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### **Labour woes and low cotton production**

THE rural economy is set to suffer losses worth billions of rupees because of the low cotton crop yield, leading to an increase in poverty. The Pakistan Cotton Crop Assessment Committee (PCCC) in its first estimate of the current crop season predicts that only 10 million bales will be produced against the target of 15m bales this year. Some quarters fear that the yield loss will be more than seven million bales with each bale weighing at least 155 kilograms.

Since cotton and textiles accounts for about 60 per cent of the country's exports, this will adversely impact the economy. But the women working in this sector will be hit the hardest.

Around 80 per cent of the country's cotton is produced in Punjab. It provides employment opportunities to rural womenfolk of the cotton belt from sowing till harvesting.

*A loss of 5m bales translates roughly into Rs10 billion in earnings for women employed as cotton-pickers*

These part-time female farm workers are paid Rs1,000 per acre for sowing cotton seeds where the germination of seed in the first sowing could not take place for any reason. They are offered Rs2,000 per acre to loosen compact soil in cotton fields. Furthermore, women are paid Rs500-800 per 40kg of raw cotton picked.

A loss of the expected minimum 5m bales of cotton output indicates that the women workers miss out around Rs10 billion in earnings from the cotton-picking job alone.

Earnings from other related jobs such as loading and unloading of produce for transportation from fields to markets, and then to ginning units and textile factories will also suffer. Labourers from rural areas are generally employed for most of these jobs. A 33pc reduction in output means a third of loaders employed at various stages of transportation in the largest value chain in the country will fail to find work.

Another factor that will hit the rural economy because of low cotton yield is the loss of wood as fuel because of diminished availability of cotton stalks. Dr Jalal Arif, focal person of the Cotton Research Group says that while stalks can become a breeding ground for the cotton whitefly and other insects, they also serve as a source of fuel for many rural households.

He estimates that about 2,400kg-3,200 kg of cotton stalks are produced per acre. At a market rate of Rs200 per 40kg, the villagers get free wood fuel worth roughly Rs12,000-16,000 per acre of cotton field. Now they will need to spend their meagre resources to purchase fuel for their kitchens.

The coming years paint a gloomier picture. In the absence of an official support price mechanism and other facilitation schemes at par with regional countries, the gap between the cost of production and market price of is decreasing, acting as a disincentive for growers.

Quoting official estimates, President of the Pakistan Kissan Ittehad Khalid Mahmood Khokhar says the cost of production per 40kg of cotton stands at Rs4,385 whereas the market rate for the produce ranges between Rs3,300 to Rs3,500.

“We are thinking of turning towards alternatives. Many of us have already started sowing maize, rice and other crops such as mangos. In the next season, the majority of cotton growers will follow suit.”

“Allowing the field to remain uncultivated is also viable for us since it provides a much-needed gap to restore the land’s fertility naturally. This way, we can sow wheat earlier and get about 800kg more grain per acre,” he added.

Calling it a “step-motherly” treatment, Mr Khokhar bemoaned the government’s attitude towards cotton crop which runs the national as well as the rural economy. Cotton has been excluded from the so-called Agriculture Emergency Programme of the prime minister for which only wheat, rice, sugarcane and oilseed crops have been considered.

“Cotton has the potential to ride the country of the persistent financial crunch and out of the clutches of lenders like the International Monetary Fund. However, growers need incentives at par with their counterparts in neighbouring countries in the form of tax-free farm inputs, cheap electricity and availability of affordable quality seeds and pesticides.”