



## Women at the Margin: National Security and Deprivation of Rights

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### **Abstract**

This article critically interrogates the lived experiences of women residing in the border villages of Punjab, where the institutional arrangements and security apparatus associated with the international border have profoundly influenced everyday life and significantly curtailed women's freedoms and mobility. Although no formal legal provisions prohibit women from accessing agricultural land, the prevailing security compulsions, surveillance practices, and regulatory mechanisms operating within the border region effectively prevent their participation in agricultural activities, which constitute the principal source of household livelihood. The study is grounded in household-level fieldwork conducted among one hundred households across six villages of Amritsar district of Punjab adjoining the Indo-Pakistan international border. It seeks to examine the gendered dimensions of marginalisation and exclusion experienced by women inhabiting these strategically sensitive borderlands. While the borderland population as a whole remains vulnerable due to its geographical location and the conflict-ridden nature of the Indo-Pakistan border, women experience a more acute and differentiated form of marginalisation, particularly in relation to their customary participation in the agrarian economy and household production processes. The findings of the study demonstrate that women are systematically excluded from engaging in agricultural work on their own land and are increasingly confined to domestic roles and unpaid household responsibilities. Their enforced detachment from agricultural labour has not only diminished their economic participation and productive contribution to household livelihood but has also reinforced pre-existing structures of socio-economic dependency, gender inequality, and political marginalisation.

**Key Words:** *Women; Borderlands; National Security; Barbed Fencing; Rights; Farming*

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Women constitute a substantial and vital segment of the human population, yet their social, economic, and political rights have historically been constrained, particularly in marginalized regions.

The society cannot be imagined without the women. The word woman is used for an adult, though girl is used for an adolescent. (Sarkar, 2016) Women are not accorded equal status with men in practically all countries of the world. Compared with men, women have very limited opportunities in most spheres of economic and social activities. (Selvaratnam, 1988) However, there is a close association between various aspects of women's status or position in society and demographic patterns of fertility, mortality and migration. (United Nations, 1973) Women are always taking place inferior to men. Women's inferiority begins from different sources such as materialistic sources, economic sources, goods and services, holistic faiths, and family behavior; in this manner domination of men is socially established and socially patterned experience. In male-dominated families, women are subordinated to men. There is numerous socio, economic and political practices which contributed to the marginalization of women since generations but many a times the legal norms concerned with any spatial requirement of the modern democratic state created a discriminative scenario for the same. The women in the border villages of Punjab have been victimized due to their place of living that is borderlands. The national security norms and regulations indirectly deprived the women from their basic rights like right to work. The democratic nation states assure the equal rights to the women but still they are not in a position to avail their rights in true spirit.

## 1.2 Objective of This Paper

This paper aims to examine the challenges and hardships faced by the women residents of borderlands in the Punjab because of the security measures adopted by the government of India for national security in general and securitization of the international border in particular. Indo-Pak border is one of the highly sensitive borders in the world and the governments priorities the national security, but local population especially women living in the borderlands have to face countless challenges. This paper will highlight especially the hardships faced by the women because of the methods and regulations employed by the government to secure and strengthen the international border.

## 1.3 Methodology

This is mixed method research based on the primary and secondary sources. The primary data is collected from the five villages located within the radius of half kilometre to five kilometres from the line of control (international border). These villages exist in the district of Amritsar. It is important to mention that Punjab is one of the Indian states shares international border with Pakistan. A total of six districts including Amritsar are adjoining to the international border. The study focuses on the struggles and problems experienced by the women of the respective district exit in the area of borderlands. The structural developments related to the security of international border deprived the women of the basic right of work. To know about the realities face-to-face interviews have been conducted with the hundred women respondents residing in the respective villages. A systematic random sampling method is followed to select the villages from the district Amritsar. The list of villages having agricultural land within international border and barbed fencing is collected from the revenue department of the district. The respondents have been selected on the basis of electoral list of the respective village. A total of twenty women respondents age group range from 55-60 are selected from the families having land beyond fencing. The age group of the women is taking into count because the barbed fencing was installed in the decade of 1980's and only those women are selected for interview who have been residing in the respective villages during this period after getting married. An open-ended questionnaire is prepared for the purpose of interview. The quantitative and qualitative data is collected by researcher in different phases. The method of qualitative analysis and tabular method are used to explore is used to draw the conclusions. In addition, the secondary sources are analysed and mentioned to explore the existing knowledge about the topic.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

Different schools regarding the feminism highlights the various socio, economic, political and demographic causes responsible for the marginalization and deprivation of the women from the prime fronts. The liberal feminism advocates the availability of equal rights and avenues in the existing social and political system. The legal and policy changes were suggested by the liberal scholars to provide equal opportunities in education, employment and other areas. (Tong, 2014) The radical feminism on the other hand consider patriarchy as the most fundamental form of oppression. It advocates to dismantle the entire patriarchal systems completely to provide the equality to them. (Wollstonecraft, 1992)

Marxist feminism as its theoretical nature upholds the capitalistic values as the root cause of social inequality, connects the women's oppression to the capitalism. It highlights the means of exploitation as unpaid domestic labor and are limited in the paid workforce because of the model of economy. (Hartmann, 1979)

Cultural feminism focuses on the idea of an inherent qualities like empathy, nurturing, cooperation and care that are seen as biologically or socially rooted and superior to traditionally male traits such as aggression and competitiveness. (Gilligan 1982). Feminist legal theories believe that legal frameworks are discriminated which are formulated on the male centered experiences and values that can disadvantage women. (Mackinnon, 1989).

Though the existing theoretical knowledge highlights the different reasons and patterns belonging to the marginalization of the women but spatial relations and specific geopolitical settings many a time are accountable for the marginalized plight of the women. In the democratic setups the females are providing the equal rights but social and spatial relations make it impossible of availing the same. The general theoretical frameworks no doubt highlight different reasons for the marginalization of women but the social practices and political settings inherited by the democratic nation state many a times lead to the hardships and marginalization of the women in a determined pattern.

The women residing in the borderlands of Indian state Punjab are the victims of the geographic settings resulted out of security managements of international border. There is the assurance of the equal rights to all the citizens in the constitution of India but the women residing in borderlands are unable to avail it.

### 2.2 Conflictual Border and Impact on the Borderlands

The border between India and Pakistan is the most sensitive of India's borders because of the dispute over Kashmir which started with its annexation in India in 1947. Since then, the region has fuelled a bitter dispute between the two countries. In 1954, upon India's announcement that the accession of the region was final, the ceasefire line (CFL) established in 1949 that cuts through Kashmir, became the *de facto* border between the two states. The root cause of instability and hostility stems from the unresolved nature of the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan. It has led to two major wars and several misses in the past. Since the early 1990's, a 'proxy war' has developed between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. (Kaur, 2026)

The situation of the border belt became more complicated with the rise of terrorist violence in the state in early eighties. It took dangerous dimensions with the involvement of Pakistan in supporting terrorism and directly involving in it by imparting training to the terrorists and supplying deadly weapons. The government of India decided to check the illegal activities from the side of Pakistan. The government decided in early 1986 to fence the border to check the supply of weapons and infiltration of terrorists into Punjab. A high powered committee was constituted by the government for this purpose. But the recommendations of this committee could not be followed because of the contemporary circumstances

and the fencing is not be installed in within the area specified by the committee constituted for this purpose that is 0.5 kilometres from the line of control (international border). It seems impossible to install the fencing in this area because regular disturbance at the international border from the side of Pakistan. Consequently, the barbed fencing was installed in a zig-zag manner ranges from half kilometre to five kilometres from the international border. As a result of it large chunks of agricultural and fertile land of the peasants of border village locked within the international border and barbed fencing. (Sekhon, 2014). More than twenty thousand acres of the agricultural land of the farmers is affected and constrained within the international border and line of control by installing the barbed fencing. The free farming activities turned to be restricted on the respective farming land.

In the forbidding environment, the farmers find it discouraging to till their fields. A number of limitations on the movement of the people have been put up after the erecting of fencing. The fencing put up all along the border to check anti-national activities from across the border, make the routine farming activities hazardous.

The farmers have grudge that they have to undergo frisking at the hands of security forces in the area twice. This not only consumes a lot of their time, they get only four to five hours to work in their fields. Eventually, their crop productivity decreases. On this account, the already poor peasants and farmers of border area have to suffer monetary losses.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Borderlands and Women

Women belonging to farming households in the border villages experienced a gradual detachment from the primary source of family livelihood, namely agricultural land. In the rural agrarian structure of Punjab, women have traditionally constituted an indispensable component of the family-based agricultural economy, actively participating in sowing, harvesting, livestock management, and other allied farming activities. However, the security arrangements instituted in the border regions significantly curtailed their participation in agricultural operations, thereby disrupting the conventional gendered division of labour within rural households.

A major transformation occurred after 1988, the year in which barbed-wire fencing was installed along the international border. Prior to the erection of the fencing, women could access agricultural fields without restriction and contributed directly to farming activities alongside male members of the household. The post-fencing security regime, however, introduced stringent regulations governing access to agricultural land situated beyond the fence. Although entry gates were established to facilitate access, farmers were permitted entry only after undergoing rigorous security checks, including body searches and verification of identity cards.

The implementation of these procedures disproportionately affected women farmers. The Border Security Forces (BSF), entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding the international border, lacked adequate provision for female personnel at the entry gates. In the absence of female security staff authorised to conduct body searches, women were effectively prevented from entering their agricultural fields. Thus, while no formal legal restriction explicitly barred women from agricultural work, the operational structure of border security mechanisms resulted in their de facto exclusion from farming activities.

This exclusion had far-reaching socio-economic implications for borderland households. The withdrawal of women's labour from agriculture disrupted the family-based agrarian economy and imposed an additional financial burden on farming households. Families were compelled to employ wage

labourers to undertake agricultural tasks traditionally performed by women members of the household, thereby increasing cultivation costs and reducing already fragile rural incomes. Consequently, the border security regime not only altered patterns of agricultural labour participation but also reinforced the processes of economic marginalisation within border communities.

The issue was subsequently taken up by several farmers' organisations and unions operating in the border belt, which mobilised collectively to highlight the hardships faced by women farmers before the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Organisations such as the *Border Area Kissan (farmer) Welfare Society* and the *Border Area Sangharsh (struggle) Committee* drew attention to the gendered consequences of border securitisation and demanded institutional intervention to address these challenges. Importantly, these restrictions affected not only women from farming households but also female agricultural labourers, who depended upon agricultural work for their daily subsistence. Their inability to access fields located beyond the fencing deprived them of employment opportunities and regular wage earnings, thereby intensifying economic insecurity among already vulnerable sections of the rural population.

The experience of women in the border villages thus illustrates how state-centric security arrangements can inadvertently produce gendered forms of exclusion and marginalisation. The securitisation of border spaces transformed agricultural practices, restricted women's mobility, and weakened their economic participation, ultimately contributing to broader patterns of socio-economic vulnerability in the borderland regions of Punjab.

Table 1

*Reasons of Restricted Entry of the Women in their Fields Locked within International Border and Barbed Fencing*

Reasons	n	%
Provision of Identity Card	100	100%
Lack of female security (BSF) staff at the entry gates	100	100%
Hesitation from physical searching	100	10%
Lack of recreational facilities	100	100%

Source: Field Survey 2024. Note: N=100 (20 n for each village)

Agriculture constitutes the principal, and in most cases the sole, source of livelihood for the majority of households residing in the border villages. However, the installation of border fencing has fundamentally transformed the occupational structure and working patterns of agrarian families, particularly affecting women's participation in agricultural activities. Women respondents across all the selected villages revealed that prior to the installation of fencing, they were actively engaged in farming operations and formed an indispensable component of the household economy. Their participation in agricultural labour not only supplemented family income but also ensured their economic contribution and relative autonomy within the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, following the installation of fencing in 1988, women's productive role in agriculture became severely restricted, confining them largely to household responsibilities. Consequently, many women reported feelings of helplessness and exclusion, as they were no longer able to contribute meaningfully to the traditional occupation of the family or support male members in agricultural activities. In effect, the security measures associated with barbed fencing have deprived a substantial proportion of the population, particularly women, of their effective right to work.

A major impediment confronting women in these border regions relates to the institutional mechanisms governing the issuance of identity cards. Regulations imposed by the government and the Border Security Forces (BSF) mandate that all individuals possessing agricultural land beyond the

fencing must obtain identity cards in order to access their fields for cultivation. However, the process of acquiring these identity cards is highly bureaucratic, cumbersome, and time-intensive, involving verification at multiple administrative and security levels. Identity cards are issued by the BSF only after verification by the concerned police authorities and are generally limited to individuals who possess legal ownership of agricultural land situated beyond the fencing. In the patriarchal agrarian structure of rural Punjab, land ownership predominantly remains concentrated in the names of male members of the household, with very few exceptions. As a result, the overwhelming majority of women are rendered ineligible for obtaining identity cards. Women generally acquire land ownership only under exceptional circumstances, such as the death of a husband and the absence of adult male heirs within the family. Even among women who fulfil the eligibility criteria, many refrain from applying because of the procedural complexities and the intimidating nature of the verification process.

In addition to bureaucratic constraints, the process of physical security checks further discourages women from participating in agricultural work beyond the fencing. Women respondents described the procedures of physical searching and verification as humiliating, inconvenient, and excessively time-consuming. Even women who possess valid authorization to access agricultural land frequently avoid doing so because of these restrictive procedures. The regulations governing entry into the fields require farmers to inform BSF personnel a day in advance before visiting their land. Upon arrival at the gates, women often have to wait for prolonged periods for physical verification, primarily due to the inadequate availability of female BSF personnel responsible for conducting searches. The number of female security staff remains disproportionately low in comparison to the number of entry gates, and in several instances female personnel are unavailable altogether, compelling officials to conduct searches sequentially at multiple locations. Furthermore, women from rural backgrounds frequently experience hesitation, discomfort, and social embarrassment during physical checking procedures. Consequently, many women deliberately refrain from accessing agricultural land situated beyond the fencing.

The respondents further recalled that prior to the installation of fencing, their access to agricultural land was unrestricted. During sowing and harvesting seasons, women actively assisted male family members in farming operations and often remained in the fields throughout the day. Their contribution extended beyond manual labour, as they also prepared meals and refreshments at the worksites, thereby sustaining the household labour process within the agricultural economy. However, the prevailing security regulations associated with the international border prohibit the construction of any room, shed, or temporary shelter in the area situated between the border and the fencing. In the absence of such facilities, it has become practically impossible for women to remain in the fields for extended durations. Consequently, women's productive role has been confined almost exclusively to the domestic sphere, substantially reducing their participation in agricultural labour.

The exclusion of women from farming activities has also generated serious economic implications for agrarian households in border villages. Since female family members are no longer able to contribute labour to agricultural production, households have become increasingly dependent upon hired labourers, who demand comparatively higher wages for working on land located beyond the fencing. Thus, the restrictions imposed upon women's mobility and participation in farming have not only alienated nearly half of the agrarian population from their traditional occupation but have also intensified the economic burden upon farming households. Women residing in borderlands, therefore, experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization produced by the interaction of state-imposed security mechanisms and deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. These processes collectively contribute to the long-term social, economic, and political marginalization of women inhabiting border regions.

### 3.2 Security Regulations: Socio, Economic and Political Impact s on the Women

Gender discrimination in India affects poor women's socio-economic development. Many attempts have been made in India to increase women's socio-economic status. (United Nations, 1997) Critics argue that income generation alone does not increase the economic equality in India. (Devi,1999, Dixon, 1982; & Sen 2002; Medhi, 2000; A.K. Sen 1999). The economic discrimination is much 'broader concept' than economic status and a complex relationship exists between culture and economic status of poor women in India. (Sen, 1999) Socio, economic forces combine to greatly influence the development of poor women in India. The state of Punjab often associated with cultural wealth and agricultural profitability yet it also represents the economic development intertwined with gender inequalities. Despite the general improvements in living standards from other socio, economic aspects evident in Punjab, women still suffer several challenges that limit them from access to their rights within society. (Kumar & Kaur, 2004) In addition to the general cause of the marginalisation at the different levels, certain specialities belonging to the exceptional settings enhanced the discriminations.

The structural arrangements relating to the security of international border adversely marginalised the socio, economic and political status of the women, though indirectly. The women being the member of the victim families (whose land locked within the international border and fencing) also are the sufferers and share the problems of their part. Consequently, the position and status of the women in the border area comparatively marginalised at the social front. At the social levels they lack the capacity of decision making at the domestic and social levels. The women respondents state that the major family decisions are taken by the male members. They also narrated that they lack the participation in any social organisation. They are dictated by the male family members for not joining any social platform because they (women) are just limited to the family take care.

Table 2

*Socio, economic and political backward/marginalisation of the women*

Socio, Economic and Political backward/marginalisation	N	%
Social participation (membership of any social organisation)	Nil	Nil
Participation at the political level (grassroots, state and national level)	Nil	Nil

Source: Field Survey 2024. Note: N=100 (20 n for each village)

Political engagement of the women is an issue of global concern. Women are underrepresented in national and state legislature around the world. Despite the constitutional provisions women in India are still marginalised in the political arena. The involvement of women in the decision making in political matters is negligible as compare to men. (Kaur and Singh, 2021) All human beings are equal and free in dignity and rights and that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms without distinction by any kind such as race, colour, sex languages and religion. However it is most unfortunate that women have suffered inferior position to men in almost all societies of the world. (Chadha, 2014) The constitution of India like every democracy provides equal status to the women. Article 14 provided equality before the law to the women. The state not to discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them (Article 15 (1): the state to make any special provision in favour of women and children; equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to appointment to any office under the State. In the same manner equality is provided in terms of equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d)) and equal right to an adequate means of livelihood (39 (a)) (IPS, 2018) Despite the constitutional guarantees of equality and the right to work, women residing in the border villages of India continue to experience systematic deprivation owing to the stringent security regulations imposed along the international borders. The regulatory framework enforced by governmental authorities and border security agencies has considerably restricted their access to livelihood opportunities

and productive economic activities. Consequently, women inhabiting these borderlands remain subjected to multiple forms of socio-economic and political marginalisation.

At the household level, women possess limited agency in decision-making processes, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal social relations and economic dependency. Their participation in community-based organisations and collective platforms, including self-help groups, gender clubs, youth clubs, and other socio-cultural associations functioning at the village, sub-divisional, district, and state levels, remains minimal. Such exclusion further reinforces their social invisibility and weakens their capacity for collective mobilisation.

Politically, the participation of women from border villages remains largely insignificant. Although the state has introduced fifty percent reservation for women in grassroots democratic institutions, structural inequalities and socio-economic disadvantages continue to impede their effective participation and leadership in village-level governance. In many cases, women are unable to exercise substantive political authority despite formal representation. Their marginal presence in local political institutions subsequently restricts their engagement in political processes at the state and national levels. Thus, the intersection of border security regimes, socio-economic deprivation, and patriarchal social structures has contributed to the continued exclusion of women in borderland regions from meaningful social, economic, and political participation.

## **Conclusions**

The experiences of women residing in the border villages of Punjab reveal the profound socio-economic and gendered consequences of border securitisation. The installation of barbed-wire fencing and the subsequent enforcement of stringent security regulations significantly altered the traditional agrarian structure of rural households. Although women had historically played an essential role in agricultural production and allied activities, the post-fencing security regime effectively restricted their access to agricultural land situated beyond the border fence. In the absence of adequate institutional arrangements, particularly the deployment of female security personnel, women were indirectly excluded from farming operations despite the absence of any formal legal prohibition.

This exclusion not only disrupted the gendered division of labour within agrarian households but also intensified economic vulnerability among farming communities. The withdrawal of women's labour increased cultivation costs, reduced household incomes, and adversely affected female agricultural labourers dependent upon daily wage employment. Furthermore, the situation demonstrates how state-centric security measures, though intended for national protection, can inadvertently produce forms of structural inequality and marginalisation at the local level. The case of borderland women in Punjab therefore underscores the urgent need for gender-sensitive border policies that balance national security concerns with the socio-economic rights and livelihood needs of rural communities.

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