

Hasan Mansoor

Female cotton pickers demand status equal to industrial workers'

KARACHI: Several women engaged in picking of cotton in fields on Wednesday demanded the provincial government award them the status equal to industrial workers with all privileges that the latter were entitled according to the Workers Welfare Board (WWB).

“It is very hard job that we do for at least 12 hours a day in extreme hazardous environment,” said Shabana Khatoon, leader of one of the first ever unions of cotton picking women in Jamal Dahiri village of Matiari district. She was speaking at a press conference at the Karachi Press Club organised by the Sindh Community Foundation in which representatives the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and Aurat Foundation also spoke.

She said workers, mainly women and children, did their work in extreme hard conditions while picking cotton in the fields where they suffered from diseases of eyes and infections because of no safety gears given to them by employers.

She demanded of the government to take quick steps to help cotton picking workers get better wages under secured environment.

Javed Soz, executive director of the Sindh Community Foundation (SCF), said Pakistan was the fourth largest producer of cotton in the world where approximately 1.5 million smallholding farmers relied on cotton for a living.

“Cotton is the country’s most widely cultivated crop grown on 15 per cent of land and an important raw material for its growing textiles industry, representing 8.5pc of GDP.”

He added that cotton was grown mostly in Punjab and Sindh that accounted for 99pc. Cotton picking is primarily carried out by women, which is considered a cash job.

Mr Soz said there were 4.9 million casual and hired farm workers in Sindh of which approximately 1.7 million were women.

“The cotton pickers mostly fall in the first category of labourers. More than half a million cotton pickers are working in Sindh of which 70pc are estimated to be women.

“In Sindh, more than 10 districts cultivate cotton including Sanghar, Matiari, Ghotki, Hyderabad, Tando Allayhar, Mirpur-khas, Khairpur, and Benazirabad.

“Although they contribute to the growth of textile and clothing industry, they remain poor and are exploited as their wages are extremely low, they have weak bargaining power and their health suffers from hazardous working conditions that involve excessive use of poisonous pesticides. No measures are taken by landowners for safety gears such as gloves, masks, hats etc., to protect them.”

He said those workers were not given health insurance or medical compensation.

“As cotton pickers are illiterate, they receive misleadingly calculated low wages by landlords. They are unaware about labour rights and are not united for collective bargaining and negotiation for wage fixation.”

He added the SCF worked with 3,000 cotton pickers from 30 villages in Matiari district. As a result, through increased awareness about their rights and collective bargaining, the groups secured a 50pc increase in their wages – from Rs200 per 40kg of cotton picked in a day to Rs300.

“These wages are still lower than the current market wages, yet still their collective struggle is a baby step towards success.”

The SCF director said there was need to apply the minim wage law of country for those workers to protect their economic and labour rights.

He said Sindh Industrial Relations Act had secured the right to form association but due to lack of information on registration of formal trade union in cotton sector among workers, they were not registered. Cotton growers, industrialists, government and public at large remained unaware of cotton pickers’ plight.

He said the first ever registration of seven trade unions of women cotton pickers with the labour department had been made while the same for three more unions was in progress.

Appreciating the approval of Sindh Agriculture Women Act 2019 by the Sindh cabinet, he demanded it be passed without further delays.

Speakers, including Badar Soomro of the HRCP and Mehnaz Rehman of the Aurat Foundation, demanded agriculture workers must be included in the list as secured labour to get social security benefits, health coverage, and worker welfare fund etc. Besides, the process of registration of their unions needed more clarity and convenience.

Aisha Agha, Niaz Soomro, and worker Shamim Bano also spoke. Later, the cotton picking women staged a demonstration outside the KPC.