traditional roles, and our services to agriculture are overlooked. As a result of this marginalization, we are unable to access markets, negotiate fair prices, or investigate new avenues for income generation, which deepens our poverty (P10).

Level of Empowerment of women farmers in Pakistan

The second question of the study was to highlight the level of empowerment of women farmers in Pakistan. The participants highlighted various narrations about their level of empowerment which are further organized under four major themes, such as 'limited liberty and empowerment', 'invisible and unpaid labor force', 'low decision-making power', and 'limited access to justice' respectively (Figure 2).

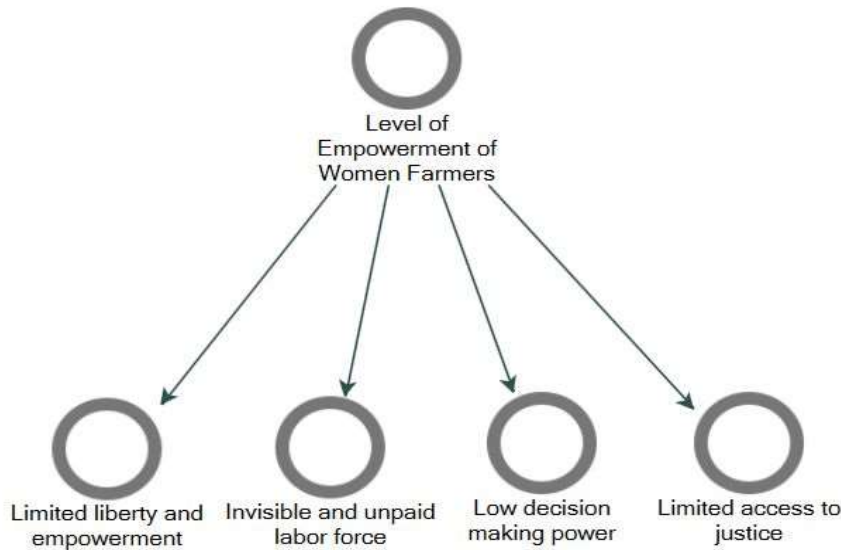


Figure 3. Level of empowerment of Pakistani women farmers

Limited liberty and empowerment

The participants identified that they had limited liberty and empowerment within their social and economic spheres. Though they have some decision-making power in households' affairs, their economic and social freedom is generally limited. Family obligations and gender stereotypes prevent women farmers from exploring outside opportunities, including networking, community engagement, investment opportunities, etc. Their lack of freedom and empowerment hinders their ability to exercise their rights, seek personal goals, and fully contribute to agriculture.

According to P4, "We are so much stuck in our daily activities related to butter and bread that we cannot even think about such issues". Similarly, P5 said, "I am under the impression that I should put my family's needs ahead of my own ambitions". Likewise, P7 stated, "I was denied access to formal education, vocational learning, and the liberty to pursue my own interests". However, some participants highlighted their intentions to contribute fully but they did not have such empowerment. As P1 stated, "I feel like there's more to life than just being a housewife, and I'd like to see what else I can do as a farmer and a person". According to P6, "I want to contribute to larger discussions, agricultural decisions, and our future but my suggestions are generally ignored". Another participant (P11) associated money with independence and said, "Because I do not have control over the income generated from farming, it is difficult for me to make independent financial decisions".

Invisible and unpaid labor force

The participants highlighted that Pakistani women farmers' work, labor contributions, and family obligations are often overlooked. They tend to plant crops, cultivate seeds, are involved in the harvest, and do domestic tasks and caregiving. They work hard in agriculture, yet they rarely get paid or acknowledged.

According to P5, “As women farmers, we often find that our efforts and contributions are unappreciated. We toil away in the fields, at home, and in the care of our children”. Similarly, P8 stated, “It's really discouraging when our efforts are disregarded and underappreciated”. Another participant P10 complained about this continuous work and said, “Although our work is essential to the agricultural industry, we are not compensated for it, and our contributions are frequently neglected”. P12 stated that this is our social problem and that women's work is neglected. She said, “Society considers us to be merely housewives, ignoring the fact that we labor tirelessly on the farms”. Similarly, P15 identifies that “We care for livestock, cultivate and harvest crops, prepare and serve food to the family members, and also look after our children during these activities and at home”.

Low decision-making power

Pakistani women farmers have little control over finances, family planning, and agricultural discussions. Traditional gender roles and cultural norms marginalize women's opinions and perspectives. They have less financial influence over investment decisions and revenue allocation. In family planning, women farmers have little say over family size and reproductive health, compromising their decision-making ability and autonomy.

According to P1, “The majority of family planning decisions are made by men, leaving women with limited control over their family size and reproductive health”. Similarly, P13 said, “Our experience and knowledge are considered inferior, and we are seldom included in discussions regarding cropping, financing, and cultivating”. Another participant (P11) reported similar low decision-making powers and said, “The majority of decisions regarding farming, financing, and investments are made by male family members or elders”. P9 highlighted the limited financial support to women and said, “Banks and other financial institutions frequently disregard us as potential borrowers, presuming that we lack the ability to manage loans, make prudent financial decisions, and/or repay their loans”.

Limited access to justice

The participants highlighted their different stories of life and claimed that they struggle to get justice due to difficulty while accessing relevant platforms, limited representation, and patriarchal norms. Whenever any issue about personal life and social sphere arises, the male elders or community leaders decide about that. This limited access to justice hinders women farmers from their right to a fair and equitable outcome which further promotes gender inequality.

According to P3, “Justice appears difficult when we suffer domestic violence and abuse. We feel powerless against patriarchal systems that shield our perpetrators”. Similarly, P1 identifies, “Physical violence is rarely reported due to fear of social stigma or repercussions”. P11 highlighted her personal incidents and said, “Justice against domestic violence seems impossible. The village council (Panchayat) and court system is scary and complicated, making it hard to get justice for women. We need help, legal aid, and a justice system that listens to us, protects us, and helps us”. She further stated, “Domestic violence is a very common issue in our community, a man starts beating his wife and giving her body sores, but no one questions him by saying it's their personal matter”. P2 complained about our

patriarchal social norms and said, “When abuse or violence occurs, our elders, mostly men, decide the fate. They typically prefer social norms or religious ideals over well-being”.

Key strategies and policies acquire to empower women farmers

The third research question identified the key strategies and policies acquired to empower women farmers in Pakistan. The participants point out five key strategies to empower women farmers such as; ‘gender equity and empowerment’, ‘legal protection and women’s land right’, ‘access to education, training and development’, ‘providing finance and market accessibility’, and ‘women farm apprentice and safety initiatives’ respectively. The responses shown in Figure 2 provide evidence of this reality (Figure 2).

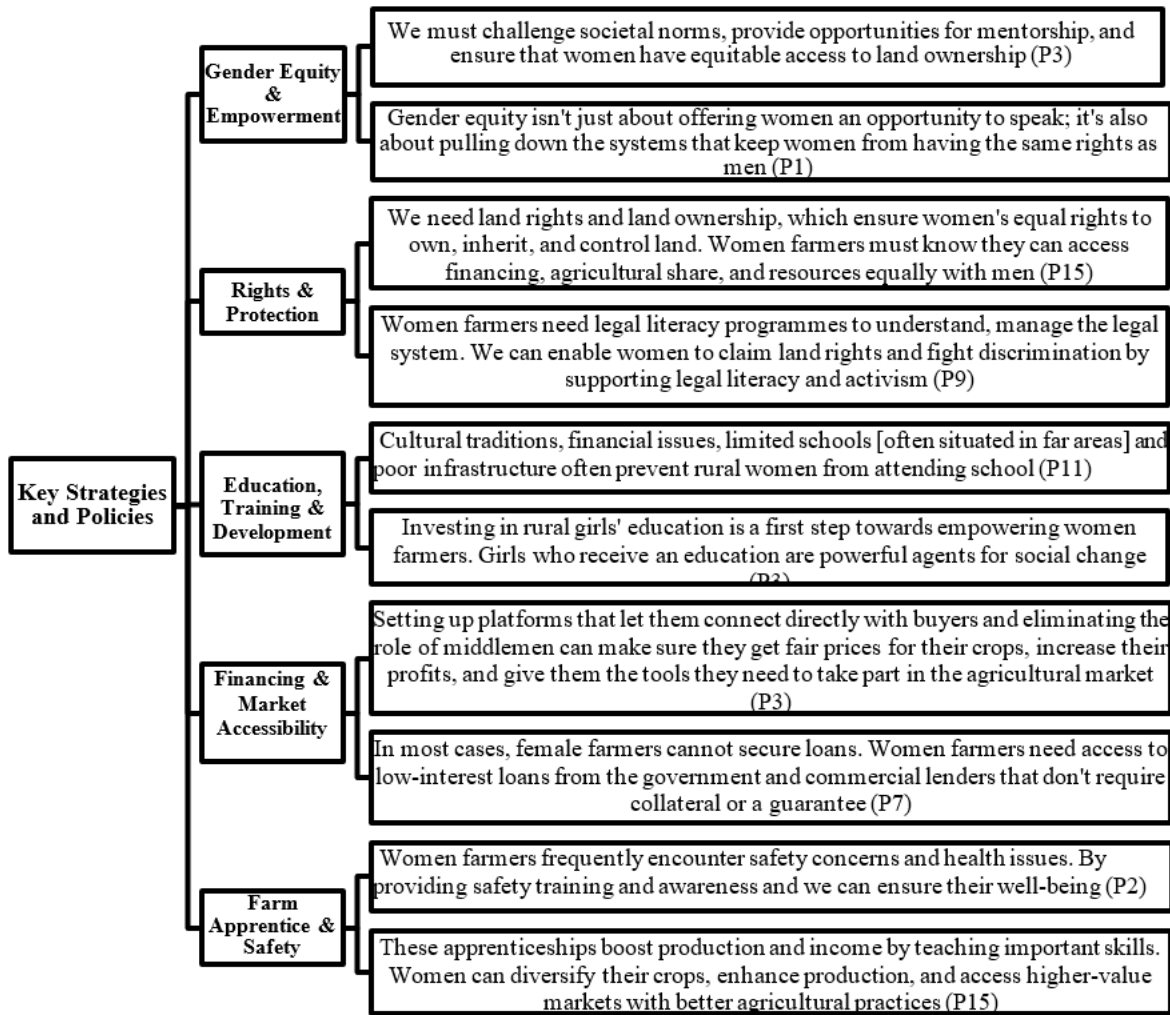


Figure 4. Key Strategies and skills for empowering women farmers

Gender equity and empowerment

The participants identified the top strategy for empowering women farmers was gender equity and empowerment. Figure 3 highlights some verbatim of the respondents about this fact. This strategy emphasizes policies and practices to challenge traditional gender norms, dismantle

patriarchal structures, and empower Pakistani women farmers. Promoting women's participation and leadership in community engagement, providing agricultural platforms, and representing them at policy forums is a key strategy. Women farmers should have the same opportunities and rights as men when it comes to land ownership, getting an inheritance, and getting access to markets and loans.

The participants stated that continuous efforts for changing gender norms and empowering women in property ownership, decision-making, and resource accessibility are key to empowering women farmers. Some highlighted to create awareness about gender equity and dismantling patriarchal systems. As P13 stated, “It's time to change cultural attitudes, break male dominance, and create an inclusive agriculture setup that values and celebrates women's contributions”. Similarly, P3 stressed to challenge social patriarchal norms. She said, “We must challenge societal norms, provide opportunities for mentorship, and ensure that women have equitable access to land ownership and women-led social agriculture platforms in which they share and figure out their issues”.

Legal protection and women's land right

The participants described that legal protection and land right is other key strategies for empowering women farmers (Figure 3). This strategy highlights the importance of creating awareness and enforcing legislation protecting women farmers' land ownership and equal rights. This includes defending women's rights to own, inherit, and control land and providing them with loans and agricultural inputs. Some participants stated that education and awareness of legal rights for working women farmers are vital as this understanding will change women's lives and agriculture in the country. Few participants stated about awareness and specifically legal literature. They highlighted that women farmers should be educated about these legal privileges and supported in their legal literacy and advocacy. As according to P4 said, “Enforcing land rights laws empowers women economically as well as socially. Women may invest in their farms, plan ahead, and promote sustainable agriculture with solid land rights”.

Access to education, training, and development

The participants highlighted serious concerns as well as the importance of education for women farmers in Pakistan. They desperately need formal education, training, and development. They acknowledge the need of providing women farmers with opportunities to advance their education and skills through formal education and vocational training programs. As P1 said, “Women farmers cannot optimize agricultural practices, adopt cutting-edge technologies, or engage in value-added activities without appropriate education and training”.

It requires the availability of schools and infrastructure in nearby areas and creating awareness about the importance of education for all children, especially girls. The participants stated that a key strategy is to create awareness among society that education for girls is equally important for boys. As P9 said, “Eliminating inequality and empowering women farmers requires rural girls' education. Government must invest in girls' education because it changes their lives and improves the community as well as the social sphere of women farmers”. They

believe that education, training, and learning have a multiplying influence on their households, farms, and communities.

Providing finance and market accessibility

The participants emphasize the need for financial resources and market channels for Pakistani women farmers. It recognizes that many women farmers are impoverished and lack the finances for investing in their farms. To empower women farmers, financial institutions (banks and cooperative associations) give loans without guarantees or mortgages to women farmers. The participants identified the difficulty while getting finance as P12 said, “Women farmers typically have trouble making ends meet and have limited access to conventional forms of credit”. To help women farmers get the financing they need, banks should offer customized loan packages that address their unique issues. Some participants stressed the role of government in this issue as P2 said, “The government should create venues for women farmers to directly sell their harvests, vegetables, and fruits, eliminating intermediaries and ensuring equitable prices. Women farmers can improve market access and profitability by creating market linkages and value chains with buyers, retailers, and exporters”.

Women farm apprentice and safety initiatives

The participants identified the need for farm apprentices and safety initiatives for women farmers in Pakistan. They highlighted the importance of training programs that address the unique obstacles that women in agriculture encounter. They stated that these programs should address agriculture, crop management, current technology, occupational health and safety, and gender-specific issues. As P3 said, “Female farmers in Pakistan greatly benefit from agricultural apprenticeship programs. They are great ways for women to learn new skills and expand their understanding of agriculture while also helping the community”. Similarly, P15 stated, “This experience gives them the skills to improve productivity, agricultural practices, and farming decisions”. Besides, some participants described that these programs also provide them with networking to share ideas, experiences, and solve problems and empower women by creating a community that continues beyond apprenticeship.

Discussion

This research reveals a variety of major barriers that women farmers being faced in Pakistan, including ‘patriarchy and domestic violence’, ‘limited access to education, learning, and training’, ‘lack of inheritance and ownership rights’, ‘finance and market accessibility issues’, and ‘poverty and marginalization’ respectively. These challenges are consistent with previous research on women's empowerment in agriculture. The prevalent patriarchal social structure in Pakistan perpetuates gender inequality, which results in discrimination and violence against women (Ibrahim & Asad, 2020; Duvvury et al., 2020). This violence not only threatens the well-being of female farmers but also inhibits their capacity to carry out agricultural tasks effectively. A lack of access to education, learning, and training compounds the difficulties faced by women farmers. Undoubtedly, education is an essential source for the social and economic empowerment of women (Ibrahim & Asad, 2020). However, in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas, women's access to quality education is frequently limited due to a limited number

of schools or colleges and poor infrastructure in the available few schools. Furthermore, there are no such training and apprentice opportunities for them. These limitations further impede their opportunities to acquire education as well as essential agricultural skills and knowledge, making it more difficult for them to enhance their agricultural practices and implement new technologies (Baig et al., 2018; Shahriar, 2021). In addition, the lack of inheritance and property rights further prevents women from making decisions and gaining access to credit and other agricultural resources. This contributes to their continued marginalization in the agricultural sector. Prior research has highlighted the importance of education and skill development in augmenting women's agricultural practices, income-generating potential, and productivity (Bushra & Wajiha, 2015; Rasul, 2014). Earlier literature also emphasizes the need for specialized technical and vocational programs that address women farmers' requirements and reduce the gender gap in agricultural skills (Baig et al., 2018).

The absence of inheritance and land rights presents a significant hindrance for women farmers. The patriarchal nature of society frequently denies women the right to inherit or own land, limiting their control over agricultural resources. Similar findings were reported by Choudhry et al., (2019), that gender disparities in land rights persist particularly in developing countries. Women farmers' inability to invest in modern farming techniques and equipment is hindered by limited access to finance and poverty. Besides, women farmers frequently encounter barriers to gender-based discrimination and market accessibility being as female. The participants of this study highlighted that most of their crops were sold to the middleman at low prices due to accessibility issues and lack of transportation facilities, particularly for women. In order to break the cycle of poverty and enable women to contribute effectively to agricultural development, women's economic empowerment is essential. Baig et al., (2018) highlight the need for specific measures to increase financial inclusion and market linkages for women farmers. The significance of developing financial mechanisms that cater to the urgent requirements of women farmers is essential, as well as providing market accessibility, knowledge, and transportation (Abbas et al., 2021). To overcome finance and poverty issues, other than government involvement, the role of private financing and interest-free loans such as Akhuwat (an interest-free microfinancing NGO in Pakistan) can greatly contribute, as Rehman et al. (2020) reported that Akhuwat has changed households and socioeconomic status and contributed to the well-being of women's family life.

Patriarchal norms and societal expectations frequently limit women farmers' mobility, empowerment, and decision-making. This finding is consistent with previous research (Abrar-ul-haq et al., 2017; Baig et al., 2018; Hussain & Jullandhry, 2020), that highlights the need to address gender inequality and promote a more inclusive and equitable environment. However, Bushra and Wajiha (2015) stated that women of Lahore were empowered enough to have education, economic participation, and a bank account. This is contrary to our findings as our participants belonged to Lahore city and they have low empowerment related to education and economic participation. They also identified that their contributions are frequently undervalued as they engage in a variety of tasks, such as livestock management, crop cultivation, and post-harvest activities, as well as the family obligation to look after the children and elders, but their efforts are frequently overshadowed by the patriarchal norms and male dominance. This dearth of recognition further perpetuates gender disparities in the agricultural sector and land ownership (Pathak & Patel, 2019; Shahriar, 2021). To address this issue, it is necessary to

increase awareness of the crucial role of women farmers and to promote gender-sensitive policies. An environment that acknowledges women's participation in domestic and community-level decision-making processes is utmost required. This can be accomplished via social awareness, capacity-building initiatives, family support, training or apprentice programs, and the promotion of inclusive governance structures that warrant the voices of women are heard and appreciated. Besides, improving access to justice as well as strengthening the legal fraternity, promoting women's legal aid services, and increasing awareness of existing laws and mechanisms that secure their rights are all essential.

Gender equality and empowerment emerged as a strategy for promoting women's empowerment. This is consistent with prior research that has highlighted the need to challenge power dynamics and gender norms (Choudhry et al., 2019). It is vital to foster an environment that recognizes and values the contributions of women, promotes equitable chances, and addresses gender disparities in access to resources, legal fraternity, and land ownership (Bushra & Wajaha, 2015). For women's empowerment in the agricultural sector, gender-responsive policies and programs that priorities women's demands and aspirations are essential (Ishaq & Memon, 2017). Furthermore, the significance of legal protection and women's land rights are also helpful to dismantle patriarchy. Ishaq and Memon (2017) revealed that women were deprived to land ownership and inheritance share. Earlier literature highlights the need to implement laws that safeguard women's land rights, strengthen the legal fraternity, and raise awareness about these rights in order to increase women's empowerment in agriculture (Pathak & Patel, 2019). Furthermore, the importance of women farm apprentices and safety initiatives as strategies for empowering women farmers is consistent with previous research. Meraj and Sadaqat (2016) and Baig et al. (2018) have highlighted the role of training programs, mentorship, and secure working conditions in enhancing women's knowledge, skills, and overall empowerment in agriculture. These initiatives provide women farmers with platforms for peer-to-peer learning, knowledge transfer, and the exchange of best practices. Policymakers and stakeholders (including family, government, NGOs, etc.) can foster an atmosphere that helps women farmers, increases their agency, and boosts the agricultural industry as a whole by empowering women economically, recognizing the significance of gender parity, and addressing land and inheritance rights.

Implications of the Study

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the existing theoretical perspective on women's empowerment in Pakistan's agricultural context. The findings identified factors that contribute to women farmers' limited empowerment and highlight the varied nature of their challenges. This study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of women's empowerment in agriculture by highlighting the themes of patriarchal norms and domestic violence, limited access to education and training, lack of inheritance and property rights, finance and market access issues, and poverty and marginalization. These results expand the theoretical understanding of the challenges that women farmers confront and the key strategies and policies that can facilitate their empowerment.

Implications for Practice

The implications of this study are for policymakers, relevant government institutions, agricultural development organizations, and practitioners working to empower women farmers in Pakistan. The identified themes of challenges encountered by women farmers and the essential strategies and policies required to empower them to provide useful insights for designing specific apprentice programs, land ownership rights, access to finance, market, and easy access to justice. Societal awareness should be launched through different electronic and print media that challenge patriarchal norms and advance equitable opportunities for women in agriculture by recognizing the significance of gender equality and women farmers' empowerment. Increasing women farmers' access to education, training, and financial resources are needed to acquire them the skills, knowledge, and expertise. In addition, addressing land rights issues and ensuring women's legal protection can increase their decision-making authority and economic security in agricultural activities. Women farmer's financing issues can be addressed through public-private partnerships and initiatives like the Aukhwat foundation by providing interest-free loans. The government should establish schools and colleges in rural areas and ensure their formal education, training, and launching of agriculture-apprenticeship programs.

Implications for Policy

The findings of this study have significant policy implications for the Pakistani government and non-government organizations engaged in agricultural development and women's empowerment initiatives. Initially, policies should prioritize gender equity and empowerment by incorporating gender perspectives into agricultural development strategies. It entails facilitating women's access to economic assets such as land, capital, and cutting-edge technology in order to ensure their equal participation in agriculture. In addition, policies should address domestic violence, issues with finance and market access, and limited access to education and training. Furthermore, enhancing legal frameworks and enforcing laws that safeguard women's land rights are essential steps for securing women's land ownership and gender equality. In addition, policies should address poverty and social justice by providing social protection measures and fostering economic opportunities for women farmers. These policy implications can inform the development of evidence-based policies, programs, and initiatives that promote women's empowerment in Pakistan's agricultural sector.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study relied on a specific sample of women farmers from a specific region of Pakistan (as data were collected from 15 participants of Lahore), which limit the applicability of the findings to other contexts and regions. There may be differences in the perspectives and experiences of women farmers from different sociocultural contexts, regions, and cultures. In addition, the study employed a qualitative methodology, which allowed for an in-depth examination of the participants' experiences but other methodologies, especially the mixed-method approach might provide comprehensive results and an expanded view of women's farmers.

Future research on women farmers' empowerment in Pakistan should examine a variety of perspectives, such as socio-economic factors of women empowerment, gender, and social justice in agriculture, sustainable agriculture, etc. It would be beneficial to gain a greater

understanding of the contextual differences in challenges and empowerment techniques by conducting comparative studies across regions and subgroups of women farmers. This would help us comprehend the numerous dynamics when it comes to the empowerment of women in agricultural contexts. In addition, longitudinal studies that track women's empowerment over time can shed light on the effectiveness of various programs and policies in promoting sustainable and long-term empowerment outputs. Examining how gender intersects with other elements of identity, such as ethnicity, caste, and religion, can improve our understanding of how various forms of marginalization interact and influence women's empowerment in agriculture.

Conclusion

This qualitative study investigates the major challenges being faced by women farmers, their level of empowerment, and key strategies and skills for their empowerment. The findings indicate that women farmers face significant challenges, such as 'patriarchy and domestic violence', 'limited access to education, learning and training', 'lack of rights of inheritance and ownership', 'finance and market accessibility issues', and 'poverty and marginalization'. These challenges ultimately contribute to their low-level empowerment, as evidenced by their limited freedom, invisible and unpaid labor force, limited decision-making authority, and limited access to justice. Five key strategies are identified to figure out these challenges and encourage the empowerment of women farmers including 'gender equity and empowerment', 'legal protection and women's land right', 'access to education, training and development', 'providing finance and market accessibility', and 'women farm apprentice and safety initiatives' respectively. First, women in agriculture need equal resources, opportunities, and recognition so that they feel encouraged and motivated. Enforcing and strengthening rules that safeguard women's land ownership and access to productive resources is necessary. Market access and financial concerns for women farmers must also be addressed. They need interest-free loans, microfinance services, and venues where they sell their goods at fair prices. Additionally, training and capacity-building activities with the newest agricultural technology are essential which boost their agriculture expertise and economic prospects. Additionally, targeted poverty reduction activities, social protection measures, and income-generating opportunities for women farmers must be prioritized. Precisely, to empower and improve their economic and mental well-being; education, training, and skill development activities must be launched.

In conclusion, empowering women farmers in Pakistan requires an extensive plan that addresses their unique challenges and employs individualized approaches. Women farmers should be empowered to actively partake in agriculture, contribute to sustainable agricultural development, and improve their livelihoods by advocating gender equity, improving financial and market access, securing land rights, and addressing poverty and marginalization. It is imperative that agricultural organizations, policymakers, and government and non-government organizations collaborate and implement these strategies in order to foster an environment that promotes social justice and the empowerment of women farmers through inclusive and equitable agricultural practices.

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