

PAKISTAN



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Women Agricultural Workers Sowing the Seeds of Feminist Climate Justice





Pakistan: Women agricultural workers sowing the seeds of feminist climate justice

This country brief is based on the Climate Justice Feminist Participatory Action Research (CJ FPAR) journey of the women agricultural workers in Matiari district together with the Sindh Community Foundation (SCF), a non-governmental organisation based in Hyderabad. During the CJ FPAR, a young woman researcher worked closely with the women agricultural workers to look into the impacts of climate crises on women cotton pickers exacerbated by their precarious working environment and advance recommendations to improve their working conditions, health and wellbeing.

Pakistan at a glance

The Global Climate Risk Index has placed Pakistan on the top five of countries most vulnerable to climate change in its annual report for 2020.¹ Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change is increasing with 152 extreme weather events recorded from 1999 to 2018, including the 2010 super flood which killed 1,600 people and caused damages worth more than USD 10 billion, and the 2015 heatwave in Karachi that claimed the lives of more than 1,200 people.²



Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change is caused by a confluence of several factors. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report³ for the Asia region notes that sensitivity to climate change in agriculture-dependent countries (such as Pakistan), arises from their distinct geographical, demographic trends, socio-economic factors, and lack of adaptive capacity that when taken together, determine the vulnerability profile by perpetuating a vicious cycle of poverty. The climate change projections for South Asia as a whole show that warming is likely to breach the global mean and climate change will impact the glaciers' melting rate and precipitation patterns, affecting the timing and strength of monsoon rainfall. Consequently, this will significantly bring negative impacts to Pakistan's productivity and efficiency in water-dependent



Although Pakistan contributes less to the overall emissions of greenhouse gases, it has signed on to the Paris Agreement⁴ as part of its international commitment to address climate change. Pakistan's updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) sets a cumulative conditional target of an overall 50 per cent reduction of its projected emissions between 2015 and 2030, with a 15 per cent reduction using the country's own resources, and an additional 35 per cent subject to international financial support. The NDC submission builds on the call for international climate finance,

¹ Pakistan 5th most vulnerable country to climate change (2020) Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1520402>

² Climate Change Profile of Pakistan (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.adb.org/publications/climate-change-profile-pakistan>

³ IPCC Fifth Assessment Report (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar5/>

⁴ Paris Agreement (2015). Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

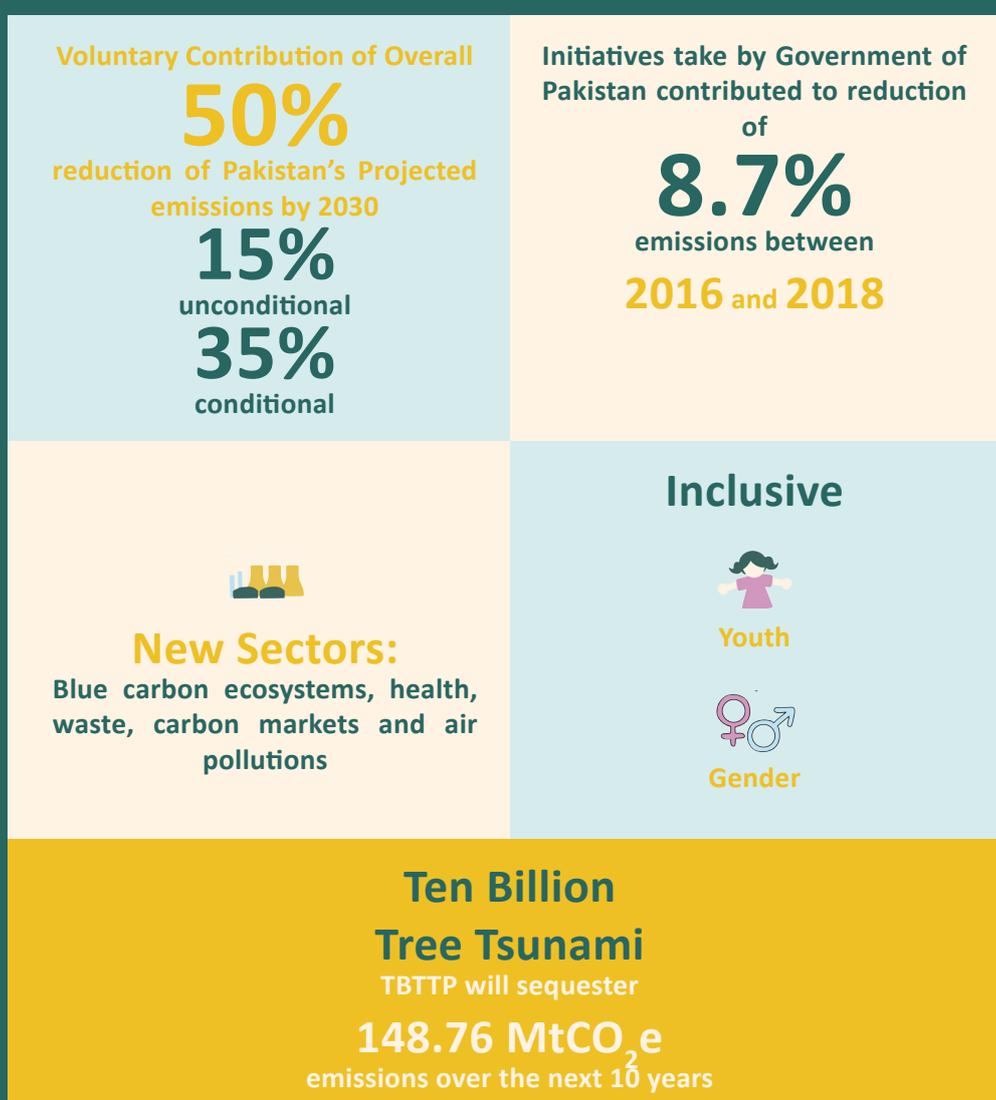
and says that Pakistan requires USD 101 billion for its green energy transition alone.⁵

This reduction in emissions is set to be achieved through an improved energy mix, green transportation, and a pledge to build no new coal power plants and ban the use of imported coal for energy generation. The commitment also hinges on a massive tree plantation project called 'Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme', with the government banking on its future success in sequestering carbon.⁶

Women agricultural workers and the NDC

Visualised summary of Pakistan's 2021 Nationally Determined Contribution⁷

Pakistan Updated NDC 2021



⁵ Pakistan NDC commits to halving emissions, but pins success on finance (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/climate/pakistan-ndc-commits-to-halving-emissions-finance-key/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Visualized summary of Pakistan's 2021 Nationally Determined Contribution. Retrieved from <http://www.mocc.gov.pk/>

Mitigation



Electric Vehicles
30% by 2030

Continued investments in NbS



Renewable Energy
60% by 2030

Moratorium on new coal
power plants

No generation of power through
imported coal.

Adaptation



Indus Basin-flood risk
mitigation and enhanced water
recharge

Enhancing protected areas
cover from 12% to 15% by 2030

The Pakistani government's commitment to respond to the challenges of climate change is outlined in its updated NDC submitted to the UNFCCC in October 2021. Through the 'Pakistan Vision 2025', the government has laid out the institutional framework for the implementation of climate policies and programmes throughout the country.



As an example, the Sindh Women Agricultural Workers' Act was enacted in recognition of the importance of a gendered approach to climate change adaptation. It recognises how the unequal power relations between women and men in Pakistani society impact especially women agricultural workers who depend on climate-sensitive resources for their survival and livelihoods.

However, many of these measures are mitigation-centric and fail to address the needs of women along with their communities and organisations, to manage and adapt to the impacts of climate change. While the National Disaster Management Act (NDM) established the Gender and Child Cells (focal point offices) at national and provincial levels, Pakistan's NDCs do not engage and tackle the full spectrum of vulnerability of women, including women agricultural workers.



Matiari women agricultural workers consolidating and collectively discussing the impacts of climate crises.

Women agricultural workers testified that resources mobilised by the government for climate mitigation and adaptation do not reach the local level and hence fail to support grassroots women's participation and leadership in climate action. This, despite the fact that women agricultural workers have been making strides in demonstrating the essential role they play in their communities as innovators and solution-makers.

A lot more needs to be done to have a positive impact on women. Due to lack of access to education, almost 95 per cent of women agricultural workers are not able to read and write, let alone being aware of these recent policy changes that supposedly promote their health and occupational safety.

The FPAR result confirmed that many climate policies and programmes are not reflecting the voices of women agricultural workers who are in the frontlines of the climate crisis and a huge gap exists between policy frameworks and implementation at the local level. Meaningful engagement of women with relevant government agencies on climate change is critical to ensure that NDC plans and implementation are not only gender-responsive but also advancing women's human rights.

Matiari women agricultural workers' realities amid the climate catastrophe

For Pakistan, climate change has meant nearly a fivefold increase in the number of heat wave days in the last 30 years. Given the fact that the country is the fourth largest cotton producer in the world with approximately 1.5 million smallholder farmers relying on cotton for a living, the effects are worse in the rural areas where temperature increases are directly impacting women's livelihoods and survival.

Cotton is grown mostly in the rural areas of Punjab and Sindh, and Matiari district is one of the major cotton-producing districts in Sindh province, where around 70 per cent of cotton pickers are women and girls. Without factoring yet the impacts of increasing temperatures, women agricultural workers are already experiencing precarious working conditions. They are not recognised as formal workers, receive lower wages than men, not having risk insurance and other social safety nets, and are often exposed to pesticides and various health hazards due to the absence of any protective equipment. This often results in workers dying from ailments without receiving medical attention as basic health services are far away from the villages.



In Matiari district, women cotton pickers shared that increased temperatures have reduced their picking time as they are unable to work long hours with the extreme heat, resulting in even less wages as they are paid on a daily basis depending on the amount of cotton they pick. A Matiari woman cotton picker said that their earnings are now dramatically reduced because 'a decade ago we were able to pick a daily average of 1 to 1.5 maund (approximately 60 kg) of cotton, but now we are able to pick only half of the amount because of the increased heat.' Women cotton pickers suffer from heat strokes and dehydration, with no proper water and sanitation facilities, as well as medical attention provided during the long working hours.

The women cotton pickers also testified that pest attacks from locusts and other insects are increasing like they have never seen before. The pest attacks have severely decreased cotton yields by 70 per cent compared to previous years.

Climate Justice FPAR engaged the women cotton pickers and surfaced their perceptions on climate change, as well as how climate crises impact their situation as workers. FPAR results showed that the women understand that changes are happening in the natural environment. When asked about how climate crises affect them as women workers, they express this in terms of harsher working conditions and lower incomes.



Matiari woman doing a presentation during FPAR consultation meeting.

Matiari women taking action

The women agricultural workers in Matiari District articulated their demands for better working conditions and access to basic health services in response to the increasing impacts of the climate crisis on their lives and livelihoods.

FPAR provided spaces for women to exchange their experiences, increase their knowledge and awareness, analyse their situation, and develop their confidence in asserting their human rights. SCF facilitated the creation and registration of a bigger network of women workers that was instrumental in conducting literacy programmes and gender sensitivity training to foster recognition of women's leadership. The initiative also heightened the awareness among women workers on the impacts of climate change and the importance of amplifying their voice and strengthening their advocacy to achieve a safer, healthier working environment for women agricultural workers.

Through FPAR, women agricultural workers of Matiari became more aware of the power they have as a collective to resist current oppressive and exploitative labour practices. With the leadership training and capacity-building sessions, the women took actions to improve their collective bargaining skills to demand for more wages, fairer terms of employment and better working conditions.



With the FPAR journey, Matiari agricultural women workers are taking a more significant role in strengthening the Federation of Trade Unions of Women Cotton Pickers, composed of 10 registered women trade unions, to engage in advocacy and movement-building activities to collectively raise their voices with relevant policy makers at various levels. They organised press briefings and dialogues with the labour department, as well as mobilisations to demand health insurance and protection for women agricultural workers. The Federation of Trade Unions of Women Cotton Pickers aims to further enhance its political education programmes to include stronger advocacy on feminist climate justice and the protection of labour rights.



What do we want?

This feminist participatory action research was conducted to collect evidence on the ground and enable women cotton pickers to assert their human rights and improve their working conditions by strengthening their voices and actions for policy change. The FPAR journey is a powerful tool that gives women cotton pickers the opportunity to articulate and advocate

At the national level, the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) has to be expanded to reach women agricultural workers. NDC for climate change adaptation must take into account the adverse effects of climate change on women agricultural workers, their rights to access quality education as well as their rights to health and safety measures. Specifically,



The Ministry of Labour must scale up and broaden the social protection measures including health and income support and ensure the reach to women agriculture workers who are disproportionately affected by climate crises;



The Ministry of Labour must review and amend the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 2017 to address the specific vulnerabilities facing women agricultural workers; and



The Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training must address the education inequality, protect, promote and advance the rights to education targeting marginalised women particularly the 95 per cent of women cotton workers who do not have access to quality education as reflected in the FPAR.

At the international level, multilateral bodies including the Green Climate Fund need to support community based initiatives to enhance the adaptation capacity of women agricultural workers. Gender-just solutions need to make women's human rights central to just and equitable climate action. There have been locally-driven and women-led climate actions implemented in the past by grassroots women's organisations.⁸ These initiatives must be recognised and supported for upscaling and replication to shift power relations, ensuring women's human rights and leadership to achieve feminist climate justice.

The private sector, particularly growers associations such as the Sindh Abadgar Board, Sindh Agriculture Chamber, Sindh Agriculture University and the Sindh Growers Association need to be sensitised on the impacts of climate change on gender, health and occupational safety. They must fulfil their responsibilities to improve the working conditions of women workers, ensuring that occupational health and safety standards are followed. More stringent mechanisms are needed to hold the private sector accountable for the impacts of their business on creating or reinforcing climate and social injustices, particularly for women.

⁸Women and Gender Constituency Gender Equality and Human Rights are Fundamental to Combating Climate Change (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.wecf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/WGCpublicationCOP21.Final-web1.pdf>



About APWLD

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist and women's rights organisations and individual activists. For 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice. APWLD worked with and supported seven partner organisations from seven countries to conduct a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) between 2019 and 2021. This FPAR is part of APWLD's Climate Justice Programme.

Email: apwld@apwld.org

Website: www.apwld.org

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