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In the Shadows of Fields: Uncovering the Nexus of Modern Slavery in Agricultural Societies

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses the persistent issue of exploitation, analysing its deep-rooted causes beyond economic factors and its integration into the sociocultural fabric of societies. Focusing on the farming communities of Pakistan, an agricultural-based developing country, the research employs an empirical approach. It reveals that modern slavery is perpetuated by a complex interplay of social norms, cultural values, political dynamics, power imbalances, and the exploitation of religious beliefs, all of which reinforce cycles of dependency and social control. These insights underscore the critical need for evidence-based interventions, enabling policymakers and sustainable development strategists to craft targeted policies and community-based initiatives for empowering marginalised communities.

1 | Introduction

Contemporary research on labour exploitation has predominantly investigated the structural mechanisms through which coercive labour relations are produced and maintained over time. Among these, tenancy and debt servitude in developing agricultural societies are frequently identified as enduring institutional arrangements that reproduce social domination, curtail labour agency, and entrench economic dependency (Brandão et al. 2024; Dowlah 2021; Julia and Davidson 2022; Patterson 2024). These mechanisms function through long-term financial obligations and unequal access to land, credit, and capital, thereby restricting smallholders' and rural labourers' socio-economic mobility while reinforcing asymmetrical power relations (Dobeson and Kohl 2024; Pascoe 2022; Patterson 2024). Exploitative tenancy, for instance, is characterised by inequitable crop-sharing agreements and high-interest lending practices that bind tenants to landowners, as observed in parts of Southeast Asia and Africa (Derrick 2022; Richardson 2023; Wright 2023). Debt bondage structured through deceptive employment contracts and structural indebtedness has similarly entrenched labour exploitation in rural agricultural sectors across South Asia and South and Latin America (Bansal et al. 2023; Hobbs 2024). In South Asia, East and West Africa, intergenerational tenancy obligations have compelled farming communities to continue labouring under exploitative conditions, institutionalising dependency across family lines (Cook 2024; Kara 2014; Natarajan et al. 2021; Samaddar 2025).

However, sociocultural practices, particularly in developing countries also play critical roles in perpetuating exploitation. These practices based on norms, values and traditions are frequently normalised, with their detrimental effects largely ignored (Han et al. 2024; LeBaron et al. 2021; Mehmood et al. 2023). Religion is also a significant part of sociocultural practices (Larsen 2013) that plays a central role in shaping social order in traditional societies and is practised as a tool to influence the slavery phenomenon (Bremen 2019; Ives and Kidwell 2019; Kara 2014; Patterson 2018). Therefore, the intersection of society, culture, and religion underscores the

complex dynamics of human values, economic motivations, and social frameworks within societies (Bonnell and Hunt 2023).

The sensitive nature of these intricacies poses significant challenges for obtaining reliable data on how these practices perpetuate sustain exploitation and for developing effective practical solutions (Bodendorf et al. 2023; Rašković 2024). The lack of reliable data maintains the powers of the status quo, increases the vulnerability of marginalised communities, and delays sustainable actions (Nebel 2015). These systems of exploitations could also have profound implications for the socio-psychological well-being of the labour force, particularly among younger demographics, leading to emotional distress and social disconnection (Greenland and Steinmetz 2019; Patterson 2019; Szablewska and Kubacki 2023). Understanding the deep-rooted influence of cultural and religious factors in perpetuating this issue is an urgent need in the contemporary world.

In South Asian societies, those are mainly agriculturally based; social stratification and discrimination based on social hierarchies, cultural practices and religious influences are the major and distinct factors that considerably affect marginalised smallholder farming communities (Breman 2019; Kara 2014). Social hierarchies, for instance, based on caste, religion, feudalism, ethnicity, wealth and gender play a significant role in determining their ability to access essential resources, including social capital (Bapuji and Chrispal 2020; Samaddar, 2025). The influence of these underlying factors consistently contributes to the exploitation of marginalised communities, reinforces the nexus of slavery practices, and necessitates thorough investigation (Breman 2019; Han et al. 2022; LeBaron et al. 2021). To investigate these factors, this study focuses on the agricultural industry of Pakistan.

Almost 70% of Pakistan's population is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture. Beyond its economic contributions, agriculture forms the foundation of social cohesion, fostering interdependence and community identity. Most Pakistani smallholders operate on small-scale farms (less than 10 acres), which serve as their families' sole income source. These smallholders predominantly depend on culturally rooted traditional farming practices. Due to their social settings and cultural practices, farmers mainly rely on local brokers and wholesalers for input financing for their crops because they are the only available options for them, who then purchase export-quality produce at local rates (Khan et al. 2024; Rana et al. 2023). Smallholders are socioeconomically bound to sell their products to them to repay their loans and high interest rates for seeds, pesticides and fertilisers (Hassan et al. 2021). By examining these intricate nexuses of sociocultural dynamics, the study seeks,

To uncover the sociocultural practices sustaining exploitation in Pakistan's agricultural sector.

This research makes significant sociological contributions. Firstly, this study joins the recent debate on modern slavery challenges by examining the role of sociocultural dynamics, offering a deeper understanding of its impact on societies, their business activities and agricultural operations. This study also addresses calls from scholars to explore the context-specific challenges of modern slavery; it also identifies its general drivers in agricultural-based South Asian communities, which share similar sociocultural practices to those in Pakistan. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first ethnographic study to comprehensively investigate modern slavery challenges embedded in sociocultural and religious practices of societies living with farming communities. This investigation provides a practical and policy-oriented framework, offering guidance for developing robust policies to address these issues in businesses and societies, particularly in remote and vulnerable communities where such challenges have yet to be adequately explored and addressed.

2 | Conceptual Framework

We applied the structuration theory by Anthony Giddens (1984), which explains how human actions and societal structures are deeply interconnected. It emphasises the duality of structure, that is, how societal norms, institutions and power structures shape individual behaviours and how those behaviours reinforce or reshape the social structures (Turner 2002). From a structuration perspective, the interrelation between cultural and religious norms and power asymmetries becomes critical to understanding the persistence of exploitative practices (Galloway and Thacker 2013). In rural Pakistan, cultural and religious ideologies serve as structural rules that legitimise exploitation. This legitimisation not only normalises such practices but also integrates them into the moral consciousness of society, rendering structural change exceptionally challenging (Hammond 2022).

In Pakistan, religious leaders also act as powerful agents within its social structures, reproducing narratives that sanctify exploitative labour practices. By framing these arrangements as culturally and religiously sanctioned, they create moral and symbolic barriers that inhibit individual or collective resistance, thereby perpetuating the status quo (Beaman 2013). Through the structuration lens, these practices are not merely the result of historical inertia but are actively sustained through the interaction of agency and structure, where individuals and institutions continuously shape and are shaped by these exploitative norms. By conceptualising a structuration framework, we investigate how exploitative labour practices are maintained within a nexus of interdependent social, cultural, and economic structures.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Data Collection

We adopted an interpretive phenomenological approach, emphasising that 'knowledge and understanding are socially constructed' (Eatough and Smith 2017). This approach was chosen to explore the systemic nature of exploitation, capturing the lived experiences and nuanced social dynamics that might be overlooked by positivist or reductionist methodologies (Larkin et al. 2006). We employed dialogue methods to gather and integrate findings, a process particularly well-suited for fostering collaborative insights into socially complex phenomena. In

research integration, dialogue focuses on a shared research question and aims to enable the formation of a combined judgement among participants (McDonald et al. 2009, 19). The probing techniques complemented our dialogue process. This approach allowed us to co-construct knowledge with participants, reflecting our study's interpretive and relational ethos.

We started with a brief piloting exercise involving farmer communities, educating them about the study's purpose and building trust and confidence.[1] Following the pilot phase, participant observation with diverse farming communities[2] was carried out in multiple phases using the convenient sampling technique. The data was collected within the natural settings of farming communities (See Figure 1), ensuring that the research captured authentic interactions. Primarily, we lived with the smallholders[3] and then large-scale landlords[4] who were also wholesalers in the food markets. Immersing in the farming communities provided a profound understanding of the dynamic interactions between agricultural activities and local cultural beliefs, allowing for the exploration of intricate socio-economic and religious factors shaping farming communities' livelihoods.

After participant observations, $n = 12$ formal focus group discussions were conducted, each lasting 3–4 h. In group discussions, the inclusion of female researchers was methodologically grounded in the demographic composition of the study area (Lee 1993; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2011), where most farmers were women. This strategy encouraged participation from female farmers who might otherwise have been unable to contribute due to sociocultural constraints. Further support was provided by the involvement of local key informants' families, which facilitated trust and improved access to the farming communities, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives was captured. As a result, this approach enhanced the reliability and depth of the data, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of female farmers. Multiple informal interactions with the wholesalers of the local food markets, religious scholars and various big landlords[5] were also conducted to understand Pakistan's centuries-old exploitative yet accepted practices in agriculture. We also met the officials of non-government organisations and local government representatives to discuss the prevalence of socio-cultural practices within agriculture. $N = 9$ life history interviews followed the entire data collection process, each lasting 2–3 h, with elders from diverse farming communities. Life histories offer a way to map multiple perspectives on actual sociocultural research contexts, corresponding with different co-existing and competing points of view of respondents in the same culture or society (Bourdieu 1999). Due to sociocultural constraints, we were only allowed to take research notes.

3.2 | Data Analysis

The research notes were translated into Urdu and then English. The relevant data was meticulously quoted, with the respondents' intonations systematically annotated using bracketing techniques. Bracketing involves a phenomenological description of respondents' subjective experiences and expressions (Yin 2015, 70). By incorporating respondents' direct quotes and expressive narratives (Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs 2020), this method allowed their authentic voices to emerge free of external influence, enhancing the credibility of the analysis (Chan et al. 2013). NVivo software was used to codify the data. The research team followed the three coding steps defined by Gioia et al. (2013) (See Figure 2). In the first step, each of the researchers independently read the translated notes and conducted open coding to identify the key contexts and activities of the research. The open codes were then collectively compared, discussed, and confirmed. In the second step, building further

FIGURE 1 | Illustrates the research dialogue within its natural farming communities' settings.

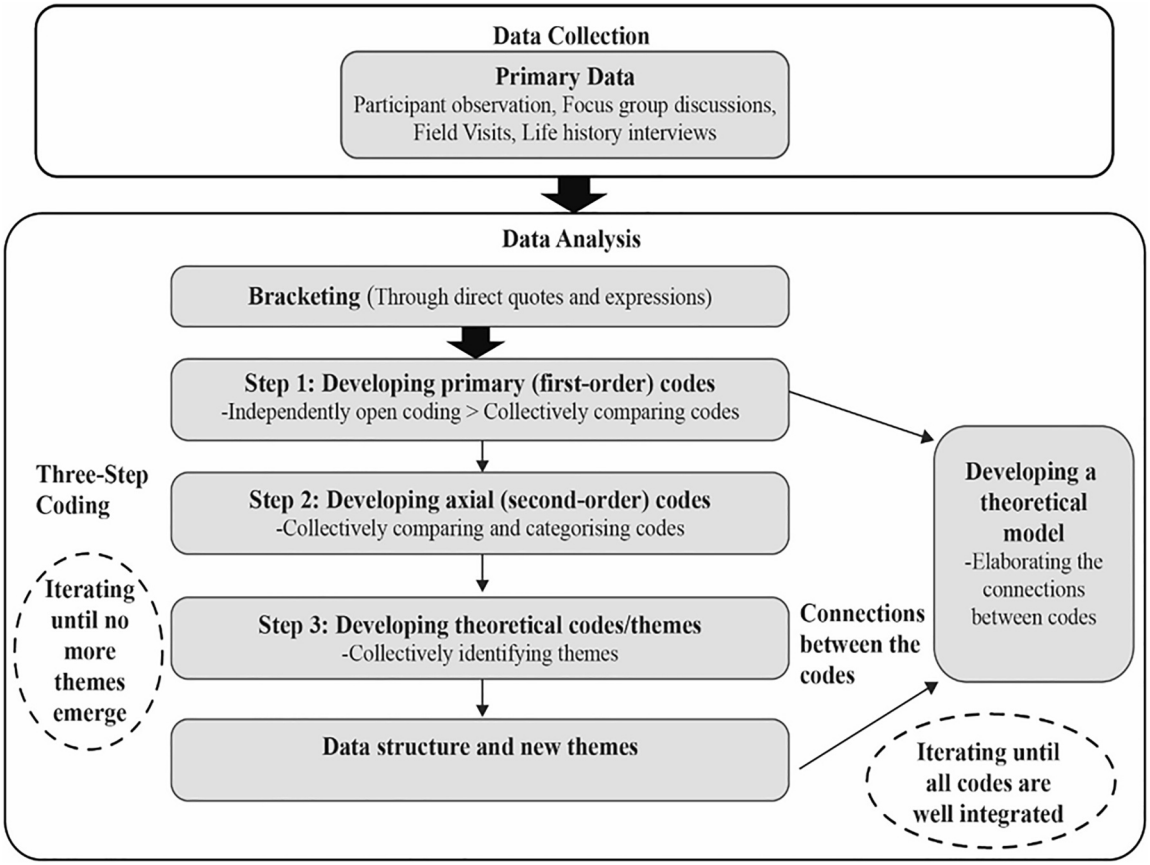

FIGURE 2 | Highlights the coding and analysis process.

upon the primary codes, all the researchers worked together to generate axial codes by comparing similarities and differences. Then, themes were generated, and this phase involved thoroughly examining respondents' viewpoints and grounded realities in the datasets to determine the substance and significance of the research phenomenon, ensuring consistency between observations, group discussions, life histories, and interactive sessions with multiple groups (Yin 2015). It was confirmed at this point that no new themes were emerging.

Primarily, grounded themes were selected as the analytical method for the study, allowing for structured analysis within a research context to gain novel insight (Sheikhattar et al. 2022). The suitability of the thematic analysis extends to any research philosophy, provided that complementary processes are followed (Cotta et al. 2023). Figure 3 highlights how major theoretical themes were generated through codes. The diverse research team were constantly engaged in collaborative discussions during the analysis process. This diversity fostered richer discussions and promoted reflexivity (Finlay and Gough 2008). Guided by comprehensive reviews and various case analysis methodologies at this stage, it prevented the researchers from forming any field preconceptions and ensured the augmentation of original research insights. To maintain uniformity and minimise inconsistencies in the data validity, inter-coder reliability checks were conducted to assess agreement among researchers, ensuring consistency in interpretation (Cole 2023). The iterative and inductive analysis confirmed that theoretical insights were firmly rooted in the data.

For the reliability of the findings, dialogic validation was performed as the second analytical phase. By physically interacting, the respondents' interpretations were confirmed through member checking (Chase 2017). To ensure a comprehensive analysis, quotes from various methodologies—including group discussions, life histories, field visits, and participant observations—were integrated into a cohesive narrative, an essential part of dialogic research (McDonald et al. 2009). This process allowed the emergence of nuanced insights, highlighting respondents' perspectives and contextual interpretations. To ensure analytical rigour, Table 1 offers a concise overview of research participants' views derived from various methods, which are subsequently presented in the findings section. Selected themes and direct quotes were also discussed with the heads of the farming communities and respondents who participated in the research to validate the accurate findings. This technique improved the reliability of the findings significantly.

4 | Findings

4.1 | Exploitation in Farming Communities: Contextual Examination

We uncovered significant power asymmetries and hierarchical social structures between large-scale landowners and smallholders. These imbalances fundamentally drive the contemporary slavery phenomenon within the Pakistani agricultural

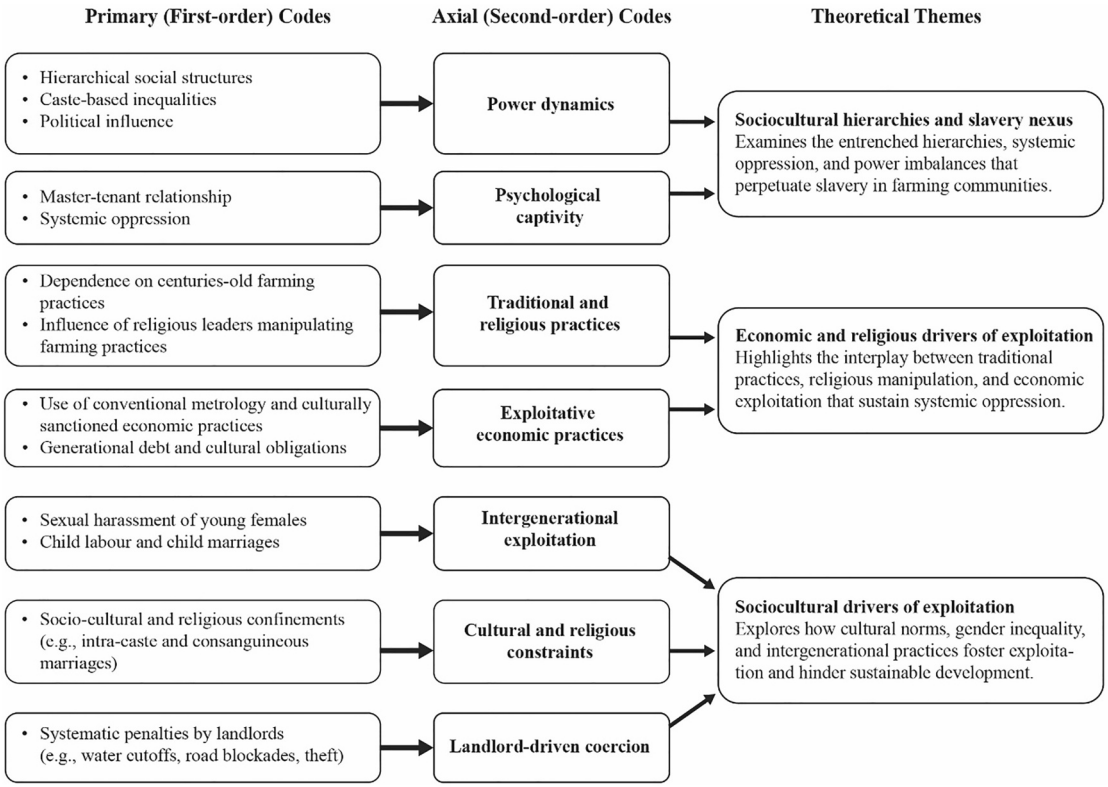

FIGURE 3 | Sample of the coding and themes.

landscape. In consultation with the local revenue department, landlords were classified into different social classes. Most of the smallholders were from lower castes,[6] a socio-cultural and religious phenomenon that prevailed in the Indian subcontinent for centuries. Big landowners, descendants of local chiefs, hailed from higher castes; others were '*Makhdooms* and *Syeds*[7]', both perceived as authoritative figures. The latter two groups systematically abuse their authority to exploit local farmers and smallholders, reflecting a culture of exploitation and systemic oppression.

These landowners are actively involved in politics and national policymaking, obstructing access to or resisting the implementation of reforms related to basic livelihood necessities, particularly education, in their constituencies. This deliberate obstruction reflects a 'resistance to change and preservation of the status quo'. Such formal authority positions mean their power is socially entrenched and institutionally recognised, making smallholders' subordination legally invisible. This centuries-old, entrenched status quo has kept farming communities ignorant of their rights across generations, leading to continued dependence on landowners and exacerbating exploitative practices in agricultural societies. These farming communities significantly face an 'identity crisis' and maintain a 'master-tenant' relationship with local chiefs and landlords, resulting in 'psychological captivity' and 'enforced obedience'.

We further explored the intertwined characteristics of master-tenant relationships, wherein landlords dictate land use terms and control the procurement of essential farming inputs. This invisibly forces farmers to become dependent, posing substantial 'socio-emotional' and economic challenges. All these factors have kept farmers in a continuous state of oppression, and they were forced to live a conventional life and follow traditional farming practices, as they have no modern agricultural facilities in this technologically advanced era.

4.2 | Farming and Society: Sociocultural Drivers of Exploitation

Conventional farming practices were evident mainly due to restricted access to technical agricultural education and training for the farmers. This led them to depend on their 'centuries-old cultural farming practices'. Their 'mental captivation' was apparent when we asked about the centuries-old practices without suiting their lands and climatic conditions; they replied, 'How can we leave the footprints of our forefathers? They used to do this, and so do we'. Another intriguing cropping phenomenon manipulated by 'religious radicals' was also observed: after seeds were planted using conventional methods without considering 'soil conditions', a local 'spiritual leader' from the *Makhdoom* or *Syed* family would visit the fields, recite prayers, and assure farmers that everything is under God's control, even advocating that grains could grow without seeds. Their authority, derived from religious status, overruled the guidance of local agronomists. Farmers often bear severe losses due to these practices, but we found most of them satisfied and consider this the will of God. We also interacted with ageing workers in the fields working under suboptimal conditions influenced by socioeconomic hardship (generational debts) and cultural obligations (family obedience to the local landlord and *Syeds*). In one family, three generations of men aged 12, 38, and 72—were still

TABLE 1 | Methodologies and respondent quotes with bracketed intonations.

Methodologies	Collected voices: Dialogues with farming communities
Group discussions/Life histories	"As these agricultural practices worked for our ancestors, it shall work for us." [older farmers showed deep reverence for ancestral methods, reflecting their commitment to maintaining tradition.]
Group discussions/Life histories	"Why change our customary practices? Why disobey our ancestral souls? Our relatives tried implementing new farming techniques but encountered significant failures." [ancestral belief and scepticism arose from failed attempts, reinforcing the preference for established traditional cultural methods.]
Group discussions/Life histories	"Traditional cultural practices, like stubble burning, are believed to be beneficial despite evidence to the contrary (significant environmental issues). We have always done that in agriculture for decades because the seeds fix well in the soil, and all the fungi and underground insects are killed." [farming practices were considered family legacies with solid ties to generational continuity.]
Group discussions/Field visits/Participant observations	"External or non-governmental organisations' support is seen as dubious agenda driven by external adversaries and considered against culture and religion. Religious fanatics and local wholesalers mostly spread this misconception." [suspicion stemmed from viewing sustainable practices as externally imposed threats.]
Participant observations/Life histories	"Mostly religious fanatics visit and recite holy verses when planting seeds, assuring farmers that it is only God, who can provide the best harvest." [strong faith in divine intervention shaped resistance to agricultural innovations.]
Group discussions/Life histories	"What if God's will is not with us for a better harvest? How can we get better crops even if we change our ancestral farming practices and use new varieties? Everything is in God's hands." [farmers relied on religious beliefs, fearing that change could distort traditional obligations and upset divine favour which could harm their yields.]
Participant observation/Group discussions	"Tenants live on landlords' land for decades. Since the british era, big landlords have also held significant authority to verify and attest official documents required for national identity cards, passports, and school admissions." [tenants' dependency on landlords.]
Group discussions/Life histories	"Wholesalers, often big landlords, keep input costs and interest rates very high and provide low-quality products. Due to high interest rates, smallholders are in a cycle of ongoing servitude, struggling to repay as high as 100% interest." [young farmers felt entrapped in high-interest debts, perpetuating a cycle of servitude.]
Participant observation/Group discussions/Life histories	"Smallholders sell their lands at lower prices to pay their debt when trapped in severe debts. This breaks their family structures." [high debt burdens forced smallholders to sell land at a loss, worsening socio-economic vulnerability.]

residing and cultivating the same land under unchanging and unwritten tenancy terms with no upward mobility, a pattern described by informants as 'written in fate' and 'ancestral footprints.' Their families (girls aged 9 and 11) also worked for household chores for landlords' families. The ageing and intergenerational family workforce trend portrayed one of the worst generational costs of exploitation.

The farming communities shared with us that most wholesalers in the local food market were also local landlords, and the smallholders were often their tenants. Due to social obligations, they felt compelled to sell their crops to these wholesalers. They explained that their grain was measured in jute bags, with each bag being treated as two kilos, resulting in farmers being 'paid less than they were owed', which trapped them in a 'cycle of financial instability'. This manipulation of measurement was widely accepted and went legally unchallenged, revealing how systemic norms permit economic abuse. Farmers also expressed that they were forced to pay culturally sanctioned sale commissions to local brokers in the food market based on their grain size. If they refused to pay the commission, their grain payments were delayed for two to 3 months.

4.3 | The Cost of Exploitation: Societal Implications

Agriculture plays a substantial role in Pakistan's economy and is performed through strong 'relational' and 'familial ties', where families engage collectively in farming activities. 'Gender-based violence' and 'patriarchal values' were prevalent issues within their family structures. Some groups of farmers reported incidents of sexual harassment, particularly affecting young females, who are often the primary farmers in rural Pakistani communities. However, these issues were rarely reported due to sociocultural challenges, such as the fear of social stigma and retaliation. Groups of farmers further explained that reporting such incidents would have brought 'dishonour' for the families and risked 'exclusion' from future market dealings, highlighting how social systems override individual and human rights. This under-reporting reflects the broader marginalisation of women in these communities and exemplifies the severe forms of exploitation that persist within vulnerable farming populations. Sociocultural and religious confinements have also significantly shaped farmers' livelihoods and values of life. For instance, socio-cultural and religiously induced 'intra-caste' and 'consanguineous marriages', under the belief that 'this is the teachings of our prophet', were causing genetic disorders. Moreover, the practice of 'exchange marriages' further exacerbated issues related to forced marriages and child labour within the local farming communities. Underprivileged farmers' families viewed their children as 'sources of income', putting them to work in fields at a very early 'age', which prevented them from receiving a proper education and promoted 'child labour'. 'Our children are from God and are earning hands for us. Every child who comes into this world also brings God's provisions', exclaimed a group of farmers. These existing 'values and norms' promoting 'child labour' further led to 'child marriages', subjecting young couples to premature responsibilities that adversely impacted their personal, social, and emotional development, thereby continuously trapping them in 'emotional and economic confinement'. This normalisation of childhood labour and marriage exists within a broader context where legal protections are unenforced and subordinated to cultural and religious norms. These findings add significantly to the literature on 'agriculture, human values, society, and slavery'.

5 | Discussion and Future Research Directions

By fostering collaborative insights, this dialogue method enabled the co-construction of knowledge with participants, ensuring that the voices of marginalised farming communities were central to the study. Through this approach, we have highlighted how entrenched cultural norms, such as social hierarchies and power dynamics, shape labour and social relations in agricultural communities, creating systemic conditions that sustain exploitation beyond age and gender. This also reflects that the caste system, which mainly creates power differences, does not only exist in Hindu societies, as it also significantly prevails throughout South Asian countries, which constitute a quarter of the world's overall population and are mainly agriculturally based. These dynamics offer generalised and incisive insights into the slavery phenomenon, engaging a broader demographic. The findings also broaden the theoretical understanding of how non-economic and invisible factors lock individuals into exploitative businesses and social systems. The reflection of ingrained social bonds tied to traditions and lands reveals how these invisible drivers facilitate the infiltration of exploitation within global supply chains (Emberson et al. 2022; Trautrims et al. 2021).

We have also explored socioreligious practices and family obligations that trap individuals in sustained mental enslavement, distinct from the more commonly discussed debt bondage and other risk factors perpetuating modern slavery. Furthermore, this dialogue not only addresses the research calls of Alzoubi et al. (2024) by examining the distinct complexities of slavery, it also responds to the future research directions outlined by Bodendorf et al. (2023) and Han et al. (2024) regarding regional variations in risk factors of modern slavery within developing countries. These findings expand existing theories of modern slavery challenges by introducing distinct, complex, and interwoven sociocultural and religious factors and how they influence societies and businesses, which have received less attention in the social science literature.

For policy experts, it is important to note that only agriculture accounts for 33% of the world's slavery victims in global businesses (Shilling et al. 2021), highlighting the sector's vulnerability to exploitation. This susceptibility stems from the often remote locations of raw material producers (Kunz et al. 2023), coupled with sociocultural practices and informal labour structures that prevail in these settings. Among the regions most affected, South Asia stands out as having the highest prevalence of slavery footprints, where deeply ingrained cultural norms and religious practices significantly influence societal dynamics. In this context, we propose the following research questions for future exploration:

RQ1: How does sociocultural slavery contribute to environmental challenges?

RQ2: How can understanding sociocultural factors help address the persistence of slavery in agricultural communities while fostering positive and enabling relationships?

RQ3: How can local actors facilitate the mitigation of sociocultural and religious labour exploitations in global businesses?

Our ongoing research seeks to address these questions in specific regions of South Asian communities (Bangladesh, India and Pakistan), where religion, culture, and social structures profoundly intersect with business practices and economic systems. Investigating these intersections will provide nuanced insights into how systemic inequalities and exploitation persist and evolve within these complex societal frameworks. The research will also find ways to establish context-specific and context-sensitive governance mechanisms for global businesses and supply chains to operate in religiously and culturally sensitive environments.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval number: 1216-202111-PGMPHD-CO4.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The study participants did not give written consent to share their data.

Endnotes

[1] The research was conducted between 2021 and 2024 in Pakistan, and participants' anonymity was ensured.

[2] The farming communities were from the various districts of Punjab, Baluchistan, and Sind provinces of Pakistan.

[3] Landholders of less than 10 acres.

[4] Landlords more than 100 acres.

[5] There were no predetermined times or locations for these discussions, as they were conducted based on participants' availability and convenience.

[6] Whose forefathers used to be potters, carpenters, ironsmiths, butchers, barbers, etc.

[7] A family lineage of the Muslim Prophet

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