



International
Labour
Organization

► 2025 Observance of recruitment and working conditions in the cotton harvest in Turkmenistan



▶ **2025 Observance of
recruitment and working
conditions in the cotton
harvest in Turkmenistan**

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► Preface

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is committed to promoting decent work for all. At the request of the Government of Turkmenistan, the ILO has continued its direct cooperation in the country, including through the observance of recruitment and working conditions during the cotton harvest. This report presents the findings from the ILO's observance of the 2025 cotton harvest, with a particular focus on progress and remaining challenges in the prevention of child labour and forced labour. The Office acknowledges and appreciates the continued engagement and cooperation of the Government of Turkmenistan in this important undertaking.

The findings in this report highlight both positive developments and areas requiring further progress. The ILO remains committed to supporting the Government of Turkmenistan in the implementation of the Roadmap of Cooperation, extended until the end of 2026, which includes continued support for the strengthening of legal and policy frameworks, labour inspection, awareness-raising, and the promotion of an enabling environment for effective social dialogue.

The ILO extends its gratitude to all stakeholders who contributed to the roundtable discussions in Ashgabat and the regions, and who provided valuable feedback on the findings. The support of the UN Resident Coordinator Office in facilitating this cooperation, as well as the continued support of development partners that has been instrumental in sustaining this process.

We hope that this report will serve as a useful resource for ongoing efforts to strengthen labour protections in the cotton sector and beyond. The ILO looks forward to continuing its collaboration with the Government of Turkmenistan and all relevant partners in support of sustained progress, strengthened social dialogue, and decent work for all.



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International Labour Organization (ILO)

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► Abbreviations

CAPI	computer-assisted personal interviewing
ILO	International Labour Organization
IRB	Institutional Review Board
OSH	occupational safety and health
PISOE	public institution and state-owned enterprise
PPE	personal protective equipment

► 1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) third consecutive observance of recruitment and working conditions in the cotton harvest in Turkmenistan, undertaken within the framework of cooperation between the ILO and the Government of Turkmenistan.

The 2025 observance was implemented nationwide across all five regions and covered cotton fields, public institutions and state-owned enterprises (PISOE) and included interviews with farmers' associations. The observance combined direct field observation with self-administered questionnaires and face-to-face interviews, applying established ethical safeguards and protocols to protect participants and to support the collection of credible evidence. The observance methodology was built directly on that of the 2024 observance, enabling the identification of patterns and emerging trends over time.

The report is structured as follows. It begins by outlining the framework of cooperation between the ILO and the Government of Turkmenistan and the policy developments that form the context for the 2025 observance, before setting out the objectives, scope and methodology of the observance exercise. It then presents findings on socio-demographic characteristics and working conditions, followed by sections on child labour, forced mobilization and production pressures faced by farmers. The report concludes with key takeaways and considerations for continued implementation of the ILO–Government Roadmap.

1.1 Cooperation between the ILO and the Government

History of cooperation between Turkmenistan and the ILO

Cooperation between the Government of Turkmenistan and the ILO has expanded rapidly over the past several years. Following the 2021 Conclusions of the ILO Conference Committee on the Application of Standards, which called on the Government to take effective, time-bound measures to eliminate forced labour in the cotton harvest, Turkmenistan and the ILO began a structured programme of collaboration in 2023.

The 2023 Roadmap for Cooperation marked the first formal framework for joint action, covering legal and regulatory review, capacity building, and technical support on labour inspection. Importantly, it introduced a new component: independent ILO observance of recruitment and working conditions in the cotton harvest, enabling the ILO to systematically document practices related to forced labour, child labour, and broader working conditions in cotton fields and public institutions.

This observance mechanism was first implemented during the 2023 cotton harvest, and, on that basis, the ILO and the Government agreed to continue and expand the observance for subsequent harvest seasons.

Continuation of cooperation and the 2024 observance

In July 2024, the Memorandum of Understanding governing the observance was extended for the 2024 harvest and broadened to include all public institutions and state-owned enterprises. The ILO conducted a full observance exercise during the 2024 cotton harvest. The results were presented in the 2024 Observance Report,¹ which provides the first comprehensive baseline against which future progress can be measured, as it reflects the first year of nationwide implementation with a substantial sample size. That report

¹ International Labour Organization (ILO), [2024 Observance of recruitment and working conditions in the cotton harvest in Turkmenistan](#) (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2025).

documented both improvements – such as an increase in wages paid to pickers and strengthened awareness measures – and persistent challenges, including continued indicators of forced mobilization and evidence of child labour.

This 2025 report builds directly on that foundation. While the previous report presented the findings of the 2024 observance, the present report provides the results of the ILO's observance of the 2025 cotton harvest, allowing for a clearer assessment of emerging trends, the effectiveness of reforms implemented during 2024, and remaining decent work challenges.

The 2024–2026 Roadmap

The ILO–Government Roadmap for 2024–2026 sets out an ambitious framework to support the elimination of child labour and forced labour. The Roadmap is structured around four pillars: (1) priority actions to prevent child labour and forced labour; (2) legislative reform; (3) strengthened enforcement mechanisms; and (4) broader policy measures, including research and enhanced social dialogue. The annual ILO observance is situated within the pillar concerning “priority actions” and contributes to the Roadmap's broader agenda.

The continuation of annual observance under the Roadmap serves a dual purpose: first, to monitor progress resulting from these reforms and commitments, and second, to provide updated evidence each year to guide further policy adjustments and strengthen protections for workers in the cotton sector.

Policy developments 2024–2025

Since the 2024 ILO observance, several reforms have been achieved through ILO–Government cooperation. These include the adoption of multiple amendments to the Labour Code, notably revisions to Article 8 on forced labour. The amendments removed key exceptions to the prohibition of forced labour, specifically references to “any work (service) that is part of the ordinary civil duties of citizens” and to “any public works, that is, work performed for the direct benefit of the labour collective by members of this collective, and which therefore can be considered ordinary civic duties of the members of the collective”.

The Government also amended provisions relating to work undertaken by children, which now effectively prohibit **all** work performed by children under the age of 18, except for limited activities in the artistic or sporting fields as provided for in Article 23 of the Labour Code. Together with reforms introduced earlier in 2024 to increase cotton purchasing prices and pickers' wages, and the inclusion of cotton picking on the Hazardous Work List, these legislative and policy changes form the context within which the 2025 ILO observance has been conducted.

Ongoing cooperation

Cooperation between the ILO and the Government of Turkmenistan is ongoing and continues to develop through regular engagement at both policy and technical levels. In early 2026, a series of bilateral discussions, high-level missions, regional awareness-raising initiatives, political dialogues, and technical assistance activities were undertaken. These efforts were aimed at strengthening the policy environment, supporting institutional capacity, and promoting practical measures for the prevention of child labour and forced labour. They have also provided opportunities to exchange information, identify priority areas for further action, and support continued progress in line with international labour standards.

A technical cooperation project is also underway, with political support of the Government of Turkmenistan, alongside plans to fully implement the 2024–26 roadmap. The Government is providing considerable in-kind support to these activities, including through coordination support, provision of venues, and facilitation of engagement with relevant institutions. These efforts are intended to further consolidate ongoing

cooperation, translate agreed priorities into concrete actions, and support sustained progress in preventing child labour and forced labour.

1.2 Objectives and scope of the observance

The 2025 observance of the cotton harvest in Turkmenistan examined the ways in which cotton pickers were recruited and employed during the harvest period, with particular attention to risks related to child labour and forced mobilization. As the observance was conducted consecutively with the 2024 exercise, it also enabled, for the first time, an assessment of emerging trends across key variables, including recruitment practices, working conditions, and the prevalence of related labour risks. This permitted insight into implementation and effectiveness of measures adopted by the Government of Turkmenistan to address child labour and forced mobilization risks and improve working conditions during the harvest.

The 2025 observance aimed to:

- collect independent and credible data on recruitment practices, working conditions, and the risks of forced labour and child labour in the cotton harvest;
- document the implementation of government measures to prevent forced mobilization and child labour, as well as persistent challenges affecting working conditions;
- examine recruitment channels, methods, and mechanisms used to engage cotton pickers;
- identify decent work deficits in recruitment and employment practices and outline areas requiring remediation;
- raise awareness among employers, workers, and other relevant stakeholders on labour rights and obligations during the cotton harvest; and
- assess changes and trends over time by comparing findings with those of the 2024 observance.

To meet these objectives, the observance followed a structured monitoring protocol that included visits to cotton fields, public institutions, state-owned enterprises and farmers' associations throughout the harvest period. Cotton field visits focused on documenting recruitment practices, working conditions, and indications of child labour and forced mobilization as they occurred. Public institutions and state-owned enterprises including schools, healthcare facilities, and essential service providers such as water and electricity utilities – were covered, allowing the observance to capture the broader institutional context surrounding labour mobilization during the cotton harvest. As discussed below, farmers' associations were included for the first time in the observance, offering insight into the economic dynamics and organizing mechanisms underlying cotton production.

► 2. Observance methodology

2.1 Ethical principles

As with prior years, ethical considerations were paramount in the design of the 2025 cotton harvest observance methodology. The observance built on the standard operating procedures, safeguards, and ethical protocols developed and refined during the 2023 and 2024 observances, incorporating lessons learned from earlier implementation. In line with this established approach, the 2025 observance was guided by internationally recognized research ethics frameworks, including the UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation (2020), UNICEF's Procedure on Ethical Standards (2021), and the European Commission's *Ethics for Researchers* (2011). This continuity ensured the consistent application of ethical standards across observance cycles and strengthened protections for participants' rights, dignity, and well-being.

During the development of the observance methodology, the research team systematically assessed potential risks and benefits for each category of participant and maintained a comprehensive protection protocol to safeguard participants from harm. Participation in the observance was strictly voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Participants received clear and accessible information on the objectives and scope of the observance, the nature of their participation, and the intended use of the data. Observers were trained to provide assistance as needed, including in cases where individuals were unable to read the consent form independently. Consistent with international ethical standards, no payments or incentives were offered, thereby avoiding any risk of undue influence or coercion. Participants were also provided with contact details for an independent ILO grievance mechanism, enabling them to seek further information or raise concerns, including those related to the observance. The mechanism was engaged by individuals during the 2025 harvest.

Respect for participants' privacy and confidentiality was central to the data collection and analysis process. Robust safeguards were implemented to ensure secure handling of personal data, including anonymization, secure storage, data encryption, and the safe disposal of data in accordance with established protocols. To support consistent and ethical implementation, all staff involved in data collection received comprehensive training on ethical principles and participant protection. Finally, the methodology and associated protocols were reviewed and approved by an independent Institutional Review Board (IRB), confirming full compliance with applicable ethical standards. This comprehensive approach reflects the ILO's commitment to conducting research that upholds the highest ethical standards and prioritizes the protection of all participants.

2.2 Scope and logistics

The 2025 cotton harvest observance was implemented over a total of 190 observance days, 10 days less than the 2024 observance as a result of funding shortages that limited the number of days that could be deployed for field observance.

The observance was conducted over four rounds spanning approximately 38 weeks, with three rounds deploying five observance teams and one round deploying four teams, resulting in a total of 19 team-weeks of observation. Despite the reduction of two observance weeks compared to the previous year, the design ensured sustained field presence throughout a significant period of the harvest. Geographic coverage remained comprehensive, with observance activities conducted across all five regions of Turkmenistan.

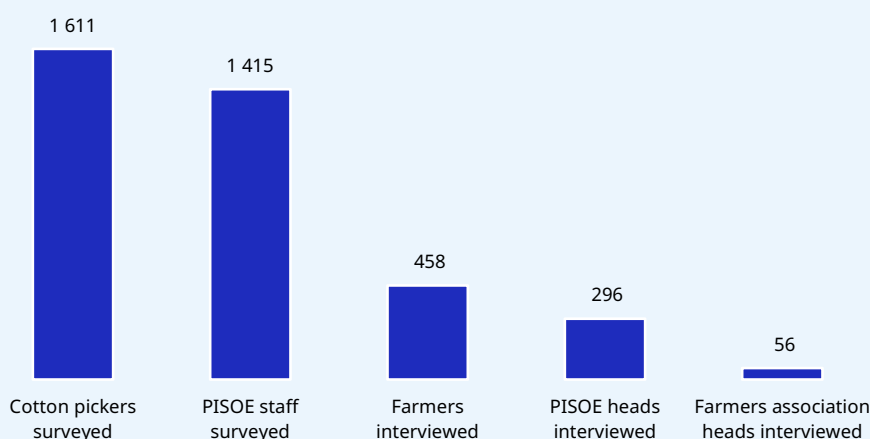
In total, 1,611 cotton pickers were surveyed through field-based interviews, providing direct insight into recruitment practices and working conditions at the point of work. In parallel, 458 farmers were interviewed,

offering information on labour recruitment, field management, and interactions with workers. The observance also included visits to public institutions and state-owned enterprises, resulting in surveys with 1,415 staff members and in-depth interviews with 296 heads of public institutions and state-owned enterprises (PISOEs). Together, these data sources enabled triangulation across workers, employers, and key institutional actors.

A new component of the 2025 observance was the inclusion of interviews with heads of farmers' associations, with 56 such interviews conducted using open-ended questions. This addition responded to findings from the 2024 observance, which indicated that farmers often had limited access to information on the economics of cotton production, including input costs and pricing arrangements. The open-ended format allowed farmers' associations to elaborate on coordination mechanisms, communication channels, and decision-making processes related to the cotton harvest at the local level. By expanding the range of institutional actors covered, the 2025 observance strengthened understanding of the broader dynamics influencing recruitment practices and labour mobilization in the cotton sector.

► **Figure 1. Scope of observance**

Number of surveys collected, by respondent category.



2.3 Field team composition

The observance exercise involved multiple field teams, each led by two ILO staff members who were assisted by two local translators and one driver. ILO observers participated in mandatory training covering the objectives, procedures, ethical considerations, and technical aspects of the observance. Local interpreters and drivers also received procedural and ethical training in-country before the exercise began.

2.4 Data collection

Data for the 2025 observance of the cotton harvest were collected through a combination of direct observation, self-administered questionnaires, and face-to-face interviews using structured surveys and open-ended questionnaires. Data collection was carried out across multiple sites and institutional settings, including cotton fields, public institutions and state-owned enterprises (PISOEs), and farmers' associations. Standardized protocols were applied throughout the observance to ensure consistency, reliability, and adherence to ethical standards.

- **Cotton fields:** In cotton fields, observance teams conducted direct observations and distributed self-administered questionnaires to cotton pickers, while farmers were interviewed face to face using structured questionnaires. These tools were used to gather information on recruitment practices, working conditions, and risks related to child labour and forced mobilization. Prior to participation, the purpose of the observance was clearly explained and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Field-based observations complemented questionnaire and interview data by documenting work conditions at the worksite. In accordance with the observance MOU with the Government, children were not interviewed in order to avoid placing them in potentially compromising situations; information related to child labour was instead collected through observations and interviews with adult respondents.
- **Public institutions and state-owned enterprises (PISOEs):** Data collection in public institutions and state-owned enterprises followed a comparable approach. Staff members completed self-administered questionnaires, while heads of institutions were interviewed face to face using structured surveys. The objective was to examine the potential involvement of a range of public institutions and their staff in cotton harvesting activities and to assess recruitment practices and potential indicators of forced mobilization.
- **Farmers' associations:** As a new component of the 2025 observance, data were collected through interviews with heads of farmers' associations. This component was introduced to address information gaps identified during the 2024 observance, particularly in relation to the economics of cotton production, which could not be adequately captured through interviews with individual farmers, as they often did not have access to this information. The interviews were conducted on the basis of informed consent and followed a semi-structured, open-ended format. This approach enabled respondents to provide detailed information on coordination arrangements, communication channels, and decision-making processes related to the cotton harvest, as well as on key economic aspects of cotton production. No structured surveys were administered for this component; qualitative data collection was prioritized to strengthen contextual analysis.

2.5 Data collection tools and methods

Updated questionnaires and consent forms were used in the 2025 observance to reflect issues identified in previous monitoring exercises and to support comparison of key indicators over time. All data collection tools were originally developed in English and subsequently translated into Turkmen (Latin script), Turkmen (Cyrillic script), Russian, Uzbek, and Balochi to ensure accessibility and comprehension among respondents. Translations were intentionally kept simple and non-technical, in line with guidance to ensure that questions could be easily understood by respondents with varying levels of education. Data were collected using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), which enhanced data quality through built-in validation checks, reduced transcription errors, and enabled timely data processing. Prior to deployment, observers received training on the use of digital data collection tools, ethical standards, and informed consent procedures.

2.6 Timing of rounds of observation

The observance was implemented through four rounds timed to reflect the different stages of the cotton harvest. The first round was carried out at the beginning of the harvest, from 28 August to 7 September, capturing early-season recruitment and working conditions. The second round followed from 12 to 22 September, with a third round conducted from 2 to 12 October, both covering the peak harvest period. The fourth and final round took place toward the end of the season, from 25 October to 4 November, enabling observation of conditions as harvesting activities drew to a close and ensuring coverage across the entire harvest cycle.

► **Figure 2. Timing of 2025 observance**



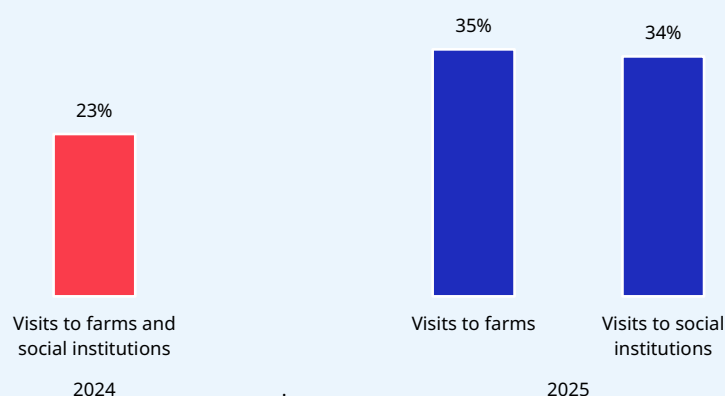
2.7 Limitations and challenges

While the 2025 cotton harvest observance provides independent and multi-source evidence, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

- First, the observance was not designed to be statistically representative; rather, it followed a purposive monitoring approach aimed at identifying patterns, risks, and practices across regions, institutions, and stages of the harvest. As such, results cannot be extrapolated to quantify prevalence at the national level.
- Second, the observance addressed inherently sensitive topics, including forced mobilization and child labour, which may have constrained full disclosure by some respondents despite the application of strict ethical safeguards, confidentiality measures, and informed consent procedures. Fear of repercussions, social desirability bias, or mistrust may have influenced responses, particularly among public sector employees and workers in vulnerable situations.
- Third, instances of interference grew in number in the 2025 observance, including the presence of local officials or supervisors near interview locations and attempts to influence access to respondents or worksites. Overall, interference was reported in approximately one third of visits nationwide (35 per cent in field visits and 34 per cent in PISOE visits).

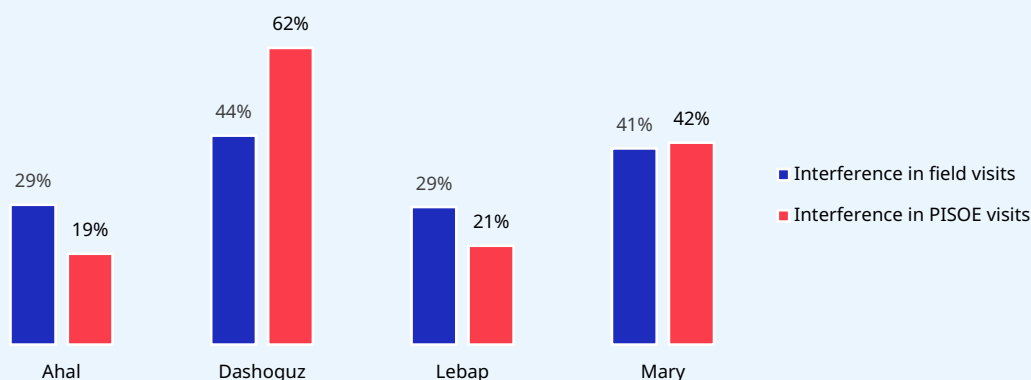
► **Figure 3. Interference with observance**

(a) Percentage of successful visits where some form of interference was reported by observers, by year and type of visit.



► **Figure 3. (cont.)**

(b) Percentage of successful visits where some form of interference was reported by observers, by region and type of visit, 2025.



The extent of interference varied markedly across regions and by type of visit, as illustrated in Figure 3, which shows the percentage of successful visits where observers reported some form of interference. Interference during field visits was most frequently reported in Dashoguz (44 per cent) and Mary (41 per cent), compared to lower levels in Ahal and Lebap (both 29 per cent). A similar regional pattern was observed during visits to public institutions and state-owned enterprises (PISOE), with interference reported most often in Dashoguz (62 per cent) and Mary (42 per cent), while substantially lower rates were recorded in Ahal (19 per cent) and Lebap (21 per cent). These regional disparities suggest uneven local implementation of commitments to enable independent observance.

Although observance teams applied mitigation measures – such as adjusting interview locations, triangulating information across sources, and documenting interference as a finding in itself – interference may have affected the depth or openness of some responses in higher-interference regions.

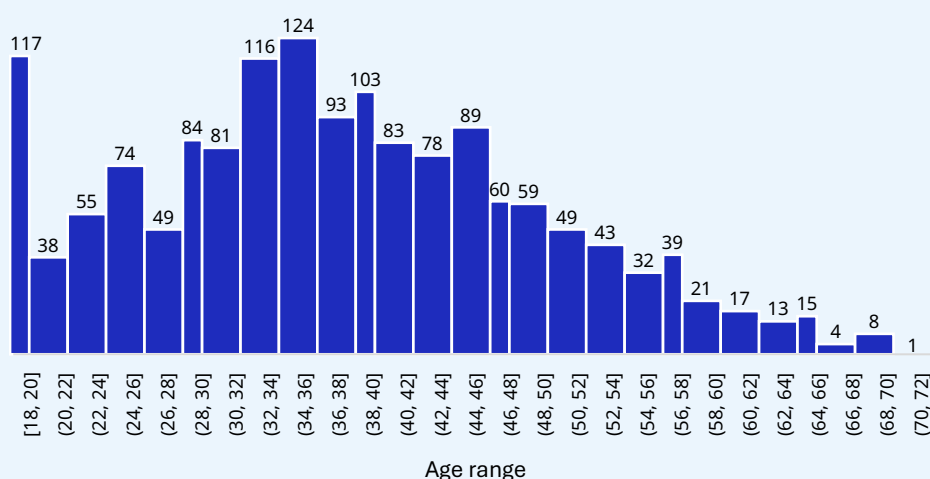
- Fourth, children were not interviewed as part of the observance. This decision was taken deliberately to avoid placing children in potentially harmful or compromising situations and to fully uphold their rights, dignity, and well-being in line with international ethical standards. As a result, information on child labour relies on direct observation by ILO staff and interviews with adult respondents rather than first-hand accounts from children themselves. While this approach prioritizes child protection, it may limit the depth of insight into children's individual experiences. The establishment of specialized child protection services, referral mechanisms, and context-appropriate protocols as well as government approval would be required before any direct engagement with children could be ethically considered in future monitoring exercises.
- Finally, funding constraints reduced the total number of observance days compared to 2024, which may have limited coverage intensity in certain locations, even though nationwide geographic coverage and seasonal continuity were maintained. Taken together, these limitations underscore the importance of interpreting the findings alongside qualitative context and observed trends over time, rather than as definitive measurements of incidence.

► 3. Socio-demographic characteristics

The observance collected demographic information on the age, gender, and place of residence of cotton pickers to inform a deeper understanding of the composition of the workforce and the factors shaping their working conditions. Respondents were from a broad age spectrum, with approximately 27 per cent aged 30 or below, 57 per cent between 30 and 50, and 16 per cent over 50, and a mean age of 38 years. The findings show that more than 90 per cent of cotton pickers surveyed were women, highlighting the significant gender dimension of cotton picking in Turkmenistan. This stands in contrast to the gender profile of farmers interviewed, of whom 68 per cent were male and 32 per cent female.

► **Figure 4. Age profile of interviewed cotton pickers**

Number of interviewed cotton pickers, by age range.

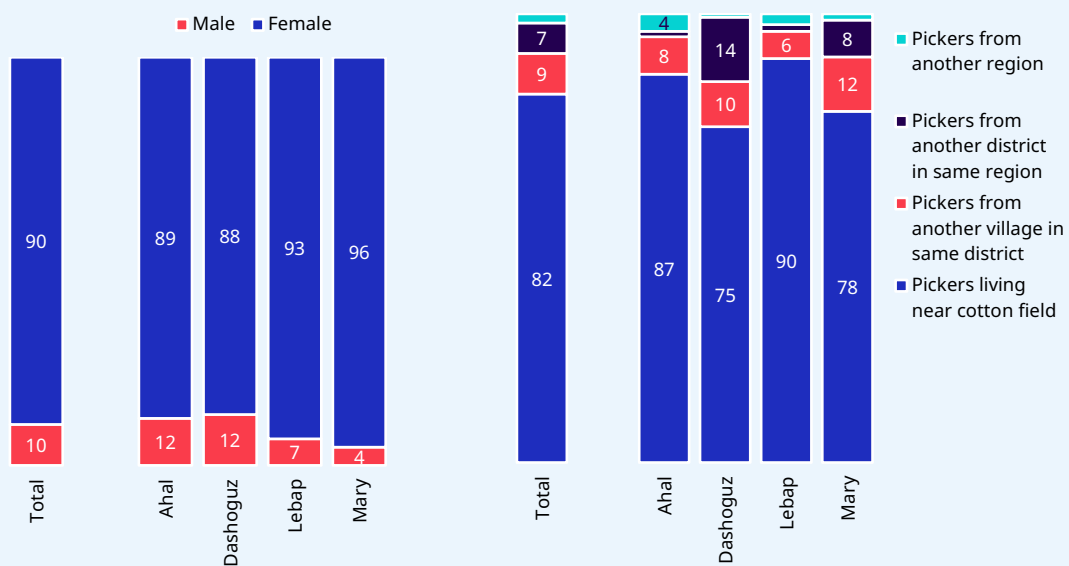


The residence patterns of pickers surveyed also vary. While most (82 per cent) lived in villages adjacent to the fields, a non-negligible proportion travelled from farther distances, including 9 per cent from another village within the same district (Etrap), 7 per cent from a different district within the same region (Velayat), and 2 per cent from another region. By region, Lebap was most reliant on local pickers (90 per cent of the total), while Dashoguz was the region with the greatest share of workers from other districts within the region (14 per cent) and Ahal recorded the highest share of workers from other regions (4 per cent). This variation in residence patterns and levels of mobility points to differing degrees of reliance on transportation, with some pickers bearing additional costs and time burdens associated with travel, and potentially greater dependence on intermediaries or temporary accommodation arrangements.

It should be noted that this demographic profile reflects only adult respondents, as children under the age of 18 were not interviewed owing to ethical considerations. As discussed later in the report, ILO international observers documented the presence of working children during field observations; if these children were included, the overall demographic profile – particularly with respect to age and gender – would be modified.

► **Figure 5. Age and residence of interviewed cotton pickers**

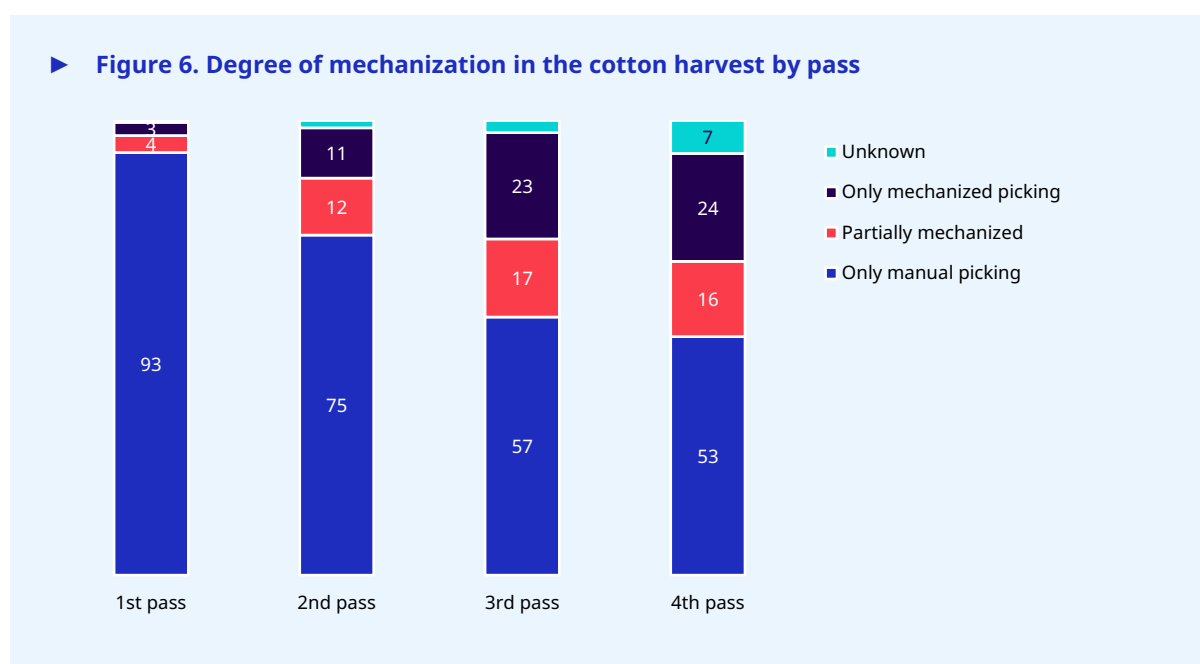
(a) Percentage distribution of cotton pickers, by sex. (b) Percentage distribution of cotton pickers, by residence.



► 4. Working conditions

4.1 Harvest mechanization

Evidence from the observance indicated that the 2025 cotton harvest in Turkmenistan was undertaken through a mix of manual and mechanized picking, with the former continuing to play by far the most important role across all four sequential passes. Manual-only picking accounted for nearly 93 per cent of farms in the first pass, declining progressively to around half by the fourth, while partially mechanized and fully mechanised operations grew correspondingly across the season. Farmers explained that they preferentially deployed hand-pickers in the earlier passes in order to protect the higher-quality, first-open bolls from damage associated with mechanical harvesting, reserving machines for the later passes when quality premiums were lower. Yet even in the final pass, manual-only picking was still used in around half of all farms visited. This sustained reliance on manual labour underscores the importance of continued investigation into the working and recruitment conditions of the workers picking cotton and speaks directly to the rationale for the observance itself.

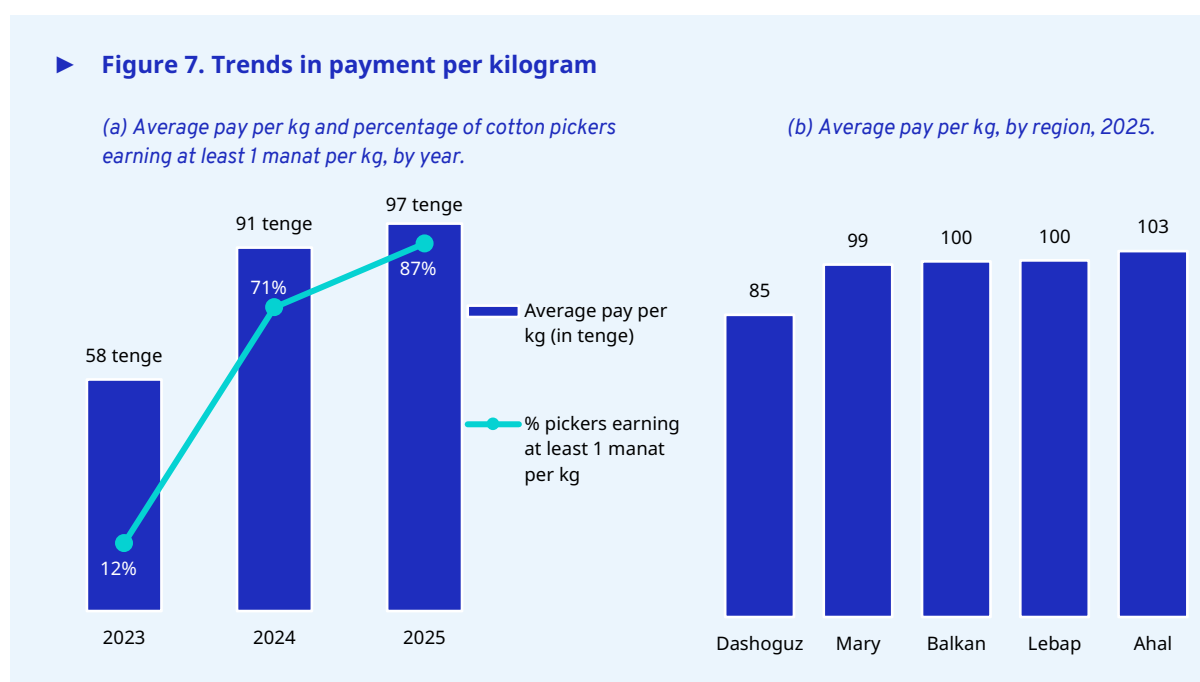


4.2 Payment and compensation

The 2025 harvest saw a continued upward trend in remuneration for cotton pickers, with the average pay per kilogram reaching 97 tenge² in 2025, up from 58 tenge in 2023 and 91 tenge in 2024. This progress was also reflected in the distribution of earnings: the share of pickers surveyed receiving at least one manat per kilogram increased from just 12 per cent in 2023 to 71 per cent in 2024 and further to 87 per cent in 2025. At the same time, the proportion earning below the mandated minimum declined from 29 per cent in 2024 to 13 per cent in the 2025 harvest. Only 2.4 per cent of pickers in 2025 reported being paid less than promised, suggesting that wage compliance has strengthened.

² 100 tenge=1 manat.

Despite these improvements, regional variation remains significant. In 2025, average pay ranged from a low of 85 tenge per kilogram in Dashoguz to a high of 103 tenge in Ahal. Seasonal differences also persist, with average piece rates rising as the harvest progresses – from 87.6 tenge in August to 95.0 in September, 99.6 in October, and 100.1 in November. This progression aligns with established seasonal dynamics in which later-season cotton typically requires more labour effort and is therefore compensated at higher rates.



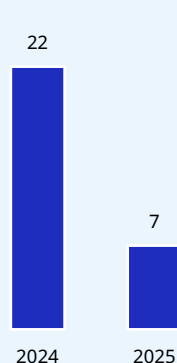
Cotton pickers report harvesting an average of 75 kilograms per day, resulting in an average daily income of 72.12 manat. These earnings represent an improvement over previous years; however, comparison with findings from an ILO preliminary small-scale study in Lebap and Mary — the ILO wages and income study — suggests that many cotton pickers may not reach the national minimum wage, particularly given the seasonal nature of the work and the limited opportunities for supplementary income during the harvest. The ILO study, conducted in December 2024 and based on interviews with households and farmers alongside an analysis of living costs, found that paying at least 1.2 manat per kilogram would enable the average picker to reach the national minimum wage.

4.3 Contracts

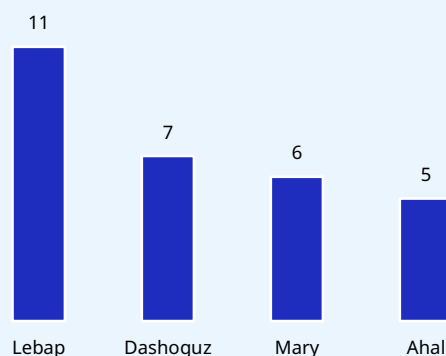
The prevalence of written contracts among cotton pickers declined further in 2025. While 22 per cent of pickers surveyed reported having a written contract in 2024, this figure dropped to just 7 per cent in 2025. Regional data for 2025 shows consistently low levels of written contracts, with no region approaching meaningful coverage. This limited access to written contracts has significant implications for the predictability and security of working conditions. In the absence of formal agreements, key aspects such as remuneration, working hours, grievance procedures, and termination clauses may be left undefined or informally arranged, increasing workers' exposure to arbitrary or changing conditions during the harvest.

► **Figure 8. Written contracts**

(a) Percentage of pickers with written contracts, by year.



(b) Percentage of pickers with written contracts, by region, 2025.



The lack of written contracts also weakens workers' ability to claim entitlements or contest non-payment, particularly given the seasonal and temporary nature of cotton picking. It may further heighten vulnerability to exploitative practices, including forced mobilization or pressure to work under terms that were not clearly communicated beforehand. For some groups – such as women, older adults, and those travelling from other districts or regions – the absence of contractual clarity can compound existing economic or social vulnerabilities. Strengthening contract coverage would therefore play an important role in improving transparency, accountability, and protection for cotton pickers across all regions.

4.4 Occupational safety and health (OSH)

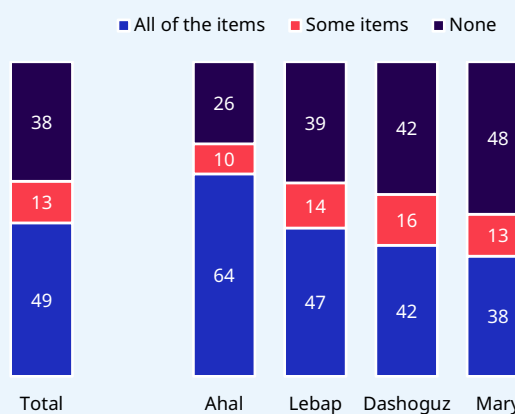
Access to personal protective equipment (PPE) among surveyed cotton pickers improved over 2024, yet the 2025 observance indicated that substantial gaps in the availability and use of PPE persist, heightening workers' exposure to OSH risks. A total of 49 per cent of surveyed cotton pickers in 2025 reported receiving all three PPE items queried – namely, gloves, aprons and masks – while 13 per cent received only some of these items and 38 per cent none at all. By region, PPE provision was highest in Ahal, where 64 per cent of pickers reported having all three items, and lowest in Mary, where the corresponding share was 38 per cent.

► **Figure 9. Provision of personal protection equipment (PPE) (*)**

(a) Percentage of pickers with access to PPE, by year.



(b) Percentage of pickers with access to PPE, by PPE items and region, 2025.



Note: (*) PPE refers to gloves, aprons and masks.

Cotton production globally involves the routine use of crop protection chemicals, with insecticides, herbicides, defoliants and other crop protection agents applied during the growing cycle. The use of gloves and masks is therefore particularly important to reduce exposure to chemical residues through skin contact, hand-to-mouth transfer, or inhalation. This is especially relevant in the dry, dusty conditions that characterize many cotton fields during harvest in the country, where the risk of inhaling contaminated dust is elevated.

The observance also queried farmers about the availability of first aid kits. Only 49 per cent of surveyed farmers reported having a first aid kit available at the field site (not shown), and in only half of these cases could observers verify its presence. This means that, in practice, fewer than one in four cotton fields had a verifiable first aid kit on site. The absence of basic first aid supplies increases the risk that work-related injuries or episodes of ill health worsen due to delayed or inadequate treatment.

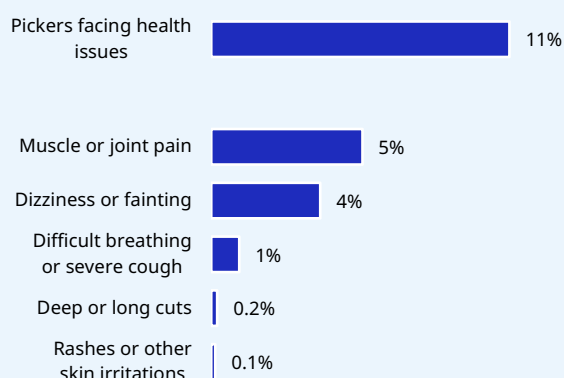
These shortcomings help explain the health outcomes reported by workers. Eleven per cent of pickers reported experiencing health issues during the 2025 harvest, up from 8 per cent in 2024. The most frequently reported symptoms were muscle or joint pain (5 percent) and dizziness or fainting (4 percent), both associated with prolonged physical exertion, repetitive tasks, dehydration, and insufficient rest. Smaller shares reported difficulty breathing or severe cough (1 percent), deep cuts (0.2 percent), and rashes or skin irritation (0.1 percent). While severe incidents were relatively uncommon, the overall pattern reflects the cumulative strain of cotton picking, particularly where PPE is inadequate.

► **Figure 10. Health issues due to cotton picking**

(a) Percentage of pickers who reported having faced adverse health consequences from picking, by year.



(b) Percentage of pickers who reported having faced adverse health consequences from picking, by consequence, 2025.



Addressing these challenges requires a dual focus on prevention and protection. Ensuring wide distribution and free access to PPE, establishing and verifying the presence of functional first aid kits in all fields, ensuring respect for re-entry intervals after application of crop protection chemicals, and strengthening training would substantially reduce OSH risks.

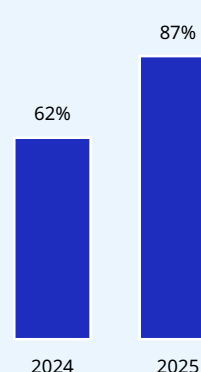
4.5 Food and water provision

► **Figure 11. Access to water and food**

(a) Percentage of pickers who report enough water or tea, by year.



(b) Percentage of pickers who report enough food, by year.



Findings from the 2025 observance indicate relatively strong performance with respect to water provision, with 93 per cent of cotton pickers reporting that they received sufficient drinking water while working in the fields, up from 91 per cent in the 2024 harvest. This is particularly important given the physically demanding nature of cotton picking and the extreme temperatures under which the harvest can take place, at times

exceeding 40°C. Such conditions significantly increase the risk of dehydration and occupational heat stress, including heat exhaustion and heat stroke. While the majority of farmers appear to be taking basic measures to address hydration needs, the remaining 7 per cent of workers who reported insufficient access to water remain a concern. Even short periods without adequate hydration can have serious health consequences under such conditions. Ensuring universal and reliable access to potable water—through on-site supply, adequate storage, mobile distribution, or other appropriate arrangements—should therefore remain a key priority.

Eighty-seven per cent of cotton pickers reported having easy access to sufficient food, an important improvement over 2024, when the corresponding share stood at only 62 percent. Further progress is needed, as 13 per cent of interviewed cotton pickers indicated that their needs were *not* adequately met. Insufficient food intake can exacerbate fatigue, reduce concentration, and increase vulnerability to injury, especially when combined with prolonged physical exertion and high temperatures. These findings point to the need for clearer expectations and monitoring regarding food provision during the harvest, particularly for workers spending long hours in the fields.

Taken together, the results highlight both progress and remaining gaps in meeting cotton pickers' basic needs. While most workers report adequate access to water and food, the persistence of coverage shortfalls underscores the importance of continued attention to basic welfare conditions as a core element of decent work in the cotton harvest.

4.6 Working hours

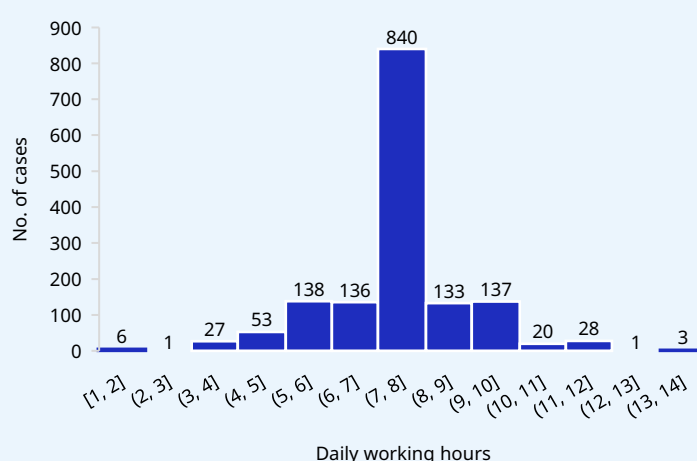
Data from the 2025 observance show that cotton pickers work an average of approximately 8 hours per day (mean: 7.96 hours), down from 8.4 hours in 2024, with the distribution heavily concentrated between 7 and 9 hours, and 13 per cent of workers reported working more than 9 hours per day. These extended working hours are of particular concern given that cotton picking is physically demanding and often carried out under extreme heat conditions in the early months of the harvest, which amplify the risks of fatigue, dehydration, heat stress, and cumulative physical strain, particularly as exposure increases with the length of the working day. In the latter part of the harvest, prolonged working hours can similarly increase exposure to very cold temperatures, heightening the risk of cold stress, reduced dexterity, and work-related injury.

► **Figure 12. Working hours**

(a) Mean daily working hours, by year.



(b) Histogram of working hours, 2025.

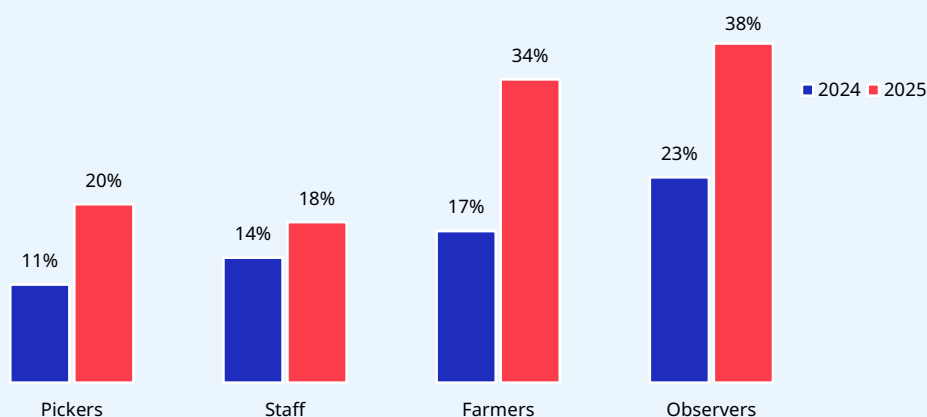


► 5. Children picking cotton

The 2025 observance provided updated data on child involvement in the cotton harvest within the scope of the exercise. The results – consistent across all respondent groups – show a deterioration compared to 2024. Among cotton pickers interviewed, the share reporting that children had been picking cotton in the fields where they worked rose from 11 per cent in 2024 to 20 per cent in 2025. Among interviewed staff of public institutions and state-owned enterprises, the share increased from 14 per cent to 18 per cent. Surveyed farmers reported the most substantial rise, with 34 per cent indicating the presence of children in their fields in 2025 – double the share reported in 2024.

► **Figure 13. Children picking cotton: feedback from respondents**

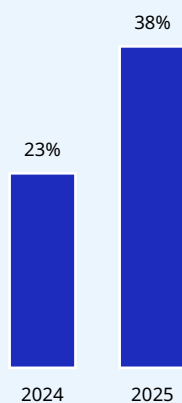
Percentage of respondents reporting that children had been picking cotton in the fields where they work, by respondent category and year.



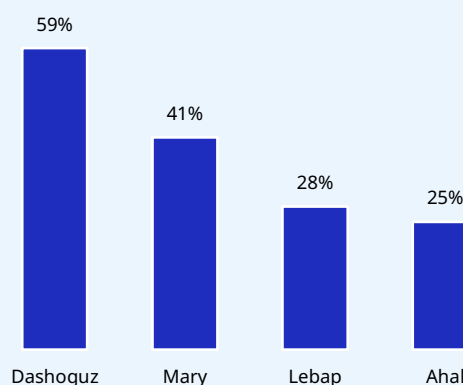
Direct observations by ILO observers confirmed these findings and provided a clearer picture of the geographic distribution of the children's involvement in the harvest. Overall, the percentage of field visits in which observers saw children present increased from 23 per cent in 2024 to 38 per cent in 2025. Observed child involvement was not localized but rather occurred across all regions, though with substantial variation: observers recorded the presence of children in 59 per cent of visited fields in Dashoguz, 41 per cent in Mary, 28 per cent in Lebap and 25 per cent in Ahal.

► **Figure 14. Children picking cotton: feedback from observers (*)**

(a) Percentage of field visits where observers saw children picking cotton, by year.



(b) Percentage of field visits where observers saw children picking cotton, by region, 2025.



Note: (*) Balkan region excluded due to limited number of observations.

In 2024 the Government of Turkmenistan added cotton picking and cotton growing to the list of hazardous work prohibited for all children under 18 years of age. The results of the 2025 observance underscore the need for systemic and sustained action to address child involvement in the cotton harvest and uphold the 2024 legal measure.

Improved information is essential to guide this action. Current data do not capture crucial dimensions such as the frequency of children's involvement, the time intensity of their participation, their specific tasks in the fields or the extent to which work coincides with school hours or is limited to school holidays. More detailed research is also needed on root causes – including the relative influence of factors such as household poverty and vulnerability, lack of alternative child care options, gender, insufficient adult wages, piece-rate payment systems that incentivize family labour, limited access to social protection - including child-centred social protection measures, entrenched social norms regarding children's work, and gaps in enforcement and oversight.

A dedicated child labour study is needed as a follow up to the 2025 observance to address these knowledge gaps and inform a programmatic response to child involvement in the cotton harvest within the broader Roadmap, particularly outcome 1.2(b), "to ensure that children under the age of 18 are prevented from being involved in cotton harvesting and that minimum age of employment legislation is enforced".

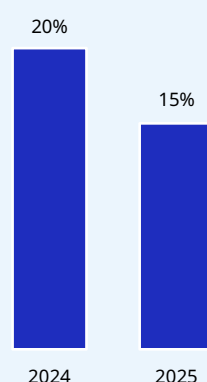
► 6. Forced mobilization

6.1 Public employee involvement

The observance triangulated information from farmers, public employees, heads of public institutions and state-owned enterprises (PISOEs) and cotton pickers themselves to assess the extent of public employee participation in the 2025 cotton harvest. The findings from these different respondent groups point to a consistent conclusion: public employees continued to take part in cotton picking during the 2025 season. Information on changes compared to 2024 varied by respondent category, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the overall trend: feedback from surveyed farmers and from PISOE heads suggested a possible decline in public employees picking cotton, while feedback from surveyed PISOE staff suggested little or no change.

► **Figure 15. Trends in public employees picking cotton**

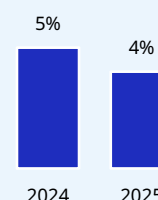
(a) Percentage of farmers indicating that public employees have been picking on their farm this season, by year.



(b) Percentage of PISOE staff indicating that they participate in the cotton harvest, by year.



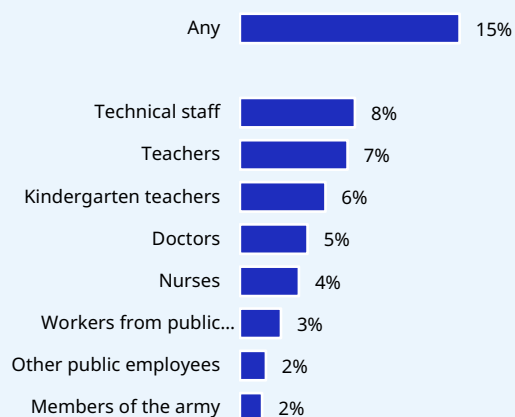
(c) Percentage of PISOE heads indicating that they provided workers to the cotton harvest, by year.



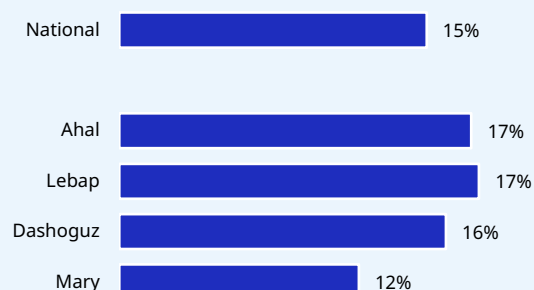
Fifteen per cent of farmers interviewed indicated the presence of public employees, or members of the army working on their fields in 2025. Farmers also provided insight into the many types of public employees involved: the most frequently mentioned were technical staff (8 percent), followed by teachers (7 percent), kindergarten teachers (6 percent), doctors (5 percent), nurses (4 percent), and public utilities workers (3 percent), with smaller shares of other public employees and army personnel (2 per cent each). Regional data from farmers indicated geographically broad involvement of public employees. The share of farmers reporting the presence of public employees was highest in Ahal and Lebap (17 percent), followed by Dashoguz (16 percent) and Mary (12 percent).

► **Figure 16. Public employees picking cotton: feedback from farmers**

(a) Percentage of farmers reporting PISOE staff working on their farm during harvest, by staff category, 2025.



(b) Percentage of farmers reporting any PISOE staff working on their farm during harvest, by region, (*) 2025.



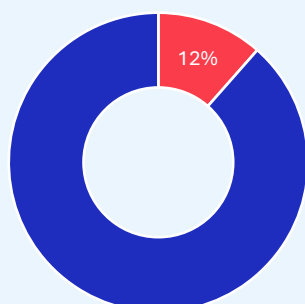
Note: (*) Balkan region excluded due to limited number of observations.

Self-reports from public employees also showed continued participation. Twelve per cent of public employees interviewed reported picking cotton during the 2025 harvest. Around one in five (18 per cent) of those indicating participation stated that they had been recruited by an authority – either their employer, a government official, or the farmers' association. Feedback from employees relating to their co-workers reinforced these findings: 7.3 per cent of public employees reported that their co-workers picked cotton, and that in 41 per cent of these cases a supervisor had told them to pick.

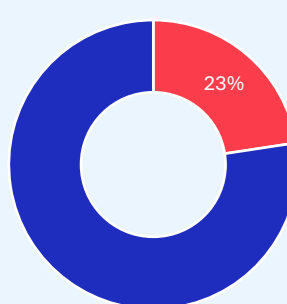
The heads of public institutions and state-owned enterprises provided further insight. Twelve per cent of heads reported that staff in their institutions participated in cotton picking, and 4 per cent reported that they *sent* staff to the harvest. Although small in absolute terms, this latter figure is significant because it indicates not only participation but also a formalized practice of deploying staff to the harvest.

► **Figure 17. Public employees picking cotton: feedback from PISOE staff and heads**

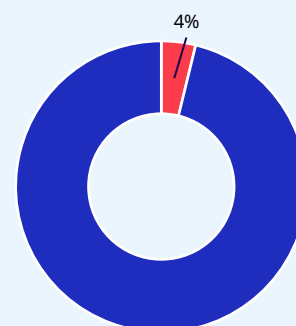
(a) Percentage of public employees reporting that they picked cotton



(b) Percentage of PISOE heads reporting that staff participate in cotton harvesting



(c) Percentage of PISOE heads reporting sending staff to work in the cotton harvest



Taken together, and considering the findings of the previous observance, these results indicate a persistent pattern of public employee involvement in cotton picking. While these results alone are insufficient to establish a pattern of forced mobilization, some document instances in which participation was initiated or directed by employers or public authorities. Notably, as reported above, 4 per cent of public institution heads reported directly providing staff to participate in the cotton harvest, and 18 per cent of staff in public institutions who reported having picked cotton indicated that they were recruited by their employer or a public authority. In addition, of the public employees who stated that their *co-workers* were picking cotton, 41 per cent reported that these co-workers had been told by their supervisor to do so. Yet determining with greater confidence whether such involvement constitutes forced mobilization requires further examination of potential coercive elements, including whether workers might face negative consequences for refusing to pick cotton. This issue is addressed in the following section.

► **Box 1. Recruitment mechanisms: feedback from farmers' associations**

Feedback from farmers' associations offered additional insight into recruitment mechanisms and the role of farmers' associations in this regard. Most associations interviewed described labour recruitment as primarily the responsibility of individual farmers, who typically relied on family members, local villagers, or established picking teams, with mechanized harvesting often described as the fallback where manual labour was insufficient.

However, a number of associations interviewed also indicated that they may facilitate contacts – such as through brigade leaders, village networks, or local administration – when farmers are unable to secure sufficient labour. In these accounts, the associations typically described acting as intermediaries rather than direct recruiters, for example by informing local leaders of farmers' labour needs, connecting available picking teams with specific farms, or coordinating communication between villages to redistribute workers where demand was higher. Some associations also indicated that they might liaise with municipal authorities to widen the pool of potential workers beyond a single village, while others referred to helping organize the movement of pickers between farms during peak periods. These descriptions suggest that, although recruitment was generally characterized as decentralized and farmer-led, associations may assume a coordinating role in situations of perceived labour shortage.

In a smaller number of accounts, associations referred to the involvement of local authorities in mobilizing workers where additional labour was required. While such references were not widespread, they suggest that recruitment practices may, in certain contexts, involve institutional actors beyond individual farmers and farmers' associations.

6.2 Consequences for refusing to pick cotton

The 2025 observance examined potential coercion associated with participation in the cotton harvest by collecting information on the perceived personal, social, and professional consequences of refusing to pick cotton. Data were gathered from cotton pickers interviewed in the fields and from public-sector employees who had picked cotton interviewed at their main place of work.

The results point to a deterioration compared to 2024. Fifteen per cent of cotton pickers reported that they would have faced at least one negative consequence had they refused to pick cotton, compared to 12 per cent in 2024. The most frequently cited concern in 2025 was loss of respect within the community (9.4 percent), followed by loss of social benefits (4.2 percent). Other reported consequences included concerns for personal safety (3.9 percent), having to pay a fee to avoid picking (2.2 percent), and other unspecified repercussions (2.3 percent). For pickers with a main job outside agriculture, the perceived stakes

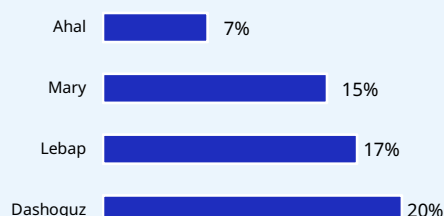
of saying no extended further: 11 per cent believed they could have lost their main job, and 9.1 per cent feared losing salary, work hours, or other employment-related benefits if they had not participated in cotton picking.

► **Figure 18. Negative consequences of not picking cotton: feedback from cotton pickers**

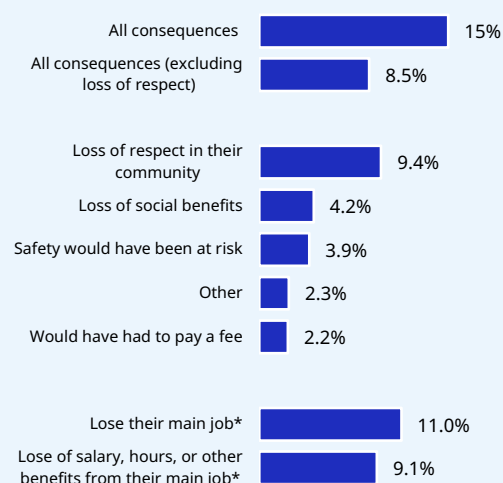
(a) Percentage of cotton pickers reporting any negative consequence, by year.



(b) Percentage of cotton pickers reporting any negative consequence, by region, 2025.



(c) Percentage of cotton pickers reporting negative consequences by consequence, 2025.



Note: * Questions only asked to respondents who reported having another job outside of the agricultural sector.

Perceived consequences also varied substantially by region. The share of cotton pickers reporting that they would have faced any consequence for refusing to pick ranged from 7 per cent in Ahal to 20 per cent in Dashoguz, suggesting that social expectations and institutional dynamics surrounding cotton picking are not uniform across the country.

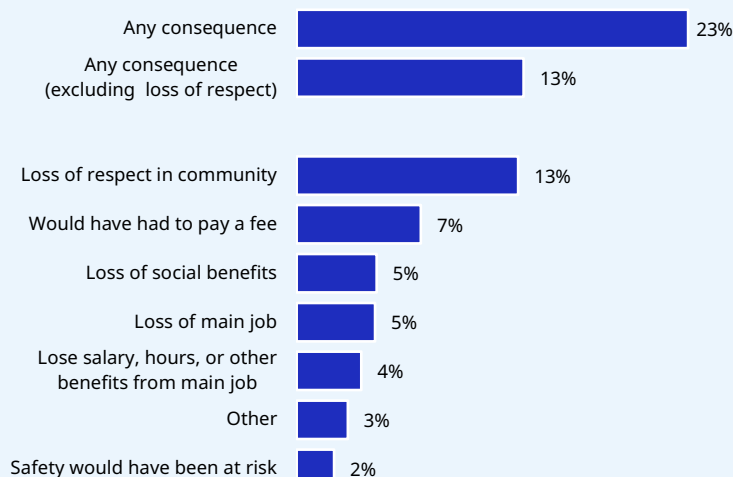
Perceived negative consequences for refusal to pick cotton were even higher for staff of public institutions and state-owned enterprises who picked cotton in 2025. Nearly one quarter (23 percent) reported that they would have faced at least one negative consequence had they refused to participate while the corresponding figure for cotton pickers interviewed in the fields was 15 percent. This comparatively higher level of perceived negative consequences among PISOE staff is significant, as it suggests that this group may perceive particular pressure to participate in the harvest. The most frequently cited concerns were loss of respect in the community (13 percent) and having to pay a fee (7 percent), followed by risks of losing social benefits (5 percent), losing their main job (5 percent), or losing salary, work hours, or other benefits (4 percent). Smaller shares cited safety concerns or other consequences.

► **Figure 19. Negative consequences of not picking cotton: feedback from PISOE staff picking cotton**

(a) Percentage of PISOE staff picking cotton reporting any negative consequence, by year.



(b) Percentage of PISOE staff picking cotton reporting negative consequences, by consequence, 2025



Taken together, the findings indicate that a share of pickers perceived refusal to participate in the cotton harvest as carrying social, economic, or professional penalties imposed by a State authority. Even in the absence of explicit threats or formally announced penalties, such perceptions matter. The ILO Committee of Experts has clarified that coercion may take the form of implicit or psychological pressure, not only overt threats. While establishing the presence of a credible threat is often challenging, the widespread fear of losing income, benefits, or employment suggests that for some workers, participation in the cotton harvest was not experienced as fully voluntary.

6.3 The practice of having to pay a fee to avoid picking cotton

The requirement to pay a fee in order to avoid picking cotton is particularly significant because it may mask forced mobilization by shifting the burden of participation: individuals who can afford to pay a fee avoid picking, while others – often with fewer resources – take their place in the fields. This practice has been raised by the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations in its observations on Turkmenistan's compliance with the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention.

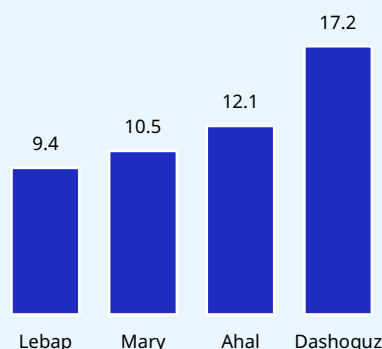
Findings from the 2025 observance suggest that this practice continues to affect a notable share of cotton pickers, while also suggesting possible progress compared to the 2024 harvest. Overall, 12 per cent of pickers reported some form of involvement related to fee payment, either because they would have had to pay a fee to avoid picking cotton or because they were replacing someone who had done so, down from 14 per cent in 2024. Regional results suggest that the practice is not isolated, but occurs across regions, with differing intensity. The highest prevalence was reported in Dashoguz (17.2 percent), followed by Ahal (12.1 percent), Mary (10.5 percent), and Lebap (9.4 percent).

► **Figure 20. Practice of paying a fee to avoid picking cotton: feedback from cotton pickers**

(a) Percentage of pickers that reported either picking cotton in place of someone else or picking to avoid paying a fee, by year.

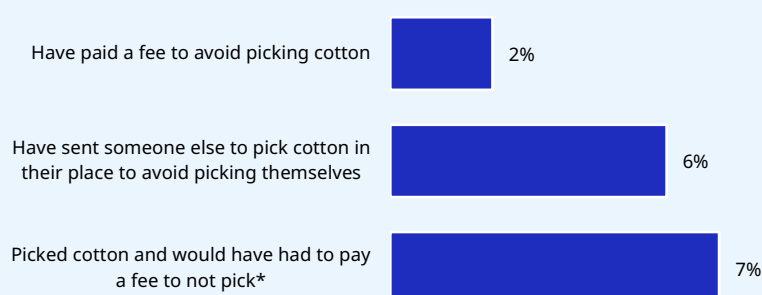


(b) Percentage of pickers that reported either picking cotton in place of someone else or picking to avoid paying a fee, by region, 2025.



Evidence from public institutions and state-owned enterprises points to similar dynamics. Among staff respondents, 2 per cent indicated that they had personally paid a fee to avoid picking cotton, and 6 per cent reported sending someone else to pick cotton in their place. In addition, 7 per cent of staff who picked cotton stated that they would have had to pay a fee had they refused to participate. Farmers' responses provide further evidence: 8 per cent reported having heard of a "pick-or-pay" system, although only 2.5 per cent admitted having replacement workers on their farms.

► **Figure 21. Practice of paying a fee to avoid picking cotton: feedback from PISOE staff**



Note: (*) Question only asked to staff members who reported having picked cotton. The percentage reported is the percentage out of staff who reported picking cotton.

Although the full scope and mechanics of the practice of paying a fee to avoid picking cotton remain difficult to quantify, its consistent appearance across multiple respondent groups – cotton pickers, public-sector staff and farmers alike – underscores its relevance to the assessment of forced mobilization as a potential coercive mechanism. The practice warrants continued monitoring and deeper investigation, given its potential to impose significant financial burdens, obscure coercion, and undermine the voluntariness of participation in the cotton harvest.

6.4 Production pressures faced by farmers

The 2025 observance also assessed pressures faced by farmers to meet the State Order for cotton. These pressures can influence recruitment practices during the harvest, as securing sufficient labour can be critical to meeting the State Order.

Feedback from farmers' associations provided insight into the State Order system and its implications for farmers. Across interviews, associations consistently described the regional targets under the State Order as set at higher administrative levels and formally communicated to them, often in written form, before being allocated to farmers on a per-hectare basis. While many association heads indicated that targets were typically met, a substantial number also described financial consequences for farmers in cases of shortfall, most commonly the accumulation of debt linked to input advances, the need to carry forward repayment obligations into the following season, or reductions in profit. In a smaller number of accounts, associations referred to more serious implications, including potential non-renewal or partial reduction of land leases for farmers who repeatedly failed to meet targets. A limited number of association heads also indicated that, in cases of repeated underperformance at the association level, leadership positions could be reviewed or replaced by higher authorities, suggesting that accountability mechanisms may extend beyond individual farmers to the management of the association itself.

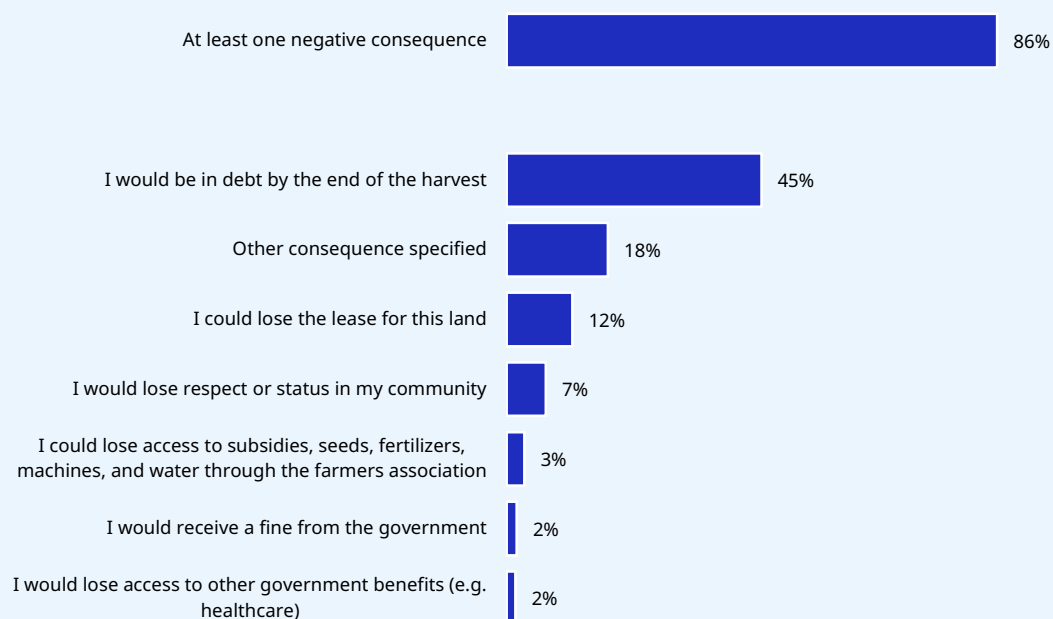
Associations further described input provision – including seeds, fertilizers, machinery and irrigation services – as organized in advance of the season, typically based on land allocation and planned cotton production, with costs recovered at the end of the harvest through deductions from farmers' proceeds. In many accounts, production targets based on the State Order informed the scale of input distribution and the financial calculations underlying seasonal settlement. These accounts suggest that production targets operate within a structured system of advance input provision and post-harvest reconciliation, in which farmers' financial outcomes are closely tied to yield performance. In this context, adverse climatic conditions, pest outbreaks, or labour availability constraints where they arise may heighten economic pressure, with potential implications for farmers' decisions regarding labour recruitment and harvest organization.

The findings from the observance show that 86 per cent of interviewed farmers anticipated at least one negative consequence if their target was not met, with financial repercussions – particularly ending the harvest in debt (45 per cent) – being the most prominent concern.

Concerns about land tenure were reported by 12 per cent of farmers, suggesting that potential loss of land access for failure to meet the production target is also significant risk for an important subset of farmers. Other reported consequences for falling short of the target included loss of access to inputs through farmers' associations (3 per cent), fines (2 per cent), and loss of other government benefits (2 per cent). Social consequences were also significant, with 7 per cent of interviewed farmers indicating that failure to meet the target would result in loss of respect or status in the community. Finally, 18 per cent of interviewed farmers specified "other" consequences, which largely also related to repayment of inputs or loans and reduced income, and in some cases to longer-term implications such as risks to land tenure.

Taken together, these features suggest that farmers themselves may be situated within a chain of pressure linked to compliance with the State Order. Where financial penalties, land tenure insecurity or administrative consequences are at stake, farmers may face strong incentives to meet production targets at all costs. In such circumstances, coercive pressures may not originate solely at the level of worker recruitment but may also operate upstream within the production system, creating structural conditions that increase the risk of forced mobilization.

► **Figure 22. Negative consequences for not meeting targets: feedback from farmers**



► 7. Conclusions and key takeaways

Overall, the 2025 observance presents a mixed and nuanced picture. It records measurable progress in selected aspects of working conditions, particularly in remuneration, suggesting that recent policy measures and adjustments are yielding results on the ground. At the same time, gaps remain evident, notably in contractual protection and occupational safety and health, indicating that improvements in earnings have not yet been matched by equally strong safeguards in the formality and safety of work.

In relation to forced mobilization, the findings point to limited overall change in key indicators, with continued public employee involvement, reported recruitment through workplace or administrative channels, alongside ongoing perceptions of negative consequences for refusal and the persistence of fee-related practices. Most concerning, the observance documents a clear increase in children's presence in cotton fields compared to 2024, despite strengthened legal prohibitions.

Taken together, the results of the 2025 observance reflect incremental progress alongside persistent risks and challenges. They underscore the need for sustained oversight and targeted measures to consolidate gains and address remaining decent work deficits in the cotton harvest.

7.1 Working conditions

- **Remuneration and wage compliance:** Remuneration levels continued to increase in 2025, and compliance with announced rates improved. Nevertheless, regional disparities persist, and earnings remain close to subsistence thresholds for many pickers, indicating that further adjustments would be required to ensure income levels consistent with a minimum living standard.
- **Written contracts:** The share of pickers reporting written contracts declined markedly, reinforcing concerns regarding informality, predictability of conditions and workers' ability to claim entitlements. Strengthening contractual arrangements for seasonal harvest work remains a priority.
- **Occupational safety and health:** While provision of personal protective equipment improved compared to 2024, significant gaps remain, with over a third of surveyed pickers provided no PPE at all, and fewer than one-fourth of fields visited having verifiable first aid kits on site. Reported health issues increased, underscoring the need for stronger preventive measures and systematic compliance with OSH standards.
- **Food and water provision:** Access to drinking water remained high and food provision improved compared to 2024. However, coverage shortfalls persist, particularly with respect to food, with 13 per cent of interviewed pickers reporting that their needs were not adequately met. Consolidating and building on gains in food and water provision therefore remain important as part of broader efforts towards decent work in the cotton harvest.
- **Working hours:** Average daily working hours fell from 8.4 hours in 2024 to approximately 8.0 hours in 2025. Yet 13 per cent of pickers in 2025 still reported working days exceeding nine hours, exposing them to heightened risks of fatigue, heat and cold stress, and cumulative physical strain. Continued attention to working time arrangements – including adequate rest breaks and adjustments during periods of extreme temperatures – is therefore warranted within wider OSH safeguards for cotton pickers.

Key takeaways: Improvements in pay and certain welfare indicators demonstrate measurable progress. However, persistent deficits in contractual protection and occupational safety and health indicate that strengthening OSH safeguards and oversight remains necessary.

7.2 Child labour

- **Increased child involvement:** All respondent groups and direct observations indicate a rise in children's presence in cotton fields in 2025 compared to 2024. Observed child involvement was not localized but rather occurred across all regions, though with substantial geographic variation.
- **Implementation gap:** The increase in child involvement occurred despite the 2024 legal amendments prohibiting all forms of work by children under the age of 18, highlighting the need for strengthened enforcement, monitoring and preventive action.
- **Evidence gaps:** More detailed research is required to better understand the frequency and intensity of children's involvement, the tasks performed, and whether participation coincides with school time. Further analysis of underlying drivers – including household economic pressures, gender considerations, piece-rate incentives, limited childcare or social protection, and social norms – is also needed.

Key takeaways: Child involvement in cotton picking increased in 2025, signalling an urgent need for strengthened, systemic measures to ensure effective implementation of the legal prohibition and to address underlying drivers. Research is needed to fill evidence gaps and inform the design of these measures.

7.3 Forced mobilization

- **Public employee participation:** Public employees continued to participate in cotton picking, with evidence from farmers, PISOE staff and PISOE heads confirming ongoing involvement. Available data do not demonstrate a decisive overall change compared to 2024.
- **Indicators of potentially involuntary recruitment:** There were continued cases of PISOE heads reporting that they had sent staff to pick cotton, PISOE staff reporting that they had been recruited by their employer or a public authority to participate in the harvest, and PISOE staff reporting that their co-workers had been told by their supervisor to do so. While not in themselves determinative of forced mobilization, these cases raise concerns regarding the voluntariness of participation of some pickers.
- **Perceived consequences for refusal:** Among respondents, 15 per cent of pickers and 23 per cent of PISOE staff who picked cotton reported that refusal to participate could entail social, economic or employment-related consequences. These reported perceptions raise questions about the voluntariness of participation for some workers.
- **Fee-related practices:** Reports of having to pay a fee to avoid picking cotton persisted, although some indicators showed a marginal decrease compared to 2024. This practice warrants continued attention, given its potential to mask forced mobilization by shifting the obligation from a direct instruction to pick cotton to a financial condition imposed on those seeking exemption from picking cotton.

Key takeaways: Indicators associated with forced mobilization remain present. Sustained oversight, clearer accountability mechanisms and full implementation of Roadmap commitments are necessary to ensure that participation in the harvest is fully voluntary.

7.4 Production pressures faced by farmers

- **Target-related pressures:** A large majority of interviewed farmers reported anticipating negative consequences for failing to meet production targets under the State Order, primarily financial but also, for some, linked to land tenure or access to inputs. Feedback from farmers' associations corroborated this picture, with associations also citing consequences including debt carry-overs linked to input advances, reduced profitability, and, in some cases, risks to land lease renewal.

Key takeaways: Addressing labour risks in the cotton harvest requires attention not only to field-level practices but also to upstream production incentives and institutional arrangements. Farmers' economic vulnerability and exposure to target-related pressures form part of a wider system of incentives that can shape recruitment behaviour and contribute to risks of forced cultivation and forced mobilization.

► 8. Next steps

Building on the findings and key takeaways of the 2025 observance report, and in line with the extended ILO–Government Roadmap for 2024–2026 and planned 2026 activities, cooperation between the ILO and the Government of Turkmenistan will continue to focus on translating identified gaps into targeted, evidence-based interventions. This work will be advanced through ongoing and planned ILO technical cooperation projects,³ including support to the observance process and a broader programme aimed at strengthening decent work and preventing child and forced labour in the cotton sector.

The findings of the 2025 observance have been discussed extensively through a national roundtable held in Ashgabat, followed by regional roundtables across all five velayats. Under the leadership of the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection, these regional dialogues brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives of regional Hakim offices and relevant government agencies, and provided an important platform to review findings in detail, exchange perspectives, and identify priority areas for follow-up action at both national and regional levels.

Among the cooperation actions to be undertaken jointly by the ILO and the Government under the 2024–2026 Roadmap, the following key priorities have been identified for implementation in 2026:

- At the policy level, continued support will be provided for the development and issuance of a presidential decree to strengthen the legal framework governing cotton harvesting, including clear prohibitions of practices that may give rise to forced labour. This will be accompanied by ongoing legislative review and reform efforts to align national laws with international labour standards.
- In response to priorities identified through the observance and subsequent dialogue, technical assistance in 2026 will support the Government’s request for further work on wage-setting mechanisms. This will include research, social dialogue, and capacity-building activities to explore options for establishing attractive, transparent and incentive-based wage systems for cotton-picking, with a view to promoting voluntary participation in cotton harvesting.
- Recognizing the need to address root causes, cooperation will also prioritize strengthening the evidence base on the drivers of child labour. This will involve the development and implementation of targeted research to better understand the socio-economic, institutional and cultural factors influencing children’s involvement in cotton picking, including linkages to household income, education access, and rural vulnerabilities. Findings will inform more comprehensive and sustainable policy responses.
- Further analytical work will be undertaken to examine structural pressures affecting the cotton sector, including a planned study on water scarcity and its implications for agricultural production and labour demand. This work will be complemented by exploration of diversification pathways for rural livelihoods.
- Further cooperation will focus on strengthening labour inspection systems, including through capacity building, legal analysis, peer learning and support for potential accession to relevant international instruments. Enhancing occupational safety and health (OSH) frameworks will remain a priority, alongside measures to improve working conditions, including access to contracts, wage protection, and adequate provision of food, water, and personal protective equipment.

³ With funding from the European Union and United States Government.

- Efforts will also continue to improve recruitment practices and labour intermediation systems, including through the development of fair and transparent recruitment frameworks and the potential strengthening of public employment services. In addition, support will be provided to enhance protection mechanisms, including accessible and confidential complaint systems and safeguards for individuals reporting labour violations.
- Additional support will be provided to strengthen systems for complaints handling, identification, investigation and prosecution of cases of forced labour. This will include capacity-building for relevant authorities, development of clear procedures and coordination mechanisms, and support to ensure timely and effective follow-up on reported cases. Particular attention will be given to strengthening protection frameworks for victims and complainants, including safeguards against retaliation, confidentiality measures, and access to appropriate remedies and support services, in line with international labour standards.
- Joint awareness-raising and outreach activities will also be expanded at the etrap level in close collaboration with the Government and social partners, including the Ombudsperson's Office, trade unions and employers' organizations. These efforts will aim to strengthen understanding of labour rights and obligations, promote prevention of child labour and forced labour, and ensure that information reaches local authorities, employers, workers and rural communities. Outreach activities will be designed to support practical implementation of policy measures and to reinforce consistent messaging at the local level.



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