



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

Effect of Women Empowerment on Wellbeing among Female Agricultural Workers in the Punjab, Pakistan: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is usually acknowledged as a vital contributing factor of social and economic development and human wellbeing. The present review article combines existing theoretical and empirical literature on the relationship between women empowerment and wellbeing. The article critically observes conceptual frameworks of wellbeing, its dimensions and measurement approaches as well as the multidimensional nature of empowerment. Moreover, this review further investigates the socio-economic challenges experienced by female agricultural workers including gender discrimination, workers' exploitation and limited access to the resources in context of the Punjab, Pakistan. The evidences consistently demonstrate a strong positive relationship between empowerment and wellbeing. However, cultural constraints, institutional gaps and the structural inequalities continue to obstruct progress. The article concludes by emphasizing policy implications and future research directions intended to foster inclusive development and gender equity.

Keywords: Women Empowerment; Female Agricultural Workers; Rural Development; Socio-economic Challenges; Psychological Wellbeing; Punjab, Pakistan.

Background

The South Asian region, heavily populated (approximately one-fourth of total population of the globe) is predominantly rural (approximately, 70 percent population in rural areas) and agriculture has been considered the major sector of economy of the region, engaging a significant portion of the female work force. Throughout the region, agricultural production extensively depends upon female work force but their role is often informal, underpaid and socially unrecognized (Dangal, 2021). Similarly, in the Punjab, women are actively take part in crop production, sowing, harvesting, post-harvesting and livestock management but their contribution is rarely acknowledged in formal economic statistics (Farah et al., 2022) due to their sub-ordinate status in traditional patriarchal society.

Although policy makers have strong claim, women empowerment, more than a goal, has become a strategy to achieve people-centered sustainable development but the scenario is



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

worst in the region. Women empowerment directly affects poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), health and wellbeing (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reduce inequalities (SDG 10), sustainable communities (SDG 11), consumption and production (SDG 12), life on land (SDG 15), and justice (SDG 16). Therefore, international development organizations (like United Nation, World Bank, Common Wealth, European Union, etc.) are considering empowerment as a vital instrument for human development in every aspect of life. According contemporary literature, it is closely associated with the wellbeing, as empowered women have strong bargaining position, significant participation in decision making, access to resources, education, and health facilities which improve their quality of life (Malhotra et al., 2002). Despite the significance of women empowerment in sustainable development, all major institutions (social, economic, political and religion) in the patriarchal settings of rural Punjab are reinforce the traditional power structure to maintain subordinate status of women which limits their mental health and wellbeing (Rauf, 2022). Therefore, the objective of this review is to critically synthesize existing literature on women's empowerment and wellbeing with special focus on female agricultural workers. This will provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue by integrating global perspective with local realities.

Conceptualization of Well-being

Wellbeing is a multi-dimensional and complex concept that covers emotional, psychological and social aspects of life and commonly defined as a state of happiness, life satisfaction and effective functioning (Diener et al., 2018). However, contemporary scholars claim that well-being extends beyond subjective happiness to include objective living conditions such as income, health as well as education (Simons & Baldwin, 2021). The conceptualization of well-being fluctuates across cultural contexts as Western frameworks stress individual satisfaction and mental health while Eastern perspectives highlight collective harmony and social relationships (Hone et al., 2015). Layard and De Neve (2023) claim that well-being is influenced by both internal psychological conditions and external social and economic states, making it a holistic construct.

Apart from this, the concept of wellbeing is increasingly viewed through an interdisciplinary approach which integrates insights from psychology, sociology, economics and public health and this wider approach highlights the need to consider structural factors such as inequality, access to resources, and social norms when analyzing well-being.

There are three primary dimensions into which wellbeing is categorized: 1) subjective, 2) objective, and 3) relational. Subjective wellbeing means individuals' personal evaluations of their lives including emotional experiences and life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2018) covering both hedonic aspects (pleasure and happiness) and eudaimonic aspect (purpose and self-realization). In contrast, the objective well-being includes measurable indicators (income, education, health, and living conditions) (Alatartseva & Barysheva, 2015) and these external factors play a vital role in formulating individuals' opportunities and life outcome. While, Relational wellbeing lay stress on the importance of social relationships and community interactions (Coulthard et al., 2018) and highlighting how social inclusion, trust and participation contribute to overall life satisfaction.

Therefore, all these dimensions are relevant in understanding the experiences of female agricultural workers, whose wellbeing is associated with autonomy, personal growth and positive relationships.

Accurate measurements are the foundation to understand wellbeing. The careful



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

measurements reflect true reality. Therefore, the tool to measure wellbeing is very important. In existing literature there are various valid tools available which measure wellbeing with reliability. The World Health Organization's (WHO-5) Wellbeing Index is generally used for measuring psychological wellbeing due to its simplicity and reliability (Topp et al., 2015). However, Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing Scale gives a more comprehensive assessment covering six key dimensions of the wellbeing (Ryff, 1989).

The BBC Wellbeing Scale presents an integrated approach evaluating psychological (subjective), physical (objective), and social relationships (relational) aspects of wellbeing (Kinderman et al., 2011) and these tools have been broadly applied in both clinical and research settings giving valuable insights into individuals' experience about quality of life. However, the critics claim that standardized measures may not fully capture cultural variations in wellbeing especially in developing countries. Therefore, context-specific approaches are need to ensure accurate assessment.

In context of the Punjab, Pakistan the wellbeing of female agricultural workers negatively affects by social and economic factors. They have worst range of experiences regarding social and economic matters. The most important issue faced by female agricultural workers is economic inequality as women often gain lower wages as compared to their counterpart and have limited access to financial resources (Dangal, 2021). Due to limited economic opportunities, they have lower bargaining status and consequently have to adopt subordinated status in social relationships. Furthermore, the informal nature of agricultural work also intensifies these challenges with long hours under poor conditions without job security or social protection (Mohiuddin et al., 2020). Although, females in the Punjab contribute up to 70% (approximately) to agricultural economics but their unrecognized role leads to their exclusion from decision-making processes (Ishaq & Memon, 2016).

Moreover, the gender-based violence and harassment are also common practices in rural agricultural setting of the Punjab. Previous and Contemporary literature highlight that females frequently face verbal, physical and sexual harassment in the fields which has severe psychological impacts in terms of anxiety, depression and social isolation (Farah et al., 2022; Rehman et al., 2023). Furthermore, the limited access to education and training limits women's ability to use modern agricultural practices and improve productivity. Similarly, the cultural norms enforced by patriarchal structure restrict mobility of women and due to restricted mobility they cannot participation in market activities and assets management.

Conceptualization of Empowerment

Empowerment is the process through which people gain control over the decisions impacting their life (Rachmad, 2022) and it is a multi-dimensional concept covering economic, social, political, psychological and legal aspects (Malhotra et al., 2002). Economic empowerment includes access to income, employment and financial resources while social empowerment means participation in community activities and access to education whereas political empowerment is the involvement in political processes and psychological empowerment contains self-confidence and self-efficacy. These dimensions jointly contribute to individual's ability to lead autonomous and fulfilling life and in the context of rural women, empowerment is important for overcoming structural hindrances and consequently improving wellbeing.

In agricultural context women empowerment is important for increasing productivity, food security and rural development as studies claim that when women have access to



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

resources such as land, credit and training, agricultural outcomes improve significantly (Anderson et al., 2021).

However, they often face challenges to gain autonomy due to lack of land ownership, limited access to financial services and exclusion from decision-making (Nasir, 2022). These challenges are compounded by cultural norms that limit the participation of women in public sphere in the Punjab, Pakistan (Rauf, 2022). In spite of these challenges, the existing literature suggest that women empowerment in agricultural sector lead to improved household welfare, better nutrition and increased economic resilience. So, targeted interventions are needed to address gender disparities in this sector.

Various factors affect women's empowerment i.e., education, employment, access to resources and socio-cultural norms. Therefore, education is one of the most important determinants as it increases women's knowledge, skills and confidence (Muhammad et al., 2021). Economic independence is also vital to enable women to participate in decision-making and improve their living condition. However, the cultural barriers and gender norms often restrict women's opportunities especially in rural areas. Research studies in Pakistan highlight that women's empowerment is strongly linked with education and access to information, while poverty and lack of autonomy hinder empowerment (Abbas et al., 2021).

Relationship Between Empowerment and Wellbeing

A significant body of literature reflects the positive association between empowerment and wellbeing as empowered women are more likely to have better mental health, good life satisfaction and improved social and economic status (Marin-Garcia & Bonavia, 2021). Moreover, the empowerment increases self-efficacy enabling women to cope with challenges and make informed decisions, promotes social participation which contributes to relational wellbeing (Biron & Bamberger, 2011). On the contrary, lack of empowerment causes social exclusion, increased stress and low quality of life. Therefore, empowerment is a significant driver of wellbeing especially in the marginalized rural communities.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

Findings of this review article have important policy implications as both Government and development organizations should prioritize gender-sensitive policies that promote women empowerment in agriculture including improving access to education, healthcare and financial resources. Moreover, the legal frameworks should be strengthened to safeguard women from discrimination and violence, while community-based programs should be designed and implemented to challenge cultural norms and promote gender equality. Apart from this, the future research should focus on longitudinal studies to have a better understanding of the causal relationship between empowerment and wellbeing as well as context-specific interventions tailored to rural communities.

Conclusion

The present review paper reflects the critical role of women empowerment in improving wellbeing among female agricultural workers as they contribute significantly to agricultural productivity but they consistently face systemic inequalities that restrict their potential.

Women empowerment is an important and crucial factor in the improvement of mental health, economic independence and social participation. However, achieving meaningful



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

empowerment needs to challenge structural barriers, cultural norms and institutional gaps. Therefore, a comprehensive and inclusive approach is necessary to promote gender equity and improve the well-being of rural women in Punjab, Pakistan.

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Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

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