

BRINGING COMMUNITIES TOGETHER TO CELEBRATE WOMEN

In Pakistan, our six Implementing Partners — our trusted, like-minded partners on the ground — currently reach 140 female BCI Farmers and 117,500 female farm workers (workers are defined as people who work on cotton farms but do not own the farm and are not the main decision makers) in the Punjab and Sindh provinces.

On 8 March 2018, International Women's Day, many of these women came together in Muzaffargarh, Punjab, to learn from each other, to deepen their understanding about women's rights and gender equality, and most importantly, to celebrate and have fun.

The women's festival was organised by Social Welfare Department Muzaffargarh with support from our Implementing Partner, WWF Pakistan, and brought communities together to celebrate and challenge entrenched attitudes about the traditional roles of women. The festival was called Women Mela. In Urdu, Mela means a 'gathering of people celebrating local cultures, traditions, food and handicrafts.'

More than 250 people gathered at Women Mela, including people from cotton growing communities, and public and private sector organisations. Many men also participated, joining in and celebrating the day with women, and taking the opportunity to deepen their understanding of women's rights. In rural agricultural communities in Pakistan, because of entrenched gender bias, men and women rarely sit together in public settings. At Women Mela, traditional attitudes towards segregation were put aside, and men were sitting amongst the women to show encouragement and appreciation. The general mood of the women who participated in Women Mela was energetic and jubilant while many proclaimed, *this is our day and we are here to enjoy it!*

The day began with the Chairman from the district council, Umar Khan, giving a speech inspiring women to take on greater responsibilities within their communities and giving thanks to WWF Pakistan for their role in bringing many women together on International Women's Day. Afshan Sufyan, Senior Programme Officer, BCI Pakistan, spoke about women's empowerment and shared examples about BCI Farmers and farm workers who were challenging gender norms in their communities. Afshan captivated the audience by sharing a story about a capable woman called Nasreen Bibi who had taken on ownership and management of her family cotton farm when her husband passed away. Instead of employing a man to manage the farm, and despite not having previous training on crop management practices, Nasreen learned how to farm cotton, cultivating healthy crops and increasing her profit.

After the opening speeches, the day erupted into a riot of colour and celebrations. On the main stage, there were poetry readings and songs about women's empowerment, including local children from different schools who sang songs celebrating women. Many women showcased their local handicrafts at stalls, designed by women for women.

Afshan concluded, *"A true woman turns pain into power, and I saw many instances of courage at Women Mela. Seeing women, who had previously been hesitant to leave the house, participate in the day — and women and men celebrating together and enjoying the festivities — was a true indication that we are successfully spreading the word of women's rights and gender equality in Pakistan."*

"BCI currently works with 40,560 female farmers worldwide."



STORIES FROM THE FIELD