

## Breaking Barriers: Addressing Gender-Based Violence in the Cotton Sector

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that one in three women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence, with the agricultural sector being particularly high-risk due to gendered power imbalances and cultural norms.<sup>1</sup> In India, where women account for 70% of sowing and 90% of cotton picking, they are over-represented in low-paid, physically demanding tasks, yet lack access to land ownership and decision-making power.<sup>2</sup> Their limited access to training, agronomic skills, and market opportunities further exacerbates gender inequality and exploitation within the sector.

Women make up nearly half of the global agricultural labour force, and up to 70% in sub-Saharan African regions.<sup>3</sup> Despite their essential contributions, they face significant challenges, including gender-based violence (GBV), discrimination, and limited access to resources and decision-making.

### COTTONCONNECT'S CONTRIBUTION TO ADDRESSING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) IN COTTON PRODUCTION

Through its work with local communities, CottonConnect has knowledge of challenges faced by women, from limited access to resources and decision-making to discrimination and violence. To address these issues, CottonConnect empowers women farmers with knowledge, resources, and access to support services. By raising awareness of women's rights, improving access to legal protections, and providing livelihood opportunities for survivors of GBV, CottonConnect strives to address root causes of gender inequality and creates safer, more inclusive environment.

CottonConnect recognises that gender inequality and GBV are significant obstacles to building a sustainable, equitable, and prosperous cotton sector. Committed to enhancing livelihoods within cotton supply chains, CottonConnect is actively working to empower women and address systemic issues such as GBV.

By engaging with communities and building strong partnerships with local and international stakeholders, lasting impact is created, ensuring the voices of women and marginalised groups are heard. Initiatives like Women in Cotton empower women, uphold their rights, and contribute to a safer, more equitable cotton supply chain.

### COTTONCONNECT'S GBV AWARENESS AND RESPONSE PROGRAMME

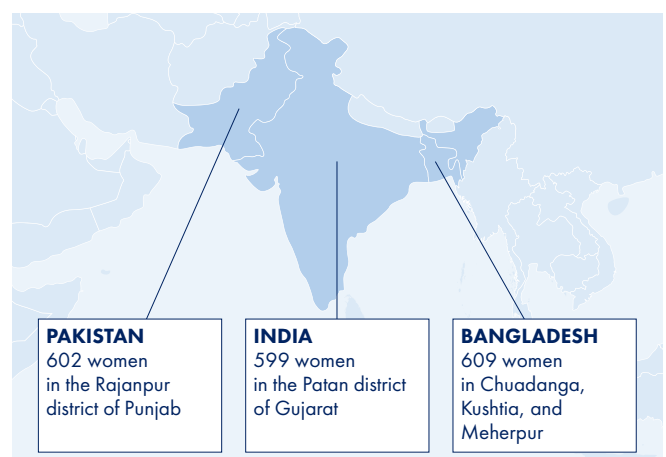
As part of its broader commitment to supporting women in cotton, the GBV Awareness and Response Programme launched in 2022, has impacted 1,810 women across three districts in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. This programme has been pivotal in raising awareness about gender equality, legal rights, and available support services.

Leveraging its strong relationships with women farmers and local partners, CottonConnect has been able to effectively address GBV and promote positive, lasting change. The programme's focus on raising awareness and providing support makes it a pioneering initiative, laying the groundwork for shifting societal attitudes, challenging harmful cultural norms, and empowering women to create safer, more inclusive environments.

The programme aimed to empower women and address gender-based violence (GBV) through:

- **GBV Training:** Educating women on identifying various forms of GBV.
- **Counselling Services:** Offering individual, family, and group counselling to support survivors.
- **Community Engagement:** Conducting meetings to raise awareness about gender equity and support for survivors.
- **Visits to Statutory Bodies:** Introducing women to police stations, crisis centres, and legal support services.
- **Sensitisation of Men and Boys:** Encouraging men and boys in challenging harmful norms.

Baseline and endline assessments revealed notable improvements in women's awareness of their rights and available support systems. However, the programme also highlighted ongoing challenges, particularly in areas where deeply rooted cultural norms continue to hinder progress.



1. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>  
 2. [https://www.idhsustainabletrade.com/uploaded/2021/07/IDH\\_GenderSensitisationModules.pdf](https://www.idhsustainabletrade.com/uploaded/2021/07/IDH_GenderSensitisationModules.pdf)  
 3. <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/mgrt/sectorbrief-addressinggbv-agribusiness.pdf>

# Key Findings from Baseline and Endline Assessments

## REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (VAW)

Women reported various barriers to reporting VAW, including shame, stigma, distrust in redressal systems, and fear of lengthy judicial processes.

- At baseline, 94% of women reported feelings of shame, and 55% mentioned distress after reporting incidents of violence.
- At endline, 49% of women reported that survivors experience low confidence after filing a case

**Stigma:** Survivors are often blamed and stigmatised in their communities, which deters them from seeking justice.

## AWARENESS OF PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (VAW), LEGAL PROTECTIONS, AND REDRESSAL MECHANISMS

The programme significantly improved awareness of VAW prevention and legal protections across all regions.

- Baseline awareness of laws was only 17% rising to 75% by the endline in Pakistan; in Bangladesh it rose from 54% to 73%.
- In India, where awareness was already high at 97% it rose 100% by the endline.
- Women also gained a better understanding of legal procedures, including the importance of female police officers and the ability to file complaints from home.

## SERVICES AVAILABLE TO SURVIVORS

Women's awareness of services available to survivors of GBV increased significantly.



Awareness of shelter services **increased** from 7% at baseline to **47%** at endline



Awareness of counselling services **increased** from 32% to **58%**

## REFERRAL MECHANISMS

The programme raised awareness of key emergency contacts.



Awareness of the women's helpline **increased**

**India:** from 19% to **94%**

**Pakistan:** from 34% to **69%**

**Bangladesh:** from 54% to **81%**

## ENTITLEMENTS FOR WOMEN

Awareness of entitlements for survivors increased, with women understanding that they can access medical treatment, counselling, and compensation funds.



### INDIA:

Awareness of medical aid **increased** from 0.2% to **22%**



### PAKISTAN:

Awareness **increased** by **21%** for women who reported all entitlements



### BANGLADESH:

A significant **increase to 90%** awareness at endline, up from 56% at baseline



## Conclusion

The GBV Awareness and Response Programme has contributed to notable improvements in the knowledge and awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) laws, available services, and reporting mechanisms. The programme equipped these women with essential information and empowering them to seek justice and support when needed.

### KEY OUTCOMES INCLUDE:

- **Increased Knowledge:** improved awareness of different forms of GBV and legal protections in all regions.
- **Greater Confidence in Reporting:** enhanced confidence in seeking legal and medical support despite cultural barriers.
- **Improved Access to Services:** better understanding of where to access shelters, legal aid, and medical services.

While these achievements are promising, the programme highlights the ongoing need to address cultural stigma, build community trust, and provide continuous support to survivors. GBV prevention and response require sustained efforts to dismantle barriers and encourage long-term behavioral change. Therefore, it requires support from all key stakeholders in the supply chain, especially the brands.

For brands and retailers, addressing this issue is crucial, as it directly impacts the well-being, productivity, and safety of workers, particularly women in cotton farming communities. With growing consumers and stakeholders demand for ethical and responsible business practices, addressing GBV prevention, brands can improve their social responsibility profile, strengthen relationships with local communities, and contribute to more sustainable, resilient supply chains. Ultimately, this benefits both brand's long-term success and the livelihoods of workers throughout the supply chain.

For more information, contact us: [info@cottonconnect.org](mailto:info@cottonconnect.org) • +44 (0)203 865 7038 • [www.cottonconnect.org](http://www.cottonconnect.org)

