



Enhancing capabilities and freedom for empowering farm women in Punjab: A sociological analysis

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Abstract

The present study has an effort to identify the capabilities of farm women, and their choices of freedom and to find out the association of socioeconomic characteristics with resources. A multistage random sampling technique was used to select three districts, six blocks, and 18 villages from three agro-climatic zones of Punjab and interviewed the male as well as females of 240 farm households. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of farm women (82%) had the freedom to visit the market, parental home, and social ceremonies independently and the rest were accompanied by their family members. Three fourth of farm women (76.25%) did not exercise their right to vote freely as it was influenced by male members of the family and 20.83 percent of farm women were Panchayat members with partial participation (62%) in Panchayati activities. The further study observed the active participation of farm women in social (48.33%) and religious (52.50%) activities rather than in political activities despite being Panchayati members. Farm women's age, education, and occupation were significantly associated with social and human resources. It implied that educated and working farm women experience more freedom and mobility in society and had exposure to using mobile phones, social media, print media, etc. The study suggested that peculiar cultural values of the region could be made more inclusive to overcome gender discriminatory practices by initiating gender sensitization and behavior change strategies among rural masses and women panchayat members' judgments and opinions must be involved and considered well in the decision-making process about village development and welfare for gender neutral structural changes.

Keywords: Freedom, capabilities, empowerment, mobility, agriculture.

Introduction

Empowerment involves improving people's ability to make strategic life decisions, especially in situations where they have previously been denied this ability (Kabeer 1999). It is the manifestation of one's ability to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable organizations that have an impact on one's life. The process involves raising awareness and growing capacity, resulting in increased involvement, decision-making authority, control, and transformational action. There are three components of empowerment viz. resources, agency, and achievements. *Resources* include material, human, and social resources disseminated through institutions and ties in society, *agency* denotes the ability to define and act on one's own or shared objectives and *achievements* referred to as well-being outcomes which the empowered ones enjoy through owned resources and being agency. In a general sense, for one to be empowered, one must come from a position of disempowerment.

Women's empowerment is critical to the process of the development of the community. Women's empowerment is referred to as promoting women's sense of self-worth, their ability to determine their own choices, their freedom of

mobility, and their right to influence social change for themselves and others. As the concept of women's empowerment was introduced at the UN's Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, which defined it as a redistribution of social and economic powers and control of resources in favor of women. The process takes place over time, making women agents who formulate choices, control resources and make strategic life choices (Sheetar and Rajeshwari 2015, Singh *et al* 2020).

Rural women play a very significant role in the working women population in our country so it is important to understand their role and status in agriculture. According to the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM) 2018, 80 percent of women are economically employed in the agriculture sector. It consists of 48 percent of self-employed farmers and 33 percent of the agricultural labor force. Agriculture required hard effort, and it was seen that women contributed more to agriculture than men did when the task was divided by gender (Rathirane 2013, Mishra 2014 Rani *et al* 2022). Though, both men and women engage in agriculture, the nature and extent of their involvement differ depending on the economy's structure and gender norms. Women actively participate range of roles from manufacturing and processing to retailing and consumption; they raise and manage crops, tend animals, work in agribusinesses and food retailing, prepare meals for their families, and much more (Malapit *et al* 2020, Pavithra 2017, Sreedhar 2016). Despite playing all these roles, they remain invisible in agriculture and country development. The lack of available gender-disaggregated data means that women's contribution to agriculture, in particular, is poorly understood and their specific needs are ignored in development planning.

Furthermore, to achieve the national goals of women's mainstreaming on one hand and agricultural development on the other, women's full potential in agriculture must be realized. However, women's contributions to food systems are frequently unappreciated and misunderstood. Women typically confront obstacles that prevent them from participating on equal terms. Women in our society have less education than males, control fewer resources, have less decision-making authority over household income, and have time limits as a result of the triple burden of productive, household, and communal duties. Against this backdrop, the present study has been conducted with the following objectives: to identify the abilities of farm women and their choices of freedom and to find out the association of socio-economic characteristics with social and human resources.

Methodology

The present study was conducted in three agro-climatic zones of Punjab state viz. sub-mountainous zone, central plain zone, and south-western zone. A multistage random sampling technique was used to select respondents. In the first stage, one district was selected randomly from each selected zone, and in the second stage, two blocks from each selected district were chosen for the study. Similarly, at the third stage, three villages from each selected block were taken randomly. Thus, six blocks and eighteen villages were selected from three zones of Punjab. From each selected block, forty households based on probability proportionate from three categories of farm households i.e. small, medium, and large were selected. Thus, making a total sample size of 240 farm households. Self-structured interview schedule was formulated for data collection. The data were tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted by using simple percentages and chi-square tests to reach logical conclusions.

Results and discussion

Individuals and groups who have access to sufficient social resources are often healthier and better prepared to deal with issues in his/her life. Here, the study made an effort to assess the sample population's social resource level using various indicators, such as freedom of movement, membership of organization and *panchayat*, social participation in various activities, exercising the right to vote, protest against social ills, etc.

Freedom of movement is an integral component of women's empowerment. So, the study gauged the mobility of women in three social contexts, viz., freedom to visit parents or relatives; freedom to visit the market, and attending social ceremonies. The study tries to explore if farm women are allowed to move alone or allowed only when accompanied by other family members. According to the data in Table 1, women were the most mobile when it comes to visiting markets (81.7%), attending social ceremonies (82%), and visiting their parental house/relatives (82.9%). There is a strong notion prevailing that daughters-in-law are less mobile than their daughters and sons when they were living with their in-law's families (Mehta and Sai, 2021). This trend was observed among 18 percent of total respondents. Further, it was noticed that although three fourth of farm women from large farmers' families exercise their freedom of mobility independently still one-fourth of them had to face restrictions on their mobility as they were accompanied by their family members.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to the norms related to visits to the market

Visit to market	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Free to move	68 (88.31)	58 (87.88)	70 (72.16)	196 (81.67)
Accompanied by others	9 (11.68)	8 (12.12)	27 (27.84)	44 (18.33)
Attending social ceremonies				
Free to move	67 (87.01)	55 (83.33)	75 (77.32)	197 (82.08)
Accompanied by others	10 (12.99)	11 (16.67)	22 (22.68)	43 (17.92)
Visit related to parents/ relatives' house				
Free to move	67 (87.01)	60 (90.91)	72 (74.23)	199 (82.92)
Accompanied by others	10 (12.99)	6 (9.09)	25 (25.77)	41 (17.08)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages

Farm women's participation in social activities is an important empowering factor as it enables them to build interpersonal connections outside of the house and allows for engagement with others in the community or society. Having this view, the social participation of farm women was studied and presented in Table 2. It was observed that the social participation of farm women. It was found that half (52.5%) of the respondents engaged in religious activities like doing *path/kirtan* and another nearly half (48.3%) of the respondents were engaged in SHGs activities like saving, accounting, etc., while 15 percent did not engage in any social activity. Greater participation in religious activities had been seen among medium (63.6%) sized farm women followed by large (52.6%) and small (42.8%) farm women. The results were by Nayak and Mahanta (2012), and Dutta and Bhakta (2017).

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their participation in social activities**Multiple responses**

Social participation	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
In any religious activity	33 (42.85)	42 (63.63)	51 (52.57)	126 (52.50)
In SHGs activity	30 (38.96)	37 (56.06)	49 (50.51)	116 (48.33)
No Participation	13 (16.88)	12 (18.18)	12 (12.37)	37 (15.41)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

The right to equality in voting is a basic human right in a democratic country like India and also a cornerstone of our country, if women are voluntarily exercising their right to vote is testimony to the rise of self-empowerment of women to secure their fundamental right to freedom of expression (Kapoor and Ravi, 2014). The data presented in Table 3 show farm women exercising the right to vote. The study found that three fourth (76%) of respondents were not exercising their vote freely due to being influenced by their family members, neighborhood, and community, while one-fourth (23%) exercised their right to vote freely. Although women become more politically mobilized still their voting is influenced by male members of families because of less exposure to political activities in India. Significant percentages (90%) of women from small farm families disclosed that the decision on whom to vote was taken by men of their families.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents according to their exercising the right to vote

Right to vote	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Yes	7	20	30	57

	(9.09)	(30.31)	(30.92)	(23.75)
No	70 (90.91)	46 (69.69)	67 (69.07)	183 (76.25)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

According to the 73rd and 74th Amendment acts, it provides 33 percent reservation of women in *gram panchayats* and local bodies. The data in Table 4 show the *panchayat* membership of respondents and it was found that one-fifth (20.8%) of respondents had their *panchayat* membership either as *sarpanch* or member of the *panchayat*, but the majority of respondents (79.1%) were not a member of the *panchayat*. The study found a higher membership among medium (27.27%) and large farm (24.74%) women compared to 10 percent of small farm women in the study area.

The study further explored the level of participation of *panchayat* members in *panchayat* activities. Participation was categorized into three categories i.e. dummy, partial, and full, characterizing dummy as not participating at all while partial as participating though not fully aware of rights and duties, and full participation as performing and participating with full awareness of rights and duties. It was heartening to note that no farm women *panchayat* member was found dummy and proxy candidate highlighting the proactive role of government intervention to fully operationalize decentralization of power at the grassroots level, especially for women.

It was observed that two third (62%) of members participated partially whereas they perform and participate in village development activities through assistance from either their husbands or other male members of their family while more than one-third (38%) of members fully participated in *panchayat* activities like welfare activities, provides information related to the training program, awareness camps, counseling of women, etc. On the other hand, a closer look reveals that though 10 percent of women from small farm households were *panchayat* members three fourth of them had full participation in *panchayat* activities as compared to medium (38.9%) and large (25%) farm women.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents according to their membership of *panchayat*

<i>Panchayat</i> Membership	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Yes	8 (10.30)	18 (27.27)	24 (24.74)	50 (20.83)
No	69 (89.67)	48 (72.73)	73 (75.26)	190 (79.17)
Participation in <i>panchayat</i> activities				
Overall n₁= 8, n₂= 18 n₃= 24 N=50				
Partial	2 (25.00)	11 (61.11)	18 (75.00)	31 (62.00)
Full	6 (75.00)	7 (38.89)	6 (25.00)	19 (38.00)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

The study further intrigued the awareness of farm women (Table 5) regarding their legal rights i.e. protection of Women from domestic violence act, 2005, pre-conception and prenatal diagnostic techniques act, 1994 (PNDT), and equal property rights (Hindu Succession Act, 2005) were explored. It was discovered that nearly three-fourths (71.2%) of farm women were unaware of the above-mentioned legal rights, while the remaining 28 percent were aware. Among farmers categories, nearly thirty percent each of medium and large farm women had awareness about their legal rights as against 23 percent of small farm women. It is disheartening to note that despite education availability, technological advancement, and the internet, still, rural women are deprived of the knowledge of legal rights which is the main hindrance in their empowerment process. **Results are from the study in** which he stated that rural women are more unaware of their rights and education. That is why they are socially, economically, and legally very low.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents according to their awareness of legal rights

Awareness regarding legal rights	Small	Medium	Large	Total
Yes	18 (23.37)	21 (31.82)	30 (30.93)	69 (28.75)
No	59 (76.63)	45 (68.18)	67 (69.07)	171 (71.25)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

Social ills refer to any social problems that affect many people in society, like sexual harassment, molestation, dowry, violence against women, etc. Table 6 indicates protests against social ills by farm women. The majority of women (90.4%) had not participated in any protest against social ills, while only 10% had participated. According to the study, a higher percentage of medium-sized farm women protested against social ills compared to small and large farm women. It substantiated the fact that the “cultural of silence” is embedded in our society in such a way that women can’t raise their voices against social ills, they were socialized by saying common belief that *change ghara di kudiya/aurta vadya morree nhi boldia*, the cultural pressure of not to speak in front of village and family elders. Under this cultural pressure, they suppressed their inner voices and suspended their thoughts.

Table 6: Distribution of respondents according to their protest against social ills

Social ills	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Yes	8 (6.16)	10 (15.15)	5 (5.15)	23 (9.58)
No	69 (89.64)	56 (84.85)	92 (94.85)	217 (90.42)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

Human resource development is the process of increasing the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of all the people in society. Further, the study attempted to measure the human resource of farm women by gauging different components which included their abilities in multiple intuitional settings such as family, neighborhood and community. For measurement of human resources various indicators viz. ability to do baking operations, accessibility to higher education, usage of mobile phones, print media, ICT/smart gadgets, social media, driving skills, etc. were considered.

Education is a powerful weapon that has the potential to change the world (Mandela 1993). The perusal of table 7 shows women's access to higher education. The majority (80.4%) of farm women in rural areas had no access to higher education whereas only one-fifth (19.6%) of respondents got a chance of higher education. Gender gaps in accessibility to education after the completion of school have been recorded and reported by various organizations and authors alike (Sidhu 2011, Sidhu and Sharma 2012).

In Table 7 the study further explored the reasons behind the non-accessibility of higher educational avenues to farm women and the study found the greater distance (53.5%) of higher educational institutes from the village to be the prime reason. Financial constraint (46%) emerged as IInd important reason followed by a cultural barrier (45%) of not spending resources on females. Lack of motivation (37%) on the part of respondents themselves and early marriage (28.4%) emerged as another reason behind non-accessibility. Distance of higher education institutions emerged as another reason in all three farm categories which keep them away from education. A greater percentage of women from small and medium farm size categories reported such constraints compare to their large farm women counterparts as is clear from the data.

Table 7: Distribution of respondents according to their accessibility to higher education and the reason thereof

*Multiple responses

Particulars	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Yes	22 (28.57)	13 (19.69)	12 (12.37)	47 (19.58)
No	55 (71.43)	53 (80.31)	85 (87.63)	193 (80.42)
*Reasons for not perusing higher education	Small n₁=55	Medium n₂=53	Large n₃=85	Total n=193
Distance	36 (65.45)	32 (60.37)	35 (41.66)	103 (53.36)

Early marriage	18 (32.72)	11 (20.75)	20 (23.80)	55 (28.49)
Lack of motivation	19 (34.54)	19 (35.84)	26 (30.95)	64 (33.16)
Financial constraint	31 (56.36)	29 (54.71)	19 (22.61)	89 (46.11)
Cultural barrier	29 (52.72)	24 (45.28)	35 (41.66)	88 (45.59)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

Mobile phone seems to contribute to female autonomy and empowerment in India by gathering information about agriculture, political, social spheres, etc. It could help strengthen the women's self-confidence and enhance their intra-household bargaining power (Rajkhowa and Qaim, 2022). Table 8 explains whether they had their mobile phones or they are using the phones of their husbands/ children. It was found that two-thirds (64.6%) of the respondent had mobile phones whereas one-fourth (23.3%) of farm women used mobile either their husbands or children and it was disheartening to note that still, 12 percent of respondents had no mobile phones of their own. The study also found that 71.44 percent of small and 65.15 percent of medium farm women had their mobile as against 58.76 percent of large farm women. It is evident from the data that small farm women had high access to mobile phones as compared to other women from medium and large farmers' families. Similar trends were also projected by Tiwari (2010), Chopra *et al* (2020), and Singh *et al* (2022).

Table 8: Distribution of respondents according to their usage of mobile phones

Usages of mobile phones	Small	Medium	Large	Total
Personal mobile	55 (71.44)	43 (65.15)	57 (58.76)	155 (64.58)
Husband/children's mobile	8 (10.38)	20 (30.30)	28 (28.86)	56 (23.34)
Not having	14 (18.18)	3 (4.54)	12 (12.38)	29 (12.08)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

The study divulged the usage of social media and it was found that two third of respondents did not use social media as they did not have their mobile whereas one-third had used social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, etc. The study further explored the level of social media usage of respondents and categorized usage into three levels i.e. low, medium, and high. Low included the respondents who were using just 1 social media platform WhatsApp, medium use included up to 2 platforms i.e. Facebook and WhatsApp whereas high were using 3 and more platforms which included WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger or Instagram, etc. Two-thirds of respondents had low social media usage while one-fifth had medium and just 13 percent had high usage. Small (68%) and medium (69%) farm women had low usage of social media than large (15%) counterparts.

Table 9: Distribution of respondents according to their level of social media usage

Usage of social media	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Yes	28 (36.36)	26 (39.39)	28 (28.86)	82 (34.16)
No	49 (63.64)	40 (60.61)	69 (71.14)	158 (65.84)
Level of Usage	Small n ₁ =28	Medium n ₂ =26	Large n ₃ =28	Total n=82
Low	19 (68.00)	18 (69.00)	17 (61.00)	54 (65.85)
Medium	5 (18.00)	5 (19.00)	7 (25.00)	17 (20.73)
High	4 (14.00)	3 (12.00)	4 (14.00)	11 (13.42)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

Using ICT gadgets helps us to reduce drudgery and save time. Data presented in Table 10 indicate women's

ability to use ICT gadgets. It was found that two-thirds (64.1%) of farm women were not able to use ICT gadgets like laptops, tab, etc. smartphones, speakers, etc., while only one-third (35.8%) of respondents were able to use gadgets. Concluding medium and large farm-size women had an edge over their small farm women counterparts. It can be stated that rural women started to use ICT/smart gadgets and become familiar with the technology leads to enhancing their capabilities and boosting their confidence.

Table 10: Distribution of respondents according to their ability to use ICT/ smart gadgets

Ability to use ICT/ smart gadgets	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Yes	22 (28.57)	30 (45.45)	34 (35.05)	86 (35.83)
No	55 (71.43)	36 (54.55)	63 (64.95)	154 (64.17)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

It was surprising to find that in the era of ICT, more than one-third (38.7%) of farm women never read any newspaper or magazine while one-fifth (20%) read it sometimes and only 40 percent were regularly reading newspapers or magazines. Comparatively nearly half (48.07%) of small farm women never read any print media as against 34 percent of medium and large farm women as they were so much indulge in household chores, they were unable to make spare time for reading newspapers. On the other hand percentages of medium farm women were high in usage of print media regularly as compared to nearly 32 percent each of small and large farm women. Despite hectic days, most women were able to read newspapers to seek new knowledge which is essential for their empowerment and personal growth.

Table 11: Distribution of respondents according to their usage of print media

Print media usage	Small	Medium	Large	Total
Never	37 (48.07)	23 (34.86)	33 (34.02)	93 (38.76)
Sometimes	16 (20.77)	12 (18.18)	22 (22.69)	50 (20.83)
Regularly	24 (31.16)	31 (46.96)	42 (32.29)	97 (40.41)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

The data presented in Table 6 show farm women's ability to do banking operations. From the study, it was investigated that half (50.8%) of farm women were not able to do any banking operations while only one-third (35.8%) did it with no difficulty. Deposit and withdrawal of cash, using ATM service were majorly performed activities by them. Nearly half of the women from each farmer category had incompetency to perform banking operations whereas 42.48 percent and 40.27 percent of women from medium and small farmers families, respectively, were more competent to do banking activities than large farm women (30.94). farm women reported the reason behind their incompetency as they had low education and less exposure to banking activities, moreover, they become idle in the presence of male members and always avoid doing so.

Table12: Distribution of respondents according to their ability to do banking operations

Ability to do banking operations	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Not able	37 (48.05)	32 (48.48)	53 (54.63)	122 (50.83)
Some difficulty	9 (11.68)	9 (13.64)	14 (14.43)	32 (13.34)
No difficulty	31 (40.27)	28 (42.48)	30 (30.94)	86 (35.83)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

Driving skill is one of the important skill in present times. It reduces dependency on other family members. The perusal of table 13 shows the respondents' ability to drive two wheelers vehicle. It was found that the majority (80%) of

respondents were not able to drive two wheelers vehicle while only one-fifth (20%) of respondents were able to drive. Further, it was found that 30 percent of medium farm women could drive two-wheelers as against small (18.18%) and large (14.44%) as they had no availability of two-wheelers at their in-law's houses.

Table 13: Distribution of respondents according to their ability to drive two-wheeler vehicles

Drive two wheeler vehicle	Small n ₁ =77	Medium n ₂ =66	Large n ₃ =97	Total N=240
Yes	14 (18.18)	20 (30.31)	14 (14.44)	48 (20.00)
No	63 (81.82)	46 (69.69)	83 (85.56)	192 (80.00)

Note-Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentage

Association of socioeconomic characteristics with social and Human resources

Table 14 reveals the association between social and human resources of women empowerment and the social profile, such as age, marital status, caste, family size, religion, and economic profile of respondents i.e. income, occupation, and education. Data presented in the table shows that human resources had a significant association with age at a one percent level of probability whereas social resources significantly were associated with marital status and the region at a one percent level of probability. It stated that married farm women belonging to *Jat/Sikh* caste were more actively participating in socio-religious activities such as *Path/Kirtan*, Self-help group, etc. than unmarried women.

Further, it was observed that income has no association with social and human resources whereas occupation and education were found to be significantly associated with both resources. It implies that educated and working farm women experience more freedom and mobility in society. Moreover, they had exposure to using mobile phones, social media, print media, etc, and could do banking operations. Thus, age, occupation, and education of farm women had a significant role in empowering women and enhancing their capabilities, so members of society should emphasize not only the education of their daughters but also be determined to make them economically independent.

Table 14: Association of different aspects of women's empowerment with their social profile

Social profile	Social resources		Human resources	
	Chi-test	p-value	Chi-test	p-value
Age	2.49ns	.962	23.60**	.003
Marital Status	16.55*	.011	11.61ns	.071
Family size	7.46ns	.113	1.85ns	.762
Caste	8.99ns	.061	3.25ns	.517
Religion	8.13*	.017	4.01ns	.134
Economic profile				
Income	4.48ns	.345	3.46ns	.483
Occupation	28.12**	.000	26.26**	.000
Education	56.33**	.000	1.15**	.000

ns: Non-significant ** and * significant at one and five percent level

Conclusion

Women can be fully empowered when they are actively involved in social, religious, and political activities and enrich their decision-making power in the family as well as in society. Though the study observed full and active participation of farm women in socio-religious activities still they constrained to involve in *Panchayat* activities despite being a member of *Panchayat*. The women who participated in *Panchayat* activities were guided by male members of their families even in their banking activities and also in other works outside the home. Even, they were restrained to raise their voices against social ills due to cultural pressure. That is why the study gave the following suggestions to enhance their capabilities and empower farm women.

The normative pattern of the family and society at large towards women needs to be made more inclusive to overcome myriad barriers imposed upon rural women, especially farm women.

Peculiar cultural values of the region could be made more inclusive to overcome gender discriminatory practices by initiating gender sensitization and behavior change strategies among rural masses.

Women *panchayat* members' judgments and opinions must be involved and considered well in the decision-

making process about village development and welfare for gender-neutral structural changes.

Farm women should be given training in the use of farm technology and ICT to improve their work participation and reduce drudgery.

Women must be made aware of their existing rights, their access to judicial relief and redress could be provided through legal aid, assistance, and counseling.

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