

FEMALE DAY LABORERS AND EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY ON SOME SELECTED RURAL AREAS IN KISHOREGANJ DISTRICT, BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex dynamics shaping the empowerment trajectories of female day laborers in rural areas of Bangladesh, as well as examining the engagement motivations, outcomes, and persistence challenges of the involvement. This study is conducted through a mixed-methods approach, and data was collected from 137 respondents through surveys and case studies in Bajitpur Municipality, Kishoreganj District. The findings reveal economic necessity and family responsibilities as the primary motivators compelling women into insecure informal labor. While day labor participation enabled some positive gains in income, confidence, mobility, and domestic decision-making, most women continued to face multidimensional difficulties, including income instability, violence, unpaid burdens, stigma, and harassment. The study reveals significant post-labor increases in financial independence (From 8.7% to 94.8%), household decision power (12.4% to 78.8%), and self-efficacy (24% to 90.5%), which overall indicate that female day laborers are being empowered after engaging the day labor works. However, over one-third still grapple with income instability, while 68.7% encounter social stigma and 72.7% experience harassment, signaling continuing disempowerment despite modest legal knowledge gains. The research points out that in the absence of greater systemic change, the inclusion of labor force is a necessary but inadequate condition for poor female day laborers in the absence of greater systemic changes and the inclusion of labor force for the transformation of alignment. It deeply demands integrated legal, economic, and infrastructure, with the cooperation of stakeholders in an ecosystem that supports rural female day laborers in all cases and helps the empowerment process in all spheres. Overall, the goal of this study is to explore the progress and the scenarios of the conditional empowerment of marginalized women workers, as well as the complex reality and continued obstacles, to inform the appropriate involvement in eliminating discrimination in their daily socio-economic progress on the basis of their self-demanding and living experiences.

Keywords: *Female Day Laborers, Women's Empowerment, Rural Bangladesh, Informal Labor, Gender Equality.*

1. Introduction

Bangladesh, a country in South Asia, is known for its developing economy. The active participation and engagement of men and women are pivotal for a nation's overall progress and development. More and more women are increasingly found working in a different sector, which operates informally and often involves lower skills and wages. In developing economies, women play an important role by contributing to household income (International Labor Organization, 2013). A significant majority of Bangladeshi women, approximately 91.8 percent according to the Labor Force Statistics of 2016-17, are employed in the informal sector (Bidisha, 2023). In rural areas of Bangladesh, women face many difficulties due to gender inequalities and lack of opportunities. As a result, many poor women are trapped in a cycle of disempowerment and economic hardship. Despite many challenges, the informal labor sector and also internal migration have become a surprising way for women to gain empowerment and improve their economic situation, increased savings, decision-making participation, and many others (Sony et al, 2020).

Female empowerment refers to the process of increasing women's sense of self-worth, their ability to make their own decisions, and their right to influence change for themselves and others (Sen et al, 2022). It encompasses various aspects of life, including social, political, economic, and other facets (Jain, 2023).

However, the informal sector employs over 70% of female workers in Bangladesh, a majority engaged in informal, casual, or seasonal day labor (ILO, 2021). Empowerment of females aims to create an environment where women can freely live their lives with self-worth, respect, and dignity, and have equal rights and opportunities in society (Bala, 2021). By empowering women in the wider context, it is supposed that they can break free from the cycle of poverty, gain independence, and enhance their overall well-being, leading to a transformative impact on the community and society at large. Day laborers play a major role in Bangladesh's informal economy, which operates outside of government regulation and taxation. However, the lack of legal protections means day laborers do not have assured minimum wages. As a result, their daily pay ranges from a meager 100 to 500 Bangladeshi taka, approximately \$1-6 USD (Shameem, 2020). They engaged in a variety of activities such as planting, soil digging, harvesting, weeding, construction, and other agricultural tasks. A particularly disadvantaged group includes female day laborers engaged in insecure informal manual work, lacking stability in income, protections, or basic amenities. Female day laborers are increasingly being empowered through various initiatives after engaging in day labor work (Kennedy, 2010). The empowerment of female day laborers has shown varying impacts on overall productivity and efficiency in different contexts, which enhanced their livelihood. Additionally, empowering women through activities and economic empowerment programs like day labor works has shown benefits in terms of economic development, as well as overall empowerment (Yamaguchi Yamaguchi, 2019). Day labor activities impacted the empowerment of women by providing income gains, economic support, social empowerment, and increased decision-making power within households (Prianto & Mardiyono, 2017).

This study thus focused on exploring the empowerment and progress of female day laborers after being engaged in day labor activities, as well as aims to

reveal the hidden experiences and challenges of female day laborers in rural Bangladesh. In addition, this study also suggests gender-sensitive recommendations on social assistance provisions, regulatory mechanisms, and financial inclusion related to women empowerment issues. Also, by identifying the factors that hinder or facilitate their empowerment, stakeholders, including governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community leaders, can design targeted programs to enhance the well-being and agency of female day laborers in rural areas. However, this study is a vital step towards understanding and supporting the rights and empowerment of female day laborers in Kishoreganj District, Bangladesh.

Research Objectives of the Study

General Objectives

The main objective of this study is to determine whether female laborers become empowered after being engaged in daily wage work, residing in rural areas of Kishoreganj District in Bangladesh.

Specific Objectives

To identify the determinants influencing the engagement of women in day labor activities in rural areas.

To compare the levels of empowerment experienced by female laborers before and after being engaged in day labor.

To reveal the impact of day labor activities, and also the challenges faced by female day laborers.

Significance of the Study

This study has significant practical implications and outcomes for promoting the empowerment of female day laborers in rural Bangladesh. The noteworthy gap in research focused specifically on this marginalized and poor rural group within the specific geographical area of Kishoreganj District, the findings will contribute pivotally to the existing knowledge related to empowerment. This study will also provide a wider understanding of the complex realities, conditional empowerment advances, and continuing barriers that impact marginalized female day workers. Crucially, the recommendations of the study for coordinated legal, economic, and infrastructural responses, which will involve relationships among governmental agencies, NGOs, community leaders, and the private sector, offer a roadmap for stakeholders to establish an ecosystem supporting needy and poor rural women's empowerment across all spheres. Furthermore, by strengthening the often ignored voices and perspectives of female day laborers in rural areas of developing countries like Bangladesh, this study aims to reveal inclusive policymaking and interventions that directly address their specific challenges, such as income instability, violence, burdens, social stigma, and harassment. Ultimately, the practical significance of this study lies in informing gender-sensitive policies, implementations, programs, and interventions for improving the well-being, and socioeconomic development of the rural day laborer women of Bangladesh.

2. Literature Review

Female day laborers in Bangladesh are pivotal to the nation's economy, making substantial contributions to the informal sector. Despite the hardships encountered, these women exhibit remarkable resilience and dedication. Their efforts are indispensable, significantly impacting the welfare of their families and localities. Seminal theory by Boserup on female employment hypothesized a U-shaped relationship with economic development, with participation declining in the early stages and rising later with service sector growth (Boserup 1970, 1990). In

Bangladesh, more women work outside homesteads (Islam 1987; Shand 1986). However, the concept of female empowerment can be complex and has been associated with self-worth and economic sufficiency in certain contexts (Daudi, 2023). Besides, Espinosa Damián (2018) stated that women are considered day laborers who are contracting for short periods and experiencing power imbalances in their employment relationships. The female labor force participation rate in rural areas of Bangladesh has experienced a significant increase over the years. In 2016, the rate was 38.6%, but by 2022, it had risen to 50.89%. This trend is also observable in the overall female labor force participation rate, which increased from 36.3% in 2016 to 42.68% in 2022 (Zaman, 2023). The percentage of women in Bangladesh's workforce has risen to 42.68% in 2022 from 36.3% recorded five years back, as per a survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). The study indicates that the country's labor force has reached 7.34 crore individuals, with 7.7 crore actively involved in various occupations. Notably, around 50.89% of women in rural areas are participating in the workforce (The Business Standard, 2023).

Apart from manufacturing industries in the organized sector, the growth of non-farm activities in rural areas created opportunities for women to work outside their homesteads without having to migrate (Choe and Lo, 1986; Islam, 1987; Shand, 1986). However, despite such growth, the rate of female labor force participation in Bangladesh (36 percent during 2006-10) has remained much lower than in countries of East Asia (67 percent in 2010). Another survey indicates that the country has a total economically active labor force of 49.5 million people. Among them, 37.4 million are men and 12.1 million are women. Moreover, 11.7 million individuals work in urban areas while 37.8 million are employed in rural regions (Mirdha, 2008).

As labor is one of the significant income-generating assets that many of the poor possess, productive employment and a rise in employment (Kant, 2022). Padhi et al. (2019) also reported the presence of gender-related wage discrimination. Such discrimination is considerably higher in urban areas compared to rural ones, and therefore, women can benefit from the expansion of urban employment despite higher discrimination.

Pan (2017) discussed the importance of women empowerment, which involves enabling women to realize their full identity and power in all aspects of life. It emphasizes the need for women to have control over resources and the right to make their own choices. Waghmode & Kalyan (2014) conducted a study on women empowerment, which means granting women the freedom to make life choices and replacing patriarchy with parity. Women are gaining control over their lives, taking their own decisions, and achieving financial independence. Amin (2005) [3] found in his study that female-headed households, smaller family sizes, lower educational attainment, lower levels of household wealth, and microcredit have a positive impact on participation.

Day laborers are individuals who actively seek employment opportunities and engage in short-term work arrangements, typically with different employers each day, and receive daily payment for their services (Blaauw et al, 2007; Mushir, 2014). Kennedy (2010) expressed that day laborers are individuals who engage in work arrangements lasting no more than a day or a few hours. Day labor markets have primarily focused on industries dominated by men, such as construction and agriculture, leaving women working in domestic industries like housekeeping, child

care, and others (Markidis & Papageorgiou, 2017) Previous studies have highlighted the unsafe socio-economic conditions experienced by female day laborers in rural areas, highlighting the prevalence of poverty among these laborers, with low wages, irregular employment opportunities, and lack of access to essential resources such as education and healthcare (Tacoli, 2012; Mehta & Shah, 2003). Other studies explored the association between household characteristics and their economic vulnerability with the significance of their economic circumstances in shaping their empowerment (Cook & Pincus, 2014; Visser et al, 2017). Asadulah & Wahhaj (2017) found that women are consistently less likely than men to engage in paid work. Furthermore, a limited proportion of women in South Asia are found to be employed in wage-based occupations. Other studies examined the influence of socio-cultural norms and gender roles on women's participation in labor markets in rural Bangladesh. Also, highlighted how traditional gender expectations and limited educational opportunities often restrict women's choices, leading to their engagement in day labor (Sultana, 2010; Sarker et al, 2017).

Furthermore, the study by Rahman and Islam (2013) found that female employment is influenced by a combination of push and pull factors. Kabeer (2012) revealed that social factors play a significant role in women's participation in the labor market, and their decision to work. In Bangladesh society, which is characterized by strong patriarchy, male family members typically have a dominant role in dictating or guiding women's decisions regarding employment. Empowerments experienced by female day laborers both before and after engaging in such activities are limited. It revealed significant improvements in women's decision-making abilities, financial independence, and access to resources after participating in income-generating activities (Rahman et al, 2017; Islam et al, 2014; Nessa et al, 2012). The challenges faced by female day laborers encompass various aspects, including limited employment opportunities, unequal wages, adverse working conditions, and mental health difficulties. Halim and McCarthy (1985). Additionally, a study by Akhter et al. (2017) shed light on the mental health challenges experienced by female informal workers. A research study by Kennedy (2010) revealed that female day laborers, often marginalized by their socio-economic circumstances, encounter compounded challenges in accessing stable employment and fair wages. Another Study by Malhotra et al. (2002) on women's empowerment through labor participation emphasized the transformative potential of employment opportunities in enhancing women's agency, autonomy, and economic empowerment. Similarly, other studies explored the positive impacts of income-generating activities on women's socio-economic well-being, with improved financial stability and increased decision-making power (Khan & Bibi, 2011; Kevany & Huisinigh, 2013).

Rahman & Islam (2013) stated in their study that the experience of developing countries reveals that female labor can play a substantial role in driving high rates of economic growth. Amin (2005) reveals that the rise in female labor force participation in Bangladesh can be attributed to more precise recognition of women's economic activities. Mahmud (2003) explored that expanding women's participation in paid work, particularly in modern sectors, which has a strong association with women's empowerment. Education is considered a crucial factor in empowering women and enabling them to respond to challenges and change their lives (Winters et al, 2023). Additionally, Moklesunnahar (2013) revealed that women's empowerment plays a crucial role in their engagement in economic activities. It serves as a keystone, in developing economic growth, enhancing

community development, and encouraging sustainable progress within societies (Bhoganadam et al, 2014; Ghosh et al, 2021). Despite this, Houth (2023) found that empowering women has numerous benefits, including contributing to social and economic development. Besides, female Day laborers often face challenges in terms of their working conditions and empowerment (Prianto & Mardiyono, 2017; Kennedy, 2010).

The review of literature in this study aims to provide an overview of existing research and scholarly works related to the dimensions of empowerment among female day laborers. While existing literature provides valuable insights into women's empowerment and labor-related issues, there are notable gaps that this study aims to address. For instance, there is very limited research on the levels of empowerment experienced by these laborers and the challenges they face in terms of employment opportunities, wages, working conditions, and mental health. Moreover, there are no specific studies on this topic, which worked and focused on female day laborers and empowerment from rural areas, and backgrounds, also there is no studies have been conducted on this topic within the particular geographical location (Kishoreganj district) which involves female day laborers.

3. Theoretical Framework

Women's empowerment is a complex, multidimensional concept that has often been analyzed using Western feminist theories or economic development models from developed Western contexts. However, applying such Eurocentric paradigms may not be appropriate or sufficient for comprehending the diverse realities and intersecting barriers experienced by disadvantaged women across the developing world. The present study on the economic empowerment pathways and persisting deprivations confronting female day laborers in rural Bangladesh requires contextualized, intersectional perspectives centered on gender, class, and poverty in the Global South. As such, it is underpinned by the Women in Development (WID) approach that emerged in the 1970s from liberal feminist strands to emphasize women's visible, active engagement in development processes as vital for dismantling gender inequities.

WID perspectives prioritize women's economic participation, waged employment, skill-building, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, leadership, and policy involvement as fundamental conduits for enhancing socioeconomic status, independence, self-worth, and household bargaining power in traditionally patriarchal societies. This productivist focus contrasts with Women and Development (WAD) paradigms that spotlight oppressive structural forces or Gender and Development (GAD) models underscoring complex gender relations, identities, and transformations.

Several concepts and dimensions constitute WID approaches for affirming women's development roles. The equity lens stresses equality in access, opportunities, rewards, asset ownership, livelihood security, and social safety nets. The anti-poverty emphasis targets women's income security for fulfilling basic survival needs and escaping destitution, given their immense burdens as primary caregivers. The efficiency pillar concentrates on optimizing women's economic productivity by overcoming constraints, especially in informal, unpaid spheres.

This study applies WID lenses to empirically analyze complex pathways linking economic struggle, uncertain informal occupations, skill acquisition, financial management, decision-making authority, mobility, legal knowledge, political participation, self-perception, and well-being for women navigating poverty

and disempowerment at society's periphery. It elucidates day labor's complex impacts across vital socioeconomic functions, probing the sufficiency and security of fragile resilience strategies shoring up family welfare amid deprivation.

Finally, the WID paradigm's spotlight on women's labor market integration as a conduit for equitable development underpins this timely investigation of marginalized working women's multidimensional empowerment trajectories across economic, social, psychological, and political terrain. The framework guides context-specific, evidence-based analysis of achievements, limitations, and continuing barriers that shape the liberation promised and progress enabled, yet not guaranteed, by income-generating incorporation of poor females on adversarial trajectories in Bangladesh.

4. Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The study focused on Bajitpur Municipality within Bajitpur Upazila, comprising 11 Unions and 178 villages spanning an area of 193.76 square kilometers under Kishoreganj district. Specifically, research was concentrated within Bajitpur municipality, targeting 9 wards as the primary research areas. The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for both qualitative and quantitative data collection. The study area has no accurate frequency of female day laborers, and purposively a total of 137 respondents were included in the study, aged 18 and above who were actively engaged in different day labor activities. In addition, for conducting surveys, participants were selected through the purposive sampling technique as accessible easily at the time of data collection. Yet, this study further used purposive sampling techniques for conducting the case studies for in-depth interviews among the respondents. A pilot test was conducted with a small subgroup of potential participants (15 participants and 02 local guides) to assess the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of the survey instruments and case study procedures. Qualitative data collection involved conducting five (05) in-depth case studies, with semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 25 to 35 minutes. For quantitative data, 137 face-to-face surveys were administered to female day laborers conducted through, using a semi-structured questionnaire. Additionally, during data collection, this study combined drafts to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the responses gathered. In addition, in the data analysis part, for the qualitative data, perceptions from the case studies were sorted using a thematic analysis approach. Besides, the survey data of this study and numerical data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistical data summed up how things were spread out and showed patterns in various aspects. Inferential stats went further, testing ideas and figuring out how strong the links between different factors were helps to understand their significance better. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the research process, ensuring participant confidentiality, informed consent, and ethical treatment of collected data. Several limitations were acknowledged in this study, including the relatively small sample size, lack of funding resources, and limitations in time, which may have impacted the depth, quality, and breadth of the study findings.

5. Findings of the Study

Socio-demographic Information of the Respondents In this study, the socioeconomic conditions of the respondents varied in various characteristics. Table 01 presents vital background details of the respondents (n=137) that summarize multiple socio-demographic characteristics. The table indicates that the

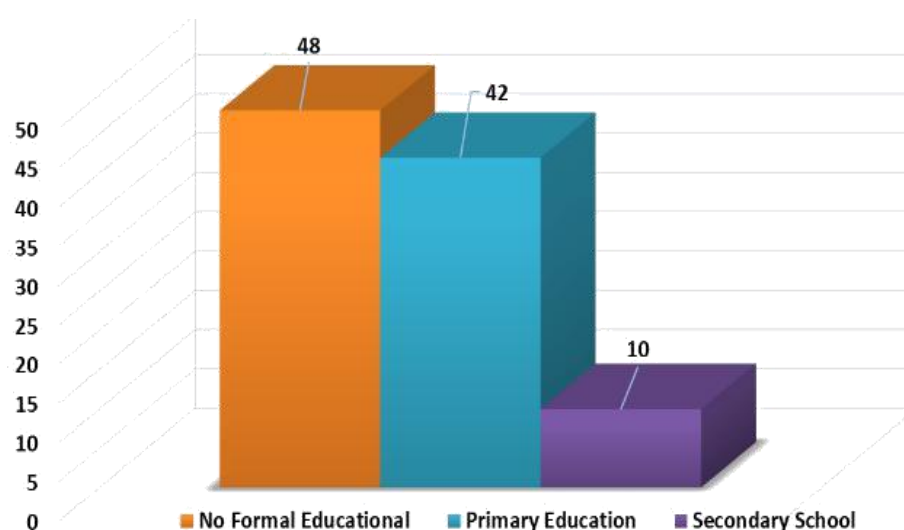
majority of the respondents (41.7%) are between 25-34 years, and more than a quarter of them (32.9%) are aged 45-54 years. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of the respondents (70%) are married while less than a quarter of them (20.5%) are divorced or separated, and 9.5% is widowed. In terms of dependents, more than half the women had 3-4 (59.8%) and 22% had 5 or more dependents. Moreover, 69.3% of them are Muslims, and 30.7% are Hindus showing participation in both key religious groups. Furthermore, an overwhelming 90.5% live in nuclear families rather than joint families, though household sizes were relatively large with 57.7% having 4-6 family members.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (n=137)

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Age | 18-24 | 12 | 8.8 |
| | 25-34 | 57 | 41.7 |
| | 35-44 | 20 | 14.5 |
| | 45-54 | 45 | 32.9 |
| | 55 and above | 3 | 2.1 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Marital Status | Married | 96 | 70.0 |
| | Divorced/Separated | 28 | 20.5 |
| | Widowed | 13 | 9.5 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Religion | Islam | 95 | 69.3 |
| | Hindu | 42 | 30.7 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Number of Dependents | 1-2 | 25 | 18.2 |
| | 3-4 | 82 | 59.8 |
| | 5 or More | 30 | 22.0 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Type of Family | Nuclear | 124 | 90.5 |
| | Extended | 13 | 9.5 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Family Members | Less than < 04 | 42 | 30.6 |
| | 04-06 | 79 | 57.7 |
| | More than > 07 | 16 | 11.7 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Figure 01 presents a wide overview of the educational qualifications. The majority (48.0%) of the respondents has no formal educational background, and others have only primary education (42.0%), one-tenth of them (10.0%) have completed secondary schooling.



Source: Field Survey, 2023

Fig 1: Educational Qualifications of the Respondents (n=137)

Table 02 reveals that the majority of respondents (65.7%) are engaged in labor as soil-digging workers, while others are engaged in household work (11.7%) and brick kiln labor (10.2%). Additionally, a smaller percentage of respondents are involved in agriculture (4.4%), farming (5.8%), and road repairing/making/cleaning (2.2%).

Table 2: Current Occupation of the Respondents (n=137)

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Current Occupation | Agriculture | 6 | 4.4 |
| | Farming | 8 | 5.8 |
| | Household Work | 16 | 11.7 |
| | Road repairing/making/cleaning | 3 | 2.2 |
| | Brick Kiln | 14 | 10.2 |
| | Soil-digging | 90 | 65.7 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 03 shows that the majority of respondents (63.5%) earn a daily income between 300-500 BDT. Most (50.3%) spend 500-1000 BDT per day on meeting household needs. A large proportion, nearly all of them (95%) earn less than BDT. Only a few (5.1%) earn between 500-1000 BDT per day and none of them earn above that range.

Table 3: Daily Income and the Expenditure of the Respondents (n=137)

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| Daily Income (BDT) | Less than <300 | 43 | 31.4 |
| | 300-500 | 87 | 63.5 |
| | 500-1000 | 7 | 5.1 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Daily Expenditures | 300-500 | 53 | 38.7 |
| | 500-1000 | 69 | 50.3 |
| | 1000-1500 | 15 | 11.0 |

| | | | |
|-------|-------|-----|-----|
| (BDT) | | | |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Moreover, Table 04 explores, the majority of respondents (73.3%) own their homes, while 17.4% live in rented accommodations. Again, a vast proportion (84%) does not possess any land or productive assets indicating income insecurity. Most respondents (60.5%) state being satisfied with prevailing living conditions but 22.1% are dissatisfied. For a small proportion of the respondents (just 16%), ownership of land/property is very low depriving them of productive resources for socio-economic mobility.

Table 4: Residence and Other Information of the Respondents (n=137)

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| Residence | Own | 100 | 73.3 |
| | Rent | 24 | 17.4 |
| | Others | 13 | 9.3 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Have Own Land/Property | Yes | 22 | 16.0 |
| | No | 115 | 84.0 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| | | | |
| Satisfaction with Living Conditions | Very Satisfied | 10 | 7.2 |
| | Satisfied | 83 | 60.5 |
| | Neutral | 14 | 10.2 |
| | Dissatisfied | 30 | 22.1 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Factors and Scenarios of the Day Laborer Engagement

In understanding the engagement patterns of female day laborers in rural areas of Kishoreganj District, the findings reveal, that the majority of participants engage in day labor for 4-7 days per week. Besides, many factors influence female day laborers to engage in this type of labor or income-based learning process. Table 05 explores that economic necessity stands out as the leading influence, with more than half of the respondents (65%) mentioning financial hardship and necessity as their main motivator or influencing factor. Over one-fourth (24%) also point to family obligations and responsibilities as a key reason. Very few attribute their day labor engagement to a lack of other jobs (3.6%), peer influence (1.4%), or personal desire for independence (6%).

Table 5: Factors Influencing Decision to Engage in Day Labor Activities (n=137)

| Factors | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--|-----------|----------------|
| Economic necessity | 89 | 65.0 |
| Lack of other Employment opportunities | 5 | 3.6 |
| Family responsibilities | 33 | 24.0 |
| Peer influence | 2 | 1.4 |

| | | |
|-------------------------|-----|-----|
| Desire for independence | 8 | 6.0 |
| Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Case 01

Amina (pseudonym), a 32-year-old woman residing in a rural area at Bajitpur Municipality, Kishoreganj, found herself pushed to the world of day labor due to compelling economic situations. With a husband unable to secure stable employment and three young children to care for, the family struggled to make ends meet. Her primary reason for engaging in day labor was the dire economic need. The unbalanced income from her husband's occasional work wasn't enough to sustain their family. Thus, she took up day labor to ensure they could afford basic necessities and provide for their children's education. She revealed, "I faced huge pressure to fulfill my responsibilities as a mother and wife. With limited income Sources, I saw day labor as a way to contribute financially to my family's needs while managing my household duties."

Despite the physical and emotional toll, her decision to engage in day labor significantly increased the family income. It helped cover essential expenses and provided a sense of fulfillment in contributing to her family's welfare. However, the struggle to balance work and family responsibilities remained a continuous challenge for her.

Case 02

Riya (pseudonym), a 26-year-old woman in a rural area of Kishoreganj, intentionally chose day labor as a means to establish her independence. Having witnessed societal norms limit women's opportunities, she aimed to break free from traditional roles. Her motivation stemmed from her desire to be independent and self-sufficient. She refused to be confined to stereotypical gender roles and sought financial autonomy by engaging in day labor. Riya encountered a scarcity of jobs suitable for her qualifications and ambitions. Day labor emerged as a practical option in the absence of better employment prospects. She added, "My decision to engage in day labor empowered me by providing financial autonomy and a sense of self-reliance. I found fulfillment in being able to support myself financially while defying societal expectations."

Comparison of Empowerment Levels of the Respondents before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

This study reveals a wide-ranging set of indicators that attempts to capture changes in female day laborers' empowerment across economic, social, and political dimensions by measuring their material welfare, freedom, domestic influence, independence, mobility, legal protections, civic participation, household decision-making power, self-efficacy, and political engagement before and after entering the informal labor sector.

Buying Abilities of Products/Services Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Table 06 shows that the percentage of women able to independently purchase products or services increased dramatically, rising from just 21.2% before day labor work to 68.7% after participating in day labor activities. This indicates that engagement in day labor greatly expanded the purchasing power of women and control over household finances.

Table 6: Respondent's Ability to Buy Products/Services Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Empowerment Indicator | | Before Engagement | | After Engagement | |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|
| Ability to Buy Products/Services | | Frequency | Percentage (%) | | Frequency |
| | Yes | 29 | 21.2 | Yes | 94 |
| | No | 108 | 78.8 | No | 43 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 | Total | 137 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Ability/Freedom of Speech in Family before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Freedom of speech is very pivotal for all individuals but sometimes female in Bangladesh is less considered in this context of freedom in their family. Table 07 explores notable relative gains in freedom - the share of women able to report freely voicing opinions inside the family grew from 19% pre-labor participation to over one-third post-participation at 37.3%. However, over 60% still lacked full freedom of speech post-labor participation, highlighting the deep entrenchment of norms silencing the voices of women.

Table 7: Respondent's Ability/Freedom of Speech in Family Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Empowerment Indicator | | Before Engagement | | After Engagement | |
|---------------------------|-------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|
| Ability/Freedom of Speech | | Frequency | Percentage (%) | | Frequency |
| | Yes | 26 | 19 | Yes | 51 |
| | No | 111 | 81.0 | No | 86 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 | Total | 137 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Financial Independence Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Financial independence is very significant for the empowerment of women, as they are struggling in life to progress their life and own self. Table 08 focuses on women's financial independence and control over personal livelihood decisions pre- and post-participation in the informal day labor sector. Only 8.7% pre-labor to near-universal financial independence at 94.8% post-labor participation, signifying engagement in day labor served as financial freedom for rural women.

Table 8: Respondent's Financial Independence Before and Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Empowerment Indicator | | Before Engagement | | After Engagement | |
|------------------------|-------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|
| Financial Independence | | Frequency | Percentage (%) | | Frequency |
| | Yes | 12 | 8.7 | Yes | 130 |
| | No | 125 | 91.2 | No | 7 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 | Total | 137 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Case 03

Roni Begum (pseudonym), a 47-year-old woman residing in a remote village in Kishoreganj District, struggled her entire life in poverty, hardship, and financial dependence. Married at a young age, she was confined to household chores while her husband worked as a subsistence farmer. With meager earnings and 5 children to feed, as the years went by, she saw her family slip deeper into debt and poverty. She lacked any income or assets in her name while continuously depending on her husband's unstable wages merely to survive. When crops failed for three straight seasons due to floods, her husband fell severely ill as stress and hunger took their toll. "As our debts mounted, we would often go days without a proper meal. We were completely desperate and helpless. But as a mother, I decided I had to take control of our lives," shares Roni. Despite no education or prior work experience, Roni made the bold decision to enter the informal labor workforce as a construction helper earning daily wages. "Initially, my in-laws discouraged me stating it was inappropriate for women to take up such demanding jobs. But I persisted, traveling miles every dawn to lift cement bags and fetch supplies at construction sites," she explains. Today, after 5 years of labor, she has not only achieved financial stability for her family but also become self-reliant with savings and assets solely in her name. "For the first time in my life, I have control of my earnings. My labor gives me independence and power within the household to decide our future," she asserts. From tuition for her daughters to medicine for her husband, she now finances most household needs independently. She says, "Poverty compelled me to work, but now empowerment inspires me every morning to carry on despite the hardship."

Freedom of Movement before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Freedom of mobility is crucial for the overall development and empowerment of women in any country and society. Table 09 explores changes in Kishoreganj women's day laborers' freedom of movement throughout public spaces before versus after participating in the informal labor sector. Freedom of movement reflects women's independence and empowerment. The percentage of women able to travel alone beyond the home grew noticeably from 40.1% pre-labor to over three-fourths at 76.6% post-labor engagement.

Table 9: Respondent's Freedom of Movement Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Empowerment Indicator | Before Engagement | | After Engagement | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage (%) | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
| Freedom of Movement | Yes | 55 40.1 | Yes | 105 76.6 |
| | No | 82 59.9 | No | 32 23.4 |
| | Total | 137 100 | Total | 137 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Case 04

Salma Khatun (pseudonym), a 33-year-old resident of rural Kishoreganj, faced severe restrictions on her mobility throughout her youth as patriarchal

norms severely discouraged women from offering outdoors alone. Confined within household walls, she felt increasingly silent and isolated missing out on community events, healthcare access, and economic opportunities. The restriction on Salma's mobility severely handicapped her growth and autonomy. She shares, "My life just passed me by at home. I desperately yearned for independence." When crops failed on their small farm, her family plunged into further poverty. To provide vital income amid her husband's failing health, she convinced her conservative in-laws to allow her to engage in daily agricultural wage. "Those first steps outdoors to the fields alone gave me a profound sense of freedom and accomplishment. My economic role has transformed social perceptions, enabling me access and acceptance", Salma explains. Today, after years of hardworking labor, she traverses various public spaces freely as an income earner. She notes, "My labor-endowed mobility has opened up vast worlds of opportunity I could never have imagined if society restricted me within the home." Economic participation served as her passport to independence and empowerment.

Legal Rights and Protections before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Day laborers, including women working in domestic industries, often face limited legal rights and protections. Legal empowerment constitutes an important protection against exploitation. The data shown in Table 10, a notable rise from less than half at 43.7% pre-labor participation to over two-thirds post-participation at 68.6% of women understanding and being able to act on legal rights.

Table 10: Respondent's Legal Rights and Protections Before and Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Baseline (n = 137) | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Empowerment Indicator | | Before Engagement | | After Engagement | | |
| Legal Rights and Protections | | Frequency | Percentage (%) | | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
| | Yes | 60 | 43.7 | Yes | 94 | 68.6 |
| | No | 77 | 56.2 | No | 43 | 31.4 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Participation in Decision-making Processes Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Female participation in decision-making processes has been recognized as an important issue. Women are increasingly involved in everyday financial and other related decisions within the family. Table 11 explores a massive shift, virtually no women pre-labor at 18.2% to over 90% post-labor participation reported holding influence in household decision-making processes.

Table 11: Respondent's Participation in Decision-making Processes Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Enter Engaging as a Day Laborer (n= 107) | | | | | | |
|--|-----|-------------------|-----------|------------------|-----|-----------|
| Empowerment Indicator | | Before Engagement | | After Engagement | | |
| | | | Frequency | Percentage (%) | | Frequency |
| Participation in Decision-making Processes | Yes | 25 | 18.2 | Yes | 124 | 90.5 |
| | No | 112 | 81.8 | No | 13 | 9.5 |

| | | | | | | |
|--|-------|-----|-----|-------|-----|-----|
| | Total | 137 | 100 | Total | 137 | 100 |
|--|-------|-----|-----|-------|-----|-----|

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Household Decision-making Power Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Women's decision-making in household matters varies depending on factors such as age, education, marital status, marriage duration, and family structure. Table 12 reveals a profoundly empowering impact, the percentage of women exercising real binding authority in household decisions skyrocketed from an abysmal 12.4% pre-labor participation to over three-fourths at 78.8% post-participation. This indicates engagement in the informal economy served as a game-changing force for strengthening genuine decision-making authority for many rural women.

Table 12: Respondent's Household Decision-making Power Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Empowerment Indicator | Before Engagement | | | After Engagement | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|------------------|-----------|----------------|
| | | Frequency | Percentage (%) | | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
| Household Decision-making Power | Yes | 17 | 12.4 | Yes | 108 | 78.8 |
| | No | 120 | 87.6 | No | 29 | 21.2 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Case 05

Pori Khatun (Pseudonym), a 28-year-old resident of a village of Bajitpur municipality, Kishoreganj, always silently obeyed her husband's directives throughout 5 years of marriage. She depended fully on his wages as a farmhand. When Pori's husband was injured, their already tenuous earnings plummeted further. She said, "We were on the brink of destitution with a toddler to feed. Though daunting, I knew taking up work was the sole possibility for our family's survival." Despite no prior experience, she steps up as the breadwinner, toiling long hours hauling bricks at nearby construction sites. "Initially, my days involved backbreaking labor under the scorching sun. But I soon parlayed my grit into skilled masonry work," Pori remarks. The economic shift catalyzed a change within the household power dynamic. "For the first time, I had a true influence on how household finances were managed given my crucial earning role. My husband began seeking my input on major expenses." Today she proudly exercises full domestic authority, from budgeting decisions to her daughter's education. Pori observes, "My labor transformed me from voiceless to the breadwinner. Although female employment out of necessity rather than choice reflects limited options, being thrust into economic responsibility redefined my family position."

Self-worth and Self-efficacy before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Self-worth and self-efficacy of the female day laborers are an essential part of identifying the empowerment. Self-worth and confidence represent important psychological pillars of empowerment. Table 13 illuminates a dramatic flow of women's self-worth and confidence levels leaped immensely from just one-quarter at 24% before engagement to over 90% demonstrating self-assuredness after engagement. This signs engagement in income-generating labor is important for boosting previously lacking self-confidence.

Table 13: Respondent's Self-worth and Self-efficacy before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Empowerment Indicator | Before Engagement | | After Engagement | |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | Frequency Percentage (%) | | Frequency Percentage (%) |
| Self-worth and Self-efficacy | Yes | 33 24.0 | Yes | 124 90.5 |
| | No | 104 76.0 | No | 13 9.5 |
| | Total | 137 100 | Total | 137 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Political Participation Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer

Political participation in female day labor is lagging in many settings and activities. Public political participation constitutes a vital axis of socio-political empowerment.

Table 14 shows the percentage of women actively participating politically increased from 20% pre-labor to 45.2% post-labor. However, over half of women remained politically inactive post-labor, underscoring significant remaining barriers to civic participation.

Table 14: Respondent's Political Participation Before and After Engaging as a Day Laborer (n=137)

| Empowerment Indicator | Before Engagement | | After Engagement | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | Frequency Percentage (%) | | Frequency Percentage (%) |
| Political Participation | Yes | 27 20 | Yes | 62 45.2 |
| | No | 110 80.0 | No | 75 54.8 |
| | Total | 137 100 | Total | 137 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Impact of Day Laborer Activities and Challenges Faced by the Respondents

Female day laborers face a variety of challenges and issues in their work, including difficulties in obtaining fair pay, exposure to hazards at job sites, and continuing insults and exploitations. Entering the informal labor market has positively affected the well-being, lifestyles, and societal respect of many poor women, who facing challenges from harassment to economic deprivation.

Impact of Day Laborer Activities on the Respondents

The activities of female day laborers have a positive impact on their lives by providing them with opportunities for employment and income. These opportunities allow them to earn income and support their households, with many of them being the primary income earners for their families. Overall, the activities of female day laborers contribute positively to their economic empowerment and livelihoods, giving them opportunities for work and income in various sectors. For instance, in Table 15 the data reveals that entering day labor markets has positively impacted the respondents. In addition, 70% report overall life quality improvements, and most of them (80%) confirm better lifestyles from increased incomes. Moreover,

when exploring societal support, a notable percentage of the respondents (58.3%) reported an increase in social status and support.

Table 15: Impacts on Lifestyle and Societal Support after Engaging Day Labor Activities (n=137)

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|----------------|
| Living Standard and Life Style | Improved | 110 | 80 |
| | Stayed the Same | 27 | 20 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Social Status and Support | Improved | 80 | 58.3 |
| | Stayed the Same | 54 | 39.4 |
| | Decreased | 3 | 2.3 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

There lies a positive association between day labor involvement and the well-being of the respondents. Table 16 shows that impressively, a significant majority (70.0%) of the respondents, report a positive effect resulting from their involvement in day labor, and others (30%) report no change or impact.

Table 16: Impact on Overall Well-being and Quality of Life after engaging Day Labor Activities (n=137)

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Impact on the Overall Well-being and Quality of Life | Positively | 97 | 70.0 |
| | No Noticeable Impact/No Change | 40 | 30.0 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 17 outlines that a significant proportion of respondents described an increase in income (46.6%). Additionally, a considerable portion approved experiencing improved self-esteem and raised social status (15.4%). Especially, a subset highlighted the positive impacts on their physical and mental well-being (10.3%). Equally noteworthy is the recognition of expanded societal value (19%) attributed to their roles.

Table 17: Positive effects/Improvements in Life due to Engaging in Day Labor Activities (n=137)

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Positive effects/Improvements | Increased income | 64 | 46.6 |
| | Improved self-esteem and status | 21 | 15.4 |
| | Better Physical and mental health | 14 | 10.3 |
| | Expanded Societal Value | 26 | 19.0 |
| | Others | 12 | 8.7 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Challenges and Barriers Faced by the Respondents Women day laborers face many challenges and barriers in their daily lives and the working environment.

Such as social stigma, discrimination, harassment, and so on. Table 18 shows that respondents with 68.7% face social stigma and 72.7% experience harassment.

Table 18: Social Stigma and Gender-based Discrimination/ Harassment Faced by the Respondents (n=137)

| Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------------|------------|-----------|----------------|
| Faced Social Stigma | Yes | 94 | 68.7 |
| | No | 43 | 31.3 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |
| Faced Discrimination or Harassment | Yes | 100 | 72.7 |
| | No | 37 | 27.3 |
| | Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

However economic insufficiencies remain the largest challenge for over one-third (37.3%) unable to escape financial instability through insecure day wages amid gender inequalities, as revealed in Table 19. Another proportion of them (8%) pointed to limited access to wages or payment as primary barriers to their well-being. Additionally, 6.7% lack basic amenities, 10.6% suffer unhealthy living conditions due to poverty, and 17.3% experience work-family responsibility imbalances from active working hours. Healthcare is another major limitation, 8.1% report insufficient maternal support and 8.6% indicate inadequate access to clean, safe work environments that support their physical health needs.

Table 19: Major Challenges Faced as a Female Day Laborer in Life (n=137)

| Challenges | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--|-----------|----------------|
| Economic Insufficiency | 5 | 37.3 |
| Limited Access to Wages/Payment | 11 | 8.0 |
| Lack of Access to Basic Amenities | 09 | 6.7 |
| Unhealthy Living Condition | 14 | 10.6 |
| Insufficient Healthcare and Maternal Support | 11 | 8.1 |
| Inadequate Access to Clean and Safe Working Environments | 12 | 8.6 |
| Imbalance of Work with Family's Responsibilities | 24 | 17.3 |
| Others | 05 | 3.4 |
| Total | 137 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Overall, this study reveals how penetrating informal sector employment to earn small wages enables limited, conditional empowerment for needy women. The study shows participation strengthened self-efficacy, earnings, and mobility for some women. However, precarity persists among low assets and gender discrimination. Most continue battling financial instability, harassment, health limitations, and family struggles despite hard working days. Still, many raise hopes for better futures, depending on structures enabling skill development, business ownership, and workplace equity to unlock their fullest potential.

6. Analysis and Discussion

This study explores the complex realities of females participating in informal manual labor work in rural Bangladesh. The earnings deficits deprive 95% of incomes above 500 BDT daily amid absent assets for 84% evidence of deep absolute poverty. This makes a parallel relation with a national survey analysis

highlighting that 63% of female informal workers in Bangladesh subsisting below minimum livable incomes, are trapped in financial hardship (Raihan, 2021). Alarming, 50.3% spent over 20% of fragile wages on daily household needs, exceeding sustainability thresholds.

The study reveals absolute economic necessity as the major factor compelling over 65% of women to engage in difficult physical labor for survival. This aligns with evidence on poverty and income instability in rural households forcing marginalized women to seek any work available (Khatun et al., 2014). Family obligations and responsibilities also emerged as a motivator for nearly one-fourth (24%). On the other hand, 37.3% highlighted economic deprivation as the largest barrier, supporting studies on high poverty trapping female informal day workers in uncertainty (Raihan, 2021). The findings indicate that day labor participation has advanced empowerment across some realms like financial independence, social mobility, and self-efficacy. Over 60% saved more income, 30% gained household decision-making power, and 75% reported heightened self-worth. In this way, the findings of the study indicate significant improvements in areas of female empowerment in various sectors such as financial independence, household decision-making authority, and self-efficacy after engaging in day labor activities. This proves influences on how income control can enable marginalized women's agency and choice (Kabeer, 2012). The findings focus on the complex, context-specific pathways through which labor force access delivers uneven empowerment outcomes for disadvantaged females (Sudarshan & Bhattacharya, 2009). On empowerment, the discussion summarizes mixed advances post-participation, while significant gains materialized across financial independence, household authority, and self-efficacy domains, over one-third still battle income instability amid pervasive discrimination and harassment. While the findings revealed massive post-entry jumps in financial independence (8.7% to 94.8%) and household decision power (12.4% to 78.8%), over one-third still report income volatility. Besides, 68.7% face social stigma and 72.7% harassment, signaling continuing disempowerment despite modest legal knowledge gains (43.7% to 68.6%). This aligns with evidence that reduced societal value assigned to women's informal work spreads inequities (Nisak & Sugiharti, 2020; Crain, 1995). The multifaceted vulnerabilities confronting marginalized working women in the informal sector (UNWomen, 2022; Addati et al., 2018). In addition, the activities of female day laborers have a positive impact on their lives, contributing to their economic empowerment and livelihoods. The data shows that entering day labor markets has positively impacted the general well-being and living standards of most poor women. However, this study highlights how labor force inclusion establishes necessary steps but requires legal guarantees, financed programs, asset building, and social norm change alongside work opportunity expansion (Klugman et al., 2014).

From socio-demographic conditions to the determinants of engagement, empowerment levels before and after day labor, and the impacts and challenges encountered, the study paints a vivid picture of their lives. While engagement in day labor has provided a pathway to economic opportunities for these women, there is a critical need for general interventions addressing socioeconomic disparities, gender-based discrimination, and inadequate access to essential services. Empowerment programs, skill development initiatives, better access to healthcare, and childcare facilities, and efforts to combat social stigma and

harassment are crucial in enhancing the well-being and empowerment of female day laborers in rural Bangladesh.

7. Conclusion

This comprehensive study was conducted to determine whether female laborers living in rural areas of the Kishoreganj district of Bangladesh experience empowerment by engaging in daily labor works, finally, this study found that female day laborers are empowered as compared to the past by being employed as day laborers. Besides, this study highlights the economic necessity and family care responsibilities that compel women into insecure and physically demanding day labor, given the limited social protection policies for the poor. While day labor participation enabled some positive gains in income, confidence, mobility, and domestic decision-making, most women still face multidimensional adversities, including income instability, violence, unpaid burdens, stigma, and harassment. The findings underscore that labor force inclusion is a necessary but insufficient condition for genuinely expanding capabilities and transforming marginalization for poor women. Coordinated legal, economic, and infrastructural responses are needed, including work conditions monitoring, gender-sensitive financial policies, aligning labor procedures, government accountability, civil society participation, and private sector responsibility within an organized ecosystem supporting needy women's empowerment across all spheres of life and labor. Effective recommendations based on the findings include:

*Implementing portable social protection schemes,
Expanding access to microfinance and business training,
Promoting community-based social entrepreneurship models,
Enforcing minimum wage and workplace safety regulations,
Developing female-friendly infrastructure,
Launching sensitization drives challenging stereotypes,
Strengthening grassroots collective action, and
Mainstreaming gender indicators in local development planning grounded
in women's self-identified needs and lived realities.*

The research further recommends the need for additional investigations into the activities and empowerment of female day laborers in this context for a more thorough analysis.

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