

**BASIC MATERIALS** | Mon Jan 25, 2016 | 4:05am EST

Pakistani women nurture trees and pride in forest drive

By [Aamir Saeed](#)

HARIPUR, Pakistan, Jan 25 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Robina Gul has swapped her needle for a trowel. Until recently, the villager from northern Pakistan got by making clothes for family weddings and religious festivals, but now she is encouraging other women to set up tree nurseries like hers that can earn them a handsome monthly income.

Gul is growing some 25,000 saplings of 13 different species crammed into the small courtyard of her two-room house in Najaf Pur, a village of around 8,000 people in the Haripur district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

"It gives me immense pleasure to look after the saplings as this has changed my whole life," said Gul, 35. "It has become a hobby for me and a source of income too."

She set up the nursery at her home in March last year under an agreement with the provincial forest department. The government provides around a quarter of the start-up cost for poor households to set up a tree nursery, with a subsidy amounting to 150,000 rupees (\$1,429.93) each over a year.

They first get black polythene bags from the forest department to fill with mud and manure, followed by seeds and training on how to sow them and tend to the trees.

"I am now getting over 12,000 rupees per month (from the subsidy), just by looking after the saplings in my home," Gul said. "I have also acquired the skills I need to grow different seedlings, and this will help me earn enough even after the project is wound up."

The provincial government is planning to spend 21 billion rupees from its budget through to May 2018, when its term ends, on a project called the "Billion Tree Tsunami". The goal is to plant 1 billion trees in degraded forest areas and on private land.

The project is part of the Green Growth Initiative launched in February 2014 in Peshawar by former international cricket star Imran Khan, who is chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, which governs the province.

The initiative aims to boost local economic development in a way that uses natural resources sustainably, with a focus on increasing clean energy uptake and forest cover.

The government has turned forest restoration into a business model by outsourcing nurseries to the private sector, including widows, poor women and young people. This provides the government with saplings to plant, as well as green jobs for the community.

At the same time, illegal logging has been almost eliminated in the province following strict disciplinary action against some officials who were involved. Other measures include hiring local people to guard forests and banning wood transportation.

ECONOMIC BOOST

According to government data, Pakistan has forest cover on 4.4 million hectares (10.87 million acres) or 5 percent of its land area, while the current rate of deforestation is 27,000 hectares per year, one of the highest in the world.

The forestry sector contributed \$1.3 billion to Pakistan's economy in 2011, or around 0.6 percent of GDP, while employing some 53,000 people directly, according to Global Forest Watch.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, individuals interested in setting up a small-scale nursery of 25,000 plants are selected by Village Development Committees.

The provincial government guarantees to buy the saplings they grow, according to Malik Amin Aslam, adviser to Khan and global vice president of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

"The government provides seeds and all relevant technical assistance to the beneficiaries, and then buys back one-year-old saplings at a fixed price of six rupees per seedling," he said.

So far, there are 1,747 private and 280 government-run nurseries in the province, with a planting stock of 45 million and 165 million saplings respectively, he said. They will all be transplanted onto the land in March and April, he added.

"These nurseries are not only providing the planting stock for the 'Billion Tree' drive but are also generating tremendous economic activity throughout the province," he said.

Aslam said the government had planted 115 million saplings so far and sown seeds for 300 million more at a cost of 1.5 billion rupees, with a survival rate of over 80 percent for the young trees planted out in August and September.

INVOLVING WOMEN

Zobia Gul, a community development officer in the forest department, mobilises women and educated girls in remote areas to play an active part in society by setting up nurseries.

"Most of the families in the rural part of the province are conservative," she said. "Here comes the role of the female forest officials in reaching women in their homes and informing them about the project."

Local men appear happy with efforts to include women in the scheme because it allows them to bring in money without having to go out to work.

Over 500 women are directly involved in the project, giving them pride in their work establishing the nurseries and serving as custodians of the forests around their villages, the officer said.

Inspired by these women, around 150 more across the province have registered with community development officers to start nurseries in the upcoming season, starting from March.

"I am going to become part of Imran Khan's vision and the 'Billion Tree Tsunami' project," said Farwa Ambreen, a recent graduate from the University of Peshawar.

"I believe this is going to help not only Pakistan but also the whole world in boosting the green economy and tackling climate change," she said. (\$1 = 104.9000 Pakistani rupees) (Reporting by Aamir Saeed; editing by Megan Rowling. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking, corruption and climate change. Visit news.trust.org)