

Case Study: Opportunities & Constraints for Women in the Pakistani Cotton Sector

Introduction

The Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) is a multi-stakeholder Standards System set up to make global cotton production better for the people who produce it, better for the environment it grows in, and better for the sector's future. The Better Cotton Standard System is a pragmatic, innovative, highly credible and constantly evolving system that is designed for scale and impact. There are currently 1.5 million licensed BCI Farmers and over 1,000 BCI Members from across the cotton sector working together to promote measurable and continuing improvements for the environment, farming communities, and the economies of cotton-producing areas.

To meet the needs of global market and shape Better Cotton relationships, the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) has established a regional office in Pakistan, which is globally the fourth largest cotton producing country. Based on a detailed literature review and 40 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders related to the BCI in Pakistan, this report focuses on the opportunities and constraints for women workers (both hired labor and unpaid family workers) in the Pakistani Cotton Sector in Punjab province. More specifically, this report elucidates opportunities and constraints for women workers to experience decent work conditions; the role of cotton production in the socio-economic landscape of the province; the activities undertaken by the BCI Implementing Partners – both generally and also particularly as relates to women and/or gender equality.

Cotton production and the socio-economic landscape: Activities undertaken by the BCI Implementing Partners – both generally and specifically as relates to women and/or gender equality

By providing livelihood to over five million people in agricultural and industrial sectors, cotton has become the second most important crop of Pakistan after wheat in terms of area and value added. Approximately 1035 ginneries, 441 textile mills and 650 oil-expelling units in the country use cotton as a raw material. Cotton makes sixty percent exports of the country. In this, the contribution of Punjab is around eighty-one percent while sixteen percent comes from Sindh. In addition, more than sixty-four percent of local edible oil production owes to 3.4 to 3.6 million tons of cotton seeds. To feed livestock, two million tons cotton oil cake is used. Lactating animals also take cotton seeds. Cotton fields in Pakistan comprise three million hectares making twelve percent of the cropped area. No other cash crop is harvested on such a large scale.¹

The BCI strives to promote a holistic approach—which considers sustainability in environmental, social and economic terms—among farmers for cotton production. This approach comprises six principles:

1. ‘Production Principles and Criteria’: providing a global definition of Better Cotton through 6 key principles.
2. ‘Capacity Building’: supporting and training farmers in growing Better Cotton, through working with experienced partners at field level.
3. ‘Assurance Programme’: regular farm assessment and measurement of results through 8 consistent results indicators, encouraging farmers to continuously improve.

¹ *S.M. ALAM*, “Cotton: An important cash crop”, <http://www.pakistaneconomist.com/issue2000/issue18/i&e2.htm> (accessed on 31/03/2018)

4. 'Chain of Custody': connecting supply and demand in the Better Cotton supply chain.

5. 'Claims framework': spreading the word about Better Cotton by communicating powerful data, information and stories from the field.

6. 'Results and Impact': monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure progress/change, to ensure that Better Cotton delivers the intended impact.²

To achieve these principles in Punjab, Pakistan, the BCI, in collaboration with WWF, Lok Sanjh Foundation, CABI and Rural Education Economic and Education Development Society (REEDS), develops awareness among farmers as how to improve the quantity and quality of cotton. Farmers are advised on the use of water, pesticides, organic farmyard manure, and methods of picking cotton.

Besides improving farming knowledge, the BCI and its Implementing Partners particularly look into gender inequality among cotton workers. In cotton production, the roles of men and women are well-defined in Punjab. Men are involved in digging and softening soil, and spraying and watering fields. Women pick up cotton. The focus on women is important as women labourers make up the bulk of the estimated half a million cotton pickers in Pakistan.³

The BCI in coordination with Economic and Education Development Society (REEDS) formed Learning Groups for men and women. In 2016, REEDS worked with 30 women farmers (some of them headed house-hold while others were co-farmers with men) and 5,072 women workers⁴. In these learning groups, women acquired farming knowledge by covering each and every aspect of

² "Better Cotton Standard System", <https://bettercotton.org/about-better-cotton/better-cotton-standard-system/> (accessed on 31/03/2018).

³ Saleem Shaikh, Sughra Tunio, "Women pickers toil unprotected in Pakistan's cotton fields", <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-women-cotton/women-pickers-toil-unprotected-in-pakistans-cotton-fields-idUSKCN1BL003>, 10th September 2017 (accessed on 31/03/2018).

⁴ "Raising Awareness of Child Labour and Gender Equality", <https://bettercotton.org/raising-awareness-of-child-labour-and-gender-equality/> (accessed on 31/03/2018).

cotton growing; best practice in observing crop health and spraying chemicals safely, replacing conventional pesticides with natural substances, and improving soil fertility, as well as optimizing irrigation and water harvesting techniques, and promoting decent work.

REEDS executive director, Shahid Saleem says: “the opportunity to share and build knowledge through the Better Cotton project inspires women to invest in their own and their daughters’ education, become involved in women’s entrepreneurship groups and scale up their business activities. As they gain confidence and leadership skills, women also gain more respect in the community, and become more involved in household and farm decision-making. One of our Learning Group members went on to become a field facilitator herself and is now helping other women improve their cotton farming knowledge.”

During the last several years in Punjab, the BCI in collaboration with its partners is imparting training to women for picking cotton and introducing them to various precautionary measures at work place. It is workers’ right to have decent work environment offering “fair pay, security and equal opportunities for learning and progression. The worker must feel safe, respected, and able to express his/her concerns and negotiate better conditions”⁵.

Our interviews with the representatives of the BCI and Implementing Partners, field facilitators (FF), production unit (PU) managers, male and female farmers, and cotton picking women show how in different ways, the training sessions have helped the cotton picking women. Women field facilitators interact with women cotton pickers. This strategy has effectively enhanced the

⁵ “Helping Farmers Promote Decent Work”, <https://bettercotton.org/helping-farmers-promote-decent-work/> (accessed on 31/02/2018).

communication between cotton-picking women and the BCI's representatives. In regular training sessions for picking up cotton, women are advised to:

- a. Go in the fields around 9:00 am and after, when the cotton is dry. According to cotton-picking women, field facilitators, and farmers, it gives women ample time to finish their daily household responsibilities. It is also beneficial to the farmers as cotton picked up is dry.
- b. Cover their head while picking. They should also wear cotton clothes. According to cotton picking women, field facilitators, and male and female farmers, it protects women worker from scorching heat and allergy from cotton. Cotton-picking women are also advised to keep their children away from fields, which contain bottles and wrappers of pesticides. Field facilitators also suggest farmers to keep their fields clean from bottles of pesticides and wrappers to protect pickers. Farmers are also advised to avoid excessive use of pesticides and rely on environmentally friendly spray such as *neem* spray and bio-pesticides. These precautionary measures have reasonably improved the health of cotton-picking women and their children.
- c. Collect and place cotton in a cotton cloth to save it from soil, grass and trash. Cotton-picking women are advised to cooperate with farmers and not to add trash or anything that could increase weight of cotton. According to farmers, field facilitators, and women workers, it has remarkably improved the quality of the cotton and women earn more respect from the farmers.
- d. Work in the form of a group. According to a field facilitator, the BCI and its partners has strengthened and reorganized this practice. One group leader negotiates on the behalf of others and decides about terms and conditions. It is called *muq-muka* (literally means

agreement). Working in a group has empowered women, as they feel more protected at work place. In addition, they are provided with transport facility by farmers and get timely payments. A few women-workers mention that they earn slightly more than others, however, wages varies in Punjab. Cotton-picking women are provided with the facility of clean drinking water; sometimes they are served tea and or one meal. Sometimes, women are paid in advance if they need money for medical treatment and family.

The Implementing Partners also advise women cotton growers. One woman farmer, whose husband is abroad and she looks after her family and field, narrates how her interaction with the BCI system helped her in farming. She was advised regarding farming techniques, which involved the use of pesticides, schedule of watering, use of fertilizers, and picking techniques. She along with her daughter pick up cotton. When her cotton crop was destroyed by heavy rain, representatives of the BCI visited her field and advised on scheduling water and use of fertilizers and pesticides, consequently, she was able to make profit.

Interviews conducted in various parts of the Punjab, such as districts of Toba Tek Singh and Layyah show that the BCI's training sessions have largely helped the cotton picking women to improve the methods of picking cotton, avoid allergies and diseases, and stabilise their economic position.

Opportunities for women workers (both hired labour and unpaid family workers)

Interviews conducted with field facilitators, male and female farmers, and women cotton pickers show that working conditions in Punjab for women cotton pickers are quite decent. Except one or two instances quoted by field facilitators, interviewees are of the view that women are not forced into work. Women cotton pickers have flexible working hours and farmers cooperate with them in

terms of transport facility, drinking water and in a number of cases, and in some cases provide to them with one time meal and tea. All interviewee agree that women are paid immediately and sometimes, they get payment in advance. Working in groups has increased the women cotton pickers' negotiating power. The team leader negotiates on the behalf of all members: It gives women worker better wages, at most places in Punjab, payment to cotton pickers has increased from Rs 10-12 to Rs 15 per kg; It gives them sense of security; Sick woman worker can be replaced by other; Women are provided with transport. Hardly any interviewee complained about any kind of discrimination. Contribution to the economic stability of family has increased the women labourers' say in family matters: They jointly decide about children's education and marriage, purchase and selling of properties and sometimes decisions concerning the change of job of spouse. If husband is away for job, dead or diseased, woman alone takes decisions.

Constraints of women workers (both hired labour and unpaid family workers)

One of the Britain's leading international development and humanitarian think tank, Overseas Development Institute (ODI) reports that agricultural wages have decreased in Pakistan, whereas in most of the countries wages have increased. Main reasons are: power shortage; stagnant agricultural productivity; and powerful land owners. Wages offered to women cotton workers affect not only women but also their families. International Labour Organization estimated that in Pakistan's agricultural sector approximately seventy-four percent women workers are 15 year-old. Most of them take up least skilled work as seasonal or part-timer; in terms of job security, women are less secure than men; women perform manual work; women are not involved in management of farms; they are unaware of government's policies and subsidies; they do not have training in farming; they have limited access to researches such as fertiliser and water; and women also have limited access to market. Domestically, women are also marginalized in Punjab: major decisions

are taken by men regarding children's education, marriage, purchasing and selling of items, etc., whereas women have less voice; women's right to property, land and livestock are largely ignored; and women alone have to manage household matters. Women have limited opportunities for getting good education.

Our studies in two districts of Punjab, Toba Tek Singh and Layyah, also show some major constraints faced by women cotton pickers, which are summarised as follows:

- i. A number of women workers complain that they are exposed to pesticides and have limited access to qualified doctors and medicine. They suffer from recurring headaches, skin and eye ailments. They spend one third of their income on medical bills. The issue is also noted by researchers and state officials. Khuda Bakhsh, agriculture scientist and a lead author of a study on the hazards of cotton harvesting, notes: "A huge number of the cotton pickers carry out cotton-picking without wearing safety gadgets such as gloves, face masks, aprons, glasses, head and arm covers. Complaints of the skin irritation, headache, nausea, gastroenteritis, general weakness, dizziness, sleeplessness, and vomiting, coughs, fever and stomach pain are rampant among women cotton pickers". Former federal agriculture minister, Nazar Gondal, says: Two laws enacted in the 1970s regarding the use of pesticide and ensuring health protection of farm workers from possible exposure to pesticides are "poorly enforced. Such laws remain unimplemented, mainly due to weak institutions and laxity on the part of the agriculture and environmental protection departments."
- ii. One of the field facilitators mentions that a number of cotton-picking women in Punjab are reluctant to share domestic violence. FF should be trained to address personal problems.
- iii. Cotton-picking women have to manage household along with working in the field.

- iv. Interviews with field facilitators show that many training sessions remain ineffective for farmers and women workers primarily because of illiteracy. Ibrahim Mughal, chairman of Agri Forum Pakistan, says: “we have organized over three dozen awareness-raising programs for cotton field owners and cotton pickers in collaboration with local non-government organizations in Punjab and Sindh provinces and encouraged farmers to make it mandatory for their workers to wear protective clothing but such efforts have failed to produce good results.”⁶ We have observed in many responses that cotton-picking women were not well aware of all the precautionary measures suggested by field facilitators during training sessions. Even if, they were aware of, they could not explain the importance of taking such care.

Recommendations for BCI and its Implementing Partners to improve the effectiveness and appropriateness of activities.

- i. Women should be provided with masks while picking up cotton. It will protect them from inhaling fibre and effects of pesticides.
- ii. Awareness campaign for men as how to treat with a working woman. Men should also be trained to help women in domestic work as our study show that in most of the cases, men does not help women in household.
- iii. Awareness campaign among women for taking care of their health.
- iv. Awareness campaign among women about the wages of women in other areas and develop negotiating skills of team leader.

⁶ Saleem Shaikh, Sugra Tunio, “Women pickers toil unprotected in Pakistan's cotton fields”, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-women-cotton/women-pickers-toil-unprotected-in-pakistans-cotton-fields-idUSKCN1BL003>. (accessed on 31/03/2018).

- v. Collaborate with farmers, government organizations for mobile medical dispensaries for women.
- vi. Training of women to do other works such as *godhi* and spraying pesticides, which could increase their income.
- vii. Awareness campaign among farmers about unfriendly pesticides. It will help in improving health of cotton picking women.
- viii. Our interviews show that women workers realise the economic situation of farmers. If the BCI could design a programme for awareness among small landlords and train workers as how to read market prices, trying to ensure there is negotiation, not confrontation, it could have a trickledown effect on women workers.

Recommendations for BCI on further research needed on gender issues in Pakistan.

- i. Domestic and health issues of working women effecting their work.
- ii. Research on effective measures to increase the income of women workers.
- iii. Social and cultural ideas regarding discrimination against women and how these can be debated and addressed.
- iv. To understand the importance of both the productive economy (paid work) and the reproductive economy (unpaid household activities usually carry out by women).