

Research Paper

Quality of Life of Farm Labourers in District Barabanki: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural work is often associated with economic instability, limited access to resources, and inadequate health and social services, all of which can adversely affect well-being (FAO, 2020; National Survey Office, 2019). Quality of life, as defined by the World Health Organisation (2012), refers to an individual's perception of their position in life within their cultural and social context. Thus, the present study examines gender differences in quality of life among farm labourers in the Barabanki district, where agriculture remains a primary source of livelihood for a large rural population in the Barabanki district. A sample of 50 farm labourers (50 males and 50 females) was selected through convenient sampling from villages in Barabanki district. Quality of life was assessed using the Hindi version of the WHOQoL-Bref developed by the World Health Organisation. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare male and female farm labourers. The findings revealed statistically significant gender differences across all domains of quality of life, including overall perception of quality of life and health, with female farm labourers reporting consistently lower scores than their male counterparts across every domain assessed.

Keywords: *Quality of Life, Farm Labourers, Barabanki, World Health Organisation*

Agriculture is an important sector for the Indian economy, contributing 20.19 percent to the country's GDP (DAC&FW Annual Report, 2020-21). Farming was initiated for domestic purposes in its early stages; over time, numerous developments and innovations have been introduced to boost agricultural output and generate income. Even so, several challenges have emerged in this field, including environmental hazards (Bhatt et al., 2019). Agriculture has remained at the core of India's economy for centuries and is a major source of employment for more than 1.4 billion people.

In the process of socioeconomic development, agriculture plays an essential role. Approximately 70% of rural households in India rely solely on agriculture, and 58% of the country's population make their living from it (IBEF, 2021). About 20% of India's GDP comes from the agricultural sector, which remains essential to the survival of a large majority of India's rural population (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

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The Indian agricultural sector provides food and raw materials to meet a large share of the population's demands and ranks among the top producers of commodities such as pulses and fruits, making it vital to the international food chain (Indian Council of Agricultural Research [ICAR], 2022). The sector has undergone considerable change with the introduction of high-yielding seed varieties, fertilisers, and irrigation techniques, most notably during the Green Revolution (Gulati & Saini, 2022), which helped India become self-sufficient in food and agricultural commodities during the 1980s.

Despite these improvements, farmers in India continue to face considerable challenges, particularly in disadvantaged regions. Most farmers are small farmers, with more than 86% owning less than 2 hectares of land (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2021). These farmers often suffer from hardship and poverty due to lack of access to technology and markets, which makes them economically insecure.

Farmers at High Risk

Farmers face common challenges of drought, flooding, disease and poor yields. Farmers usually work under considerable stress and financial pressure, in physically demanding conditions with little human contact, for days on end, which can be isolating. Farmers are often reluctant to talk about personal problems openly and tend to suffer alone (Fraser et al. 2005). Long-term exposure to pesticides, through inhalation or absorption through the skin, has also been linked with an increased risk of depression (Kim et al. 2019).

Generally, farmers have a hard life in terms of physical work, income stability and social support, which influences their overall quality of life. However, as women are a marginalised group in rural society, every problem that a farmer faces are likely to be magnified for women in that role. Women farm workers often face a unique and compounding set of problems that affect their overall quality of life.

Farmers experience different mental health problems. Long hours of work in mostly isolated environments, indebtedness, financial constraints, heavy workloads, adverse weather conditions and natural disasters all have a significant impact on their livelihoods and wellbeing (Gifford, 2019). Most farmers report that economic stress impacts their mental health (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2019). In response, the University of Minnesota formed a rural task force to connect farmers to resource persons they can contact when they are feeling anxious or stressed (Lauritsen, 2019). Farmers have also been noted to be reluctant to talk about their mental health issues, viewing it as a sign of weakness (Roy et al. 2017).

Mental Health of Farmers in India

Dongre and Deshmukh (2012) in their study on farmer suicides in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra found that farmers indicated a combination of reasons for their suffering; these included debt, low prices for farm produce, high costs of farming, poor irrigation, crop failures, indifference of the government and use of chemical fertilisers that also degraded the environment around them.

The causes of suicides by farmers in India have been analyzed by Mitra and Shroff (2007), who have identified the deteriorating competitiveness of the Indian cotton farmer since the liberalization of the Indian agricultural economy in the middle of the 1990s as one of the main causes for the increase in the rate of farmer suicides.

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The Prerna Prakalp Farmer Counselling Health Program has been started by the government as a continuation of the existing district mental health programs targeting at farmers committing suicide. Local people are trained as counselors and travel between villages to perform their duties, while accredited women social health activists are trained to recognize the symptoms of mental disorders. Aggarwal (2008), a psychiatrist, reported that the stressors among Indian farmers are different from other countries because of illiteracy, bonded labor, population pressure, corruption, and debt to local moneylenders, among other stressors. Therefore, a responsible response to farmer suicides should involve both biological and more complex social, cultural, political, and economic factors and not just the individual farmer, but also the situation in which he is placed (Mishra, 2006). In his report, Malone (2008) pointed out that poverty, alcoholism, drought, and distress in the agricultural sector are the major factors contributing to farmer suicides.

The interest in the quality of life (QoL) construct has been increasing substantially both in clinical and research settings since the early 1970s. The assessment of quality of life has become one of the crucial elements of evaluating the effectiveness of treatment and its results, even though there is still some controversy about how to measure it.

World Health Organisation (1995) defines Quality of Life as an individual's perception of his or her place in life in relation to the cultural context, systems of values, goals and concerns. It is a broad, multidimensional concept shaped by physical health, psychological well-being, level of independence, social relationships, and environmental conditions. Among farming communities, these life domains are often constrained by economic hardship, limited access to resources, and social barriers in rural settings.

While there is a difference in the ways in which men and women contribute to agriculture, there are also similarities in these contributions because of the existing institutional framework and the sociocultural environment. On average, women account for 30 to 50 percent of the labour employed in agriculture around the world, especially in developing countries, and they are crucial participants in the food supply chain as well as household food security (FAO, 2011). However, even though women farmers have such an important role, they lack the opportunity to become as productive and economically independent as men do because of their unequal access to land, inputs, finance, extension, and decision-making (Doss et al., 2018; World Bank, 2020). The division of labour along gender lines also means that men tend to be allocated mechanised agricultural work, whereas women are engaged in labour-intensive, low-paid agricultural and household work (Agarwal, 2014).

Such structural imbalances have an important effect on the quality of life of the farmers in terms of economic security, physical well-being, mental well-being, and social status. Therefore, gender must be analyzed as a social category that spans beyond caste, class, occupation, age, and ethnicity. The reason for this is that due to the differential roles, responsibilities, resources, access, and restrictions of both males and females in agriculture, there must be gender-disaggregated data. A gendered approach in the field of agriculture will be helpful in reducing such gender-related inequalities and enabling learning from one another's experiences.

There are many areas of life that farming influences such as physical wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, interpersonal relations, and living conditions, and there are differences between how men and women experience these aspects due to unequal access to resources and power of decision-making and also because of the additional stress that is

placed on women with regard to balancing work at farms and household. While there have been quite a few studies conducted on gender differences in agricultural engagement and productivity, there are not many studies focused on how these differences influence the quality of life of farmers. This study will focus on finding out and comparing the quality of life of male and female farm workers in terms of various life domains.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The quality of life may be perceived as the individual's subjective perception of his or her position in the world, defined through such factors as one's physical condition, mental condition, social interactions, and environment. The quality of life in relation to farmers, however, is closely associated with the conditions under which they operate as well as the socio-economic environment where they live considering the nature of their job.

Several studies have highlighted the impact of work-related factors on the quality of life of farmers. Work satisfaction is important for the life satisfaction of farmers, with financial security being the most significant factor influencing it, according to Sabillon et al., (2021). Similarly, financial pressure along with weather uncertainties and psychological stress were identified as risk factors by Yazd et al., (2019).

The Indian literature serves as a testament to the magnitude of farmer woes. Dongre & Deshmukh (2012) highlight indebtedness, low prices of produce, insufficient irrigation facilities, increasing cost of farming, crop failure, government indifference and overuse of fertilizers as key elements of farmer woes and suicides. In addition to these factors, Quadri & Javeed (2017) have enumerated certain additional factors that play a role in affecting the development and welfare of farmers such as climate change, market fluctuations, poor infrastructure in the rural sector, flooding and drought, occupational hazards, machine malfunctioning and domestic issues.

Demographics also seem to influence the psychological well-being of farmers and their quality of life. Studies indicate that the probability of developing depression and cognitive impairment increases with age for farmers as compared to other occupations (McClure et al., 2015; Pulgar et al., 2016).

Inconsistent gendered patterns of mental well-being among the farming population have been consistently reported. According to Hanklang (2016), female farmers exhibited greater levels of psychological distress when compared with their male counterparts, an increased risk which is related to the dual burden of labor, reduced access to resources, and less participation in household decisions. Similar results were obtained by Carruth and Logan (2002), who indicated that farming stress goes beyond the farmer themselves, influencing his/her family members, and leading to increased physical illnesses and emotional distress of farm women and farm spouses.

Chronic stress has been identified as one of the key factors determining physical and psychological health among the farming population. According to McShane, Quirk, and Swinbourne (2016), chronic stress is characterized by somatic symptoms such as headaches and sleep disorders, mental problems such as anxiety and depression, and cognitive deficits including memory and decision-making impairments. McShane and Quirk (2009) noted that depressed farmers were characterized by somatic symptoms and suicidal ideation and perceived life as not worth living.

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Socioeconomic status and ownership of land may also impact farmer health. According to Fragar (2002), somatic complaints, anxiety, sleep problems, and concerns about health were observed more frequently in landless farmers compared to farmers who owned some land, whereas the farmers who owned more land felt socially isolated owing to the demands of their work on the farm. Similarly, Mehra, Gupta, and Behmani (2022) found that landless farmers were at increased risk of suicide and more land ownership was associated with decreased risk, which is consistent with previous studies conducted by Molnar (1985) and Brooks, Stucker, and Bailey (1986).

Hounscome et al. (2012) reported a higher rate of psychiatric disorders among farmers and their spouses compared to non-farming populations, and similar patterns have been observed internationally: Liu et al. (2018) and Simsek and Ersin (2015) documented a range of mental health difficulties among farmers, including reduced concentration, appetite and sleep disturbance, fatigue, irritability, and a sense of loss of control, with Malmberg et al. (1999) identifying mental health difficulties as among the most common contributors to farmer suicide.

Taken together, this literature suggests that farmers' quality of life is shaped by an interplay of financial, environmental, demographic, gender, and social factors. Yet, despite growing interest in this area, most existing research continues to focus on mental health specifically, with comparatively little emphasis on quality of life as a broader construct.

Despite substantial literature on agrarian distress, farmer suicides, and mental health, there remains a scarcity of studies examining farmers' quality of life as a multidimensional phenomenon, and using standardised measures to compare male and female farmers specifically. Much of the existing research has also been conducted in Western contexts, where socio-cultural, economic, and agricultural conditions differ considerably from those in India, limiting how far these findings can be generalised. Gender-based experiences of farm labourers in India, in particular, remain under-explored. The present study seeks to address this gap by providing context-specific insight into gender differences in quality of life among Indian farm labourers.

Objectives

- To examine gender differences in the overall quality of life and overall perception of health among farm labourers.
- To examine gender differences in the physical health domain of quality of life among farm labourers.
- To examine gender differences in the psychological domain of quality of life among farm labourers.
- To examine gender differences in the social relationship domain of quality of life among farm labourers.
- To examine gender differences in the environmental domain of quality of life among farm labourers.

Hypotheses

- There will be a significant gender difference in the overall quality of life and overall perception of health among farm labourers.
- There will be a significant gender difference in the physical health domain of quality of life among farm labourers.

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- There will be a significant gender difference in the psychological domain of quality of life among farm labourers.
- There will be a significant gender difference in the social relationship domain of quality of life among farm labourers.
- There will be a significant gender difference in the environmental domain of quality of life among farm labourers.

METHOD

Research Design

The present research used a cross-sectional comparative design to examine gender differences in the quality of life of farm labourers. This design was considered suitable because it allows direct comparisons between male and female farm labourers across the different domains of quality of life at a single point in time.

Sample

The study consisted of a sample of 100 farm labourers as the study population, comprising 50 males and 50 females, aged between 20 and 40 years ($\geq 20 < 40$ years). The farm labourers were drawn from various rural areas of Barabanki district, Uttar Pradesh. Care was taken to ensure that all participants were engaged in farm labour as their primary occupation, with an equal distribution of males and females to allow for meaningful gender comparisons. A convenient sampling technique was adopted to identify participants who met the objectives of the study.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In order to ensure the relevance and consistency of the sample, certain inclusion and exclusion criteria were followed.

- Inclusion criteria included farm labourers who were adults, actively engaged in agricultural labour at the time of data collection, and residing in the villages of Barabanki district. Participants had to be willing to take part in the study and able to understand the questions, with assistance where necessary.
- The exclusion criteria included those who were not dependent on farm labour for their livelihood, those who were temporary agricultural workers, and anyone suffering from a severe physical or psychological illness that could impair their ability to respond reliably. Participants who were unable or unwilling to give informed consent were also excluded from the study.

Variable

Conceptually, Quality of Life is defined by the WHO (1995) as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value system in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. Operationally, quality of life in this study is defined as the scores obtained on the World Health Organization Quality of Life–BREF (WHOQoL-BREF) (WHO, 1996).

Tool Used

Quality of life was assessed using the World Health Organization Quality of Life–BREF (WHOQoL-BREF, 1996) questionnaire, the short form of the WHOQoL-100. The scale comprises 26 items across four domains viz. physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environment along with two additional items assessing overall quality of life and general health. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating better quality of life. Domain scores are calculated by averaging item responses

and converting them according to WHO guidelines, such that higher domain scores reflect better quality of life in that area.

Reliability & Validity

The WHOQoL-BREF is a reliable and valid measure of quality of life. The scale shows good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.66 to 0.84 across its domains. It also demonstrates good construct and cross-cultural validity, having been developed using a standardised approach across different countries.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted through personal interaction between the researcher and the respondents. The purpose of the study was clearly explained to respondents before administering the questionnaire, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. As literacy levels among the farm labourers varied, the questionnaire was administered in Hindi and respondents were given adequate time to respond naturally. Respect for participants was maintained throughout the research process.

Statistical Analysis

After data collection, responses were systematically coded and analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarise overall and domain-wise quality of life scores. To examine gender differences, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted comparing male and female farm labourers on overall quality of life and on each domain of the WHOQoL-BREF. Statistical significance was interpreted using standard criteria ($p < .05$).

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to examine gender differences in quality of life among farm labourers.

Table 1: Comparison of Male and Female Farm Labourers on Overall Quality of Life and Overall Perception of Health

Domain	Gender	N	Mean	SD	SE Mean	F(1,98)	Sig. (p)
Overall perception of Quality of life	Females	50	1.56	0.65	0.13	120.21	<.001**
	Males	50	3.48	0.59	0.12		
Overall perception of health	Females	50	1.80	0.87	0.17	24.47	<.001**
	Males	50	3.16	1.07	0.21		

** $p < .001$

The results show a statistically significant difference between male and female farm labourers on both overall perception of quality of life, $F(1,98) = 120.21$, $p < .001$, and overall perception of health, $F(1,98) = 24.47$, $p < .001$. Male farm labourers reported considerably higher scores on both indicators than their female counterparts. This suggests that men and women engaged in farm labour do not experience their general quality of life and health in a comparable way, and points to a meaningful gender gap even at this broad level. The hypothesis that there will be a significant gender difference in overall quality of life and overall perception of health among farm labourers is therefore retained.

Table 2: Comparison of Male and Female Farm Labourers Across Domains of Quality of Life

Domain	Gender	N	Mean	SD	SE Mean	F(1,98)	Sig. (p)
Physical Domain	Females	50	9.27	2.05	0.41	46.13	<.001**
	Males	50	13.14	1.98	0.40		
Psychological Domain	Females	50	7.58	1.93	0.39	181.33	<.001**
	Males	50	13.65	1.16	0.23		
Social Relationship Domain	Females	50	11.84	2.22	0.44	20.13	<.001**
	Males	50	14.13	1.28	0.26		
Environmental Domain	Females	50	8.74	1.21	0.24	67.18	<.001**
	Males	50	11.54	1.21	0.24		

** $p < .001$

Physical Health Domain

Male farm labourers scored significantly higher than female farm labourers on the physical health domain, $F(1,98) = 46.13$, $p < .001$. This indicates that women reported greater difficulty than men with energy levels, pain, fatigue, and capacity for work, despite performing physically demanding labour of a broadly similar nature. This may reflect the additional physical burden women carry through unpaid domestic and caregiving work on top of farm labour. The hypothesis that there will be a significant gender difference in the physical health domain of quality of life among farm labourers is retained.

Psychological Domain

A clear and statistically significant gender difference emerged in the psychological domain, $F(1,98) = 181.33$, $p < .001$ — the largest effect observed across all domains. Male farm labourers reported considerably better psychological well-being than female farm labourers. This finding suggests that women farm labourers are markedly more vulnerable to psychological distress, likely shaped by the combined pressures of agricultural work, household responsibilities, financial insecurity, and limited personal autonomy. The hypothesis that there will be a significant gender difference in the psychological domain of quality of life among farm labourers is retained.

Social Relationships Domain

Significant gender differences were also observed in the social relationship domain, $F(1,98) = 20.13$, $p < .001$, with male farm labourers scoring higher than their female counterparts. This suggests that men experience greater satisfaction with their social support, personal relationships, and community participation. Lower scores among women may reflect restricted mobility, heavier domestic roles, and fewer opportunities for social interaction outside the home and farm. The hypothesis that there will be a significant gender difference in the social relationships domain of quality of life among farm labourers is retained.

Environmental Domain

Male farm labourers also scored significantly higher than female farm labourers in the environmental domain, $F(1,98) = 67.18$, $p < .001$. This suggests that women perceive their living conditions, access to resources, financial security, and physical surroundings less favourably than men do, even though both groups live within the same broader rural environment. The hypothesis that there will be a significant gender difference in the environmental domain of quality of life among farm labourers is retained.

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Taken together, the results indicate that gender differences in quality of life among farm labourers are consistent and pronounced across every domain measured. Female farm labourers reported lower scores than male farm labourers on overall quality of life, overall health, and all four WHOQoL-BREF domains, with the largest gap observed in psychological well-being. This points to a broad and systemic disadvantage faced by women farm labourers, rather than one confined to a single area of life, and underscores the need for interventions that address women's health, psychological support, social inclusion, and living conditions together rather than in isolation.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate a significant and consistent gender difference in quality of life between male and female farm labourers, evident in their overall perception of quality of life and general health as well as across all four WHOQoL-BREF domains. This pattern implies that the challenges faced by workers in the farms are not shared evenly between the genders and that the extra burden that women carry from their household duties and care-giving adds to the disadvantage created by farmwork. These challenges include risky working environments, low pay, long working hours, and lack of health services.

When it comes to physical health, male farm laborers were found to have better physical health than female farm laborers. Both the genders are involved in the same type of physical labor. However, females being engaged in unpaid domestic labor would add up more to physical exertion, tiredness and pain, which goes beyond the labor involved on farms alone. This is in agreement with findings which suggest that there are certain physical costs of combining productive labor with domestic labor in women of farming community (Agarwal, 2014). This phenomenon is similar to other studies conducted in agrarian societies where female farmers who bear the dual burden of agricultural and domestic labor have poorer physical health than their male counterparts in the same category.

The greatest gender difference was found in the psychological field, where women farm workers exhibited significantly reduced psychological well-being compared to men farm workers. This aligns with the literature review conducted previously, which establishes that psychological stress among women is a direct result of higher exposure to financial insecurity, lack of autonomy and double burden of farm work and domestic chores (Agarwal, 2014; Hanklang, 2016).

The same was true with respect to social interactions as male farm workers exhibited more social well-being than female farm workers. This can be attributed to the fact that male individuals have more chances of interacting with people in their community whereas female individuals have fewer chances of doing so, which is similar to the earlier studies on the relation between limited social interactions and emotional well-being of female farm workers (Carruth & Logan, 2002; FAO, 2011).

In terms of the environment, male farm workers also had higher scores compared to female farm workers. Even though both the males and females live in the same rural environment, women seem to perceive their environment in an unfavorable manner. This could be because of the limited access by women to household assets, healthcare, and financial matters even while living in the same environment.

Moreover, one needs to mention the fact that many of the works devoted to the issue of farmers' well-being and reviewed herein have been produced in the framework of Western

agriculture, where ownership of lands, mechanization, and other factors may be very different compared to the case of Indian rural areas. Given that the observed gender gap was consistent with these differences in context, it can be argued that the disadvantage associated with the gender factor in quality of life of farmers is based on some universal mechanisms, such as inequality in domestic workload and limited autonomy in making decisions.

Overall, the findings from this study indicate that gender differences in quality of life among farm labourers are not confined to one or two areas of life, but extend consistently across physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains, as well as overall perceptions of quality of life and health. Female farm labourers appear to be disadvantaged relative to male farm labourers across the board, pointing to a need for interventions that address women's well-being holistically rather than targeting a single domain in isolation.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine gender differences in the quality of life of male and female farm labourers in Barabanki district. The findings show a clear and consistent pattern: female farm labourers reported significantly lower scores than male farm labourers across every measure examined, including overall quality of life, overall perception of health, and all four WHOQoL-BREF domains — physical, psychological, social, and environmental. The gap was most pronounced in the psychological domain, underscoring the particular vulnerability of women farm labourers to psychological distress, but the consistency of the disadvantage across all domains suggests that the challenges faced by women in this context are broad-based rather than isolated to any single area of life. These findings highlight the importance of psychological, social, and structural support tailored specifically to women farm labourers in order to improve their overall quality of life.

Limitations

- Small sample size, drawn from a single region, limits wider generalisation.
- Cross-sectional design captures quality of life at only one point in time.
- Reliance on self-reported data may have influenced responses.
- Other potentially relevant factors such as income level, marital status, family structure, and access to healthcare were not examined in this study and may help explain the gender differences observed.

Suggestions

- Use larger and more diverse rural samples in future studies.
- Conduct longitudinal research to track changes over time.
- Include qualitative methods for deeper understanding.
- Develop gender-sensitive mental health and social support programmes.

Implications

- The findings highlight the importance of addressing gender-specific needs, particularly the psychological, social, physical, and environmental well-being of women farm labourers.
- Mental health support should be made more accessible within rural health services.
- Community-based support systems can help women feel less isolated and more supported.
- Opportunities for skill development and participation in decision-making may enhance women's overall well-being.
- The study can inform more inclusive and responsive rural welfare policies.

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Conflict of Interest

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