



Empowering Deserving Women through Resilient Livelihood Strategies in Punjab, Pakistan: A Qualitative Analysis of Challenges, Empowerment, and Agricultural Innovations

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Abstract

Women in rural Pakistan, particularly in South Punjab, continue to face persistent socio-economic vulnerabilities shaped by poverty, restrictive gender norms, and limited access to livelihood opportunities. This qualitative study explores how deserving and marginalized women navigate livelihood challenges and build resilience through empowerment processes and agricultural innovations. The objectives of the research are to investigate the systemic barriers confronting women in their agricultural and livelihood practices, to examine the multidimensional and contested nature of their empowerment experiences, and to analyze how agricultural innovation serves as a catalyst for both technical and social change. The study employs a rigorous qualitative methodology, involving thematic analysis of 30 in-depth interviews with women engaged in microfinance, vocational training, and agricultural programs across three districts of South Punjab. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed inductively to identify core patterns within participants' narratives. The findings reveal a syndemic of interlocking constraints financial precarity, patriarchal resistance, and social stigma that synergistically limit women's agency. Despite these barriers, empowerment emerges as a negotiated process, manifested through enhanced household decision-making, significant economic contribution, and a transformative 'ripple effect' within communities. Furthermore, the adoption of agricultural innovations, facilitated by institutional support, enables women to re-gender technical knowledge and strategically frame their work, acting as a potent site for socio-technical change. The study concludes that resilient livelihood strategies foster deep and sustainable empowerment only when integrated with gender-transformative approaches that simultaneously provide resources and reshape the socio-cultural terrain.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, resilient livelihoods, negotiated agency, agricultural innovation, patriarchal constraints, South Punjab, qualitative research.

Introduction

The role of women in rural Pakistan as the backbone of agricultural production, household food security, and community resilience is both foundational and systematically undervalued. Their labor, often rendered invisible within formal economic metrics, constitutes a critical pillar sustaining rural livelihoods in contexts of chronic

scarcity and environmental stress (FAO, 2011; Sathar & Kazi, 2000). Nowhere is this paradox more acute than in South Punjab, a region characterized by deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that intersect with pervasive poverty, low literacy rates, and escalating climate vulnerabilities to severely constrain women's autonomy and access to productive resources (Naz & Khan, 2021; Ashraf & Routray, 2013).

This systemic marginalization exists within a broader South Asian context where women farmers disproportionately bear the brunt of constraints including lack of land ownership, poor access to markets, credit, and agricultural extension services (Agarwal, 2003; FAO, 2011). In Pakistan, these barriers are intensified by specific socio-cultural configurations, most notably gender seclusion norms (purdah), restricted mobility, and male monopolization of economic decision-making, which collectively curtail women's capacity to participate fully in and benefit from livelihood opportunities (Roomi & Parrott, 2008).

Simultaneously, environmental degradation, water scarcity, and unpredictable climatic patterns further compound these vulnerabilities, undermining the very productive base upon which rural households, and women's roles within them, depend (World Bank, 2020). The conceptual framework of livelihood resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt, withstand, and recover from socio-economic and environmental shocks (Chambers & Conway, 1992), has gained considerable traction in development discourse as pivotal for sustainable poverty reduction and empowerment. For women, resilience is not merely a matter of survival but intrinsically linked to processes of empowerment the expansion of their ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 2005; Batliwala, 2007).

Resilient livelihood strategies offer a promising approach to empower poor and needy women in this region. The concept of resilient livelihoods goes beyond mere economic sustenance; it encompasses the ability to adapt, recover, and sustain income-generating activities in the face of socio-economic and environmental shocks (Chambers & Conway, 1992). For women in South Punjab, resilience means not only economic independence but also access to resources, agency in personal and community decisions, and the capacity to cope with adversities such as climate change, natural disasters, and economic instability. Research has shown that when women are equipped with resilient livelihood strategies, the benefits extend beyond individual households to entire communities, fostering economic growth, social cohesion, and improved well-being (Kabeer, 2005).

Economic empowerment of women in Pakistan contributes to the reduction of various socioeconomic problems in our society. It has been noticed that women's priorities are shifting throughout time as a result of rising literacy rates, new innovations, and the tendency of migration to cities (Baig et al., 2018). Empowerment of women involves self-confidence, understanding of their rights, to have a control over their life's both at home and outside and ability to bring the social change (Sohail, 2014). Despite significant progress in some areas, the persistent exclusion of women from economic and social spheres remains a major challenge in South Punjab. Many women are confined to informal, low-paying jobs or unpaid labor within their households, limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to the economy or to improve their quality of life (FAO, 2011).

This exclusion is further exacerbated by the region's vulnerability to environmental challenges such as water scarcity, soil degradation, and unpredictable weather patterns, which disproportionately affect agricultural livelihoods, a primary source of income for many families in South Punjab (Ashraf & Routray, 2013). Addressing these intersecting challenges requires an integrated approach that empowers women by enhancing their resilience through diversified, sustainable livelihood options and supportive policy frameworks.

Agricultural innovation presents a particularly potent, yet complex, pathway within this negotiated process. The introduction and adoption of sustainable practices such as drip irrigation, climate-resilient seeds, integrated pest management, and organic fertilization hold the promise of increasing productivity, income, and environmental sustainability (FAO, 2020). For women, engagement with such innovations transcends mere technical adoption; it becomes a social process with the potential to re-gender agricultural knowledge and authority. Traditionally a masculine domain, technical agricultural know-how, when mastered by women through targeted extension services provided by organizations like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-Pakistan), can disrupt established hierarchies and create openings for the renegotiation of status and decision-making power (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). Furthermore, women often strategically frame these innovations through a lens of feminine caregiving linking soil health to children's well-being or water conservation to household responsibility a form of strategic essentialism that legitimizes their participation and claims to authority in culturally resonant ways. Thus, technological change is inseparable from social change, and agricultural innovation becomes a critical site for observing the interplay between resource provision and the transformation of gendered norms.

Agricultural innovation play a vital role in fostering gender equity in rural areas. Women's participation in cooperatives challenges traditional gender roles, providing them with leadership opportunities and a platform to voice their concerns and ideas. Studies show that women engaged in cooperatives exhibit increased confidence and decision-making power, both within their households and communities (Chant, 2016; Ostrom, 2009). For instance, cooperatives in South Punjab have seen women take on leadership roles, managing activities such as supply chain logistics and financial planning, which were traditionally male-dominated domains (Ali & Hamid, 2021).

This study is situated at this critical intersection of resilience, empowerment, and innovation. It seeks to contribute a nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of how women in South Punjab experience and shape their engagement with livelihood programs. Moving beyond a deficit model, the research aims to illuminate not only the barriers women confront but also the agential strategies they employ the negotiation, innovation, and recalibration of roles that constitute the lived reality of empowerment in a patriarchal setting. By centering women's own narratives, the study aims to generate insights that can inform more holistic, effective, and ethically grounded policies and interventions aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the systemic socio-economic, cultural, and environmental barriers that constrain women's livelihood practices in South Punjab.
2. To examine the multidimensional, negotiated, and often contested nature of women's empowerment within patriarchal rural settings.
3. To analyze how agricultural innovations contribute to women's resilience, agency, and socio-technical transformation.
4. To identify the enabling conditions and institutional mechanisms that support sustainable, gender-transformative livelihood strategies.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design underpinned by an interpretive paradigm, which prioritizes understanding the subjective meanings, experiences, and social contexts of participants. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data, allowing for a deep, nuanced exploration of the lived realities of women engaged in resilient livelihood strategies. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select 30 women from rural areas across three districts of South Punjab Multan, Khanewal, and Muzaffargarh. Participants were recruited based on their active involvement in one or more livelihood support programs, including microfinance schemes (e.g., Kashf Foundation), vocational training centers (e.g., Sanat Zar), or agricultural innovation projects (e.g., with WWF-Pakistan), ensuring the sample represented women with direct experience of the phenomena under study.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in local languages (Urdu and Punjabi) by female researchers to ensure comfort and cultural appropriateness. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was guided by a flexible topic guide focusing on personal history and program involvement, experiences of challenges (financial, familial, social), perceived changes in decision-making and self-confidence, engagement with agricultural training and new practices, and interactions with family and community. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English for analysis.

Thematic analysis followed the established six-phase process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. An inductive, 'bottom-up' approach was emphasized to ensure the identified themes were strongly grounded in the data itself rather than imposed by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Rigorous ethical protocols were maintained throughout, including securing written and verbal informed consent, guaranteeing anonymity through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., P01, P02), and conducting interviews in private settings to protect participant confidentiality and safety.

Thematic Analysis

The analysis of the interview data yielded three interconnected, core themes that collectively articulate the complex journey of women engaging with resilient livelihood strategies in South Punjab. These themes elucidate a dynamic process where significant structural barriers are met with strategic negotiation and transformative agency, revealing empowerment as a contested and ongoing practice rather than a definitive endpoint.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: The Syndemic of Livelihood Constraints

Women's narratives consistently detailed a dense, interlocking web of barriers where financial, familial, and social constraints synergistically amplified each other, creating a compounded limitation on agency more severe than the sum of its parts. The foundational challenge was a crippling lack of access to formal financial systems, which forced women into precarious and personally costly self-financing methods. Participants described making profound sacrifices, such as selling personal or household assets, to generate seed capital. As one participant (P01) recounted, selling her school's furniture was "a deeply personal sacrifice" that underscored the extreme financial exclusion faced by women, rendering their ventures inherently vulnerable and undermining their credibility from the outset. This financial precarity was intimately linked to persistent patriarchal resistance within the household, where male family members often expressed deep-seated skepticism about women's capabilities and the validity of their work.

This resistance was frequently framed as concern for safety or practicality, masking a deeper unease with the disruption of prescribed gender roles. For instance, a participant (P02) starting an online business faced family apprehensions that clients "might not pay you, or it could be a complete fraud," reflecting a lack of trust in her judgment. Beyond the household, women navigated a contested social landscape marked by restrictive gender norms and stigma. Public opinion was often divided, with women receiving both encouragement and conservative criticism for transgressing boundaries of propriety. A particularly poignant finding was the role of other women in enforcing these norms through social policing, exemplifying Kandiyoti's concept of the "patriarchal bargain." One woman (P05) producing organic fertilizer was told by village women, "*This is men's work*," highlighting how internalized oppression maintains gendered divisions. This syndemic meant that economic endeavors were constantly evaluated through lenses of familial authority and social propriety, requiring immense resilience to navigate.

Theme 2: Empowerment as Negotiated Agency and Social Transformation

Despite formidable barriers, participants reported significant, multifaceted experiences of empowerment, conceptualized not as a final state of liberation but as an ongoing, negotiated process of expanding agency. The most profound shift occurred in the domain of household decision-making, where women transitioned from being passive laborers to recognized strategists. They gained a decisive voice in critical choices regarding crops, investments, and market timing. A farmer (P03) described this transformation: "*Before, I was merely a laborer, following instructions... Now, I am a strategist. The most critical decisions... are now mine to make.*" This represents a fundamental gain in epistemic authority. This enhanced agency was fundamentally underpinned by tangible economic contribution.

Generating and often controlling income provided the essential leverage for shifting intra-household dynamics, enabling strategic investments in children's education and household well-being. Furthermore, empowerment demonstrated a powerful social dimension, generating a recognizable 'ripple effect' within communities. Successful women became sources of inspiration and practical knowledge, transforming initial critics into learners and earning respect through demonstrated competence. *The participant (P05)*

who was once criticized for her work later found that the same women “seek me out, asking to learn the techniques I pioneered.” This journey from social scrutiny to becoming a community resource highlights how individual empowerment can catalyze collective change, fostering networks of support and gradually reshaping local perceptions of women’s roles and capabilities.

Theme 3: Agricultural Innovation as a Catalyst for Socio-Technical Change

For women engaged in farming, the adoption of new agricultural practices served as a critical pathway for empowerment, illustrating how technical change is inherently social change. Participation in programs facilitated by institutions like WWF enabled access to and mastery of sustainable practices such as drip irrigation, tunnel farming, and organic fertilization. These innovations led directly to increased productivity, resource efficiency, and higher market returns, providing the material basis for greater economic autonomy. *A participant (P03) noted that drip irrigation saved “a remarkable 40% of our water usage,” making farming “more profitable but also more responsible.”*

Crucially, women often strategically framed these technical adoptions within socially valued feminine roles, linking organic practices to improved family health or water conservation to responsible household management. This strategic framing a “feminization of sustainability” helped legitimize their work and claim authority in a culturally resonant manner, disarming potential criticism. The role of institutional support was catalytic, extending beyond technical training to include confidence-building, legitimization, and the provision of essential resources. By offering hands-on demonstration and reducing the perceived risk of innovation, organizations helped women re-gender agricultural knowledge, challenging the traditional masculine domain of technical expertise and creating new spaces for female authority and recognition within the agrarian economy.

Conclusion

This qualitative exploration elucidates that empowering women through resilient livelihoods in South Punjab is a complex journey of skilled navigation within an enduring patriarchal landscape. Empowerment emerges not as a linear escape from constraint but as a continuous, contested process of negotiation, marked by tangible victories in decision-making and economic life that coexist with and are shaped by persistent structural barriers. The study reveals the central paradox of empowerment: women experience transformative gains in autonomy and social standing while simultaneously maneuvering through a syndemic of interlocking financial, familial, and social constraints. Agricultural innovation, particularly when supported by trusted institutions, acts as a potent catalyst in this process, enabling both technical advancement and the renegotiation of social roles by allowing women to re-gender knowledge and strategically frame their contributions. The ultimate theoretical implication is the need to conceptualize empowerment as a relational and negotiated practice, moving beyond linear or purely econometric models. Practically, this demands interventions that recognize and support women as sophisticated social negotiators, not merely as economic beneficiaries or victims of circumstance.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following multi-level recommendations are proposed to translate insights into meaningful action and foster deep, sustainable

empowerment. It is essential for program designers and implementing organizations to develop integrated intervention packages that bundle financial services, skills training, market linkages, and gender-transformative activities in a coordinated framework, moving decisively beyond siloed projects that address only one facet of the syndemic of constraints. Gender-transformative work must be institutionalized as a core component, involving structured community dialogues, men's engagement sessions, and family counseling to foster enabling environments and shift restrictive norms.

Concurrently, significant investment must be directed towards strengthening women's collectives such as self-help groups, cooperatives, and producer companies to amplify the observed 'ripple effect,' build collective bargaining power, and create sustainable platforms for shared learning and advocacy. Partnerships with legitimizing local institutions, including religious leaders, community elders, and government extension services, are crucial to build broader social acceptance and anchor women's economic participation within respected community structures. For government and policymakers, mainstreaming gender in agricultural and rural development policy is non-negotiable.

This entails formally recognizing women farmers as primary clients in extension services, allocating specific quotas for women in input subsidy schemes and credit programs, and ensuring technology demonstrations proactively include and address women's needs. Investments must prioritize gender-responsive rural infrastructure such as water management systems, renewable energy solutions, and digital connectivity designed to reduce women's drudgery and unlock new economic opportunities. Strengthening the legal framework and its implementation, particularly concerning women's inheritance and property rights, through the establishment of fast-track courts and legal aid services, is fundamental to securing the foundational assets upon which resilient livelihoods depend. Furthermore, social protection systems, like the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), should be innovatively linked with skills training and 'graduation' approaches to create intentional pathways from social safety nets to sustainable livelihoods and economic empowerment.

Future research must prioritize participatory action research that centers women's own voices in knowledge creation, develop context-specific mixed-methods metrics to capture the nuanced reality of negotiated empowerment, and conduct longitudinal studies to track the sustainability and intergenerational impacts of these complex processes. Documenting and systematically scaling successful models of integrated, gender-transformative programming is critical for wider impact. Only through such a comprehensive, integrated, and patient approach one that simultaneously provides resources and works to reshape the socio-cultural terrain can resilient livelihood strategies fulfill their true potential for fostering deep and sustainable empowerment in contexts of enduring inequality like South Punjab.

Note: This research article has been derived from my PhD research work topic "Empowering needy and poor women through resilience livelihood strategies in South Punjab, Pakistan".

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