



Role Of Women Worker's In The Cotton Sector

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Abstract:

Cotton is an important source of livelihood for millions of smallholders worldwide. It is estimated that about 31.5 million farmers produce cotton globally and nearly half of them are women. Women face disproportionate barriers along the cotton value chain in terms of access to land, inputs and services that affect the quality of their participation and the benefit they can derive. In many countries, they are largely marginalized in low-skilled, low-paid and labour-intensive jobs. Gender-sensitive policies and programmes can help ensure that benefits and incomes generated along the cotton value chain are equitably distributed among women and men. Closing the gender gap in the cotton sector, such as in employment, wage, and land rights, can contribute significantly to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Investments to strengthen cotton-producing countries' capacity to collect gender-disaggregated data and conduct gender-focused studies across cotton producing developing countries are needed to support the development of gender-sensitive policies and strategies.

Keywords: Gender Gap, SDG Goals, Income Inequities.

Introduction:

Cotton is one of the most versatile crops used for clothing, homewares, cottonseed oil, animal feed, and industrial and beauty products. Cotton is an important raw material, accounting for about 30 percent of those used in the textile industry. It is the most widely produced natural fibre, accounting for 81 percent of world total natural fibre production. The cotton sector contributes significantly to the economies of many developing countries and to the livelihoods of millions of rural smallholders worldwide. Cotton is cultivated on about 2.5 percent of the world arable land across 85 countries, 31 of which are classified as least developed countries (LDCs). Cotton production relies on smallholder farmers, rather than mass-scale farm production. In

2020, world cotton (seed cotton) production reached 82 million tonnes China and India are the largest cotton producers globally, accounting for approximately 58 percent of world production, followed by the United States of America (12 percent) and Brazil (8 percent). Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali – the so-called Cotton-4 (or C-4) countries – account for 2.2 percent of global production.

Objectives and Method:

1. The objectives of studies on the role of women in the cotton sector are generally centered on understanding and addressing these challenges of foster a more equitable and sustainable industry.

2. Insure womens participation in all stages of cotton production from cultivation to ginning and trade.
3. Examin the social,culture and economic constraints that limit womens full and equitable participation.
4. To study the effectiveness of targeted programs in empowering women,increasing their decision making.

Method:

This Research paper entirely based on secondary data, collected from published sources such asbooks, journals, government reports, research articals, and reliable online databases.

Review of Literature:

1. Bina Agarwal, Gender Challenges, Oxford University press 2016.In this book bina Agarwal emphasise how local institutions and how climate and market pressures interact with gendered rules.
2. Economic Benefits Of Empowering Women in Agriculture. (by CL

Anderson 2021) this paper consider how prioritising women's empowerment in agriculture might lead to economic.

Women Role in Cotton Farming:

Cotton production plays an important role in poverty alleviation and food security, securing incomes for millions of farmers in many developing countries. It is estimated that globally around 31.5 million farmers depend on the cotton cultivation for their livelihoods (ICAC, 2025). In households that are specialized in cotton production, there is a positive relation between cotton production and their ability to buy basic foodstuffs and other goods and services. Cotton production and value chain operations generate employment for both women and men. Globally, it is estimated that up to 190 million people earn a living from their involvement in the cotton production sector Women contribute significantly to cotton farming, constituting a large share of the workforce involved in primary production.

	Male farmers (%)	Female farmers (%)
Australia	77	23
Benin	93	7
Brazil	81	19
Burkina Faso	89	11
China	37	63
India	60	40
Greece	52	48
Mali	99	1
Pakistan	93	7
Türkiye	77	23
Uzbekistan	93	7
C-4	93	7
Africa excluding C-4	77	23
World	54	46
World excluding China	69	31

Source: ICAC Cotton Data Book June 2025.

As shown in the table above the share of female farmers is particularly high in China (63 percent of 15 million cotton farmers) and in India (40 percent out of 10.3 million farmers overall). In Pakistan and the C-4 countries (Benin, Burkina, Faso, Chad, and Mali as a group which are leading west African cotton producer), women represent 7 percent of all the cotton farmers. In the C-4 countries, the percentage of women farmers ranges from 1 percent in Mali to 11 percent in Burkina Faso. In Benin, the share of women farmers increased from 9 percent in 2016 to 12 percent in 2020, but down to 7 percent in 2021. In Greece and Türkiye, respectively 48 percent and 23 percent are women cotton farmers. In Australia and Brazil, two other major cotton-producing countries, women account, respectively, for 23 percent and 19 percent of all the cotton farmers. Excluding the C-4 countries, 23 percent of the cotton farmers in Africa are women, with substantial variances across countries.

- Out of the 31.5 million farmers who cultivate cotton worldwide, it is estimated that 46 percent are women. Women contribute significantly to cotton farming both as farmers or hired labourers. In developing countries, where seed cotton production is mostly smallholder-driven, women play a prominent role in production. In these countries, cotton is largely hand-picked – traditionally by women, who are generally involved in tasks that require manual work, such as stubble picking, sowing, weeding, fertilization and stalk destruction. According to a

survey by the International Trade Centre (ITC), women typically supply 65 percent of the labour associated with cotton picking and 55 percent of the labour for sowing.

- In India, the world's second largest cotton producing country, the majority of cotton workers are women supplying 70 percent of labour in sowing and 90 percent in cotton picking. In Pakistan, women have a significant role in cotton picking. In Latin America, women account for around 60 percent of labour for cotton picking and 35 percent for planting.
- Women's contribution to the cotton value chain is undervalued in many contexts. They usually carry out low-skilled, low-paid, labour-intensive tasks in cotton cultivation, and are less likely to engage in the most profitable value-adding activities further downstream (African Development Bank, 2015; Cotton Connect, 2016; the Sustainable Trade Initiative [IDH], 2019). The gender pay gap in the cotton industry is still widespread globally. In rural India, for instance, the average income for women is 78 percent of men's income .
- In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), women supply more than half of the labour required to plant, nurture and harvest the cotton crop. In addition to operating their own farms, another five to ten million people perform seasonal labour on cotton farms. Of those, about two-thirds, or between three and seven million, are women since most seasonal work consists of

planting and harvesting. As highlighted in the study by ITC (2025), women are regularly paid less than men, in some cases as much as 90 percent less than their male counterparts.

- In developing countries, women cotton farmers commonly own smaller cotton plots and overall manage less land area than male farmers. In Burkina Faso, one of the main cotton producers in Africa, the estimated average land area farmed by male cotton farmers was 2.45 hectares per year in the period 2020- 2025, while female farmers planted on average 0.6 hectares of crop area, equalling around 25 percent of the land farmed by men. Assuming equal yields per hectare, women farmers earn approximately one fourth of what male farmers on average earn from cotton production. In Benin, female cotton farmers produce less cotton than male farmers: 10 percent of all farmers are female, but they produced only about 6 percent of total output in 2021.

Findings:

Women cotton farmers also face greater difficulties than men in accessing productive inputs and resources, such as seeds, fertilizer and pesticides, agriculture technologies and mechanization, credit, extension services and training in Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs), resulting in negative impacts on productivity. Lack of access to cash and credit also constrain women from hiring wage labourers. Labour shortage caused by poor cash flow can disrupt cotton farming, delaying planting

beyond the optimum planting season and holding up harvesting, eventually resulting in reduced yields and loss of earnings.

Gender inequalities in cotton farming remain a pressing challenge in many cotton-producing developing countries. Gender-based constraints often affect women's full and decent participation in the cotton value chain, with adverse impacts on them as well as their households' livelihoods. If not adequately addressed, gender inequalities can also worsen, and women's already vulnerable socioeconomic status can exacerbate, especially in fragile contexts, as a result of the compounding impacts of climate change and intersecting crises.

Conclusion:

- Empowering women in the cotton value chain can have positive effects on their livelihoods, including increased financial autonomy, decision-making and wellbeing. This, in turn, can be beneficial for their households in terms of improved living standards, food security and nutrition, education and health of children.
- Achieving gender equality can also have positive macroeconomic impacts on agricultural productivity and economic growth, while contributing to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG 1 "Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere", SDG 2 "End hunger, achieve food security, and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture", and SDG 5 "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls".

- Despite their contribution, women often face challenges such as low wages, limited access to land, lack of recognition, poor working condition. Addressing this issue through better training, fair wages, gender sensitive policies and greatly enhance both their livelihood and the overall efficiency of the cotton sector.

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