



**“CUT US OPEN AND SEE THAT  
WE BLEED LIKE THEM”**

DISCRIMINATION AND STIGMATIZATION OF SANITATION WORKERS IN  
PAKISTAN

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



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**Cover photo:** Sanitation worker in Lahore, a city in Punjab province of Pakistan, cleaning a sewerage drain after a spell of rain in the city taken in June 2025. The sanitation worker is seen cleaning the drain without any safety equipment and using his bare hands. © Daniyal Yousaf 2025/Amnesty International

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# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>BISP</b>	Benazir Income Support Programme
<b>CDA</b>	Capital Development Authority
<b>CEDAW</b>	UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CERD</b>	UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
<b>CESCR</b>	UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>CLJ</b>	Center for Law & Justice (Pakistan)
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>ICCPR</b>	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
<b>ICERD</b>	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IRA</b>	Industrial Relations Act
<b>LWMC</b>	Lahore Waste Management Company
<b>NCHR</b>	National Commission for Human Rights
<b>OSH</b>	Occupational safety and health
<b>PBM</b>	Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal
<b>PKR</b>	Pakistani Rupee
<b>PPE</b>	Personal protective equipment
<b>WASA</b>	Water and Sanitation Agency
<b>WWF</b>	Workers Welfare Fund

# GLOSSARY

**Scheduled Castes:** Broadly, Scheduled Castes are castes designated as marginalized due to their caste status, often facing economic and social disadvantage because of their caste identity. In Pakistan, Ordinance No. XVI 1957 designates 40 non-Muslim castes as 'scheduled'.<sup>1</sup>

**Dalit:** Dalits are the so-called 'lower caste' in the social hierarchy created by the caste system in South Asia, which is rooted in Hinduism but adopted by other religions.<sup>2</sup>

**Dalit Muslims:** Dalits who have converted from Hinduism to Islam but are still identified or discriminated against due to their so-called 'lower caste'.

**Permanent worker:** Permanent worker is an employee hired on a long-term contract, that does not have an end date. These workers typically receive full employment benefits such as healthcare coverage, paid leave, pension and job security.

**Contractual worker:** Contractual worker is an employee hired through a fixed-term contract. These workers usually do not receive the same benefits or protections as permanent workers, such as gratuity or pension at the end of their service, however they may have access to healthcare or social security benefits depending on the employer.

**Daily-wage worker:** Daily-wage worker is paid on a day-to-day basis for the work performed, without any long-term contract, or in some cases, without any contractual agreement. These workers lack job security and are not entitled to employment benefits.

**Regularization:** The process of converting informal, contractual, or temporary employment into permanent status, often to ensure job security and access to employment benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> Pakistan, The Scheduled Caste (Declaration) Ordinance XVI, 12 November 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, "*No-one Cares*": *Descent-based Discrimination against Dalits in Nepal* (Index: ASA 31/7980/2024), 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa31/7980/2024/en>, pp. 5.

***“kutta”***

Dog in Urdu

***“chuhra”***

Historic name of  
a Dalit caste

***“jamadar”***

Janitor in Urdu

***“issai”***

Term for Christian  
deemed derogatory  
by the community

***“bhangi”***

Another term for  
*chuhra* caste



Caste-based occupations such as scavenging and sweeping are associated with religious minorities in Pakistan, including so-called “lower-caste” Christians and Hindus. Many sanitation workers experience stigmatization because of their profession and are called derogatory and insulting names. Photo shows a sanitation worker being lowered into a sewerage drain in Lahore city, March 2025. Photo: Daniyal Yousaf/Amnesty International

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**“They can cut us open and see that we bleed like them, so why do they call us these hateful words?”<sup>3</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Lahore

Sanitation work refers to the management and disposal of waste, an activity that is often perceived culturally as polluting and “dirty”. This contributes to the social stigmatization of people who are engaged in such work. In Pakistan, sanitation work is disproportionately assigned to non-Muslims who belong to so-called “lower castes”, often without real choice in the matter. This report explores how communities in Pakistan that are marginalized due to their caste and religious identities experience compounded discrimination in Pakistan’s sanitation sector. This results in violations of sanitation workers’ rights to dignity, life, safety, freedom of association and access to health and labour rights such as the minimum wage, safe working conditions and fair treatment, despite the protections provided by the Constitution of Pakistan and Pakistan’s obligations under international human rights law.

For this research Amnesty International partnered with the Center for Law & Justice (CLJ), a human rights organization in Pakistan working for the rights of religious communities and women, and labour rights. Data was collected for the research through purposive sampling, employing qualitative questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews and right to information requests to understand the rights violations faced by sanitation workers in Pakistan. The data allowed Amnesty International to explore concerning patterns and themes regarding the experiences of sanitation workers in various parts of Pakistan. This data was supplemented by analysing existing research and national laws and the international human rights framework.

The data for the research was collected between February and September 2024 from six districts in three provinces of Pakistan: Lahore, Bahawalpur, Karachi, Umerkot, Islamabad and Peshawar. In total, the researchers spoke to 231 sanitation workers. The qualitative questionnaires, consisting of 107 questions, were administered to 66 participants. Of these, 54 were Christian, six Hindu and six Muslim; 36 were men and 30 were women. In addition, 13 FGDs were conducted with a total of 156 sanitation workers (71 women and 85 men). Seventeen interviews were held with sanitation workers and key experts to validate the findings. Lastly, 56 right to information requests were sent to various government departments across all four of Pakistan’s provinces to understand recruitment and employment patterns in the public sector. Answers were received from 15 government agencies from Punjab province and there was no response from other provinces.

The report seeks to understand the impact of caste-based discrimination on sanitation workers. Although Pakistan is party to a number of conventions such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), it does not have an anti-discrimination law, nor does Article 25 of Pakistan’s Constitution, which sets out the right to non-discrimination, mention caste. Furthermore, Pakistan’s labour laws largely fail to address sanitation work.

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<sup>3</sup> Focus group discussion (FGD) in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.



Pakistan's labour laws are scattered across a patchwork of acts and ordinances, and since the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment in 2010 they have varied in each province as labour became a provincial matter. Within these laws, very few mention sanitation work specifically and when they do, they only refer to some parts of sanitation work. Furthermore, sanitation workers do not fall into the definition of worker under many laws, and if they do, these laws fail to cover temporary and daily-wage workers, who represent a significant part of the sanitation labour force.

Pakistan has ratified only 38 International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and eight out of the 10 core conventions (covering subjects considered to be fundamental principles and rights at work). The Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (ILO Convention 111), ratified by Pakistan in 1951, requires Pakistan to commit to eliminating discrimination in employment and occupation. Amnesty International notes that Pakistan has not ratified several key conventions that impact sanitation workers, including the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 155) and the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 187).

## CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION

Sanitation work is stigmatized because of its symbolic association with caste-designated occupations within the traditional caste system in South Asia. The caste system has persisted into present-day Pakistan and has largely been transposed onto religious identities. A majority of Christians in Pakistan today are converts from so-called "*chuhra*" backgrounds, a caste historically assigned the task of cleaning. Caste-based occupations such as scavenging and sweeping are associated with religious minorities in Pakistan, including "lower-caste" Christians and Hindus. This, in turn, has resulted in the designation of sanitation work, considered undesirable by wider Pakistani society, to non-Muslims from so-called "lower castes".

In Pakistan, sanitation work is divided into two categories: "dry" and "wet". Dry sanitation work primarily includes sweeping and dealing with solid waste. Wet work consists of dealing with human waste and sewage, which can often be hazardous and sometimes fatal through exposure to toxic gases or by drowning in sewerage systems. Pakistan's sanitation system largely relies on manual labour. The workforce is officially estimated to be around 68.75 million, but it is believed to be much larger given the number of workers in the informal and domestic sector.

Amnesty International found that many workers who were part of the study experienced stigmatization because of their profession. Of the 66 questionnaire respondents, 29 explicitly reported being called derogatory and insulting names such as "*chuhra*" (historic name of a Dalit caste), "*bhangi*" (another term for *chuhra*), "*jamadar*" (janitor in Urdu) and "*issai*" (derogatory term for Christian) and even "dog". Many reported that they were not allowed to use the same dishes or eat in same places as Muslims. Nineteen participants stated that they regularly faced discrimination in public places. A woman from Peshawar told Amnesty International: "Obviously, people do not see us with respect. Even our children feel hesitation when talking about our occupation in school, because if they do their classmates make fun of them."<sup>4</sup>

This stigmatization has also resulted in violence, particularly in the context of blasphemy allegations. The report notes that there have been several prominent cases of sanitation workers being accused of blasphemy, including Asia Bibi, who spent nearly a decade on death row before being acquitted of all charges in 2018. In August 2023, a blasphemy accusation against two sanitation workers led to an arson and mob attack on more than 20 churches and 80 Christian neighbourhoods in Jaranwala.

This report corroborates existing findings that sanitation work is often assigned on the basis of caste and religion. From the data obtained for this report, Amnesty International noted trends indicating so-called "lower caste" non-Muslims are more likely to be relegated to sanitation-related jobs, partly as a result of discriminatory recruitment and hiring practices, limiting their upward social mobility. These observations have been corroborated by the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) that found in its 2022 report that 80% of non-Muslim religious minorities are employed in the lowest grades for government jobs. Data collected by CLJ on nearly 300 government job advertisements from 2010 to March 2025 showed that the advertisements explicitly required applicants to be non-Muslim or so-called "lower castes" or gave preference to them as part of the job criteria. This reinforces existing caste-based patterns of employment within sanitation work and ensures that so-called "lower caste" non-Muslims are pushed towards sanitation work. A man from Bahawalpur described how he had gone for a job interview for an electrician position, but when the recruiters found out he was Christian, they only offered him a sanitation job.<sup>5</sup> He ended up accepting the job because he needed an income to support his family.

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<sup>4</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 3 June 2024, Peshawar.

<sup>5</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 22 June 2024, Bahawalpur.

With data collected from right to information replies received from government agencies in Punjab, Amnesty International analysed disaggregated staff data from five agencies. It found that in those organizations, Christians were disproportionately employed not only in lower grades but also specifically in sanitation positions. Data from the Punjab police force showed that there were 1,909 non-Muslims in the lower 1-5 grade positions, but only 55 total in grades 7 to 18. Data from the Punjab Forensic Science Authority showed a similar pattern: 23 Christians employed as sweepers, compared with only 10 Muslims, whereas all other occupations showed Muslims as the majority. Data from the Water and Sewerage Authority revealed that non-Muslims were overrepresented in lower pay scales. Out of the 1,538 non-Muslims employed across all positions in the department, 1,515 (98.5%) non-Muslims worked in grade 1-5 jobs. Additionally, data provided by Punjab University showed that out of 400 sanitation workers, only four were Muslim. This, along with existing research, indicates a correlation between religious identity and occupation.

Out of the 66 questionnaire respondents, 36 recognised their religious identity as a defining aspect of their recruitment. A female worker in Lahore shared: “even if the Christian workers are quite educated they [still] hire them as a cleaner, whereas, and if a Muslim is illiterate [he can even] can become an officer.”<sup>6</sup>

Sanitation workers participating in this study reported that workload was disproportionately and discriminately distributed among Muslim and non-Muslim workers. A male worker from Karachi shared that Muslim sanitation workers in his workplace were rarely assigned sanitation-related tasks, transferring the workload onto non-Muslims.

In 2023, in the case of *Mubarak Ali Babar v. Punjab Public Service Commission*, the Supreme Court stated that discriminatory advertisements and employment selection processes limiting the minority job quota only for lower-level posts was “offensive to the constitutional values, the fundamental rights of the minorities”.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, the practice persists as CLJ has documented at least 16 discriminatory government job advertisements since 2023.

Further, the research found trends that indicated women sanitation workers faced discrimination at the intersection of class, caste, religion and gender. Women are more likely to work in the informal sector, often doing domestic work as housemaids, sweepers and cooks, outside the structure of formal labour laws and workplaces. Twenty-five respondents to the questionnaire noted that women were assigned sweeping duties, which were perceived as “lighter” or less dangerous, though still underpaid and stigmatized. Some questionnaire respondents noted that Muslim women sanitation workers were often assigned tasks inside kitchens, while non-Muslim women were assigned “less clean” tasks elsewhere.

Amnesty International found a clear gender gap in salary data collected through the questionnaires. Eight women were earning in the PKR 0-10,000 (USD 0-35) per month range compared to only two men. Similarly, 21 men were earning more than PKR 30,000 (USD 106) per month in contrast to only eight women.

## **PRECARITY IN WORK**

The study found that sanitation workers in Pakistan can be categorized into three main employment groups: permanent, contractual and daily wage. By its very nature, sanitation work is of a permanent character, essential to the daily functioning of cities and public institutions; however, over the past few decades, government bodies across Pakistan have increasingly avoided regularizing sanitation workers, thereby denying them job security, benefits and legal protections. Out of the 66 questionnaire respondents, only 29 were permanent (35 were non-permanent, two were unsure of their status). During a FGD in Umerkot, a man reported that despite working in the Municipal Committee for 18 years, he was never regularized and had been working as a daily-wage worker throughout his employment.

The study notes several practices by employers to maintain a non-permanent workforce. First, some employers hire sanitation workers on 89-day contracts to avoid legal obligations under the Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance that defines a permanent worker as someone who has completed a probationary period of three consecutive months. Second, Amnesty International’s questionnaire responses from 66 sanitation workers found that 30, including two classified as permanent and eight as contractual, did not have written contracts. Lack of written contracts allows employers to altogether evade the requirement for regularization under the Standing Orders Ordinance. Lack of regularization within the sanitation workforce potentially enables employers to evade laws regarding working

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<sup>6</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.

<sup>7</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Mubarak Ali Babar v Punjab Public Service Commission*, Civil Petition No.2045 of 2019, 2023 SCMR 518, 18 November 2023, [https://health.punjab.gov.pk/uploads/circular/10342E&A\(Health\)2-178-2015-min.pdf](https://health.punjab.gov.pk/uploads/circular/10342E&A(Health)2-178-2015-min.pdf), para. 8.

hours, leave, minimum wage, access to social security and welfare, and compensation in case of injury or death.

The questionnaires revealed that 15 respondents, out of 66, regularly worked more than eight hours daily. Fifty-two said that they were never paid for extra work and only nine said they received some form of compensation, which was mostly in-kind compensation. Almost all respondents had a designated weekly day off; 42 said that they could be asked to work on their day off.

The ILO states that only 9.2% of Pakistan's population is covered by at least one kind of social protection benefit,<sup>8</sup> far below the global average of 46.9%. Sanitation workers participating in the research were found to be inadequately protected by social security and welfare schemes. Overall, these workers lacked awareness regarding social service and worker welfare schemes. Among the 66 questionnaire respondents, only one had heard of the Employees Old-Age Benefits Institution and none knew about social security schemes such as the Workers Welfare Fund (WWF).

The study identified disparities in access to healthcare based on employment status. Permanent workers are entitled to healthcare under the various Employees' Social Security Acts.<sup>9</sup> It was difficult to obtain a clear answer about healthcare coverage in the questionnaire because respondents were often unsure what it meant. Only 19 answered positively that they received medical assistance. Of those who said yes, 12 were permanent employees and three were contractual. Some respondents stated that they had to take out loans to meet medical expenses. Interestingly, workers in Islamabad stated that they all had access to healthcare services, regardless of employment status.

The minimum wage in 2024 was set at PKR 37,000 (USD 135) per month in most of the country; at the time of the field research, it was PKR 32,000 (USD 115) per month. Questionnaire data reveals that 35 (of 66) received salaries below the minimum wage. Of the 31 workers receiving minimum wage or above, there was a strong correlation between receiving minimum wage and permanent employment status. There was also a strong correlation with gender: 23 of those receiving the minimum wage were men and only eight women. Workers across all districts reported that their salaries were insufficient to cover their basic needs. Fifty-three respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their income and 60 said their income was insufficient to cover their family expenses.

Participants to this study reported that, to their knowledge, compensation for injury or death was virtually non-existent and there was no established process for documenting or reporting injuries. These observations were supported by the cases of Nadeem Masih and Faisal Masih, who died while cleaning a sewerage drain in Sargodha in October 2021. Faisal Masih was a permanent worker so his family received PKR 1.9 million (USD 6,795); however, the family of Nadeem Masih, a daily-wage worker, received only PKR 500,000 (USD 1,790), despite the deaths occurring together. Nadeem's family received the amount through an out of court settlement after a criminal case of the incident was filed.

The report's findings align with existing research which conclude that sanitation workers are regularly subject to unsafe, and sometimes hazardous, working conditions. Sanitation workers participating in the study seldom received personal protective equipment (PPE) or training in occupational safety and health (OSH). Of the 66 questionnaire respondents, only six stated that they had received some occupational safety training. Based on data collected from news reports and personal testimonies between 2011 and 2023, the CLJ found that in 50 incidents 80 sanitation workers had died while working in manholes across Pakistan, an overwhelming majority of whom were non-Muslims.

Appropriate safety equipment was not always provided to the research participants. Fourteen questionnaire participants reported that they were not provided with any protective or safety equipment; six stated that they had to buy the equipment out of their own salaries. Thirty-six out of 66 questionnaire respondents stated that they had developed health issues due to their work. These ranged from allergies, breathing issues and chronic coughs due to exposure to dust or directly picking up trash. Masks and some PPE were provided during the Covid-19 pandemic, but this practice has ceased in some places.

Workers reported suffering from a range of health issues due to the varied nature of sanitation work. A male worker from Peshawar told Amnesty International that workers frequently suffered skin burns due to acids released in sewage lines and hand injuries due to discarded glass sheets. During the FGD in Islamabad, a male worker showed a missing finger on his left hand, narrating how he had been pricked by a syringe while handling waste without gloves and the wound had become septic, eventually leading to amputation. Those working outside, especially sweepers, are often exposed to extreme heat conditions in the summer months.

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<sup>8</sup> Social security benefits include healthcare coverage, pension/old-age benefits, maternity funds and education coverage.

<sup>9</sup> Provincial Employees' Social Security Ordinance 1965, Sindh Employees' Social Security Act 2016, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Employees' Social Security Act 2021, and Balochistan Employees' Social Security Act 2022.

At least four of the questionnaire respondents reported they suffered a heat stroke while working. Road accidents were also cited as a risk, especially for sweepers. A male participant in Islamabad stated that his colleague had died due to a road accident while working.

These issues were compounded by lack of inspections. Local civil society organizations point out that effective labour inspections under the 1936 Factories Act are rare and labour departments are inadequately resourced to carry out inspections. Inspections are even more difficult to carry out in domestic settings, where a large number of women sanitation workers are employed.

Despite the risks, sanitation workers participating in the research told Amnesty International that they felt unable to refuse unsafe work. Out of the 66 questionnaire respondents, 46 said they could not refuse work even when they felt that it was dangerous. A pervasive atmosphere of job insecurity, given their temporary employment status, could contribute to this. 50 out of 66 respondents stated that they feared sudden job termination, highlighting a widespread sense of precarity. Additionally, 44 respondents said they would not even get one-month notice before being terminated.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International calls for systemic and intersectional action to address the unique issues of caste-based discrimination faced by sanitation workers in Pakistan. Despite the challenges outlined in the report, there are signs of improvement. Some sanitation workers noted that discriminatory attitudes are shifting.

There is a lot, however, that the government needs to do to ensure robust protections and remedies for sanitation workers and prevent violations of their human rights. Amnesty International calls on the Government of Pakistan and relevant authorities to take the following actions:

- Eliminate the manual cleaning of drains and gutters and introduce machinery to perform these tasks.
- Ensure that sanitation workers currently employed in the manual cleaning of drains and gutters are trained to operate these machines.
- Amend the Constitution to explicitly include protection against caste-based discrimination as part of the fundamental rights chapter and pass legislation recognizing caste-based discrimination as per Pakistan's international human rights obligations to address the unique discrimination faced by sanitation workers and communities associated with sanitation work.
- Ensure that this legislation includes a definition of caste that corresponds to the local social context and in meaningful consultation with the communities facing this discrimination.
- End discriminatory recruitment practices, including discriminatory job advertisements, for sanitation work.
- Conduct a substantive and consultative review and amendment of Pakistan's labour laws to address the particular issues of safety, mistreatment and discrimination that sanitation workers face, taking into account the varied workplaces in which this work takes place.
- Take immediate steps to ensure the full regularization of sanitation workers in line with the Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance and that mandatory requirements are placed on employers to provide written contracts for sanitation workers.
- Ensure that adequate PPE is provided to all sanitation workers, regardless of their employment status.
- Increase resources to provincial labour departments for effective and independent labour inspections to ensure compliance with labour laws and safety codes, and effective oversight of their implementation.
- Implement government-mandated minimum wage for all workers, regardless of their employment status, ensure that no unlawful deductions take place, and take steps to address the gender pay gap in line with its obligations under CEDAW.
- Take steps to ensure mandatory enrolment of all sanitation workers, regardless of employment status, in social security and worker welfare schemes.
- Develop awareness-raising campaigns, including changes to school curricula, to combat discrimination and systemic racism against non-Muslims and stigmatized castes, as well as prejudices associated with sanitation work.
- Allocate funds and resources to provide opportunities to sanitation worker communities and their children, through affirmative action programmes and robust educational opportunities.
- Ensure companies and employers uphold their obligations under international human rights law.



“

[When I am cleaning the streets, people often remark] this *chuhra* has come again and now he will spread dust everywhere.”

- A male sanitation worker in Lahore



↑ Three sanitation workers clearing a sewerage drain after a spell of rain in Lahore in June 2025. The workers are using bamboo sticks and do not have any safety equipment such as gloves, masks or rain boots. Photo: Daniyal Yousaf/ Amnesty International

# 1. METHODOLOGY

This report is the result of a collaboration between Amnesty International and the Center for Law & Justice (CLJ), a human rights organization in Pakistan working for the rights and interests of disadvantaged religious communities and women and labour rights.

The report investigates the issues impacting sanitation workers in Pakistan, focusing on their working conditions, social interaction and economic status, with particular attention on caste, gender and religion-based discrimination. It aims at surfacing commonly shared lived experiences of sanitation workers and trends to inform existing advocacy and proposed policy and lawmaking efforts. While existing research has documented the social and economic marginalization of sanitation workers in Pakistan, Amnesty International brings a unique perspective by framing religious and caste-based discrimination as a human rights violation under international law. Partnering with a local organization with a wealth of experience in advocacy for sanitation workers' rights, this study situates their lived experiences within the framework of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), enabling a more precise articulation of state responsibility and highlighting caste as a structural form of racial discrimination.

Given the complexity of the issues at play, Amnesty International and CLJ employed a range of methodologies including a qualitative questionnaire, focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews. The study also used data provided by government institutions and companies through right to information requests. Desk research was conducted through a literature review of academic and civil society research and an analysis of national legislation, including national labour laws, policies and international human rights treaties to which Pakistan is a party, including International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH COLLECTION

Fieldwork was carried out between February and September 2024 in six districts in three provinces of Pakistan: Lahore, Bahawalpur, Karachi, Umerkot, Islamabad and Peshawar. For the purposes of this research, Karachi city is referred to as one unit, which administratively consists of seven districts.<sup>10</sup> Lahore and Bahawalpur are located in Punjab province, Karachi and Umerkot in Sindh province, Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, and Islamabad is the capital territory bordering Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. The districts have varying levels of urbanization and economic development; Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and Islamabad are major urban centres, whereas Umerkot and Bahawalpur are more rural. These districts were chosen to provide a broad perspective from different contexts on the intersection of caste, religion and occupation. Lahore and Karachi are the two biggest cities, with respective populations of 13 million<sup>11</sup> and 20.3 million.<sup>12</sup> Islamabad, the federal capital, is home to 2.3 million people;<sup>13</sup> Peshawar is the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province with a population of 4.7 million.<sup>14</sup> Bahawalpur is relatively rural and

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<sup>10</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Punjab, "Table 9: Population by sex, religion and rural/urban, Census – 2023", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_9\\_punjab\\_districts.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_9_punjab_districts.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Punjab, "Table 1: Households, population, household size and annual growth rate", <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/Punjab.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Commissioner Karachi, Census, <https://commissionerkarachi.gos.pk/population> (accessed on 22 June 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Islamabad, "Table 1: Area, population by sex, sex ratio, population density, urban population, household size and annual growth, Census-2023, Islamabad", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_1\\_islamabad.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_1_islamabad.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, "Table 1: Area, population by sex, sex ratio, population density, urban population, household size and annual growth, Census-2023", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_1\\_kp\\_province.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_1_kp_province.pdf)



less developed, with a population of 4.2 million; 62% of the population is characterised as rural.<sup>15</sup> Umerkot, one of the poorest and most rural districts, has a population of 1.1 million and is 77% rural.<sup>16</sup>

Religious diversity in these districts is critical to the study's focus on caste and religion. Data from the census indicates that Christians are a bigger minority in Lahore, Islamabad and Peshawar; Hindus are a bigger minority in Bahawalpur; and Karachi has a more diverse minority population. Umerkot is notable because it is the one district without a clear Muslim majority as almost half of its population is Hindu.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1: Religion in six districts (percentage)**

DISTRICT/CITY	MUSLIM	CHRISTIAN	HINDU
ISLAMABAD <sup>18</sup>	95.5	4.2	0.03
PESHAWAR <sup>19</sup>	99.2	0.6	0.03
LAHORE <sup>20</sup>	95.2	4.6	0.019
BAHAWALPUR <sup>21</sup>	98.1	0.6	1.1
KARACHI <sup>22</sup>	96.3	2.1	1.1
UMERKOT <sup>23</sup>	44.8	0.2	43.3

The researchers interacted with 231 sanitation workers via questionnaires, FGDs and informant interviews. Questionnaires were conducted by phone with 66 participants across the six districts. The 107 questions covered demographics, employment conditions, health and safety, social dynamics, discrimination, union representation, and future expectations. The questionnaire was translated into Urdu and refined via a pilot test with a small group. The participants were chosen through convenience-sampling and snowballing method, and shaped by access and CLJ's existing network of sanitation workers. The sample was expanded by reaching out to contacts through referrals. The sample was also quota-based and stratified, aiming at equal gender representation, diversity of employment status and religious and caste identities.

<sup>15</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Punjab, "Table 1: Area, population by sex, sex ratio, population density, urban population, household size and annual growth, Census-2023, Punjab", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_1\\_punjab\\_districts.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_1_punjab_districts.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Sindh, "Table 1: Area, population by sex, sex ratio, population density, urban population, household size and annual growth, Census-2023, Sindh", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_1\\_sindh\\_districts.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_1_sindh_districts.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Sindh, "Table 9: Population by sex, religion and rural/urban, Census – 2023", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_9\\_sindh\\_districts.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_9_sindh_districts.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Islamabad, "Table 9: Population by sex, religion and rural/urban, Census – 2023", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_9\\_islamabad.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_9_islamabad.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, "Table 9: Population by sex, religion and rural/urban, Census – 2023", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_9\\_kp\\_districts.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_9_kp_districts.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Punjab, "Table 9: Population by sex, religion and rural/urban, Census – 2023", [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_9\\_punjab\\_districts.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_9_punjab_districts.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Punjab, "Table 9" (previously cited).

<sup>22</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Sindh, "Table 9" (previously cited).

<sup>23</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Sindh, "Table 9" (previously cited).

Table 2: Profile of questionnaire participants

LOCATION	MUSLIM MALE	MUSLIM FEMALE	CHRISTIAN MALE	CHRISTIAN FEMALE	HINDU MALE	HINDU FEMALE	TOTAL
ISLAMABAD	1	0	6	4	0	0	11
PESHAWAR	1	0	3	4	0	0	8
LAHORE	2	1	5	8	0	0	16
BAHAWALPUR	0	0	4	5	2	0	11
KARACHI	0	0	7	3	1	1	12
UMERKOT	1	0	2	3	1	1	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	5	1	27	27	4	2	66

Of the 66 respondents to the questionnaire, 30 identified as women and 36 as men. 54 participants, identified as Christian, while six as Hindu and Muslim each. The higher number of the Christians was not only due to the higher representation of this group among sanitation workers (see section 2) but also due to a greater willingness to participate in this study and share their experience of caste-based discrimination. As explained in the methodology, responses were interpreted as indicating patterns of issues that researchers sought to confirm through further investigation.

Questionnaire participants were asked about their caste identity given its centrality in the study. However, this posed a challenge given complexity of caste dynamics in Pakistan, their formal invisibility and methodological limitations with having participants self identify. Some chose not disclose caste due to the stigma associated with it. Further, many participants have changed their surname to hide caste and descent identity, often to avoid stigmatization. This underlines that caste-based discrimination is often hidden, denied, or normalized, making it harder to fully capture in data but no less real. These issues invite further investigation in future studies.

Table 3: Questionnaire respondents by religion

RELIGION	NO. OF RESPONDENTS
MUSLIM	6
CHRISTIAN	54
HINDU	6

Nearly two-thirds of the participants either had no formal schooling (42%) or had left before starting secondary level education. This necessitated that the questionnaire be conducted verbally. It was done over phone calls to the 66 sanitation workers participating in the questionnaire.



Table 4: Questionnaire respondents by education

EDUCATION LEVEL	NO. OF RESPONDENTS
NO EDUCATION	28
PRIMARY	14
MIDDLE	17
MATRICULATION <sup>24</sup>	6
INTERMEDIATE <sup>25</sup>	1

Additionally, 13 FGDs were conducted with 156 sanitation workers (71 women and 85 men), selected through a similar snowballing method. Two FGDs were conducted in each of the selected districts, for female and male workers respectively. In Islamabad, due to the large number of male participants, two FGDs were conducted with male sanitation workers. The discussions explored participants' experiences related to working conditions and discrimination. Questions were open ended to encourage detailed responses. The discussions were conducted in Urdu and Punjabi according to the preference of the participants.

Table 5: Gender and location of FGD participants

LOCATION	GENDER	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
ISLAMABAD	Female	15
	Male	24
PESHAWAR	Female	11
	Male	8
LAHORE	Female	12
	Male	12
BAHAWALPUR	Female	11
	Male	19
KARACHI	Female	6
	Male	10
UMERKOT	Female	16
	Male	12

In addition, researchers interviewed 17 people to understand the challenges faced by sanitation workers in more detail. Interviews were conducted with nine sanitation workers from Bahawalpur, Islamabad, Lahore, Umerkot and Karachi, and eight experts including academics, activists, unionists and members of relevant government departments working on sanitation workers' rights. The interviews were conducted in Urdu, Punjabi and English without interpreters.

<sup>24</sup> Part of secondary education levels, grades nine and ten, typically completed by students around ages 14 to 16.

<sup>25</sup> Higher grades in secondary level, grades 11 and 12. Typically for students aged 16 to 18.

Table 6: Profile of interviewees

	BAHAWALPUR	ISLAMABAD	LAHORE	UMERKOT	KARACHI	TOTAL
MALE SANITATION WORKERS	1	1	1	1	1	5
FEMALE SANITATION WORKERS	1	1	1	1	0	4
MALE EXPERTS	0	3	3	0	1	7
FEMALE EXPERTS	0	1	0	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	2	6	5	2	1	17

The research also draws on right to information requests filed across Pakistan's four provinces (Balochistan, Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and the federal capital to inquire about disaggregated employee data. However, the data obtained from this method was limited as out of the 56 requests, only 15 government agencies from Punjab provided information and one refused, citing restrictions under section 13 of the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act 2013.

### DATA MANAGEMENT AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research was undertaken according to Amnesty International's policies and guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Strict confidentiality was maintained to ensure data integrity and protect participants' privacy. Participants were reimbursed PKR 1,000 (USD 3.5) each for transport costs to acknowledge their contribution without influencing their participation. The names of participants in the FGDs, interviews and questionnaires have been withheld to ensure safety and protect workers from any repercussions to their employment. Given the unique risks faced by sanitation workers belonging to religious minorities, these safeguarding precautions were built into the methodology from the start. Data and digital recordings from the FGDs, interviews and questionnaires were stored securely to protect participant confidentiality, adhering to strict data protection protocols.

### MITIGATING LIMITATIONS

One of the study's key limitations was Pakistan's vast geographical and cultural diversity and the fact that the study could only include a few districts. The selected districts were, however, chosen to represent a range of administrative, cultural and ethnic divisions, thereby providing rich descriptive accounts of the experiences of sanitation workers. Further, due to security constraints preventing field research, districts from Balochistan province could not be included in the study.

The questionnaire was administered to a relatively small number of participants to identify emerging issues and patterns. Results indicate trends, rather than pervasive findings which were further explored in FGDs and individual interviews. Access to sanitation workers was facilitated through existing connections to build rapport, which may have introduced selection bias. Efforts were made to include participants from diverse backgrounds to mitigate this. Data collected from FGDs and the questionnaire was triangulated with data from multiple sources, including government records, interviews, and secondary research. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to confirm the themes, trends and systemic patterns emerging from the data.


Gaps in public data from government departments were a major hurdle. To address this, right to information requests were filed to gain additional insight into employment patterns among sanitation workers. Finally, researchers noted the difficulty of measuring discrimination given the varying and subjective definitions at play. This made it difficult to measure discrimination in the questionnaire, however, follow up questions in the questionnaire and during FGDs were introduced to explore instances and experiences where participants were otherized or excluded.



“

**Deaths in this line of work are extremely common. Four to five of our workers have died in the main line, which is about 15-20 feet deep, due to lack of safety equipment.”**

- A male sanitation worker in Karachi

 *↑ Sanitation worker pulls out waste from a sewerage drain in Lahore using a metal bucket and rope, March 2025. Photo: Center for Law and Justice/ Amnesty International*

# 2. BACKGROUND

## 2.1 CASTE IN PAKISTAN

Sanitation work involves the management and disposal of waste, an activity that is culturally perceived as “dirty” or “impure” in South Asia.<sup>26</sup> This contributes to the social stigmatization of people engaged in sanitation work in the region.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, such tasks are disproportionately assigned, often without real choice, to society’s most marginalized groups – those deemed lower in caste hierarchies, excluded on the basis of religious identity, or subordinated by gender norms.<sup>28</sup>

The traditional South Asian caste system reinforces this marginalization by linking occupations to family status, establishing rigid social, economic and spatial boundaries for people engaged in sanitation work and deepening stigma by assigning ritual notions of impurity to such labour.<sup>29</sup> Caste hierarchies are enforced through public shaming, social exclusion via untouchability,<sup>30</sup> denial of employment opportunities outside caste-designated roles, and sometimes through verbal and physical violence.<sup>31</sup>

The caste system has persisted into modern-day Pakistan and has largely transposed onto religious identities. A majority of the Christians in Pakistan today are converts from so-called “*chuhra*” backgrounds,<sup>32</sup> a caste historically assigned the task of cleaning. This has resulted in caste-based occupations such as scavenging and sweeping to now be associated with religious minorities in Pakistan, including “lower-caste” Christians and Hindus.

### 2.1.1 UNRECOGNIZED DISCRIMINATION

Pakistan, a nation of approximately 241 million people of whom less than 4% are non-Muslims, primarily Christians and Hindus,<sup>33</sup> has largely refused to acknowledge the existence of caste-based discrimination.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, existing conversations regarding sanitation work suggests that marginalized communities – Scheduled Caste Hindus, Christians and Dalit Muslims – are reluctant to bring the issue into public

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<sup>26</sup> International Dalit Solidarity Network, *Caste-based Discrimination in South Asia*, June 2009, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201102/20110228\\_510eustudy\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201102/20110228_510eustudy_en.pdf), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Labour Research & Development Institute, *Sanitation Workers in Lahore: A Socio-Legal Study*, 2024, <https://pwf.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Report-On-Sanitation-Workers-Complete.pdf>, p. 5, 3.

<sup>28</sup> CLJ, *Shame and Stigma in Sanitation: Competing Faiths, and Compromised Dignity, Safety and Employment Security of Sanitation Workers in Pakistan*, September 2021, <https://clj.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Shame-and-Stigma-in-Sanitation-New-Edition-2021.pdf>, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues*, 28 January 2016, UN Doc. A/HRC/31/56, para. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Al Jazeera, “How death and despair haunt Pakistan’s Christian minority”, 9 April 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/9/how-death-and-despair-haunt-pakistans-christian-minority>

<sup>31</sup> Sewperheroes, Instagram post, “Instagram post featuring the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mianwali”, 3 December 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CrW0xVtYAM>

<sup>32</sup> UK Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note Pakistan: Christians and Christian converts*, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/663b68f474933dccb6c3d5/PAK+CPIN+Christians+and+Christian+converts.pdf>, April 2024, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, National, “Table 9: Population by sex, religion and rural/urban, Census – 2023”, [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_9\\_national.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_9_national.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, *Long Behind Schedule* (previously cited), p. VI.

discourse. The Christian community is vocal about minority rights, but has been unwilling to address the stigmatizing association of manual scavenging with their faith.<sup>35</sup>

Researchers have noted that caste identities in Pakistan have been rendered invisible and buried under religious identity.<sup>36</sup> This denial of caste and, by extension caste-based discrimination, is despite extensive literature on the persistence of caste practices.<sup>37</sup> Subsumed under the identity of “religious minorities”, the structural class and caste distinctions among religious minorities are often obscured and seen only through the lens of religion-based discrimination or persecution. Further, the persistent refusal to recognize caste identity in Pakistan has not only erased non-Muslim so-called “lower-caste” experiences from mainstream discourse but has also masked caste-based inequalities among Muslims, often referred to as “Islamic castes”.<sup>38</sup>

Pakistan’s official recognition of caste and caste-based discrimination has changed drastically over time. Article 20 of Pakistan’s first Constitution in 1956 declares the abolition of “untouchability”.<sup>39</sup> This article was largely reproduced from Article 17 of the Constitution of India 1950, which stated: “‘Untouchability’ is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of ‘Untouchability’ shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law”.<sup>40</sup>



#### CONSTITUTION OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN 1956, ARTICLE 17<sup>41</sup>

Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form forbidden and shall be declared by law to be an offence.



Two sanitation workers using bamboo sticks to clean waste in a “nalla”, a water body, in Lahore while a crane is being used to remove waste. A “nalla” is often an open drain where waste from surrounding areas is routinely dumped. Photo: Center for Law and Justice/ Amnesty International

<sup>35</sup> Al Jazeera, “It is time to talk about caste in Pakistan and Pakistani diaspora”, 15 December 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/12/15/it-is-time-to-talk-about-caste-in-pakistan-and-pakistani-diaspora>

<sup>36</sup> Waqas H. Butt, *Life Beyond Waste: Work and Infrastructure in Urban Pakistan*, 2023, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> The Inclusivity Project and Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent, *Pakistan through CDWD Lens: Country Report on Status of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent in Pakistan*, 2023.

Asia Dalit Rights Forum, *Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent in South Asia – Status of Modern Slavery: A study of South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka*, October 2021, [https://theinclusivityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/MSSStudy\\_SouthAsia.pdf](https://theinclusivityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/MSSStudy_SouthAsia.pdf)

Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network and International Dalit Solidarity Network, “Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Pakistan 2017: Discrimination against Dalits in Pakistan”, [https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/documents/2017-10/js13\\_upr28\\_pak\\_e\\_main.pdf](https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/documents/2017-10/js13_upr28_pak_e_main.pdf)

Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network and International Dalit Solidarity Network, “Caste-based discrimination in Pakistan: Key recommendations for the Universal Periodic Review of Pakistan, 14<sup>th</sup> UPR session, 30 Oct 2012”, [https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user\\_folder/pdf/New\\_files/UN/UPR/UPR\\_Pakistan\\_2012\\_-\\_Key\\_recommendations\\_-\\_PDSN\\_and\\_IDSND.pdf](https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/UN/UPR/UPR_Pakistan_2012_-_Key_recommendations_-_PDSN_and_IDSND.pdf)

Haris Gazdar, “Class, Caste or Race: Veils over Social Oppression in Pakistan”, January 2007, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 42, Issue 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4419123>

<sup>38</sup> Prashant K. Trivedi and others, “Does untouchability exist among Muslims? Evidence from Uttar Pradesh”, 9 April 2016, *Economic & Political Weekly*, Volume 51, Issue 15, [https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Does\\_Untouchability\\_Exist\\_among\\_Muslims.pdf](https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Does_Untouchability_Exist_among_Muslims.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues* (previously cited), para. 29.

<sup>40</sup> India, The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 8 May 1955, <https://ncwapps.nic.in/acts/TheProtectionofCivilRightsAct1955.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of 1956, “Part 2: Fundamental rights”, 1956, [https://web.archive.org/web/20090324010348/http://therepublicofrumi.com/archives/56\\_02.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20090324010348/http://therepublicofrumi.com/archives/56_02.htm)



Pakistan's second Constitution in 1962 included a similar statement:

**“Practice of Untouchability Forbidden: No law shall permit or in any way facilitate the introduction into Pakistan of the practice of untouchability in any form.”<sup>42</sup>**

In 1973, Pakistan adopted its third and current Constitution which does not include any reference to untouchability or caste-based discrimination. Further, caste-based discrimination is not effectively addressed in any existing legislation in Pakistan. This constitutional evolution is emblematic of conflation in Pakistan's legal and policy framework of non-Muslims from so-called “lower castes”, historically referred to as “backward”, “depressed” and “scheduled” classes and castes,<sup>43</sup> with religious minorities as a whole. Pakistan's current constitution incorporates language from the 1949 Objectives Resolution<sup>44</sup> as part of Article 2(A): “Wherein adequate provision shall be made to safeguard the legitimate interests of minorities and backward and depressed classes.”<sup>45</sup> This has meant the erosion of affirmative action programs and policies specifically targeted at non-Muslims belonging to so-called “lower castes”. Pakistan introduced a 6% government job quota for scheduled castes in 1948,<sup>46</sup> The quota was abolished in 1998<sup>47</sup> and reintroduced in 2009 as a religion-based “minority quota”,<sup>48</sup> severing the original link to caste. The collapsing of minority and caste categories has meant that there is no specific quota for non-Muslims who are disadvantaged by caste and now have to compete with religious minorities who do not belong to so-called “lower castes”.

The association of sanitation work with caste, non-Muslims and demeaning occupations associated at birth<sup>49</sup> is reinforced through social shaming and exclusion from social and economic life via a cultural wall of ritual purity, refusal of employment opportunities outside caste-associated jobs<sup>50</sup> and sanitation jobs being reserved for non-Muslim communities. The government perpetuates this discriminatory practice through employment advertisements for public sector sanitation jobs explicitly seeking “non-Muslims”, often specifying Christians or Scheduled Caste Hindus.<sup>51</sup>



Two women sanitation workers helping a male sanitation worker load a garbage van in Lahore, March 2025. The women collected the waste while sweeping roads and footpaths nearby. Photo: Center for Law and Justice/ Amnesty International

<sup>42</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1962, 8 June 1962, Article 6(2)(16)

<sup>43</sup> Government of India Act 1935, 2 August 1935, [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1935/2/pdfs/ukpga\\_19350002\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1935/2/pdfs/ukpga_19350002_en.pdf), First Schedule, Part 1, section 20.

<sup>44</sup> Pakistan, Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, *Objectives Resolution*, 12 March 1949.

<sup>45</sup> Pakistan, Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, Article 2A.

<sup>46</sup> Establishment Division, “Rules for reservation of vacancies for the Scheduled Castes”, Serial No. 54, 19 October 1948, <https://paaa.gov.pk/download/ESTABLISHMENT%20CODE.pdf>, p. 117.

<sup>47</sup> International Dalit Solidarity Network, Equality denied: Pakistan's “lower caste” Hindus, [https://idsn.org/uploads/media/FACTSHEET\\_PAKISTAN.pdf](https://idsn.org/uploads/media/FACTSHEET_PAKISTAN.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, *Long Behind Schedule: A Study on the Plight of Scheduled Caste Hindus in Pakistan*, 2008, [https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user\\_folder/pdf/Old\\_files/asia/pdf/RR\\_Pakistan.pdf](https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/Old_files/asia/pdf/RR_Pakistan.pdf), p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, including its Causes and Consequences, Report: *Contemporary Forms of Slavery Affecting Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minority Communities*, 19 July 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/51/26, para. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Asif Aqeel, “Unprotected, unpaid or unrecognised: Christian workers on the frontline in Pakistan's fight against Covid-19”, 28 May 2020, Institute of Development Studies,

<https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/unprotected-unpaid-or-unrecognised-christian-workers-on-the-frontline-in-pakistans-fight-against-covid-19>

<sup>51</sup> NCHR, *Unequal Citizens: Ending Systemic Discrimination against Minorities*, May 2022, <https://nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Unequal-Citizens.pdf>



## 2.2 SANITATION WORK IN PAKISTAN

Sanitation workers play a crucial role in managing waste, including solid waste, sewage (wastewater), hazardous waste, and electronic waste.<sup>52</sup> Traditionally, sanitation work is divided into “dry” and “wet” categories. Dry waste, also known as municipal solid waste, consists of non-hazardous materials such as decomposable food waste and dry materials including glass, paper and wood.<sup>53</sup> Wet waste includes faecal sludge, which is hazardous due to the risk of contamination from decayed organic matter and pathogens. Sanitation workers perform a range of essential tasks to process waste, including sweeping roads, cleaning toilets, emptying septic tanks, maintaining sewage pipelines, clearing drains, managing storm water overflow,<sup>54</sup> and collecting and transporting refuse from homes, factories, offices, hospitals and schools.

Several human rights organizations inside<sup>55</sup> and outside<sup>56</sup> Pakistan have pointed towards the disproportionate representation of Christians in sanitation work despite constituting less than 2%<sup>57</sup> of the population.<sup>58</sup> To maintain this caste-based division of labour and society, the caste system imposes distance and exclusion through the practice of untouchability. For instance, marriage is only permitted within the caste and marrying outside the caste can result in honour killings.<sup>59</sup> Opportunities for education are also limited, restricting Dalit communities to occupations requiring no specialization or literacy.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the overall system precludes employment in occupations other than those of their parents, blocking generational upward mobility.<sup>61</sup>

### 2.2.1 PAKISTAN'S SANITATION WORKFORCE

Pakistan generates approximately 49.6 million tons of solid waste per year, but only 60% to 70% of solid waste in urban areas is collected.<sup>62</sup> Rural regions, home to about 60% of the population,<sup>63</sup> often lack any formal waste management services.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, only 1% of wastewater or sewage is treated, with the remainder discharged untreated into irrigation canals, farms, landfill sites, rivers<sup>65</sup> or the sea.<sup>66</sup> This inadequate waste management poses severe risks to public health and exacerbates environmental degradation.

Pakistan inherited a sanitation system from British colonial rule that is still largely dependent on sanitation workers. Workers often clear blocked or silted sewer pipelines manually using rudimentary tools such as bamboo sticks, buckets and hoes.<sup>67</sup> They enter manholes, which can be as narrow as three feet in diameter

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<sup>52</sup> Britannica, “Waste disposal”, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/waste-disposal-system> (accessed on 30 May 2025).

<sup>53</sup> Asian Development Bank, *Solid Waste Management Sector in Pakistan: A Reform Road Map for Policy Makers*, March 2022, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/784421/solid-waste-management-pakistan-road-map.pdf>, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> World Health Organization, *Health, Safety and Dignity of Sanitation Workers: An Initial Assessment*, 2019, <https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/wash-documents/health-safety-dignity-of-sanitation-workers.pdf>, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *Hazardous Matters: Examining the Right to Safe and Dignified Work for Sanitation Workers*, 2024, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2024-hazardous-matters.pdf>, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> NCHR, *Unequal Citizens: Ending Systemic Discrimination against Minorities*, May 2022, <https://nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Unequal-Citizens.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> WaterAid, “Sanitation Workers in Pakistan”, 17 November 2021, <https://www.wateraid.org/au/articles/sanitation-workers-in-pakistan>

<sup>58</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Sindh, “Table 9: Population by sex, religion and rural/urban, Census – 2023”, [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table\\_9\\_sindh\\_districts.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_9_sindh_districts.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> In a 2023 study by CLJ, based on data of 307 workers from 41 districts collected through questionnaires, showed that most sanitation workers were Christians and “Scheduled Castes” from lesser-known Dalit communities such as the “Gujrati”; CLJ, *Unseen Slavery in Sanitation*, 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Dharmendra Kumar Singh, “Inter-caste or inter-religious marriages and honour related violence in India”, June 2017, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, Volume 6, Issue 6, [https://web.archive.org/web/20210927203105/https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v6\(6\)/Version-2/I0606024953.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20210927203105/https://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v6(6)/Version-2/I0606024953.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> Dawn, “The miserable scheduled castes”, 18 June 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1188782>

<sup>62</sup> Tayyaba Tamim and Hana Tariq, “The intersection of caste, social exclusion and educational opportunity in rural Punjab”, July 2015, *International Journal of Educational Development*, Volume 43, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.04.008>.

<sup>63</sup> International Trade Administration, Pakistan country commercial guide, “Waste management”, 12 January 2024, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/pakistan-waste-management> (accessed on 30 May 2025).

<sup>64</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, “Table 1: Households, population, household size and annual growth rate”, <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/Pakistan.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> UN Water, *What Progress Looks Like: Pakistan – Sanitation (SDG Target, 6.2)*, 2023, [https://www.unwater.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/sdg6\\_acceleration\\_snapshot\\_621a\\_pakistan\\_feb\\_2023.pdf](https://www.unwater.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/sdg6_acceleration_snapshot_621a_pakistan_feb_2023.pdf)

<sup>66</sup> Government of Pakistan, National Sanitation Policy, September 2006, <https://www.mocc.gov.pk/SiteImage/Policy/SanitationPolicy.pdf>, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ghulam Murtaza and Munir H. Zia, “Wastewater production, treatment and use in Pakistan”, Institute of Soil and Environmental Sciences, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, 2012, <https://kh.aquaenergyexpo.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Wastewater-Production-Treatment-and-Use-in-Pakistan.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> Diplomat, “Pakistan and the sea: Preserving the marine environment”, 18 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/pakistan-and-the-sea-preserving-the-marine-environment>

<sup>69</sup> End Water Poverty, “Destigmatising sanitation labour in Pakistan through dignity, safety and employment security”, 17 February 2020, <https://endwaterpoverty.org/destigmatising-sanitation-labour-in-pakistan-through-dignity-safety-and-employment-security>



and range in depth from 15<sup>68</sup> to 30 feet,<sup>69</sup> under highly hazardous conditions<sup>70</sup> without proper safety equipment.<sup>71</sup> Some municipalities are introducing mechanization of these processes, but manual cleaning of sewers remain common.<sup>72</sup>

According to the Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2018-2019, about 0.4% of 68.75 million people in employment in Pakistan, approximately 275,000 workers, are involved in sanitation work.<sup>73</sup> Given the number of workers in the informal sector, in reality this figure is likely to be higher.<sup>74</sup>

Sanitation work in Pakistan is extremely labour intensive and therefore, where means allow, it is outsourced. Among the sanitation workers in the informal sector, many are domestic workers, of which there are reportedly nine million in Pakistan.<sup>75</sup> Domestic work is often divided: where multiple workers are employed in a household, some are assigned to cooking and laundry, while others, often according to religion and caste, are tasked exclusively with cleaning floors and toilets.

For the purposes of this research, “sanitation work” refers to “water supply, sewage, waste management, and remediation”, encompassing both dry and wet work.<sup>76</sup> The nature of sanitation work and its conditions vary greatly. Sanitation work is typically managed under local governments, where workers are employed through municipal corporations. Given the political challenges in Pakistan, however, the local government system is often under-funded<sup>77</sup> or limited due to chronic delays in local government elections.<sup>78</sup> Further, in cities such as Bahawalpur, Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar, there is a visible shift towards the privatization of sanitation services. For example, in Lahore, the Lahore Waste Management Company (LWMC) was established under section 42 of the Companies Ordinance 1984 on 19 March 2010 as a government-controlled company. Until recently, LWMC outsourced waste management to private companies through contracts to local<sup>79</sup> and foreign vendors.<sup>80</sup> There are plans for privatization that would impact sanitation workers.<sup>81</sup> In April 2025, sanitation workers protested plans to privatize the sanitation directorate of Islamabad’s Capital Development Authority (CDA), which consists of 1,700 regular sanitation workers.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Friday Times, “Unheard And Unseen: The Unspoken Plight Of Sanitation Workers”, 30 October 2023, <https://thefridaytimes.com/30-Oct-2023/unheard-and-unseen-the-unspoken-plight-of-sanitation-workers>

<sup>69</sup> Dawn, “Indignity, disease, death: The life of a sewerage worker in Pakistan”, 14 June 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1839660/indignity-disease-death-the-life-of-a-sewerage-worker-in-pakistan>

<sup>70</sup> Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed Fatmi, Naveed Mansoori, and Syed Muhammad Mubeen, “Health Related Quality of Life amongst Sewerage and Sanitary Workers of Karachi, Pakistan”, 2022, Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences, Volume 38, Number 7, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9532682>.

<sup>71</sup> Lok Sujag, “Why Are Sewage Workers Dying Despite Advances in Automatic Machines?”, <https://loksujag.com/story/sanitary-workers-safety-neglect-legal-loopholes-eng>

<sup>72</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Hazardous Matters: Examining the Right to Safe and Dignified Work for Sanitation Workers, 2024, <https://hrqp-web.org/hrqpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2024-hazardous-matters.pdf>, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2018-19*, 2019,

<https://webapps.ilo.org/surveyLib/index.php/catalog/6837/related-materials>

<sup>74</sup> ILO, *Challenges and Policies to Address the Persisting Problems of Sanitation Workers in South Asia: Background Note to the Workshop on Decent Work for Sanitation Workers in South Asia*, October 2021,

[https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\\_dialogue/@sector/documents/genericdocument/wcms\\_821051.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_dialogue/@sector/documents/genericdocument/wcms_821051.pdf), p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> ILO, “ILO and Pakistan Workers’ Federation join hands for protection of the rights of domestic workers”, 23 August 2023,

<https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ilo-and-pakistan-workers-federation-join-hands-protection-rights-domestic>

<sup>76</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2018-19* (previously cited).

<sup>77</sup> Express Tribune, “Financial strain halts local government projects”, 28 December 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2518641/financial-strain-halts-local-government-projects>

Dawn, “No funds for KP local bodies due to financial constraints: Gandapur”, 27 October 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1867861>

<sup>78</sup> Express Tribune, “Delay in Punjab LG polls irks CEC,” 3 June 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2549223/delay-in-punjab-lg-polls-irks-cec>

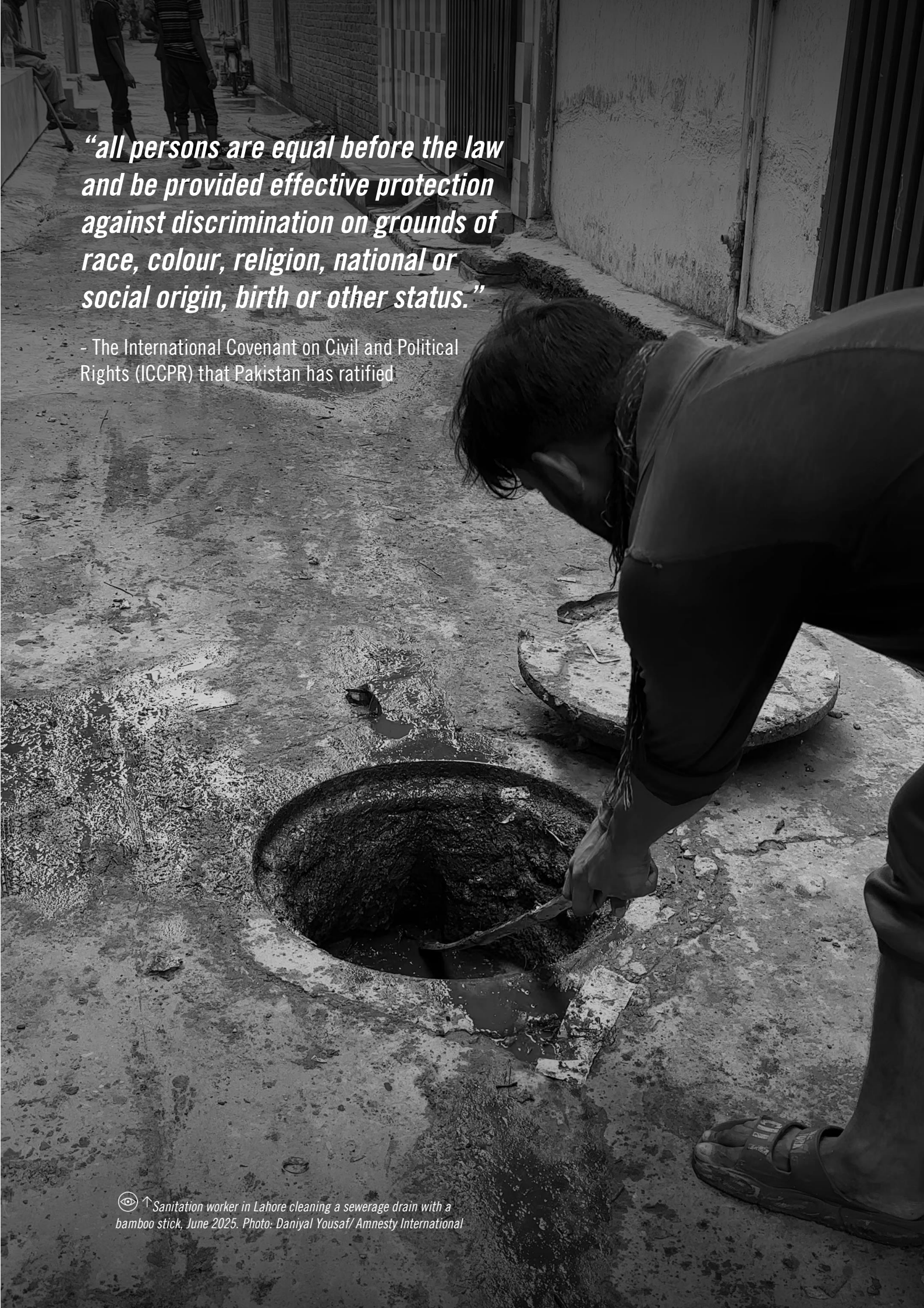
<sup>79</sup> Express Tribune, “LWMC signs short-term sanitation agreements”, 27 January 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2281486/lwmc-signs-short-term-sanitation-agreements>

<sup>80</sup> Business Recorder, “Contracts with Albayrak, Ozpak cause huge losses to govt: LWMC”, 19 January 2021,

<https://www.brecorder.com/news/40053069/contracts-with-albayrak-ozpak-cause-huge-losses-to-govt-lwmc>

<sup>81</sup> Express Tribune, “Preparations on for LWMC privatization”, 30 January 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2398344/preparations-on-for-lwmc-privatisation>

<sup>82</sup> Dawn, “Workers protest proposed privatisation of CDA sanitation directorate”, 18 April 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1905002>



***“all persons are equal before the law  
and be provided effective protection  
against discrimination on grounds of  
race, colour, religion, national or  
social origin, birth or other status.”***

- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that Pakistan has ratified

# 3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Pakistan ratified ICERD in 1966. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has recognized that caste-based discrimination falls under scope of the convention.<sup>83</sup> In General Recommendation 29, the committee noted “that discrimination based on ‘descent’ includes discrimination against members of communities based on forms of social stratification such as caste and analogous systems of inherited status which nullify or impair their equal enjoyment of human rights”.<sup>84</sup> In Pakistan’s combined 24th to 26th periodic CERD review, the committee expressed concern “about persistent racial discrimination, in particular caste-based discrimination, in the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, including significant barriers in gaining access to fundamental rights and services, which exacerbates marginalization and social exclusion”.<sup>85</sup>

Pakistan has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which requires that “all persons are equal before the law and be provided effective protection against discrimination on grounds of race, colour, religion, national or social origin, birth or other status”.<sup>86</sup> It has also ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which states that “enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work”<sup>87</sup> be “exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.<sup>88</sup> The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) in General Comment 20 notes that national legislation complying with Article 2(2) of ICESCR is “indispensable”, encouraging “laws aimed at eliminating formal and substantive discrimination, attribute obligations to public and private actors”.<sup>89</sup> General Comment 23 notes that “just and favourable conditions of work” extends without discrimination to “all workers in all settings, regardless of gender, as well as young and older workers, workers with disabilities, workers in the informal sector, migrant workers, workers from ethnic and other minorities, domestic workers, self-employed workers, agricultural workers, refugee workers and unpaid workers”.<sup>90</sup>

## 3.1 LACK OF CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS

The Constitution of Pakistan 1973 does not specifically mention race, caste or descent in its right to non-discrimination. Article 25 simply states: “All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law”.<sup>91</sup> Pakistan’s domestic legal system does not define racial, caste or descent-based discrimination nor does any national legislation on anti-discrimination despite recommendations from the CESCR to address this.<sup>92</sup> The preamble of the current Constitution of Pakistan states that “the Muslims shall be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective spheres in accordance with the teachings and requirements

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<sup>83</sup> CERD, Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: India, 17 September 1996, UN Doc. CERD/C/304/Add.13, para. 14.

<sup>84</sup> CERD, General Recommendation 29: Discrimination Based on Descent, 1 November 2002, UN Doc. A/57/18.

<sup>85</sup> CERD, Concluding Observations: Pakistan, 24 September 2024, UN Doc. CERD/C/PAK/CO/24-26, para 21.

<sup>86</sup> ICCPR, 16 December 1966, Article 26.

<sup>87</sup> ICESCR, 16 December 1966, Article 7.

<sup>88</sup> ICESCR, Article 2(2).c

<sup>89</sup> CESCR, General Comment 20: Non-Discrimination in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 2, Para. 2), 2 July 2009, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/20, para. 37.

<sup>90</sup> CESCR, General Comment 23: Right to Just and Favourable Conditions of Work (Article 7), 27 April 2016, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/23, para. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, Article 25(1).

<sup>92</sup> CERD, Concluding Observations: Pakistan, 2024 (previously cited), para. 8.

of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and Sunnah”, while also emphasizing that “adequate provision shall be made for the minorities freely to profess and practise their religions and develop their cultures”.<sup>93</sup>

Three articles in the fundamental rights chapter of the Constitution mention caste: non-discrimination in admission into educational institutes (Article 22), non-discrimination in access to public places (Article 26) and non-discrimination in public service (Article 27). The Principles of Policy in the Constitution say that the state shall “secure the wellbeing of the people, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or race, by raising their standard of living”.<sup>94</sup> However, Principles of Policy are not binding on the government and its institutions because the Constitution hinges their application is “dependent upon resources being available”.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, Article 30(1) of the Constitution states that the “validity of an action or of a law shall not be called in question on the ground that it is not in accordance with the Principles of Policy”.<sup>96</sup> However, Pakistani courts have interpreted the Principles of Policy to apply within the binding fundamental rights of the Constitution. For instance, in the 1988 case *Benazir Bhutto v. Federation of Pakistan*, the Supreme Court stated that while these principles are “not enforceable by any Court” they are nonetheless “the basis of all legislative and executive actions by the State for implementing the principles laid down therein... the authors of the Constitution, by enumerating the Fundamental Rights and the Principles of Policy, apparently did so in the belief that the proper and rational synthesis of the provisions of the two parts would lead to the establishment of an egalitarian society under the rule of law”.<sup>97</sup>

### 3.1.1 LIMITED LEGISLATIVE PROTECTIONS

While there is no anti-discrimination legislation in Pakistan, there are criminal provisions intended to discourage hate speech. These were introduced into the Pakistan Penal Code through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 1973<sup>98</sup> and include caste: “incitement or organization of others to promote enmity or hatred based on religion, race, language, caste or community”.<sup>99</sup> Further, section 505(2) of the Penal Code criminalizes the spread of information that causes “feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious, racial, language or regional groups or castes or communities”, punishable by up to seven years’ imprisonment and a fine.<sup>100</sup> The effectiveness of these criminal provisions in addressing caste-based discrimination, violence or marginalization remains unclear, particularly given the lack of documented cases where individuals from so-called “lower castes” have invoked these sections for relief against caste-based harm.

## 3.2 INADEQUATE LABOUR LAWS

Pakistan’s labour laws fail to provide protections applicable to sanitation work, but Pakistan has ratified 38 ILO conventions, including the eight core ILO conventions (core conventions cover subjects considered to be fundamental principles and rights at work).<sup>101</sup> These include the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (ILO Convention 111), which requires that each member state declares and pursues a national policy designed to eliminate discrimination in employment and occupation,<sup>102</sup> as well as enact or amend legislation or statutory instruments to ensure non-discrimination.<sup>103</sup> Pakistan has also ratified the Labour Inspection Convention (ILO Convention 81), which requires a system of inspection in industrial workplaces. Pakistan has not ratified the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 155) or the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 187).

The 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010<sup>104</sup> decentralized labour laws, including those regulating working hours, holidays, safety provisions, compensation for injuries or death and unionization, placing them under provincial jurisdiction. Legislation such as the Pakistan Factories Act 1934, the Industrial Relations

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<sup>93</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, Preamble.

<sup>94</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, Article 38.

<sup>95</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, Article 29(2).

<sup>96</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, Article 30(2).

<sup>97</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Benazir Bhutto v. Federation of Pakistan*, 20 June 1988, PLD 1988 Supreme Court 416, <https://nasirlawson.com/historic/pld416.htm>.

<sup>98</sup> Pakistan, Criminal Law (Amendment) Act VI of 1973, section 2.

<sup>99</sup> Pakistan, Pakistan Penal Code, Act XLV of 1860, section 153(A).

<sup>100</sup> Pakistan, Pakistan Penal Code, Act XLV of 1860, section 505(2).

<sup>101</sup> ILO, Ratifications for Pakistan, [https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx\\_en?f=p=1000:11200:0::NO:11200:P11200\\_COUNTRY\\_ID:103166](https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en?f=p=1000:11200:0::NO:11200:P11200_COUNTRY_ID:103166) (accessed on 1 June 2025).

<sup>102</sup> ILO, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (ILO Convention 111), 1958, Article 2.

<sup>103</sup> ILO, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958, Article 3.

<sup>104</sup> Pakistan, Constitution (Eighteenth Amendment) Act 2010, 19 April 2010, <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/amendments/18amendment.html>

Ordinance 1969, and the Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance 1968 are now adapted and enforced by the provinces. These laws only refer to sanitation work tangentially. For instance, the Factories Act includes in its definition of “worker”: “cleaning any part of the machinery or premises used for a manufacturing process, or in any other kind of work whatsoever, incidental to or connected with the subject of the manufacturing process, but does not include any person solely employed in a clerical capacity in any room or place where no manufacturing process is being carried on”.<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, the Hazardous Occupations Rules 1963 under the Factories Act list “work inside sewer pipelines, pits and storage tanks” and “all scavenging including hospital waste” as hazardous occupations.<sup>106</sup>

The nature of sanitation work is such that it cuts across industries and workplaces, and conventional labour codes in Pakistan fail to take into account the specific nature of the work. This has left a legal vacuum where no labour rights regulation covers sanitation workers, meaning that they fall in between the cracks of the legislative protective scheme. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) notes that the National Sanitation Policy 2006<sup>107</sup> did not address any of the concerns related to the working and living conditions of sanitation workers.<sup>108</sup> Individual provincial labour policies in Sindh,<sup>109</sup> Punjab<sup>110</sup> and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa<sup>111</sup>, issued in 2018, also do not explicitly refer to sanitation workers.

Although a large number of sanitation workers are employed in government departments, many are either temporary workers or retained through a contractor, arrangements that can result in them having to work beyond legal limits without overtime pay or guaranteed rest days. This violates national and international standards, including the Weekly Rest (Commerce and Offices) Convention (ILO Convention 106). Government labour inspectors do not inspect working conditions of sanitation work in government departments because they are only authorized to inspect non-government facilities, commercial entities or “establishments” under laws such as the Factories Act,<sup>112</sup> Shops and Establishments Acts and Ordinances,<sup>113</sup> Occupational Safety and Health Acts,<sup>114</sup> and Minimum Wages Acts.<sup>115</sup> Inspectors may carry out inspections of private companies to which sanitation work is being outsourced, but Pakistan’s labour administration, and inspections in particular, are under-resourced and often ineffective in identifying violations.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, as the research shows, women sanitation workers are more likely to work in the informal sector, either as daily-wage workers or in domestic settings, which places them outside the scope of labour laws. These legal lacunas mean that a large part of the sanitation workforce remains unprotected under Pakistan’s legislative and enforcement frameworks.

<sup>105</sup> Pakistan, Pakistan Factories Act 1934, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/index.php/UY2FqJw1-apaUY2Fqa-b56X-sg-jjjjjjjjjjjj>, section 2(h)

<sup>106</sup> Pakistan, Hazardous Occupations Rules, 1963, Rule 2.

<sup>107</sup> Pakistan, Ministry of Environment, *National Sanitation Policy*, September 2006, <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/pak182158.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *Hazardous Matters* (previously cited), p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> Labour & Human Resource Department, Government of Sindh, *1<sup>st</sup> Sindh Labour Policy 2018: “A Frame Work of Industrial Relations, Social and Economic Well-Being of the People of Sindh”*, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@ilo-islamabad/documents/publication/wcms\\_647697.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@ilo-islamabad/documents/publication/wcms_647697.pdf)

<sup>110</sup> Labour & Human Resource Department, Government of Punjab, *Punjab Labour Policy 2018*,

<https://labour.punjab.gov.pk/system/files/Labour%20Policy%202018.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> Directorate of Labour, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Labour Policy 2018*, <http://directorateloflabour.kpdata.gov.pk/img/kp-labour-policy-2018/KP%20Labour%20Policy%202018.pdf>

<sup>112</sup> Pakistan, Factories Act, 1934, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/index.php/UY2FqJw1-apaUY2Fqa-b56X-sg-jjjjjjjjjjjj>, section 11.

<sup>113</sup> Pakistan, Balochistan Shops and Establishments Act, 2021, [https://pabalochistan.gov.pk/storage/4219/2021-07-16\\_11\\_04\\_05\\_d24d7.pdf](https://pabalochistan.gov.pk/storage/4219/2021-07-16_11_04_05_d24d7.pdf), section 30.

Pakistan, West Pakistan Shops and Establishments Ordinance, 1969, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqJw1-apaUY2Fqa-apaUY2Npa5pkZw%3D%3D-sg-jjjjjjjjjjjj>, section 26.

Pakistan, Punjab Shops and Establishments Ordinance, 1969, <http://punjablaws.gov.pk/laws/230.html>, section 26.

Pakistan, Sindh Shops and Commercial Establishment Act, 2015, [https://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications\\_SindhCode/PUB-NEW-18-000109.pdf](https://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications_SindhCode/PUB-NEW-18-000109.pdf), section 25.

Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Shops and Establishments Act, 2015,

[https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/r/natlex/fe/details?p3\\_isn=102083&cs=16kHdQMh1YHNQ1ssy5U3vNRz5khsbLHi0i6FIUERUvY\\_fuD2ve09PIP1uxukQQn54fSr7gspukKXaK\\_ntuJoiQ](https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/r/natlex/fe/details?p3_isn=102083&cs=16kHdQMh1YHNQ1ssy5U3vNRz5khsbLHi0i6FIUERUvY_fuD2ve09PIP1uxukQQn54fSr7gspukKXaK_ntuJoiQ), section 27,

<sup>114</sup> Pakistan, Pakistan Occupational Health and Safety Act, 2018, <https://growsafehse.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Pakistan-Occupational-Health-and-Safety-Act-2018-Draft.pdf>, section 8(g).

Pakistan, Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2017, section 19.

Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2022, section 18.

Pakistan, Punjab Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2019, section 15.

<sup>115</sup> Pakistan, Minimum Wages Ordinance, 1961, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqJw1-apaUY2Fqa-cJ2Y-sg-jjjjjjjjjjjj>, section 17.

Pakistan, Punjab Minimum Wages Act, 2019, <http://punjablaws.gov.pk/laws/2750.html>, section 16.

Pakistan, Sindh Minimum Wages Act, 2015, [https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/r/natlex/fe/details?p3\\_isn=102145](https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/r/natlex/fe/details?p3_isn=102145), section 14.

Pakistan, Balochistan Payment of Wages Act, 2021, [https://pabalochistan.gov.pk/storage/4221/2021-11-08\\_11\\_54\\_47\\_90e3f.pdf](https://pabalochistan.gov.pk/storage/4221/2021-11-08_11_54_47_90e3f.pdf).

Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Minimum Wages Act, 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Dawn, “Labour inspection mechanism in provinces has failed to protect workers’ lives”, 29 April 2021,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1620938>

A landmark Supreme Court judgment in 2013, *Fauji Fertilizer Company Limited v. National Industrial Relations Board*,<sup>117</sup> held that contractual workers were to be considered employees of an organization if they were found to be “running the affairs of the organization”, which includes tasks such as filling and loading urea bags and cleaning machines and floors, regardless of their formal status. The respondent in the case, a state-owned company, was obligated to provide employment benefits to those employed through contractors. The judgment effectively protects workers against employers evading labour laws by using third-party contractors. As highlighted later in section 5.1, although steps are being taken towards regularization in the sanitation employment sector (i.e. employing workers on a permanent basis) by some employers, many workers who were part of this study were still employed on a contractual basis or earning daily wages. Further, later sections note that jurisprudence on the issue of regularization is inconsistent and shifting.

Similarly, domestic worker laws, including the Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2019 and the Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Act 2022,<sup>118</sup> introduce obligations on employers to provide safe working conditions and social security benefits. Domestic workers are entitled to written contracts, leave, holidays and the minimum wage; however, the laws are not widely implemented given the difficulty of conducting labour inspections in domestic settings. The laws are also thin on specific health and safety protections appropriate for sanitation workers in domestic settings; for instance, the acts do not require the provision of protection equipment. The Domestic Workers Convention (ILO Convention 189) requires states to develop measures for labour inspections “with due regard for the special characteristics of domestic work”,<sup>119</sup> but Pakistan has not ratified this convention.

The Pakistan Occupational Health and Safety Act 2018 does not specifically mention sanitation workers.<sup>120</sup> Provincial labour laws address workplace safety, vaccination, the provision of safety equipment, and medical care in case of injury or death—but not all mention sanitation workers. Notable progress was made in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where the Occupational Safety and Health Act 2022 has explicitly recognized sanitation work by including “work inside sewer pipelines, pits and storage tanks” and “all scavenging including hospital waste” within the scope of the law, thereby extending legal protection to sanitation workers in that province. Similarly, the Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Rules 2019<sup>121</sup> under the Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Act 2017<sup>122</sup> require personal protective equipment (PPE) for “workers entering a sewer, flue, duct, or other similarly confined places”.<sup>123</sup> Yet, many sanitation workers remain outside the scope of these protections due to the informal nature of their employment and gaps in enforcement.

The minimum wage is set by provincial governments in Pakistan. It was at PKR 37,000 (USD 135) per month in all provinces except for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the financial year 2024-25. It remains at PKR 37,000 in the federal budget announced on 9 June 2025.<sup>124</sup> The Minimum Wages for Unskilled Workers Ordinance 1969 and respective provincial legislation notes that every unskilled worker employed in a commercial or industrial establishment “shall be paid wages at a rate not lower than the minimum wages per month”.<sup>125</sup> Supplementing these protections, the Payment of Wages Act 1936 states that no deductions shall be made from wages unless authorized by the 1936 Act. The law allows for deductions for fines in cases of absence from duty or damage to property.<sup>126</sup> As demonstrated in the subsequent sections of this report, many sanitation workers, particularly daily-wage workers, earn far below the minimum wage.

<sup>117</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Fauji Fertilizer Company Limited v. National Industrial Relations Board*, 2013 SCMR 1253, judgment, 16 May 2013.

<sup>118</sup> Pakistan, Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Act 2022, <https://www.pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqaJw1-apaUY2Fqa-apaUY2Npa5lqag%3D%3D-sg-jjjjjjjjjjjjjj>

<sup>119</sup> Domestic Workers Convention (ILO Convention 189), 2011, [https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx\\_en/?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::p12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C189](https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::p12100_ILO_CODE:C189), Article 17.

<sup>120</sup> Pakistan, Pakistan Occupational Health and Safety Act 2018, <https://growsafehse.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Pakistan-Occupational-Health-and-Safety-Act-2018-Draft.pdf>

<sup>121</sup> Pakistan, Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Rules 2019, <https://www.pec.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sindh-Occupational-Safety-and-Health-Act-2017.pdf>

<sup>122</sup> Pakistan, Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Act 2017, [https://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications\\_SindhCode/PUB-NEW-19-000060.pdf](https://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications_SindhCode/PUB-NEW-19-000060.pdf)

<sup>123</sup> Pakistan, Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Rules (previously cited), Rule (K)(4)(k).

<sup>124</sup> Profit, “Minimum wage kept unchanged at Rs37,000 in FY26 budget”, 11 June 2025, <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/06/11/minimum-wage-kept-unchanged-at-rs37000-in-fy26-budget>

<sup>125</sup> Pakistan, Minimum Wages for Unskilled Workers Ordinance 1969, <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/86162/PDF86162.pdf>

<sup>126</sup> Pakistan, Minimum Wages for Unskilled Workers Ordinance 1969 (previously cited).






“

Obviously, people do not see us with respect. Even our children feel hesitation when talking about our occupation in school, because if they do their classmates make fun of them.”

- A woman sanitation worker in Peshawar

 <sup>↑</sup> A sanitation worker working for a local municipal authority picking up waste at the side of a road in Lahore. Photo: Center for Law and Justice 2025/ Amnesty International

# 4. SANITATION AS STIGMA

**“People think that sweepers are dirty and insult us by saying that we clean or pick trash from the roads. But we reply to them that we are doing hard work to earn money for our children and there is nothing wrong with it.”<sup>127</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Islamabad

This research found evidence that sanitation work in Pakistan is marked by caste-based discrimination, as reported by participants in the study and confirmed in interviews with trade unionists and labour department officials – findings consistent with existing research.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, sanitation workers in the study reported being exposed to hazardous working conditions and exploitative employment structures. Other studies have also found that sanitation work remains closely associated with so-called “lower caste” communities deemed “untouchable” in the South Asian context, resulting in social ostracization and stigmatization.<sup>129</sup> This discrimination exasperates breaches of workplace safety and labour laws under Pakistan’s legal system and Pakistan’s international human rights obligations. Lack of regularization of sanitation work further denies the workers’ access to benefits such as healthcare and paid leave. Pakistan’s laws do not recognize caste-based discrimination, so there are no legal mechanisms to address the unique discrimination faced by sanitation workers at the intersection of religion, caste and class. Many are forced into sanitation work by virtue of their identity, without the possibility of promotion or transferral to other forms of work.

## 4.1 SHAME AND EXCLUSION

**“People think of us as we are ‘dirty people’ without even thinking, but not all [people] are the same. We can say that 50% [of] people are good to us and rest don’t treat us well...”**

<sup>127</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 3 April 2024, Islamabad.

<sup>128</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *Hazardous Matters* (previously cited), p. 5.

Asia Dalit Rights Forum, *Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent in South Asia* (previously cited), p. 26.

United Nations, “Experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Commend Pakistan on “A” Status for National Human Rights Commission, Raise Questions on Blasphemy Laws and the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan”, <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2024/08/examen-du-pakistan-au-cerd-des-experts-font-notamment-part-de>.

<sup>129</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, Report: *Stigma and the Realization of the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation*, 2 July 2012, UN. Doc. A/HRC/21/42, paras 22-23.



## But mostly people think that if a person is Christian, he must be a sanitation worker and that he will be a ‘dirty’ man.”<sup>130</sup>

A male sanitation worker in Islamabad

From the accounts sanitation workers gave of their experiences, it transpired that society at large views sanitation work as “dirty” or “impure”. Almost all workers participating in the FGDs said they experienced social stigmatization. Social stigma plays a significant role in reinforcing occupational roles.<sup>131</sup> However, experiences were not uniform. In the case of the Christian participants, caste-based derogatory terms such as “*chuhra*” (historic name of a Dalit caste) or “*bhangi*” (another term for *chuhra*) were used to convey so-called ritual impurity and caste-based occupational segregation. Of the 66 questionnaire respondents, only 15 reported not experiencing such name-calling, while 29 explicitly reported being called insulting terms such as “*chuhra*”, “*bhangi*”, “*jamadar*” (janitor in Urdu), “*issai*” (considered a derogatory term for “Christian”) and even “dog”.

**“[When I am cleaning the streets, people often remark] this *chuhra* has come again and now he will spread dust everywhere.”<sup>132</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Lahore

This prejudice is not limited to Christians. A female worker in Karachi noted during a focus group that although Hindus are not called *chuhra*, they are subjected to similar forms of exclusion. She explained that sometimes the discrimination is so severe that Muslims refuse to reuse a water glass used by sanitation workers, instead instructing them to “throw it in the dustbin”.<sup>133</sup>

**“They won’t touch our dishes even by mistake.”<sup>134</sup>**

A female sanitation worker in Karachi

Nearly half the questionnaire participants reported facing consistent discrimination based on their profession, which as highlighted in the background is linked to caste and religious identity. Nineteen participants stated that they regularly face discrimination in public places when accessing drinking water and food. Fourteen participants said that they did not encounter any discrimination at all, while four reported experiencing discrimination sometimes in public spaces. The remaining 24 preferred not to answer the question. One participant added, “If they don’t know that we are Christians then they allow us to eat and drink with them and the moment they come to know someone is Christian, they separate their dishes and give them broken plate and glass to eat and drink.”<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, 18 people stated that their children faced discrimination because of their parents’ profession as sanitation workers; 20 said that they did not. The remaining respondents preferred not to answer or were unsure. One participant from Lahore described how a pupil at her daughter’s school referred to her daughter with the derogatory term *chuhra*, but she noted that the schoolteachers often took notice of such incidents.<sup>136</sup> At least five respondents during focus group discussions noted that attitudes were shifting:

**“Earlier, people never allowed sanitation workers to eat in their plate or touch their food, but these days people are educated, and they don’t treat us like this. Their minds have changed.”<sup>137</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Peshawar

Across all the FGDs, sanitation workers reported being stigmatized and devalued at some point in their lives, often experiencing shame and humiliation while performing their professional duties. They felt that they were denied social respect and dignity:

<sup>130</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 3 April 2024, Islamabad.

<sup>131</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, *Stigma and the Realization of the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation* (previously cited), para. 15.

<sup>132</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.

<sup>133</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>134</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>135</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 14 June 2024, Lahore.

<sup>136</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 13 June 2024, Lahore.

<sup>137</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 9 September 2024, Peshawar.

**“Obviously, people do not see us with respect. Even our children feel hesitation when talking about our occupation in school, because if they do, their classmates make fun of them.”<sup>138</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Peshawar

One woman during the FGD in Lahore described how her son got into a fight with Muslim children in the neighbourhood and the parents threatened to burn their house down: “They said, ‘We will burn your *chuhras*’ houses...’.” She went on, “They can cut us open and see that we bleed like them, so why do they call us these hateful words?”<sup>139</sup>



Municipal authority sanitation worker loading waste onto a designated van using a shovel in Lahore, June 2025. Photo: Daniyal Yousaf/ Amnesty International

#### 4.1.1 THREATS AND INTIMIDATION ON ACCOUNT OF RELIGION

There were a few accounts of religion-based tension at work, for example one male sanitation worker in Lahore described constant tension and pressure to convert,<sup>140</sup> but, what came out strongly was the fear of blasphemy accusations. A woman sanitation worker in Karachi described how the fear of blasphemy accusations is so extreme that Christian families sometimes refrain from religious expression, even within their own homes, because it can be misinterpreted as blasphemy. Christian women also wear head coverings (*dupatta*) to avoid suspicion from their Muslim neighbours.<sup>141</sup>

Blasphemy-related violence is an ever-present reality for religious minorities in Pakistan, as experienced by the communities who participated in this study. Previous research by Amnesty International found that

<sup>138</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 3 June 2024, Peshawar.

<sup>139</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.

<sup>140</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.

<sup>141</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws violate the rights to life; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief; and freedom of opinion and expression.<sup>142</sup> There have been several blasphemy cases involving sanitation workers in recent years. In May 2023, the 22-year-old son of a Christian sanitation worker was sentenced to death on blasphemy charges.<sup>143</sup> In August 2022, a Hindu sanitation worker in Hyderabad, Sindh province was accused of desecrating the Holy Quran. The case was registered by the police, but a mob still gathered demanding justice.<sup>144</sup> In March 2013, a sanitation worker from Lahore was accused of blasphemy by a Muslim friend. The accusation resulted in a mob attacking Joseph Colony, a Christian neighbourhood in Lahore, and the destruction of at least 170 houses and two churches. The worker was sentenced to death a year later by a local court,<sup>145</sup> but was subsequently acquitted in 2020 by the Lahore High Court due to lack of evidence.<sup>146</sup>

Blasphemy accusations in Pakistan are weaponized against religious minorities and have resulted in violence.<sup>147</sup> There were 89 extrajudicial killings due to blasphemy allegations in Pakistan between 1947 and 2021, of which 30 of the victims were Christian and 49 Muslim.<sup>148</sup> At the time of publication, the figure was 107 extrajudicial killings. In 2023, allegations of blasphemy against two Christian sanitation workers from Jaranwala in Faisalabad district, Punjab province, led to a mob<sup>149</sup> vandalizing and destroying more than 20 churches and 80 Christian houses.<sup>150</sup> Through information verified by the partner organization, the accused were two brothers engaged in sanitation work. They were both acquitted seven months later.<sup>151</sup> In its review of the cases in August 2024, Amnesty International found that more than 90% of the suspects of the attack are still at large and around 40% of the Christian families affected by the violence are still awaiting government compensation.<sup>152</sup> Since then more people accused of attacking the Christian community have been acquitted.<sup>153</sup>

A woman in Umerkot described the ease with which blasphemy allegations are used against sanitation workers as revenge for work-related disputes. She narrated an incident in her neighbourhood when a Christian woman who cleaned homes was accused of blasphemy by Muslim domestic workers. She described a sense of fear gripping the entire community.

**"We, along with all Christian households here, started keeping our lights off throughout the night. We feared that if they saw any Christian house with lights on, that house would be attacked by the Muslims."**<sup>154</sup>

A woman sanitation worker in Umerkot

The dangers faced by sanitation workers were demonstrated in a 2021 blasphemy case. A Christian sanitation worker employed by LWMC was accused of blasphemy after engaging in a conversation on religion with four Muslim college students. The accused was working in a park in Lahore at the time the conversation took place.<sup>155</sup> He was charged with blasphemy under the Pakistan Penal Code and was granted bail by the Supreme Court more than a year later in August 2022.<sup>156</sup>

**"We should be thankful to the Christian brothers for at least they clean up for us."**<sup>157</sup>

Former Judge of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, August 2022

<sup>142</sup> Amnesty International, *Pakistan: "As Good as Dead": The Impact of the Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan* (Index: ASA 33/5136/2016), 21 December 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa33/5136/2016/en>

<sup>143</sup> Voicepk, "Youth sentenced to death over alleged blasphemy charges", 31 May 2023, <https://voicepk.net/2023/05/youth-sentenced-to-death-over-alleged-blasphemy-five-years-after-arrest>

<sup>144</sup> Dawn, "Unrest in Hyderabad after alleged desecration of Quran", 22 August 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1706155/unrest-in-hyderabad-after-alleged-desecration-of-quran>

<sup>145</sup> New York Times, "Pakistani gets death penalty for blasphemy", 27 March 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/28/world/asia/pakistani-gets-death-penalty-for-blasphemy.html>

<sup>146</sup> Arab News, "Pakistani man's death penalty overturned in blasphemy case", 7 October 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1745621/pakistan>

<sup>147</sup> Amnesty International, *Pakistan: "As Good as Dead"* (previously cited).

<sup>148</sup> Center for Research & Security Studies, *Faith and Fury: The Rise of Blasphemy-Driven Violence in Pakistan*, 2021, <https://crss.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Blasphemyreport-12-9-24-1.pdf>

<sup>149</sup> Amnesty International, "Pakistan: Authorities must ensure protection of minority Christian community", 16 August 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/pakistan-authorities-must-ensure-protection-of-minority-christian-community>

<sup>150</sup> Amnesty International, "Pakistan: One year since Jaranwala attack, minority Christians await justice", 16 August 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/08/pakistan-one-year-since-jaranwala-attack-minority-christians-await-justice>

<sup>151</sup> Dawn, "Brothers 'framed' for Jaranwala desecration freed after acquittal", 2 March 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1818463>

<sup>152</sup> Amnesty International, "Pakistan: One year since Jaranwala attack" (previously cited).

<sup>153</sup> Dawn, "10 acquitted in Jaranwala church arson case", 5 June 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1915562>

<sup>154</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Umerkot.

<sup>155</sup> Dawn, "SC grants bail to Christian worker in blasphemy case", 24 August 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1706523>

<sup>156</sup> Express Tribune, "Blasphemy suspect gets bail", 24 August 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2372745/blasphemy-suspect-gets-bail>

<sup>157</sup> Dawn, "SC grants bail" (previously cited).

## HARASSMENT OF WOMEN SANITATION WORKERS AT THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGIOUS, GENDER AND OCCUPATION DISCRIMINATION

Women sanitation workers often face “triple discrimination”<sup>158</sup> at the intersection of religion, caste and gender.<sup>159</sup> Of the 30 women questionnaire respondents, 13 reported that they had experienced workplace harassment. Some women were hesitant to share their experiences with researchers. One respondent reported an incident that had happened to a colleague:

**“There was a woman [colleague] who used to work as a road sweeper and some men would pee on the road in front of her as a tactic to harass her. She ended up leaving her permanent job after that experience.”<sup>160</sup>**

- Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 15 June 2024, Bahawalpur.

This testimony illustrates how gendered violence is used to assert dominance over women in public spaces, particularly those in low-status occupations. Concerns over harassment and direct reports of harassment emerged more strongly in some FGDs, particularly in Lahore and Karachi. Workers in Karachi felt that Christian women were more likely to be harassed. One woman worker said: “[If] a woman has not covered her head, then men think it is ‘okay’ to harass a woman.”<sup>161</sup> Another woman worker who sweeps roads in Lahore reported experiencing harassment while doing her work: “Men say, ‘Look, she is a Christian woman so we can harass her’.”<sup>162</sup> She also said that the darker complexion associated with Christians helped people identify them in public places. This reflects how religious markers, such as not wearing a headscarf or having a darker complexion (often associated with Christian identity), make women more visible and thus more vulnerable to harassment.

Additionally, the notion of “chastity” and “respectability” that is socially ascribed to Muslim women does not extend to non-Muslim women, who are often perceived as lacking moral protection and are therefore deemed “available” or “less respectable”. This perception legitimizes harassment in the eyes of perpetrators in the workplace and beyond and reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal and religious biases.

Often, women do not report harassment because of the socially ascribed shame and stigma associated with sexual harassment.<sup>163</sup> However, this experience is not uniform. At least one female worker who completed the questionnaire stated that when harassment does happen, “we complain to our supervisor, and he takes action against them [the perpetrators]”.<sup>164</sup> This suggests that institutional responses vary, and some women may have access to supportive mechanisms.

Pakistan’s Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 requires that all workplaces set up inquiry committees for reporting and protection against harassment. The act was amended in 2021 to include “regular, contractual, piece-rate, gig, temporary, part-time, freelance” employees.<sup>165</sup> However, for women workers in domestic settings, avenues for reporting remain non-existent. This legal gap disproportionately affects women from marginalized religious and caste backgrounds, who are overrepresented in domestic sanitation work.

<sup>158</sup> International Dalit Solidarity Network, Caste-based Discrimination in South Asia (previously cited), p. 1.

<sup>159</sup> Ayra Indrias Patras, *Swept Aside: A Story of Christian Sweepers in Lahore*, 2023.

<sup>160</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 7 June 2024, Umerkot.

<sup>161</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>162</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>163</sup> Ayra Indrias Patras, *Swept Aside* (previously cited), p. 101.

<sup>164</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 12 June 2024, Peshawar.

<sup>165</sup> Pakistan, Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqJw1-apaUY2Fq-apaUY2Fsap0%3D-sg-ijjjjjjjjjjjj>, section 2(f).

## 4.2 DESCENT-BASED WORK



### ARTICLE 36 OF THE CONSTITUTION OF PAKISTAN MANDATES THE STATE TO SAFEGUARD SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS AND INTERESTS OF MINORITIES:

“The State shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial services.”<sup>166</sup>

This study found that, contrary to constitutional guarantees, sanitation roles are more likely to be imposed on people of certain non-Muslim and so-called “low caste” backgrounds over generations due to their descent and associated social stigma. In May 2009, the Federal Government approved a 5% quota within federal jobs for religious minorities.<sup>167</sup> The National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) noted in 2022, however, that “nearly half of the minority posts under the quota lie vacant”. Further, it found that 80% of non-Muslim religious minorities are employed in grades 1 to 4.<sup>168</sup> Government employment in Pakistan is structured by a grading system, ranging from grade 1 (lowest) to grade 22 (highest). The commission referred to this as a form of “state-led discrimination”.<sup>169</sup> The government claimed this was because insufficient minority candidates were applying or qualifying for senior posts. The commission countered that this was due to lack of equal educational opportunities afforded to minorities and systematic prejudice during recruitment and job allocation.<sup>170</sup>

As expanded on in the background section, religious identity is more likely to be recorded and documented by employers and government departments in Pakistan. Due to these limitations with lack of documentation on caste, this research seeks to investigate the overlap between religious identity and sanitation work in government employment. 56 right to information requests were sent to various government departments asking for employee data, grades and designations. Several departments did not respond and one declined. Fifteen provided information, all from Punjab province:

- LWMC
- Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA)
- Higher Education Commission
- Punjab University
- University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences
- Government College University
- Lahore Women College University
- Emergency Services Department (Rescue 1122)
- Punjab Police
- Punjab Power Development Company
- Punjab Public Service Commission
- Punjab Human Organ Transplantation Authority
- Punjab Population Welfare Department; and
- Punjab Forensic Science Agency.

The LWMC, Lahore Women College University, Government College University and the University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences did not provide a breakdown of the religion of their sanitation staff. Data from Punjab Human Organ Transplantation Authority was incomplete. The Punjab Power Development Company and Higher Education Commission only reported employing a small number of staff and thus are not included in the analysis below. The data Amnesty International received and analysed is included in the annex of this report.

The Punjab Assembly refused to provide information, stating that the application was “not maintainable” under the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act 2013. However, the Assembly has published a list of all its employees on its website including full names, father’s names, grades, and designations.

<sup>166</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, Article 36.

<sup>167</sup> Pakistan, Establishment Division, “Provincial/Regional quotas for recruitment to the civil posts under the Federal Government” (No., 1/ I 5/94-R-2), 31 August 1953, <https://www.establishment.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/Provincial%20Regional%20Quota%20for%20Recruitment%20to%20the%20Civil%20Posts%20under%20the%20Federal%20Government.pdf>, p. 6.

<sup>168</sup> NCHR, *Unequal Citizens* (previously cited), p. 4.

<sup>169</sup> NCHR, *Unequal Citizens* (previously cited), p. 6.

<sup>170</sup> NCHR, *Unequal Citizens* (previously cited), p. 15, 17.

Although the data does not list staff members' religion, common Christian names, particularly surnames like Masih, appear mainly among the 1,103 sanitation workers employed at grade 1, with almost no representation in other grade 1 positions such as kitchen attendants, guards or gardeners.<sup>171</sup> Masih has been adopted as a surname by the community to shed the surname "Issai" after it was designated as "sweeper" in the 1961 national census.<sup>172</sup>

According to data provided to Amnesty International, more than 6,000 people were employed at the University of Punjab in Lahore, Pakistan's oldest university. Of the 400 working in sanitation-related jobs, 396 identified as Christian and only four as Muslim.<sup>173</sup> A breakdown of other job categories shows the scarcity of Christian workers at higher grades or non-sanitation grade 1 jobs:

- Among 249 clerks at grade 14, only four are non-Muslims (all Christians), while the rest are Muslim.
- At grade 12, there are 480 junior clerks, of whom 12 are Christian.
- In grade 7, there are 85 machine operators, with just one Christian worker.
- Grade 6 includes 16 plumbers, with one Christian among them.
- Grade 5 includes 61 drivers, with only two non-Muslims, both Christian.
- Gardeners are also in grade 1, like sanitation workers, but of the 345 gardeners, only 10 are Christian.
- Similarly, among 385 *naib qasids* (assistant messengers) in grade 1, just 19 are Christian.

The over-representation of Christians among sanitation workers at the University of Punjab and the lack of representation at employment grades other than grade 1 points towards a pattern of systemic exclusion and discrimination.

Data from other departments in Punjab available to Amnesty International present similarities with Christians also disproportionately employed in sanitation roles. For instance, data from WASA in Lahore, Punjab shows that about 73% of the employees were Muslims and fewer than 2% were women. Out of the 1,538 non-Muslims employed in the department, 1,515 (98.5%) worked at grades 1-5.<sup>174</sup> This data draws clear correlations between non-Muslims and occupations at lower grades.

Data from the Punjab police force showed that there were 1,909 non-Muslims in the lower 1-5 grade positions, but only 55 total in grades 7 to 18.<sup>175</sup> Data from the Punjab Forensic Science Authority showed a similar pattern: 23 Christians employed as sweepers, compared with only 10 Muslims, whereas all other occupations showed Muslims as the majority.<sup>176</sup>

Noticeably, publicly available information is not caste-based disaggregated. This is evidence of the lack of awareness and understanding of how caste identity intersects with religion and plays a role in restricting access to occupation based on decent.

Similar discrimination, if replicated across government departments in other provinces, restricts Christians and so-called "low castes" to sanitation work, with only a few managing to access alternative employment and breaking through the glass ceiling. Of the 66 questionnaire respondents, 29 reported that at least one of their parents was involved in sanitation work, whereas only nine respondents reported that their parents were not engaged in sanitation work at all. In a separate question about family members other than parents, nine participants mentioned that their entire family was involved in sanitation labour. Additionally, 10 respondents noted that one or more of their brothers were sanitation workers, and seven indicated that other family members, such as a sister, father-in-law, wife or husband, were also engaged in sanitation work. At the same time, not a single respondent desired for their children to become sanitation workers.

**"We just want them [our children] to not do what we are doing."<sup>177</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Islamabad.

While data collected for this study suggests that sanitation workers are highly likely to be from non-Muslim backgrounds, their supervisors were often Muslim. Twenty-eight respondents, including two Muslims and two Hindus, said that their supervisors were Muslim. Eight respondents, all Christian, stated that supervisors were "mostly Muslim". The rest did not provide a clear answer. A Muslim worker from Islamabad, however,

<sup>171</sup> Provincial Assembly of the Punjab, Directory of Officers & Employees, <https://pap.gov.pk/en/about-secretariat/directory-of-officers-employees> (accessed on 1 May 2025)

<sup>172</sup> Herald, "Caste away: The ongoing struggle of Punjabi Christians", 26 February 2018, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153539>

<sup>173</sup> Table 10, Annex of this report.

<sup>174</sup> Table 17, Annex of this report.

<sup>175</sup> Tables 11-13, Annex of this report.

<sup>176</sup> Table 14, Annex of this report.

<sup>177</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 12 June 2024, Islamabad.

noted that there were some Christian supervisors. A Hindu sanitation worker from Bahawalpur also said that supervisors could be from any caste or religion, including Muslim, Christian and Hindu. Meanwhile, a Muslim worker from Lahore denied the presence of discrimination altogether, stating: “There is no such discrimination here.”<sup>178</sup>

Respondents were asked how they learned about job vacancies. Their answers reveal the communal nature of this occupation. Among the 66 participants, the most common route was family referral, reported by 26 individuals. This was followed by community networks, cited by 20 respondents, where neighbours, friends or local contacts played a key role in job referrals. A smaller number, three individuals, entered their jobs through inherited posts, typically filling a position vacated by a deceased family member. Three others mentioned learning about vacancies through advertisements.

Out of 66 respondents, 26 believed that caste, gender or religion did not play a significant role in the type of occupation and that people from all religious backgrounds were involved in sanitation work. A Christian man from Bahawalpur said:

**“Because of inflation, Hindus and Muslims are also doing this work.”<sup>179</sup>**

A Christian male sanitation worker in Bahawalpur

In contrast, 36 respondents recognized the religious identity of workers as a defining aspect of the occupation. Of these, 27 explicitly stated that sanitation work was predominantly reserved for Christians, while four said that it is typically done by both Hindus and Christians.

A male worker in Umerkot echoed this: “We don’t have any other choice. Even if we try to become street hawkers, people won’t buy from us once they find out we used to be sanitation workers.”<sup>180</sup> In Islamabad, a female worker<sup>181</sup> stated that workers were offered this work solely because they were Christian, regardless of their skill set and level of literacy, whereas illiterate Muslim women often had access to other types of jobs. A female worker in Lahore lamented: “even if the Christian workers are quite educated, they [still] hire them as a cleaner, whereas if a Muslim is illiterate [he can even] become an officer.”<sup>182</sup> Another woman in Peshawar said: “We should get factory jobs, like packing goods, but they only give those jobs to Muslims.”<sup>183</sup>

When asked why they had chosen their occupation, a small number mentioned preference for job stability in the form of a government or regular job (four in total), while one said they found the work relatively easy. Some acknowledged lack of experience in other fields, suggesting limited career guidance or opportunity. Ten respondents gave no clear answer but the most frequently cited reason – given by 22 respondents – was lack of another option. Fifteen respondents pointed to lack of education.

## 4.2.1 DISCRIMINATORY JOB APPLICATIONS

Descent-based occupational roles, though not codified in law, are institutionalized within government agencies. Workers often believe that their lack of formal education contributes to their marginalization, but research finds that discriminatory hiring practices also play a large role. In 2015, the Punjab Services and General Administration Department issued a notification against discriminatory government advertisements for the recruitment of sanitation workers,<sup>184</sup> but such advertisements are still widely published.

It was reported in 2017 that the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation invited applications for the job of sewage workers only from non-Muslims applicants. The application further required prospective employees to take an oath on their religious holy book – Geeta or Bible – that they would never do anything else but work as a sanitation worker and would not refuse to carry out the work.<sup>185</sup> As part of a separate study, the CLJ collected 281 government discriminatory job advertisements for sanitation workers. All of these advertisements, made available to Amnesty International and running from 2010 to March 2025, explicitly required applicants to be

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<sup>178</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 27 August 2024, Lahore.

<sup>179</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 8 June 2024, Bahawalpur.

<sup>180</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Umerkot.

<sup>181</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2024, Islamabad.

<sup>182</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.

<sup>183</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 3 March 2024, Peshawar.

<sup>184</sup> Express Tribune, “Ending discrimination: Eligibility rules changed for sanitation jobs”, 30 November 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1000860/ending-discrimination-eligibility-rules-changed-for-sanitation-jobs>

<sup>185</sup> Asian Human Rights Commission, “Pakistan: Non-Muslims forced to do sanitary work”, 11 July 2017, <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-077-2017>

non-Muslim or from so-called “lower castes” or gave preference to them, reinforcing societal occupation expectations.<sup>186</sup>

One such advertisement, published by Gilgit-Baltistan Police on 29 November 2024,<sup>187</sup> demonstrates a misreading of the 2014 landmark judgment by then Chief Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani on rights of religious minorities.<sup>188</sup> While the judgment directs the government to ensure the enforcement of quota for minorities in all services, the advertisement reserves the position of sweeper exclusively for the minority community in order to fulfil the 5% quota.<sup>189</sup>

#### EMPLOYMENT ADVERTISEMENT BY GILGIT-BALTISTAN POLICE, 29 NOVEMBER 2024

“In Gilgit-Baltistan Police, under the orders of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the Chairman Shoaib Suddle Commission, for the allocation of a 5% minority quota, it has been decided that due to the lack of representation of minorities in Gilgit-Baltistan Police, individuals belonging to the minority community should be recruited. To fulfill this objective, applications are required from suitable candidates for the recruitment of one vacant post of Sweeper (BPS-01) in Gilgit-Baltistan Police on a minority quota basis. Only those minority candidates who meet the required qualifications and conditions are eligible to apply on the prescribed application form:

SERIAL	PARTICULAR	ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA
1	AGE	20 to 28
2	DOMICILE	The candidate must have a permanent domicile in Gilgit-Baltistan.
3	CASTE	Only candidates belonging to the minority community will be eligible to apply.”

No.IGP-1(69)/GAB  
از دفتر انسپکٹر جنرل آف پولیس گلگت بلتستان

**اشتہار برائے بھرتی سونپہر**

گلگت بلتستان پولیس میں پریم کورٹ آف پاکستان اور دیگر بین شیب عدالت کی فیصلہ کے مطابق 5% کوٹہ ریز کے لئے جتنی کیا گیا ہے جس پر حال گلگت بلتستان پولیس میں آسامیوں خالی نہ ہونے کی وجہ سے باقی ریز سے تعلق رکھنے والے افراد کو منظور تعداد میں بھرتی نہیں کیا جاسکا۔ پولیس ایجنٹ میں سونپہر (Sweeper) کی (بی بی ایس۔01) کی ایک خالی نشست کو پُر کرنے کیلئے گلگت میں رہنے والے باقی ریز امیدواروں سے جو کہ ریز میں دی گئی شرائط پر پورا اترتے ہوں بھرتی کیلئے مجوزہ اقدام پر درخواستیں طلب ہیں۔

خود خدمت دہانچہ ریز امیدوار اس آسامی کیلئے درخواست نام آئی جی کی ایجنٹ کوٹہ کے ساتھ منسلک ہونے کے بعد 15 دن کے اندر ہی نی او میں منسلک کرنا چاہئے۔ درخواستیں کیلئے لازم ہے کہ بھرتی کے تمام مراحل کے دوران عملیاتی حیاتی کارڈ اور ڈیوٹی کال بھراوا جائیں۔

امیدواران کا نمونہ ڈیڑھ میٹر پر چارٹر لازمی ہے۔

اہلیت برائے امیدوار

نمبر شمار	مستندات	اہلیت کا معیار
1۔	عمر	20 سے 28 سال۔
2۔	سکونت	امیدوار کا مکان گلگت بلتستان میں ہونا ضروری ہے۔
3۔	کاسٹ	صرف باقی ریز سے تعلق رکھنے والے امیدوار درخواست دینے کے اہل ہونگے۔

کمیشن (ر) نیپیل احمد نی ایس پی  
ایس آئی جی کی ایجنٹ برائے  
آئی جی کی ایجنٹ بلتستان

IDGB 888/24



Advertisement by the Gilgit-Baltistan police department appearing in the newspaper K2 on 29 November 2024.

Participants in the research expressed barriers in securing jobs other than sanitation work. A worker in a focus group in Lahore shared how as soon as employers find out an applicant is Christian, “they reject us regardless of our abilities, education and skills”.<sup>190</sup> A worker from Bahawalpur said he went for an interview for the position of electrician, but when they found out he was Christian the administration offered only a sanitation job. He ended up accepting the job as he needed it to support his family.<sup>191</sup> A male worker in an FGD in Lahore described how when he was working as an assistant to a clerk, people questioned, “How

<sup>186</sup> CLJ, *Unseen Slavery in Sanitation* (previously cited), p. 11.

<sup>187</sup> Daily K2, “Advertisement for recruitment of sweeper”, 29 November 2024, [https://epaper.dailyk2.com/Home?Issue=NP\\_GB&p=29573](https://epaper.dailyk2.com/Home?Issue=NP_GB&p=29573) (in Urdu)

<sup>188</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Suo Moto Actions Regarding Suicide Bomb Attack on the Church in Peshawar and Regarding Threats being Given to Kalash Tribe and Ismailies in Chitral*, PLD 2014 SC 66, 19 June 2014, [https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/smc\\_1\\_2014.pdf](https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/smc_1_2014.pdf)

<sup>189</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Suo Moto Actions Regarding Suicide Bomb Attack on the Church in Peshawar* (previously cited), para. 37(vi).

<sup>190</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.

<sup>191</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 22 June 2024, Bahawalpur.



come a Christian holds this position?” He further asserted that people who held lower educational qualifications as him would say: “You should be sweeping outside.”<sup>192</sup>

**“Once they know you are Christian, the only work they offer is sanitation.”<sup>193</sup>**

A female worker in Karachi

The association of sanitation work with religious minorities is demonstrated in the attitudes of the judiciary as well. In a case challenging the termination of Muslim sanitation workers in 2017, Sindh High Court held that it would be “reasonable to reserve the posts of sanitary worker/sweeper to [religious] minorities, known to be engaged in such like work”.<sup>194</sup> The court explained its rationale:

**“A post of sanitary worker/sweeper would always include an ability to do cleaning without any hesitation in doing such job which includes jumping into drainpipe, even which normally is not expected from a white collared person. It is so that per our culture, normally the term sanitary worker/sweeper brings a picture of a downtrodden ‘non-Muslim’”.<sup>195</sup>**

Justice Fahim Ahmed Siddiqui in the case of *Mehboob Ali v Province of Sindh*, Sindh High Court, September 2017

**GOVERNMENT OF SINDH**  
**WORKS & SERVICES DEPARTMENT**  
No. E&AW&S/3-421/2017(Disabled Quota) Karachi Dated 18th February, 2020

**ADVERTISEMENT**

Applications are invited for the following posts in Works & Services Department, Government of Sindh, from differently abled (Disabled) persons as provided in Civil Servants (amended) Act, 2017 i.e. 5% Quota, domiciled in Sindh for their appointment as per rules / requirements of post.

S. No.	Name of Post with BPS	No. of Vacancies	Qualification	Age
01.	Computer Operator (BPS-12)	1	1. Graduate at least 2nd Division from a recognized university 2. Diploma in Computer Science from Sindh Board of Technical Education	18-28
02.	Tracer (BPS-05)	2	Matriculation with Certificate in Elementary Drawing from Institute recognized by the Sindh Board of Technical Education	18-28
03.	Operator (BPS-04)	1	Matriculation, preferable experience in concerned field	18-28
04.	Nab Qasid (BPS-01)	5	Primary / Middle Pass, able to read and write Urdu / Sindhi	18-28
05.	Chowkidar / Watchman (BPS-01)	7	Primary / Middle Pass, able to read and write Urdu / Sindhi	18-28
06.	Cleaner / Cook / Helper (BPS-01)	5	Primary / Middle Pass, able to read and write Urdu / Sindhi	18-28
07.	Beldar	20	Primary / Middle Pass, able to read and write Urdu / Sindhi	18-28
08.	Beldar / Coolie	2	Primary / Middle Pass, able to read and write Urdu / Sindhi	18-28
09.	Mahli	1	Primary / Middle Pass, able to read and write Urdu / Sindhi	18-28
10.	Mahli / Gardner Attendant	1	Primary / Middle Pass, able to read and write Urdu / Sindhi	18-28
11.	Sanitary Worker / Gutter Man (BPS-01)	3	Non-Muslim only, preferably illiterate	18-28

**Note:**

- Applications along with attested photocopies of CNIC, Certificates, Domicile, PHC and Two latest Photographs, bearing name of the post applied for on top of the envelope addressed to the Section Officer (General), Works & Services Department, 3rd Floor, New Sindh Secretariat Building No. 1, Karachi.
- Applications should reach the office of the undersigned within 15 days of the publication of this advertisement.
- Applicant must provide Certificate of Disability issued by the Board constituted by the Provincial Council for Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PCRD) as per power conferred under Sindh Empowerment of persons with Disability Act-2018 with the recommendation of Board for the said posts.
- One candidate can apply only for One Post.
- Incomplete or late submission of application cannot be entertained.
- Age relaxation is admissible as per policy of Govt. of Sindh.
- The time of interview / test & venue will be announced through newspaper.
- Government reserves the right to reject any or all applications including the entire process of recruitment without assigning any reason and the candidate(s) shall have no right to lodge any claim whatsoever.
- Only eligible / shortlisted candidates will be called for written test / interview.
- No TA / DA will be admissible to the candidates appearing for test / interview.

**SECTION OFFICER (GENERAL)**  
**Works & Services Department**  
3rd Floor, New Sindh Secretariat Building No. 1, Karachi

INF-KRY No. 542/2020 Say No to Corruption



An advertisement by the government of Sindh published in Dawn on 19 February 2020.

In 2022, the CLJ filed a petition at the Supreme Court asking for advertisements by government departments exclusively hiring non-Muslims for sanitation work to be declared discriminatory and unconstitutional under Articles 2A, 9, 14, 25 and 27 of the Constitution of Pakistan.<sup>196</sup> The petition called on the court to order government departments to withdraw all such advertisements and notifications in light of Pakistan’s

<sup>192</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.

<sup>193</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>194</sup> Sindh High Court, *Mehboob Ali v Province of Sindh*, September 2017, <https://caselaw.shc.gov.pk/caselaw/view-file/MTE4MTkxY2Ztcy1kYzgZ>, para. 10.

<sup>195</sup> Sindh High Court, *Mehboob Ali v Province of Sindh* (previously cited), para. 12.

<sup>196</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Mary James Gill v Federation of Pakistan*, Constitutional Petition No. 49/2022.

constitutional and international law obligations. The petition was dismissed in March 2025 because the court felt it had ruled on the matter already.<sup>197</sup>

In 2023, in the case of *Mubarak Ali Babar v Punjab Public Service Commission*,<sup>198</sup> the Supreme Court stated that discriminatory advertisements and employment selection processes restricting the minority job quota to low-level posts was “offensive to the constitutional values, the fundamental rights of the minorities”.<sup>199</sup> The court endorsed the recommendations of the NCHR:

**“[End] the practice of publishing discriminatory advertisements and ensuring public transparency in the number of minority posts filled across each level of the government. We fully support the said recommendations of the NCHR in the report and accordingly direct that the respective governments shall ensure that the employment quota of the minorities is maintained at all levels and to strictly avoid discriminatory and demeaning advertisements flouting the dignity and self-respect of the minorities.”<sup>200</sup>**

Justice Mansoor Ali Shah in the case of *Mubarak Ali Babar v Punjab Public Service Commission*, Supreme Court of Pakistan, November 2023

Despite the strong observations in the case, data collected by CLJ showed at least 16 government job advertisements since 2023 that included caste or religion as a criterion for recruitment.

Though the judgment is important in its recognition of religion-based discrimination, it falls short of identifying caste-based discrimination. It conflates the terms ‘backward’ and ‘depressed’ classes with the larger category of minorities or marginalized people, even including persons with disabilities in its ambit. It states that: “‘Backward’ and ‘depressed’ classes are not defined in the Constitution; therefore, going by their simple meaning, they include any class of people who are marginalised, under-privileged, disadvantaged, lacking choice, agency, autonomy, level-playing field, and opportunity.”<sup>201</sup> The comments underscore the lack of caste-specific language in Pakistan’s legal instruments and barriers to legal recognition of the caste-specific aspect of discrimination faced by sanitation workers.

Pakistan became a party to ICERD in September 1966. In 2008, at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Pakistan said that “it is a Muslim country and does not have the concept of Dalit or Scheduled Caste”.<sup>202</sup> However, on 24 September 2024, in its Concluding Observations on the Combined 24th to 26th Periodic Reports of Pakistan, CERD recommended the following:

**“Prevent and combat discriminatory employment and advertisement practices based on racist stereotypes, in particular those targeting members of non-Muslim ethnic minority groups for sanitation work.”<sup>203</sup>**

<sup>197</sup> Dawn, “Supreme Court: Petition to declare jobs reserved for Christians discriminatory rejected”, 17 March 2025, <https://www.dawnnews.tv/news/1255235> (in Urdu)

<sup>198</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Mubarak Ali Babar v Punjab Public Service Commission*, Civil Petition No.2045 of 2019, 2023 SCMR 518, 18 November 2023, [https://health.punjab.gov.pk/uploads/circular/10342E&A\(Health\)2-178-2015-min.pdf](https://health.punjab.gov.pk/uploads/circular/10342E&A(Health)2-178-2015-min.pdf), para. 8.

<sup>199</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Mubarak Ali Babar v Punjab Public Service Commission*, Civil Petition No.2045 of 2019, 2023 SCMR 518, 18 November 2023, [https://health.punjab.gov.pk/uploads/circular/10342E&A\(Health\)2-178-2015-min.pdf](https://health.punjab.gov.pk/uploads/circular/10342E&A(Health)2-178-2015-min.pdf), para. 8.

<sup>200</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Mubarak Ali Babar v Punjab Public Service Commission* (previously cited), para. 8.

<sup>201</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Mubarak Ali Babar v Punjab Public Service Commission* (previously cited), para. 5.

<sup>202</sup> UNHRC, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Pakistan*, 4 June 2008, UN Doc. A/HRC/8/42, para. 9.

<sup>203</sup> CERD, Concluding Observations: Pakistan, 2024 (previously cited), para. 22.





“

**We have to buy everything ourselves. They only provide [cleaning equipment] to the permanent workers.”**

**- A male sanitation worker in Karachi**

↑ *Four sanitation workers in Lahore walking with bamboo sticks and shovels on their way to clean sewerage drains in the area, June 2025. Photo: Daniyal Yousaf/ Amnesty International*

# 5. PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

This research found that sanitation workers participating in the study were often denied their employment rights and job security. Employers avoid giving workers permanent status, evading the rights that permanent employees are owed. The workers are often required to work long hours, sometimes without pay, and those without permanent status do not accrue annual leave. The minimum wage is not applied consistently, and workload can also be allocated on a discriminatory basis. By its nature, some sanitation work is hazardous. Sanitation workers in this research were reportedly not provided with adequate protective equipment, if any, and were expected to undertake undue risks in their work. Access to social security benefits for sanitation workers was also lacking and dependent on employment status, about which workers have no say. This section explores these issues.

## 5.1 EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Sanitation work in Pakistan falls into three employment status categories: permanent, contractual and daily-wage. These workers are largely employed by four types of employers: government departments, private companies, contractors for government departments or individual employers, usually in domestic settings.

Permanent workers are employed until the age of 60 or until they have completed 25 years of service, after which they are eligible for retirement benefits, including gratuity and pension. Contractual workers are hired for fixed terms, typically renewed every one to three years, and are not entitled to gratuity or pension at the end of their service. Both permanent and contractual workers may have access to certain benefits such as medical coverage, social security, paid leave and sick days. Daily-wage workers, by contrast, are only paid for the days they work. They receive no benefits – no paid leave, medical coverage, pension or gratuity – and lack job security. A female worker in Karachi expressed the vulnerable status of daily-wage workers: “We get paid only for the work we do.”<sup>204</sup>

By its very nature, sanitation work is permanent because it is essential to the daily functioning of cities and public institutions. Over the past few decades, however, government bodies across Pakistan have increasingly avoided regularizing sanitation workers, thereby denying them job security, benefits and legal protections. WaterAid, in its 2023 policy paper, noted that the sanitation sector in Pakistan is facing rapid privatization and workers are being hired on a contractual basis only.<sup>205</sup> However, in some organizations there is a move towards regularization. A study conducted by the Labour Research & Development Institute found that in WASA, a government-supported body that manages water supply, sewerage and drainage in Lahore, 38 of the 40 sanitation workers surveyed were on permanent employment, and the remaining two were recent recruits awaiting regularization.<sup>206</sup> However, these trends do not appear to be uniform. The same study found that only 18% of LWMC employees interviewed were permanent employees. In an interview the

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<sup>204</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>205</sup> WaterAid, *Improving Social Protection for Sanitation Workers in Pakistan*, September 2023, <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g/files/jkxooof256/files/2023-09/Improving%20social%20protection%20for%20sanitation%20workers%20in%20Pakistan%20-%20policy%20brief.pdf>, p. 4.

<sup>206</sup> Labour Research & Development Institute, *Sanitation Workers in Lahore* (previously cited), p. 20.

LWMC Managing Director, Ataf Yousafzai, said the company has 22,000 employees. Of these, 5,000 were inherited from the Municipal Corporation of Lahore and are permanent employees, but other employees remain contractual.<sup>207</sup> In the responses to Amnesty International’s questionnaire, out of the 66 respondents, the majority (35) were not permanent employees; 29 were permanent.<sup>208</sup>

**Table 8: Questionnaire respondents by employment status**

EMPLOYMENT STATUS	NO. OF RESPONDENTS
CONTRACTUAL	10
REGULAR/PERMANENT	29
DAILY-WAGE WORKER	25
UNSURE	2

Workers in Karachi reported that the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation had not recruited permanent sanitation workers since 1992.<sup>209</sup> During a FGD in Umerkot, a man reported that in the organization employing him the regularization of non-permanent staff had been on hold for more than 21 years. He said that despite working in the Municipal Committee for 18 years, he was never regularized and had been working as a daily-wage worker throughout his employment.<sup>210</sup>

Employers appear to have adopted two primary strategies to avoid conferring permanent or regular employee status. The first strategy involves deliberately circumventing Order 1 of the Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance 1968, which defines a “permanent workman” as: “A workman who has been engaged on work of permanent nature likely to last more than nine months and has satisfactorily completed a probationary period of three months.”<sup>211</sup> This means that any worker who successfully completes 90 days of continuous work should be retained for six additional months and then confirmed as a permanent employee. To avoid giving permanent status to sanitation workers, daily-wage workers are given 89-day contracts so that they do not reach the 90-day threshold. This cycle whereby workers are terminated with artificial breaks in their employment and then rehired can repeat for years. The practice is not only exploitative but is designed to avoid legal obligations under the standing orders.

Thirty of the 66 respondents to the research questionnaire, including two workers classified as permanent and eight as contractual, did not have written contracts. Two were unsure. Due to limited literacy among the workforce, many workers do not know whether they have valid contracts or what their employment terms were. Not issuing written contracts also allows employers to evade the 90-day continuous work regulation and change the employment terms to avoid legal obligations. The lack of a written contract violates the principle articulated in the ILO’s Employment Relationship Recommendation 2006 (ILO Recommendation 198). Section 4(b) urges member states to:

**“Combat disguised employment relationships... [including] the use of other forms of contractual arrangements that hide the true legal status of the worker.”<sup>212</sup>**

The second strategy to avoid giving permanent status is contractual employment, which includes a model in which government functions are outsourced through government-owned section 42 non-profit companies under the Companies Act 2017.<sup>213</sup> Examples include the LWMC<sup>214</sup> and the Bahawalpur Waste Management Company.<sup>215</sup> These entities are registered as non-profit companies, but the government controls their administration; however, their workers, are often not treated as government employees, stripping them of social security protections that come with government employment, such as job security and pension.

<sup>207</sup> Interview in person, Ataf Yousafzai, Managing Director of LWMC, 21 March 2025, Lahore.

<sup>208</sup> Labour Research & Development Institute, *Sanitation Workers in Lahore* (previously cited), p. 20.

<sup>209</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>210</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Umerkot.

<sup>211</sup> Pakistan, Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance, W.P. Ord. VI of 1968, Order 1.

<sup>212</sup> ILO, Employment Relationship Recommendation 2006 (ILO Recommendation No. 198), [https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx\\_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312535, section 4\(b\).](https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312535, section 4(b).)

<sup>213</sup> Pakistan, Companies Act 2017, <https://www.secp.gov.pk/document/companies-act-2017, section 42.>

<sup>214</sup> LWMC, “About us”, <https://www.lwmc.com.pk/about-us.php> (accessed on 1 May 2025)

<sup>215</sup> Bahawalpur Waste Management Company, “Company profile”, <https://www.bwmc.com.pk/Cp.html> (accessed on 1 June 2025)



Regularization of workers has been addressed in several key judgments by the Supreme Court of Pakistan and has resulted in jurisprudence supporting the right of workers to be regularized despite the tactics outlined above. In a landmark 2013 case, *Fauji Fertilizer Company Ltd. v. NIRC & others*,<sup>216</sup> the court held that outsourcing agreements used to evade labour rights were a “sham or pretence” and ruled in favour of recognizing the true employment relationship. In 2018, in *State Oil Company Ltd. v. Bakht Siddique & others*,<sup>217</sup> the Supreme Court held that regularization does not require statutory rules and that the length and nature of service are sufficient grounds for regularization. It rejected the contractor argument, holding: “This all seems to be a sham or pretence... to outsource the employment of the posts which are permanent in nature.”<sup>218</sup> In another case in 2018, the court acknowledged the misuse of repeated 89-day contracts with artificial breaks as a strategy to avoid regularization, labelling it a violation of fair employment practices.<sup>219</sup>

More recently, however, there has been a shift in judicial reasoning. In two cases in 2022,<sup>220</sup> the Supreme Court emphasized the doctrine of *casus omissus*, which says that where the law does not explicitly grant a right, the court cannot create one. These rulings established that regularization is not a vested right and it must be grounded in statutory law or executive policy. Furthermore, the court held that long or continuous service does not in itself entitle a worker to regularization and courts cannot order retroactive regularization unless permitted by law. These rulings significantly restrict the legal remedies available to daily-wage and contract employees.

International law includes protections against the use of employment status to deprive workers of their rights. The CESCR notes in General Comment 23 that “workers should not be placed on temporary contracts in order to be excluded from such leave entitlements”.<sup>221</sup> ILO Recommendation 198 urges states to develop a national policy to determine employment through the nature of the work, “notwithstanding how the relationship is characterized in any contrary arrangement, contractual or otherwise”.<sup>222</sup>

## 5.2 WORKING HOURS AND LEAVE

Of the 66 questionnaire respondents, 15 reported regularly working more than eight hours, usually about nine hours. Twenty-eight worked eight hours a day and 19, mostly domestic workers, reported working for fewer than eight hours. According to the Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2020-21, workers in the “water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities” industry were working average of 50.3 work hours per week. Among this male sanitation workers were working 50.5 hours weekly and women were working 42.6 hours.<sup>223</sup> Fifty-two respondents to the questionnaire said that they were never paid for extra work; only nine said they received some form of compensation. A male worker in Bahawalpur shared that he sometimes worked for 15 hours in a day but was never paid any overtime.<sup>224</sup> Of those who received overtime, most stated that the compensation was often in kind rather than financial; for example, a woman domestic worker in Bahawalpur received overtime compensation in the form of leftover food.<sup>225</sup>

Across all types of sanitation work covered in this research, it was considered normal for working hours to exceed eight and workers could be called in on their days off. Of the 66 respondents, 55 said that they had a designated weekly day off, usually Sunday; however, 42 said that they are sometimes asked to work on their weekly off day. The blurred line between fulfilling reasonable duties and exploitation is starkly illustrated by the tragic case of two Christian workers in Sargodha, a city about 200km from Lahore, who were called to work at 10 pm on a Sunday (the weekly designated day off) in 2023, leading to them sustaining fatal injuries as a result of working at night without any safety equipment.<sup>226</sup> A male worker in Bahawalpur highlighted the lack of boundaries, sharing that they were sometimes called at midnight and on Sundays to perform tasks such as killing dogs with poison, work beyond their designated duties.<sup>227</sup>

<sup>216</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Fauji Fertilizer Company Ltd. v. NIRC & others*, 2013, 2013 SCMR 1253.

<sup>217</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *State Oil Company Ltd. v. Bakht Siddique & others*, 2018, 2018 SCMR 1181.

<sup>218</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *State Oil Company Ltd* (previously cited).

<sup>219</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Faisalabad v. Tanveer Sajid, 2018 PLC (CS) 1254.

<sup>220</sup> Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Deputy Director Finance & Administration, FATA v. Dr. Lal Marjan and others*, 2022, 2022 SCMR 566; Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Province of Punjab v. Dr. Javed Iqbal*, 2022, 2022 SCMR 897.

<sup>221</sup> CESCR, General Comment 23 (previously cited), para. 44.

<sup>222</sup> ILO Recommendation 198 (previously cited), 9.

<sup>223</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2020-21*, [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/labour\\_force/publications/lfs2020\\_21/LFS\\_2020-21\\_Report.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/labour_force/publications/lfs2020_21/LFS_2020-21_Report.pdf), p. 31.

<sup>224</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 22 June 2025, Bahawalpur.

<sup>225</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 18 June 2024, Lahore.

<sup>226</sup> Al Jazeera, “How death and despair haunt Pakistan’s Christian minority”, 9 April 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/9/how-death-and-despair-haunt-pakistans-christian-minority>

<sup>227</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 22 June 2025, Bahawalpur.



**“Our condition is worse than that of army personnel; we can be called anytime, day or night.”<sup>228</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Bahawalpur

A woman worker from Umerkot explained that they were only granted Sundays off after the workers collectively submitted a request, citing its importance as a religious day.<sup>229</sup>

Working hours are governed by the Factories Act 1934,<sup>230</sup> and the Shops and Establishments Ordinances and Acts in the four provinces, both of which state that workers are entitled to work a maximum of 48 hours a week and nine hours per day. Sanitation workers do not, however, fall under the definition of worker under the Factories Act.<sup>231</sup> Section 8 of the Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance 1968 guarantees that workers have a weekly day off, annual holidays, festival holidays, and casual and sick leave.<sup>232</sup> Sanitation workers appear to be covered under the 1968 Ordinance, which defines a worker as anyone who works directly or indirectly in an establishment.<sup>233</sup> This definition would ostensibly cover contractual workers, but it is unclear if it would cover daily-wage workers. Furthermore, the standing orders do not apply to government offices. The Weekly Rest (Commerce and Offices) Convention (ILO Convention 106), ratified by Pakistan, obliges state institutions to provide rest days, holidays and leave.

## 5.3 UNEQUAL AND UNFAIR WORKLOAD

Another theme emerging from the data collected for this research was discriminatory patterns in the distribution of types of work and specific tasks assigned to non-Muslim and Muslim workers. A male sanitation worker from Karachi shared that Muslim sanitation workers in his workplace were rarely assigned sanitation work, transferring that workload onto non-Muslims.<sup>234</sup> A male worker in Umerkot explained that he and two Muslims were recruited as tractor drivers. After finishing the training, however, he was forced to drive a sanitation loader rickshaw, while his Muslim co-workers worked as drivers for officers. His Muslim co-workers earned PKR 25000 (USD 90) a month, while he was paid PKR 18000 (USD 65) for the same time period—while both were earning below the minimum wage, income of non-Muslim sanitation workers was even lower.

**“I have seen with my own eyes that officers do not make Muslim workers do [sanitation] work.”<sup>235</sup>**

A Christian sanitation worker in Karachi

A worker at an FGD in Peshawar reported that Muslim sanitation workers often avoid cleaning toilets by citing religious obligations, such as the need to offer prayers five times a day or the requirement to take multiple baths if they clean toilets.<sup>236</sup> This left Christian workers with the burden of performing these tasks. The worker further explained that if Christian workers refuse to comply, they face termination. A female worker in Karachi observed: “During Ramadan, Muslims refuse to perform their full duties; however, when we have the Lent season, they don’t let us observe it with the same solemnity.”<sup>237</sup> Another woman in Karachi added: “During [the Islamic] fasting, they don’t let us eat or drink [during work hours].”<sup>238</sup> Similarly, a woman sanitation worker in Lahore noted:

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<sup>228</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 22 June 2025, Bahawalpur.

<sup>229</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Umerkot.

<sup>230</sup> Pakistan, Factories Act 1934, Act No. XXV of 1934, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqaJw1-apaUY2Fqa-b56X-sg-jjjjjjjjjjjj9>, section 47.

<sup>231</sup> Pakistan, Factories Act 1934, section 2(h).

<sup>232</sup> Pakistan, Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance 1968, Ordinance VI of 1968, <http://punjablaws.gov.pk/laws/222.html>, section 8.

<sup>233</sup> Pakistan, Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance 1968, section 2(ii).

<sup>234</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>235</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>236</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 6 March 2024, Peshawar.

<sup>237</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>238</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

**“Muslim women are assigned to kitchen duties, primarily making tea, while Muslim men (hired as sanitation workers) work as drivers. In contrast, Christian women are assigned to cleaning toilets and Christian men are given sweeping duties.”<sup>239</sup>**

A Christian sanitation worker in Karachi

These experiences are echoed in a 2018 case where Muslim sanitation workers employed by municipal authorities refused to clean gutters. A Supreme Court-appointed judicial commission ordered that the 200 Muslim workers be removed from service for their refusal to perform their full duties as sanitation workers.<sup>240</sup> In Islamabad, sanitation workers stated<sup>241</sup> after the CDA recently deployed 100 Muslim workers, their workload did not reduce:

**“But even after that [100 Muslim workers being hired] they do not work, so we do extra work in their place; we leave get free at 5 or 6 pm instead of 2 pm.”<sup>242</sup>**

A Christian woman sanitation worker in Lahore

These practices, although not explicitly prohibited under domestic law, are in violation of Pakistan’s international obligations, particularly the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (ILO Convention 111), to which Pakistan is a party. This convention obligates Pakistan to eliminate all forms of discrimination in employment and occupation, including unfair treatment based on religion. These discriminatory practices also violate Pakistan’s obligations under Article 5(e)(i) of the ICERD, which requires the prohibition and elimination of racial discrimination (including religious and descent and caste-based discrimination)<sup>243</sup> in all its forms and guarantees to everyone, without distinction, the right to “just and favourable conditions of work”.<sup>244</sup>



Two women sanitation workers transporting collected trash after sweeping a street in Lahore. Photo: Center for Law and Justice 2025 © Amnesty International

<sup>239</sup> FGD in person, female sanitation worker, 23 March 2024, Lahore.

<sup>240</sup> Dawn, “Karachi municipal told to dismiss all Muslim sanitation workers who refuse to clean sewers”, 30 March 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1398500>

<sup>241</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>242</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>243</sup> CERD, General Recommendation 29: Discrimination Based on Descent, 2002, UN Doc. A/57/18.

<sup>244</sup> ICERD, Article 5(e)(i).

## GENDER-BASED REPARTITION OF DUTIES AND COMPOUNDED VULNERABILITIES

Segregation in sanitation work is not only caste-based but also deeply gendered, with women disproportionately assigned to specific roles based on perceptions of physical weakness and social propriety. This gendered logic shapes their experiences across both formal and informal sectors.

In formal sanitation roles, women are overwhelmingly assigned to sweeping duties – cleaning roads, corridors, and indoor spaces – while tasks such as sewage processing, manhole work, or garbage collection are almost exclusively reserved for men.<sup>245</sup> Out of 66 questionnaire respondents, none reported female sanitation workers being assigned to go down open drains or manholes. This occupational segregation, rooted in entrenched gender norms and safety concerns, can be seen as a protective measure. However, the same logic and gender stereotypes apply to limit women's access to roles with higher status or technical recognition.

**"Female sanitation workers are told that they will only do the cleaning and sweeping and nothing else."<sup>246</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Umerkot

This is reflected in the limited presence of women in supervisory positions. When asked about leadership roles, only six respondents said that women could be supervisors, while 35 stated that there were no female supervisors in their workplaces. A female worker explained:

**"Christian women are only made supervisors when [they're nearing retirement] with only two to three months left in their service."<sup>247</sup>**

The same gendered assumptions that spare women from the most dangerous tasks also tend to confine them to domestic settings. The ILO notes that about 65.5% of women in Pakistan's workforce are in the informal sector.<sup>248</sup> Women are more likely to be employed as housemaids and sweepers in private homes,<sup>249</sup> roles that fall outside the scope of formal labour protections. In these informal and often invisible spaces, women face heightened vulnerabilities due to the absence of oversight, grievance mechanisms, or institutional support.

Within these domestic settings, caste and religious hierarchies continue to shape the division of labour. Muslim women are often assigned tasks inside kitchens, while non-Muslim women – particularly Christian workers – are relegated to cleaning toilets and washing clothes, tasks considered more degrading. A 40-year-old Christian woman from Karachi explained:

**"Christian women clean toilets and wash clothes, whereas Muslim women work in the kitchen."<sup>250</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Karachi

Another Christian woman, aged 35, highlighted the unequal workload between Muslim and non-Muslim women:

**"At the school where I work, Muslim women have to clean only one class, and Christian women clean 10 classes each."<sup>251</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Lahore

In Islamabad, some women sanitation workers reported preferring public sanitation work over domestic work to avoid the risk of being falsely accused of theft,<sup>252</sup> a common fear in private households where they are often viewed with suspicion.<sup>253</sup> The issues underscore the need for further in-depth research on the challenges faced by sanitation workers in the informal sector.

<sup>245</sup> Labour Research & Development Institute, Sanitation Workers in Lahore (previously cited).

<sup>246</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 7 June 2024, Umerkot.

<sup>247</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>248</sup> ILO, *Decent Work Country Programme Pakistan 2023–2027* (previously cited).

<sup>249</sup> Ayra Indrias Patras, *Swept Aside* (previously cited), p. 149.

<sup>250</sup> Interview in person, male sanitation worker, 23 April 2024, Lahore.

<sup>251</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 13 June 2024, Lahore.

<sup>252</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 11 June 2024, Islamabad.

<sup>253</sup> Ghazal Mir Zulfikar, "Dirt, foreignness, and surveillance: The shifting relations of domestic work in Pakistan", 222 November 2018, *Organization*, Volume 26, Issue 3, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1350508418812579>, p. 11.



## CASE STUDY: FORCED TO WORK AS A CLEANER<sup>254</sup>

In 2014, a Christian man, “Peter” (not his real name), was appointed in an administrative position working in the civil courts under the minority quota system following a directive from Lahore High Court. The appointment came after he filed a petition challenging his initial rejection during the selection process.

Upon starting his job at the civil courts, Peter’s superior, a senior civil judge, demanded that Peter work as a sweeper at his residence. When Peter refused, asserting that he had been employed as administrative staff and not a sweeper, he started to face harassment at work. “I told them, ‘I was not hired to clean your floors or sweep your house. I am here to serve the court,’ but my words were ignored.”

**“I was frequently called a *chuhra* of which I complained to colleagues and superiors, but nothing changed.”**

Peter then alleged that his Facebook account was hacked and some defamatory content posted from his account, after which the supervisor opened an official inquiry and sacked him. Determined to challenge this, Peter filed a case with Lahore High Court, which ruled in his favour and reinstated him. Instead of being reinstated to his original post, Peter was transferred to another location about 55km from his home, requiring a gruelling 110-km daily commute.

**“They thought transferring me far from home would silence me, but I was determined to prove my innocence.”**

Peter suffered a serious motorcycle accident commuting to his new post, resulting in a fractured shoulder and collarbone. He submitted a medical certificate and applied for sick leave, but his request was rejected. “Even after breaking my shoulder, I was told to either return to work or quit. They didn’t care if I was injured,” he recalled. Overwhelmed by the lack of support, Peter resigned.

## 5.4 SOCIAL SECURITY AND BENEFITS

Article 9 of the ICESCR, which Pakistan has ratified, requires member states to recognize the right to social security, including social insurance.<sup>255</sup> In General Comment 19, the CESCR notes that the right to social security includes:

**“...the right to access and maintain benefits, whether in cash or in kind, without discrimination in order to secure protection, *inter alia*, from (a) lack of work-related income caused by sickness, disability, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, old age, or death of a family member; (b) unaffordable access to healthcare; (c) insufficient family support, particularly for children and adult dependents”.<sup>256</sup>**

The committee urges states to give special attention to, among others, “persons working in the informal economy” and “minority groups”.<sup>257</sup> It recommended that states must take “steps to the maximum of their available resources to ensure that the social security systems cover those persons working in the informal economy”, noting that some countries with a large informal economy have adopted universal pension and healthcare schemes.<sup>258</sup> The Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention (ILO Convention 102) also requires states to ensure equitable access to social security benefits,<sup>259</sup> but Pakistan has not ratified this convention.

Article 12 of the ICESCR enshrines the right to the “enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” and provision of “all medical service and medical attention in the event of sickness”.<sup>260</sup>

<sup>254</sup> Interview in person, male sanitation worker, 20 February 2024, Lahore.

<sup>255</sup> ICESCR, Article 9.

<sup>256</sup> CESCR, General Comment 19: The Right to Social Security (Art. 9), 23 November 2007, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/19, para. 2.

<sup>257</sup> CESCR, General Comment 19 (previously cited), para. 31.

<sup>258</sup> CESCR, General Comment 19 (previously cited), para. 34.

<sup>259</sup> ILO, Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention (ILO Convention 102) 1952, [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C102](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C102)

<sup>260</sup> ICESCR, Article 12.

In General Comment 14 the CESCR notes that the right to health not only includes timely and appropriate healthcare, but also “healthy occupational and environmental conditions”.<sup>261</sup> Article 38 of the Constitution of Pakistan, within the Principles of Policy, states that it will “provide for all persons employed in the service of Pakistan or otherwise, social security by compulsory social insurance or other means... [and] provide basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, housing, education and medical relief, for all such citizens, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or race”.<sup>262</sup> In its 2017 review on Pakistan, the CESCR expressed concern at the low level of funding for public health and “insufficient coverage of the National Health Insurance Programme”.<sup>263</sup> It recommended that Pakistan increase public expenditure in the health sector and expand health coverage to provide free basic healthcare to all.<sup>264</sup>

## 5.4.1 MEDICAL BENEFITS

Testimonies reveal disparities in healthcare access and financial security based on employment status. These also vary between districts and institutions. Female sanitation workers at the FGD in Bahawalpur said that people working for a college or university received free medical assistance, but other workers did not.<sup>265</sup> In other cases, the medical coverage, when provided, was reportedly inadequate. A male interviewee in Karachi said, “In some areas workers do have health insurance but it is equivalent to nothing as workers [end up paying] medication expenses on their own.”<sup>266</sup> It was difficult to obtain a clear answer about health coverage and insurance in questionnaire responses because the workers were often unsure of what this meant. Only 19 answered that they received medical assistance. Of these, 12 were permanent employees and three were contractual. Interestingly, four daily-wage workers also reported receiving medical assistance. A questionnaire participant from Lahore responded to a question about health spending, stating that despite being a permanent worker he sometimes had to take out a loan to meet medical expenses such as buying medicines.<sup>267</sup>

**“None of [the workers at my workplace] receive any health benefits. We have to buy medicines on our own. If we request them that we have spent this much on medicine, even then they don't even give us any medical allowance.”<sup>268</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Peshawar

During the FGDs, most workers reported not having access to healthcare assistance or leaves. For instance, a female worker in Karachi said:

**“If someone is sick, they have to take care of themselves. If you want to take medication, it is up to you. They do not give anything—not money or anything else. If we take a day off, they will deduct from your salary. Even if my child is sick, I have to go to work.”<sup>269</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Karachi

Based on questionnaires, focus groups and interviews in Islamabad, free medical treatment seems to be provided to every category of sanitation worker in the city. A female permanent employee of the CDA in Islamabad said: “They have provided us with the health cards. We use them in the CDA hospital and get free medicine and medication for ourselves and for our family members.”<sup>270</sup>

<sup>261</sup> CESCR, General Comment 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Art. 12), 11 August 2000, UN Doc. E/C.12/2000/4, para. 11.

<sup>262</sup> Pakistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, Article 38.

<sup>263</sup> CESCR, Concluding Observations: Pakistan, 20 July 2017, UN Doc. E/C.12/PAK/CO/1, para. 75.

<sup>264</sup> CESCR, Concluding Observations: Pakistan (previously cited), para. 76.

<sup>265</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 22 June 2025, Bahawalpur.

<sup>266</sup> Interview in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>267</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 27 August 2024, Lahore.

<sup>268</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>269</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>270</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

Article 38(d) of the Constitution of Pakistan mandates that the state provide basic necessities such as medical relief for all citizens. Medical facilities and healthcare benefits for workers are established at the provincial level under various employees' social security acts, such as the Provincial Employees' Social Security Ordinance 1965, Sindh Employees' Social Security Act 2016, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Employees' Social Security Act 2021, and Balochistan Employees' Social Security Act 2022. Under these acts and ordinances, employees' social security institutions were created to provide sickness benefits and access to hospitals or medical facilities. These benefits are given to "secured employees", meaning those who make social security contributions.

The Secretary of the Punjab Labour Department stated in a meeting with Amnesty International that all permanent employees were covered under the Punjab Employees' Social Security scheme (and receive free healthcare at its medical facilities across the province). He said, however, that non-permanent employees were often not covered under social security schemes because their employers are not obligated to make contributions.<sup>271</sup> Similar arrangements exist in other provinces, such as the Sindh Employees' Social Security Institution,<sup>272</sup> the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Employees' Social Security Institution which provides free medical care through medical units and affiliated government hospitals,<sup>273</sup> and Balochistan Employees' Social Security Institution.

The Managing Director of the LWMC stated that all the company's employees were covered under the Punjab Employees' Social Security scheme, except 3,000 who have been recently recruited and would soon be registered with the scheme.<sup>274</sup> However, a LWMC employee interviewed for this report stated that, in the case of an accident, workers are expected to bear expenses, and on some instances they have been fired if unable to resume their work.<sup>275</sup>

## 5.4.2 WORKERS' BENEFITS AND WELFARE SUPPORT

According to the ILO, only 9.2% of Pakistan's population is covered by at least one kind of social protection benefit, far below the global average of 46.9%.<sup>276</sup> Informal or temporary workers, who make up a large portion of the sanitation workforce, are excluded from welfare programmes in Pakistan.

Pakistan has a number of federal and provincial social security institutions, which are meant to provide financial support, pensions and health coverage, including:

- Employees' Old-age Benefits Institution: designed to provide pensions and financial security to workers in their old age
- employees' social security institutes: provincial programmes intended to provide healthcare, maternity benefits and injury compensation for registered workers (see section 5.4.1)
- Workers Welfare Fund (WWF): established under the Workers Welfare Fund Ordinance 1971,<sup>277</sup> provide welfare facilities, including education, housing, and marriage and death grants, to registered workers; now administered at the provincial level following the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment in 2010<sup>278</sup>
- Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP): established in 2008 to provide income support to women and families below the poverty line; not specifically geared towards workers and does not require contributions like employees' social security institutes; households can only claim it if there is a woman recipient and women are required to show their computerized national identity card to receive payments
- Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM): government-run charity and welfare-based fund that provides cash support and shelter, among other facilities, to poor, older people, persons with disabilities and women, as per approved eligibility criteria.

<sup>271</sup> Meeting in person, Muhammad Naeem Ghaus, Secretary of the Punjab Labour Department, 16 May 2025, Lahore.

<sup>272</sup> Dawn, "Labour schemes", 31 December 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882190>

<sup>273</sup> Employees' Social Security Institute, "Functions", <https://essi.kp.gov.pk/page/functions> (accessed on 1 May 2025)

<sup>274</sup> Interview in person, Ataf Yousafzai, Managing Director of LWMC, 21 March 2025, Lahore.

<sup>275</sup> Interview in person, male sanitation worker, 20 February 2024, Lahore.

<sup>276</sup> ILO, *Decent Work Country Programme Pakistan 2023–2027*, 2024, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/DWCP\\_brochure\\_ILO\\_Pakistan\\_WEB\\_v6\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/DWCP_brochure_ILO_Pakistan_WEB_v6_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>277</sup> Pakistan, Workers Welfare Fund Ordinance 1971, Ordinance No. XXXVI of 1971, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqJw1-apaUY2Fq-apaUY2Fuaps%3D-sg-ijjjjjjjjjjj>

<sup>278</sup> Pakistan, Constitutional (Eighteenth Amendment) Act 2010, Act of No. of 2010, [https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1302138356\\_934.pdf](https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1302138356_934.pdf)



In its 2023 report, WaterAid identified the narrow eligibility criteria and limited coverage of these schemes as a major reason why sanitation workers are excluded from protection.<sup>279</sup> For instance, WWF covers workers in “industries”, but the status of sanitation workers with reference to the law often means that they are not covered by the scheme because the sanitation sector is not an “industry”.<sup>280</sup> The Workers Welfare Fund Ordinance states, however, that it uses the same definition of worker as in the Industrial Relations Ordinance/Act, which defines worker as anyone not falling under the definition of “employer” and who “is employed in an establishment or industry for hire or reward either directly or through a contractor whether the terms of employment are express or implied”.<sup>281</sup> In a meeting with the Secretary of the Punjab Labour Department, he stated that sanitation workers would be covered by WWF if registered by their employer.<sup>282</sup>

In Amnesty International’s research, testimonies suggested that gender and religious factors or discrimination could present further obstacles to accessing social protection. In an FGD with female sanitation workers in Karachi, a participant shared that government officials had visited their area once for registration with the BISP, but the officials were only accompanied by men, which meant that local women were hesitant to approach them to sign up to the scheme.<sup>283</sup> Institutions such as PBM are perceived to discriminate against non-Muslims,<sup>284</sup> although the organization officially denies such claims.<sup>285</sup> Lack of awareness of social support schemes often compounds these issues of access: among 66 questionnaire respondents, only one worker had heard of the Employees’ Old-age Benefits Institution and none of the respondents were aware of social security schemes such as BISP, PBM or WWF.

## GRATUITIES AND PENSIONS

The employment status of sanitation workers has consequences for access to a gratuity and pension after retirement. Gratuity is a one-time payment after a permanent worker leaves employment, retires or is laid off. The amount of the gratuity payment is contingent on the number of years served. Although permanent workers reported challenges in accessing gratuity and pensions, their situation was notably better than that of daily-wage workers, who often had no such entitlements. The pension amount for regularized workers is typically between PKR 20,000-25,000 (USD 72-90) monthly, which is below the minimum wage. A man from Bahawalpur highlighted the systemic corruption involved in receiving these benefits: “If the gratuity is PKR 500,000 (USD 1,790), we must pay PKR 100,000 (USD 360) to the clerk as a bribe. When my father retired as a sweeper from a government educational institution, we had to give a motorcycle as a bribe just to receive the retirement cheque.”<sup>286</sup>

## 5.5 DENIAL OF FAIR WAGE

Federal and provincial governments, as well as private institutions, are obligated under the Payment of Wages Act 1936 to ensure timely payment of wages and are further mandated by the Minimum Wages Ordinance 1961 to pay at least the prescribed minimum wage. At the time of writing, the monthly minimum wage was set by the provincial minimum wages boards at PKR 37,000 (USD 135) in Islamabad,<sup>287</sup> Punjab,<sup>288</sup> Sindh<sup>289</sup> and Balochistan,<sup>290</sup> and PKR 36,000 (USD 130) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>291</sup> However, of the 66 questionnaire respondents, 35 were receiving less than the minimum wage, which was PKR 32,000 (USD 115) in June 2024. Among the 31 workers receiving minimum wage or above, there was a strong correlation between receiving minimum wage and permanent employment status: 21 were permanent employees, five were daily-wage workers, four were contractual, and one was unsure of their status. There

<sup>279</sup> WaterAid, *Improving Social Protection for Sanitation Workers in Pakistan* (previously cited), p. 4.

<sup>280</sup> WaterAid, *Improving Social Protection for Sanitation Workers in Pakistan* (previously cited), p. 3.

<sup>281</sup> Pakistan, Industrial Relations Act 2012, Act No. X of 2012, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqJw1-apaUY2Fqa-apaUY2FqaZk%3D-sg-ijjjjjjjjjjjj>, section 2(xxxiii).

<sup>282</sup> Meeting in person, Muhammad Naeem Ghaus, Secretary of the Punjab Labour Department, 16 May 2025, Lahore.

<sup>283</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>284</sup> Dawn, “Non-Muslims benefit more from BISP than Bait-ul-Maal: report”, 30 April 2013, <https://www.dawn.com/news/794846/non-muslims-benefit-more-from-bisp-than-bait-ul-maal-report>

<sup>285</sup> Government of Punjab, Punjab Bait-ul-Maal, “Frequently asked questions”, [https://baitulmaal.punjab.gov.pk/frequently\\_asked\\_questions](https://baitulmaal.punjab.gov.pk/frequently_asked_questions) (accessed 9 May)

<sup>286</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 22 June 2025, Bahawalpur.

<sup>287</sup> Dawn, “Govt notifies Rs37,000 minimum wage”, 30 August 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1855605>

<sup>288</sup> Pakistan Today: Profit, “CM Punjab directs enforcement of Rs37,000 minimum wage for workers”, 10 March 2025, <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/03/10/cm-punjab-directs-enforcement-of-rs37000-minimum-wage-for-workers>

<sup>289</sup> Government of Sindh Labour & Human Resources Department, “Notification, No. SO(L-II)13-03/2016-I”, 22 October 2024, <https://efp.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Sindh-Minimum-Wage-Notification-Un-Skilled-2024-25-1.pdf>

<sup>290</sup> Business Recorder, “B’tan govt implements minimum wage of Rs37,000 for labourers”, 12 October 2024, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40326705>

<sup>291</sup> Express Tribune, “Rs36k set as minimum wage in K-P”, 30 August 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2492105/rs36k-set-as-minimum-wage>

was also a significant correlation with gender; 23 of those receiving minimum wage or above were men and only eight were women.

Out of those who were not receiving the minimum wage, six were permanent workers, 23 were daily-wage workers and six were contractual. Twenty-one of the 35 respondents receiving below the minimum wage were women, the rest (14) were men. Fifteen of these workers received between PKR 20,000 (USD 70) and PKR 10,000 (USD 35) per month and eight received PKR 10,000 (USD 35) or less. Seven of those earning PKR 10,000 or less were daily-wage workers, however, one was a permanent Hindu worker from Karachi. Out of those receiving PKR 10,000-20,000, nine were daily-wage workers, five were contractual and one was permanent (a Christian woman from Lahore).

Daily-wage workers often do not receive the minimum wage because employers are able to sidestep legal obligations due to the lack of regularization. Local civil society organizations have pointed out that effective labour inspections under the 1936 Factories Act are rare.<sup>292</sup>

Salaries also varied according to location. Participants in a focus group in Umerkot reported receiving monthly wages as low as PKR 18,000 (USD 65), while workers in nearby Mithi town received wages closer to the provincial minimum of PKR 32,000 (USD 115). Domestic workers in Islamabad reported earning as little as PKR 12,000 (USD 45) monthly, significantly below the mandated minimum. Workers across all districts reported that their meagre salaries were insufficient to cover basic needs. Fifty-three questionnaire respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their income and 60 said their income was not enough to meet their family's expenses. A female worker in Lahore said that it was almost impossible to survive on her salary.<sup>293</sup> In 2024, the Asian Development Bank stated that Pakistan had the highest living costs in Asia.<sup>294</sup> In 2025, the World Bank set the international poverty line threshold at USD 4.20 per person per day, which puts 44.7% of Pakistanis below the poverty line.<sup>295</sup> This determination puts a majority (48) of the workers who participated in the questionnaire below the poverty line, with only 18 receiving a salary that would be categorized above the poverty line.

On top of low wages, workers participating in the study reported having to sometimes buy their own work equipment. A woman in Lahore stated that they had to purchase their own brooms.<sup>296</sup> Out of the questionnaire respondents, 14 said they were not provided with any equipment at all.

**“We have to buy everything ourselves. They only provide [cleaning equipment] to the permanent workers.”<sup>297</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Islamabad

A worker in Bahawalpur reported that his small salary was the main hurdle in providing education to his children.<sup>298</sup> A male questionnaire respondent from Umerkot, who earns PKR 16,000 (USD 56) per month, said in response to the questionnaire that the salary of workers like him was so low that they had to take out loans for medical expenses.<sup>299</sup> Another worker from Umerkot said that he had been forced to borrow money from a loan shark to meet his day-to-day expenses and was paying interest of PKR 17,000 (USD 60) from his monthly PKR 24,000 (USD 85) pension.<sup>300</sup> A woman worker in Peshawar reported having difficulty paying her children's school fees of PKR 1,500 (USD 6) a month.<sup>301</sup> These experiences run contrary to Pakistan's obligations under Article 13 of the ICESCR, which requires that the right to education be accessible to all, particularly through free primary education and progressive introduction of free secondary education.<sup>302</sup>

Poverty and hunger were recurring themes in research participants' accounts. A male interviewee in Lahore shared the severity of his and his peers' plight, stating that they sometimes had to beg for food at restaurants.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Dawn, “‘Labour inspection mechanism in provinces has failed to protect workers' lives’”, 29 April 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1620938>

<sup>293</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>294</sup> Express Tribune, “Pakistan has highest living cost in Asia: ADB”, 19 April 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2462416/pakistan-has-highest-living-cost-in-asia-adb>

<sup>295</sup> Business Recorder, “Pakistan's threshold: World Bank fixes new poverty lines at \$4.20/person/ day”, 6 June 2025, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40366574/pakistans-threshold-world-bank-fixes-new-poverty-lines-at-420person-day>

<sup>296</sup> Focus group discussion in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>297</sup> Focus group discussion in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>298</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 22 June 2025, Bahawalpur.

<sup>299</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 7 June 2024, Umerkot.

<sup>300</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Umerkot.

<sup>301</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 6 March 2025, Peshawar.

<sup>302</sup> ICESCR, Article 13(2).

<sup>303</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

**“If I pay for a single piece of bread, I ask the shopkeeper to simply wipe the curry pot on my bread to give it some flavour.”<sup>304</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Lahore

Pakistan is a member state of the ICESCR, Article 7(a) which requires fair remuneration for all workers, equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction, and a decent living for themselves and their families. General Comment 23 requires that employers failing to respect the minimum wage should face penal consequences. Furthermore, the committee mandates “appropriate measures”, including effective labour inspections, to ensure compliance of the minimum wage.<sup>305</sup> In addition, Pakistan has ratified Equal Remuneration Convention (ILO Convention 100), which requires mechanisms for equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value.<sup>306</sup> Pakistan has not, however, ratified the Minimum Wage Fixing Convention (ILO Convention 131), which requires member states to create or maintain national mechanisms to determine and implement the minimum wage.<sup>307</sup>



## GENDER PAY GAP

When questionnaire participants were asked if there was a difference in wages for men and women engaged in sanitation work, all of them felt that there was no difference based on gender. Several respondents pointed out that the only difference was based on employment status – whether the person was a permanent employee or not. Salary data collected through the questionnaires reveals, however, that there is a clear disparity in wages based on gender as women sanitation workers are overrepresented in lower income brackets compared to male sanitation workers (refer to table below). Only four women were earning more than PKR 40,000, compared to 12 men.

Table 7: Salaries of sanitation workers by gender

SALARY RANGE (PKR)	SALARY RANGE (USD)	FEMALE	MALE
0–10,000	0 – 35	8	2
10,000–20,000	35 – 75	10	4
20,000–30,000	75 – 105	6	7
30,000–40,000	105 – 145	4	9
40,000–50,000	145 – 180	2	4
50,000+	180+	2	8

There are two factors that make further difference to the gender wage gap. Firstly, regularization directly impacts salary and other benefits, and women are less likely to be regularized or part of the formal workforce. Of the 66 questionnaire respondents, 22 of the 29 respondents holding permanent positions were men; women held 22 of the 35 non-permanent positions. This highlights the exclusion of women from stable, well-compensated employment in the sanitation sector. Secondly, promotion to a supervisory role improves salary. It is not clear whether there are female supervisors in general, but as explained

<sup>304</sup> Interview in person, male sanitation worker, 20 February 2024, Lahore.

<sup>305</sup> CESCR, General Comment 23 (previously cited), para. 24.

<sup>306</sup> ILO, Equal Remuneration Convention (ILO Convention 100), 1951.

<sup>307</sup> Minimum Wage Fixing Convention (ILO Convention 131), 1970.

previously, Christian women supervisors were non-existent in the dataset for this research. Moreover, because a significant number of women work in the informal sector, implementing and enforcing a minimum wage becomes more challenging. Even when women sanitation workers are employed to clean offices and commercial establishments, this study suggests that they are less likely to be regularized and promoted to higher positions.

In Pakistan's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) treaty body review in 2020, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women noted Pakistan's stark gender pay gap, which stood at "34 per cent, which is more than double the global average".<sup>308</sup> In its 2025 report, the ILO found that the gender pay gap based on hourly wages is 25% and 30% using monthly wages—significantly noting that the pay gap is higher in the informal sector compared to the formal one.<sup>309</sup>

## 5.5.1 UNLAWFUL DEDUCTIONS

The practice of supervisors deducting an amount from workers' monthly wages was found to be widespread among research participants across all districts in Pakistan and was reported by research participants of every employment status, whether permanent, contractual or daily-wage workers. This deduction, referred to as "*nawan*", is an unofficial and exploitative wage cut based on arbitrary determinations by supervisors. These deductions are made on account of being late, or when workers take leave to which they were entitled. Out of 66 questionnaire respondents, 29 said they faced unlawful deductions. From these, nine said their salaries were deducted when they took a day off. This practice was reported across all districts.

LWMC's Managing Director acknowledged that this practice was quite prevalent. He claimed that these issues at LWMC had been addressed by the termination of the supervisors who partook in such practice and added that this action should be replicated in other districts.<sup>310</sup> While the timeframe for these corrective measures is unclear, in the fieldwork for this report in Lahore, workers continued to report such deductions. When a female worker in Lahore was asked why her salary was deducted, she responded: "I have no idea."<sup>311</sup> Muslim workers sometimes experienced different treatment. One FGD participant stressed the discriminatory nature of *nawan*:

**"Sometimes they take this money from some Muslim workers, and sometimes they don't. But they always take money from Christian workers."**<sup>312</sup>

A woman sanitation worker in Karachi

Deductions significantly impact sanitation workers' salaries, especially since many of them are already paid below the minimum wage. A male worker in Karachi<sup>313</sup> said that the deduction ranged between PKR 7,000 (USD 25) and PKR 9,000 (USD 32) per month, adding that while the amount varied, there was always a deduction. In Lahore, a female worker reported a PKR 2,000 (USD 7) deduction, which was paid directly to the supervisor.<sup>314</sup> A female worker in Islamabad explained that although workers received their salaries in their bank accounts, they are required to return a portion to their supervisor.<sup>315</sup> A female worker revealed: "They keep our ATM cards with them and tell us that once our salaries arrive, they will withdraw the money and give us the remaining amount."<sup>316</sup>

The widespread practice of arbitrary wage deductions from sanitation workers directly contravenes both domestic employment legislation and Pakistan's international obligations. Article 8 of the Protection of Wages Convention (ILO Convention 95), not ratified by Pakistan, states that "deductions from wages shall be permitted only under conditions and to the extent prescribed by national laws or regulations or fixed by collective agreement or arbitration award".<sup>317</sup> Pakistan has, however, ratified ICESCR, and in General

<sup>308</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Concluding Observations: Pakistan, 10 March 2020, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/PAK/CO/5, para. 41.

<sup>309</sup> ILO, *The gender pay gap in Pakistan: An empirical analysis and policy implications*, 2025, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/ILO\\_Pakistan\\_GenderPayGap\\_GPG\\_PRINT\\_v3%20%281%29.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/ILO_Pakistan_GenderPayGap_GPG_PRINT_v3%20%281%29.pdf).

<sup>310</sup> Interview in person, Ataf Yousafzai, Managing Director of LWMC, 21 March 2025, Lahore.

<sup>311</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>312</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>313</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>314</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>315</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>316</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>317</sup> Protection of Wages Convention (ILO Convention 95) 1949, Article 8(1).

Comment 23, the CESCR states that wages must be paid in a “regular, timely fashion and in full”.<sup>318</sup> In line with this, section 7(1) of Pakistan’s Payment of Wages Act 1936 clearly provides that “notwithstanding the provisions of any other law for the time being in force, the wages of an employed person shall be paid to him without deductions of any kind except those authorized by or under this act”. The *nawan* deductions, which are informal, undocumented and lacking legal basis, are therefore unlawful.

## 5.5.2 SALARY DELAYS

Delays in the payment of salaries, and the resulting worker protests, have become a routine issue across Pakistan,<sup>319</sup> particularly affecting workers hired by government departments but paid through private companies, and daily-wage workers.<sup>320</sup> In Faisalabad,<sup>321</sup> Hyderabad,<sup>322</sup> Islamabad,<sup>323</sup> Gujranwala<sup>324</sup> Dera Ghazi Khan,<sup>325</sup> and Toba Tek Singh,<sup>326</sup> workers have protested against delays in the disbursement of salaries. These workers often experienced salary delays due to their non-permanent status. The workers are subject to complex contracting arrangements, while many do not have contracts or are hired through verbal contracts, and others are hired through sub-contracting and out-sourcing arrangements.<sup>327</sup>

Workers that Amnesty International spoke to had similar experiences. A female worker in Bahawalpur said: “I am not permanent, and they don’t pay salaries for two to three months.”<sup>328</sup> Another female worker in Islamabad reported: “We just received two months’ worth of delayed salaries. Permanent workers do not face such problems.”<sup>329</sup> Salary delays were not, however, limited to daily-wage workers. A female participant in Karachi reported: “Sometimes they also delay the salaries of contractual workers for at least two to three months.”<sup>330</sup>

This suggests that such delays largely impact non-permanent workers and have the potential to exacerbate financial insecurity and reinforce workplace hierarchies that disadvantage contractual and daily-wage labourers. Regular delay in wage payments violates section 3 of the Payment of Wages Act 1936, which mandates that salaries be paid within seven days of the end of the wage periods for establishments with fewer than 1,000 workers, and within 10 days for larger establishments.

## 5.6 OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

**“Deaths in this line of work are extremely common. Four to five of our workers have died in the main line, which is about 15-20 feet deep, due to lack of safety equipment.”<sup>331</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Karachi

<sup>318</sup> CESCR, General Comment 23 (previously cited), para. 10.

<sup>319</sup> Dawn, “Sanitary workers protest non-payment of salary”, 30 November 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1875606>; Dawn, “Kohat sanitation workers go on strike over salary non-payment”, 17 February 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1814773>; Express Tribune, “WSSCA staff protest non-payment of salaries”, 19 April 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2412667/wssca-staff-protest-non-payment-of-salaries>; Dawn, “Non-payment of salaries: Heaps of garbage in Faisalabad as sanitary workers go on strike”, 19 December 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1799003>; Express Tribune, “Sanitary workers go on strike”, 30 November 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2331715/sanitary-workers-go-on-strike>

<sup>320</sup> Dawn, “Sanitary workers protest non-payment of salary” (previously cited).

<sup>321</sup> Dawn, “Non-payment of salaries: Heaps of garbage” (previously cited).

<sup>322</sup> Express Tribune, “Sanitation workers block sewage flow in protest”, 8 March 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2532993/sanitation-workers-block-sewage-flow-in-protest>

<sup>323</sup> Dawn, “Contractor disappears as protesting CDA sanitation workers demand salaries”, 28 March 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1900725>

<sup>324</sup> Dawn, “Wazirabad workers ‘denied’ salaries ahead of Easter”, 18 April 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1904978/workers-denied-salaries-ahead-of-easter>

<sup>325</sup> Dawn, “Sanitary workers protest two-month salary delay”, 21 May 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1912267>

<sup>326</sup> Dawn, “Sanitary workers protest non-payment of salary” (previously cited).

<sup>327</sup> Labour Research & Development Institute, *Sanitation Workers in Lahore* (previously cited), p. 13.

<sup>328</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 22 June 2025, Bahawalpur.

<sup>329</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>330</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>331</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

In recent years, occupational safety and health (OSH) laws have been introduced in all provinces of Pakistan. Notably, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Occupational Safety and Health Act 2022<sup>332</sup> and the Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Rules 2019,<sup>333</sup> under the Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Act 2017,<sup>334</sup> now explicitly mention sanitation work. They list work inside sewer pipelines, pits and storage tanks, and scavenging, including dealing with hospital waste, as “hazardous occupations”. Section 22 of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act imposes one year’s imprisonment and a fine of up to PKR 2 million (USD 7,050) for violations of the act. Rule 8(K) of the Sindh rules includes specific safety standards, particularly for sewage-related work, which include provision of one additional worker in an enclosed toxic or oxygen-deficient atmosphere, use of masks and gloves, and safety belts and life lines.



#### **RULE 8(K)(4)(K) OF THE SINDH OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH RULES 2019:**

“Workers entering a sewer, flue, duct, or other similarly confined places shall be provided and required to wear safety belts with life lines attached and held by another person stationed at the opening ready to respond to agreed signals.”<sup>335</sup>

While these laws are welcome, their impact on improving OSH standards for sanitation workers on the ground remains undetermined. As noted earlier, Pakistan has not ratified the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 155). The ILO in Pakistan has included sanitation workers in its ‘Decent Work Country Program 2023-2027’ as an area of focus for its advocacy and work,<sup>336</sup> but it is unclear how this impacted workers as sanitation workers routinely risk injury, death and disease in the course of their work.

Although some initiatives have been taken to provide workers with adequate protective equipment,<sup>337</sup> research findings show that is not the case for many sanitation workers. Research reports by the CLJ<sup>338</sup> and Labour Research & Development Institute,<sup>339</sup> focusing on sanitation workers in Lahore in 2021 and 2022 respectively, have found that a majority of sanitation workers covered by the reports did not receive PPE. Despite the presence of national laws mandating the provision of safety equipment, penalties for non-compliance, accident reporting, safety manuals, worker training and its implementation remain inadequate. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, in its report *Hazardous Matters*,<sup>340</sup> confirmed the absence of these protective measures and the continuation of unsafe sanitation work practices.

The lack of safety protocols and their implementation violate sanitation workers’ right to health and have led to numerous injuries and fatalities among sanitation workers and an increased risk of various health conditions. These include:

- headaches, dizziness, and fatigue<sup>341</sup>
- gastrointestinal diseases such as gastroenteritis, cholera and typhoid
- infectious diseases such as hepatitis and polio
- musculoskeletal disorders (e.g. chronic back pain)
- respiratory issues including asthma
- eye and skin burns and irritation
- puncture wounds, cuts and blunt force trauma.<sup>342</sup>

<sup>332</sup> Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Occupational Safety and Health Act 2022, Act No. XV of 2022,

[https://kpcode.kp.gov.pk/uploads/THE\\_KHYBER\\_PAKHTUNKHWA\\_OCCUPATIONAL\\_SAFETY\\_AND\\_HEALTH\\_ACT\\_2022.pdf](https://kpcode.kp.gov.pk/uploads/THE_KHYBER_PAKHTUNKHWA_OCCUPATIONAL_SAFETY_AND_HEALTH_ACT_2022.pdf)

<sup>333</sup> Pakistan, Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Rules 2019, <https://www.pec.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sindh-Occupational-Safety-and-Health-Act-2017.pdf>

<sup>334</sup> Pakistan, Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Act 2017, NO.PAS/LEGIS-B-27/2017, [https://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications\\_SindhCode/PUB-NEW-19-000060.pdf](https://sindhlaws.gov.pk/setup/publications_SindhCode/PUB-NEW-19-000060.pdf)

<sup>335</sup> Pakistan, Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Rules (previously cited), Rule 8(K)(4)(k).

<sup>336</sup> ILO, *Decent Work Country Programme Pakistan 2023–2027* (previously cited).

<sup>337</sup> WaterAid, *Rapid Assessment of Measures on Safety of Sanitation and Waste Workers during Covid-19 in Pakistan*, June 24, 2020, <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g/files/jkxoo256/files/rapid-assessment-of-measures-on-safety-of-sanitation-and-waste-workers-during-covid-19-in-pakistan.pdf>, p. 19.

<sup>338</sup> CLJ, *Shame and Stigma in Sanitation* (previously cited).

<sup>339</sup> Labour Research & Development Institute, *Sanitation Workers in Lahore* (previously cited).

<sup>340</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *Hazardous Matters* (previously cited).

<sup>341</sup> Touqeer Ahmad Abbasi and Iqbal Badruddin, “Developing standard operating procedures for sanitation workers working with urban utilities in Pakistan”, *Waterlines*, Volume 38, Issue 1, [https://www.susana.org/\\_resources/documents/documents/default/3-5013-340-1655717329.pdf](https://www.susana.org/_resources/documents/documents/default/3-5013-340-1655717329.pdf)

<sup>342</sup> World Bank, *Health, Safety and Dignity of Sanitation Workers: An Initial Assessment*, 2019, <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/316451573511660715>, p. 8.



Dangerous working conditions violate the right to life of sanitation workers who suffer deaths in the line of duty. Workers who clean sewer pipelines are especially vulnerable to hazardous gases, which can lead to unconsciousness or death by asphyxiation. News reports and personal testimonies accumulated by CLJ between 2011 and 2023 revealed that 80 sanitation workers died in 50 incidents while working in manholes across Pakistan.<sup>343</sup> Among those who died, 40 were Christian, 22 were Muslim and 18 Hindu, underscoring the disproportionate impact on minorities.<sup>344</sup> In most incidents, workers died due to exposure to poisonous gases. Some workers died falling down manholes.

Mechanization in sanitation work remains extremely limited. Although street sweeper vehicles and vacuum trucks are occasionally seen in larger metropolitan areas, a majority of participants in this study stated that sanitation work is still largely performed manually, often putting workers at great personal risk in the case of manual scavenging and cleaning of drains and gutters.

The safety of a worker is the responsibility of the state and most workers know this. In the questionnaire responses, 39 workers affirmed that they knew it was the state's responsibility to ensure workplace safety (13 were unaware and 15 declined to respond).

## 5.6.1 CULTURE OF FEAR AND JOB INSECURITY

Many workers in the study stated that they were not in a position to refuse unsafe work. Forty-six questionnaire respondents said they could not refuse work. A female worker from Lahore said: "No one does that, especially Christians, because we do not get any other jobs and are compelled to do this work."<sup>345</sup> One worker said that if they complain to the supervisors, they are told to "go home, we will hire someone else in your place."<sup>346</sup>

The study revealed a pervasive atmosphere of job insecurity and fear among sanitation workers. Out of 66 respondents, 50 feared sudden termination. Additionally, 44 respondents said they did not expect to get a month's notice before being terminated. This is a legal requirement under the West Pakistan Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance 1968, which states that if the employment of a permanent worker is terminated, for any reason other than misconduct, either one month's notice is to be given or one month's salary be paid in lieu of notice.<sup>347</sup> The responses highlight a severe lack of accountability mechanisms and a culture of fear within the sanitation labour system. Out of those who responded to the questionnaire, 26 said they would like to complain about mistreatment or being forced into dangerous working conditions, but none were able to identify any formal or designated complaints procedure.

Even more troubling, 28 respondents stated outright that they could not complain, with some saying that raising a concern could lead to immediate termination. The absence of a grievance mechanism leaves workers completely vulnerable to the unchecked power of supervisors, especially when paired with the already precarious nature of their employment.

**"Workers stay quiet for the sake of their jobs. They fear that if they complain, they might be fired or transferred to remote areas for work." <sup>348</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Karachi

<sup>343</sup> CLJ, *Unseen Slavery in Sanitation* (previously cited).

<sup>344</sup> CLJ, *Unseen Slavery in Sanitation* (previously cited).

<sup>345</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>346</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>347</sup> Pakistan, West Pakistan Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance, 1968, Ordinance VI of 1968, section 12.

<sup>348</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

## 5.6.2 SAFETY EQUIPMENT, PROTOCOLS AND TRAINING


Safety equipment adequate to the needs and nature of sanitation work was often not provided to the participants in the study. Fourteen questionnaire participants reported that they were not provided with any protective or safety equipment; six stated that they had to buy the equipment from their own salaries.<sup>349</sup> The rest (46) reported that they received some protective equipment—most of the responses however cited basic gear such as masks and gloves. Masks were provided during the Covid-19 pandemic, but this was likely motivated by pandemic regulations rather than workplace safety. One female worker from Karachi recalled that during the pandemic there was some enforcement of mask wearing, but that such measures have since stopped.<sup>350</sup>

In an FGD in Islamabad, a female sanitation worker stated that no safety equipment was provided to her, except during Eid-ul-Adha when workers had to handle large amounts of animal remains from Islamic customary animal sacrifices.<sup>351</sup> In Karachi, a female sanitation worker reported that women often use their *dupatta* (head covering) to shield their faces from dust because no protective equipment is provided.<sup>352</sup> Female participants in Karachi mentioned that the department provided them with brooms, but not dustpans, forcing them to use their hands to pick up waste.<sup>353</sup>

In an interview, the Chairman of the All Pakistan Local Government Workers Federation in Karachi, said that workers are regularly seriously injured or killed due to the absence of safety equipment and safety protocols.<sup>354</sup> FGD participants across the districts confirmed that deaths occur in sewage drains due to toxic fumes. A typical manhole, constructed from bricks and concrete, varies in width from approximately three feet at the surface to five feet at the base and can be several dozen feet deep, depending on the pipeline.<sup>355</sup> Workers, often without protection, descend bare-bodied and using wooden ladders. They often employ bamboo sticks to unblock the sewage.<sup>356</sup> Male workers, particularly those responsible for maintaining underground sewers, frequently come into direct contact with human waste.<sup>357</sup> A 54-year-old Christian man working for the Karachi Water Board noted, however, that things had improved over time: “In the past, around 10-20 years ago, when I used to do this work, we didn’t receive any equipment and had to handle the excreta manually. However, over time, things have changed, and companies are now providing some equipment to workers to make their work easier.”<sup>358</sup>

A male worker from Peshawar shared that workers frequently suffer skin burns due to acids released in sewage lines<sup>359</sup> and hand injuries due to discarded glass sheets.<sup>360</sup> During the FGD in Islamabad, a male worker showed a missing finger on his left



 ↑ Sanitation workers improvising to build make-shift equipment with sticks and a plastic bag to clean a sewerage drain in Lahore, June 2025. Photo: Daniyal Yousaf/ Amnesty International

<sup>349</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>350</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 9 September 2024, Peshawar.

<sup>351</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>352</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>353</sup> Focus group discussion in person, woman sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>354</sup> Interview in person, Syed Zulfiqar Shah, Chairman of All Pakistan Local Government Workers Federation, 25 February 2024, Karachi.

<sup>355</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 7 September 2024, Karachi.

<sup>356</sup> Dawn, “Indignity, disease, death: The life of a sewerage worker in Pakistan”, 14 June 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1839660/indignity-disease-death-the-life-of-a-sewerage-worker-in-pakistan>

<sup>357</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *Invisible Lives: Stories from Pakistan’s Sanitation Workers*, 2023, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-Invisible-lives-Stories-from-Pakistans-sanitation-workers.pdf>, p. 43.

<sup>358</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 7 September 2024, Karachi.

<sup>359</sup> Geo, “How Karachi sanitation workers face sweeping exploitation”, 11 June 2024, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/547937-underpaid-overworked-how-karachi-sanitation-workers-face-sweeping-exploitation>

<sup>360</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 6 March 2025, Peshawar.

hand and related how a syringe had pricked him while handling waste without gloves. The wound became septic, eventually leading to amputation.<sup>361</sup>

**“There are poisonous insects, broken glass, and other harmful objects in the drainage lines.”<sup>362</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Islamabad

A male worker in Karachi reported: “There are ‘special’ experienced workers who can hold their breath for two to three minutes. They act like divers but some of them have lost their lives due to [exposure to] toxic gases.”<sup>363</sup> Another participant in the discussion shared that although things had improved and supervisors now received safety belts, they failed to distribute them to workers during duty hours.<sup>364</sup> Another daily-wage worker in Umerkot said that they were still not provided with safety equipment despite the death of Christian workers in their city.<sup>365</sup> He was referring to 20-year-old Irfan Masih, a Christian sanitation worker who lost his life in 2017 after inhaling toxic gases in a sewer and being refused treatment by doctors at the Umerkot Civil Hospital on account of being “dirty”.<sup>366</sup> This incident highlights the structural neglect and exclusion of sanitation workers, and non-Muslims belonging to so-called “lower castes”, that permeate society. In April 2025, after the questionnaires and FGDs for this study had concluded, two Hindu sanitation workers died cleaning a clogged drain in Umerkot due to exposure to poisonous gases.<sup>367</sup>

Training is essential for the safety of sanitation workers. Of the 66 questionnaire respondents, 53 said that they had received no training. Six said they received some training; eight declined to reply. A male worker in Karachi referred to the lack of emergency procedures. He explained that although there was sometimes a rope to pull workers out in case of danger, they were often ordered to descend into manholes without one.<sup>368</sup> Another worker in Karachi compared their situation with that of Pakistan Navy personnel, whom he had seen conducting rescue operations during the 2022 floods,<sup>369</sup> fully equipped with protective equipment in stark contrast to the lack of protection offered to sanitation workers.<sup>370</sup>



*Sanitation worker for a municipal authority in uniform and wearing gloves while sweeping and collecting trash in Lahore. Photo: Center for Law and Justice/ Amnesty International*

<sup>361</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>362</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 17 June 2024, Islamabad.

<sup>363</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>364</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>365</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 8 September 2024, Umerkot.

<sup>366</sup> Dawn, “Sanitary worker ‘covered in filth’ dies as doctors won’t touch him”, 3 June 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1337059>

<sup>367</sup> Dawn, “Two sanitation workers die after inhaling toxic gases”, 27 April 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906757>

<sup>368</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>369</sup> The Nation, “Pak Navy rescue, relief operation continues in flood affected areas of Sindh”, 23 August 2022, <https://www.nation.com.pk/23-Aug-2022/pak-navy-rescue-relief-operation-continues-in-flood-affected-areas-of-sindh>

<sup>370</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

#### **“CUT US OPEN AND SEE THAT WE BLEED LIKE THEM”**

#### **DISCRIMINATION AND STIGMATIZATION OF SANITATION WORKERS IN PAKISTAN**

## WORK-RELATED INJURIES AND HEALTH CONDITIONS

Of the 66 questionnaire respondents 36 reported that they had developed health issues due to their work. These ranged from allergies, breathing issues and chronic coughs due to exposure to dust or direct contact with rubbish.

**“When I started this job, due to working in extreme dust, I developed a thyroid condition.”<sup>371</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Peshawar

People working outside, especially sweepers, are often exposed to extreme heat conditions in the summer months. At least four of the questionnaire respondents mentioned having suffered heat stroke while working. Amnesty International has previously pointed out that parts of Pakistan are vulnerable to extreme heat, with temperatures reaching above 50 degrees Celsius. In a 2023 research report, it found that workers in the informal sector, especially daily-wage workers, are particularly vulnerable to heatwaves.<sup>372</sup> In a 2025 report, it found that older and younger people are disproportionately impacted by high temperatures. Fieldwork in Sindh and Punjab found that there were inadequate protections for people during heatwaves, including lack of access to healthcare and cooling centres.<sup>373</sup>

**“There are often only two workers covering the roads and we are working in direct heat. Recently, I started vomiting because of excessive heat.”<sup>374</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Islamabad

Road accidents were also cited as source of injuries, especially for sweepers. A male participant in Karachi said that he was recruited to replace his father after he died in a road accident.<sup>375</sup> Another man from Islamabad reported that his colleague had died due to a road accident while working.<sup>376</sup>

## 5.6.3 LACK OF COMPENSATION

The safety issues faced by sanitation workers in this study were compounded by their limited access to health benefits and the fact that they often have to cover their own medical expenses, resulting in severe financial strain. Workers who responded to the questionnaire reported spending between PKR 300 (USD 1) and PKR 10,000 (USD 35) per month on healthcare. This lack of adequate support extends beyond financial strain to job security. Workers risk losing their jobs if they take time off to recover from injury or illness. A sanitation worker interviewed in Lahore shared the story of a co-worker, Rani Bibi, who was hit by a car while collecting rubbish. He recounted:

**“I took her to the hospital and informed the authorities. It has now been a year, and she has recovered, but the authorities terminated her [job] just 15 days after the accident.”<sup>377</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Lahore

The Workmen’s Compensation Act 1923 requires employers to pay compensation for personal injury caused to a worker “by accident arising out of and in the course of his employment”.<sup>378</sup> The Act includes in its definition of worker anyone “employed in the construction, working, repair or demolition of any aerial ropeway, canal pipeline, or sewer”.<sup>379</sup> However, the definition of worker notes anyone employed “other than

<sup>371</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 11 June 2024, Peshawar.

<sup>372</sup> Amnesty International, *Pakistan: A burning emergency: Extreme heat and the right to health in Pakistan* (Index: ASA 33/6823/2023), 4 June 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa33/6823/2023/en>, p. 18.

<sup>373</sup> Amnesty International, *Pakistan: Uncounted: Invisible deaths of older people and children during climate disasters in Pakistan* (Index: ASA 33/9007/2025), 5 May 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa33/9007/2025/en>, p. 64.

<sup>374</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 13 June 2024, Islamabad.

<sup>375</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Karachi.

<sup>376</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, male sanitation worker, 11 June 2024, Islamabad.

<sup>377</sup> Interview in person with male sanitation worker, 20 February 2024, Lahore.

<sup>378</sup> Pakistan, Workmen’s Compensation Act 1923, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/english/UY2FqJw1-apaUY2FqJw1-apaUY2FqJw1-sg-jjjjjjjjjjjj>, section 3.

<sup>379</sup> Pakistan, Workmen’s Compensation Act 1923 (previously cited), SCHEDULE-II, x.

a person whose employment is of a casual nature”,<sup>380</sup> meaning that non-permanent workers are not covered by the Act.

Recounting the case of an 18-year-old trash picker, an interviewee shared that the boy had not been provided with safety training, safety protocols or protective equipment as prescribed by the Punjab Occupational Safety and Health Act 2019. While working on a roadside rubbish pile, a speeding car struck the boy. As he fell, his foot landed on a shard of broken glass completely severing his left big toe and severely injuring the other toes. Since he wasn't a permanent worker, he was not covered under the Workmen's Compensation Act and was unceremoniously dismissed without compensation or medical support.<sup>381</sup>

The questionnaire responses highlight that in practice there is little or no compensation available to sanitation workers in the case of injury. Out of 66 questionnaire respondents, 50 stated that there was no concept of compensation for injury. In the case of accidental death, permanent employment status was critical. A male worker in Lahore said that their superiors tell them that if they die while working their families will receive PKR 50,000 (USD 178) compensation. In the same FGD, another participant said that when a worker, probably a daily-wage worker, died in a road accident, his family was not even provided with a small amount of money for burial arrangements.<sup>382</sup>



### CASE STUDY: TALE OF TWO WORKERS

In this case investigated by the CLJ, two sanitation workers, Nadeem Masih and Faisal Masih (not related), died in Sargodha, Punjab in October 2021 while trying to rescue their co-worker Michael Masih, who had fainted in a sewage drain during work.<sup>383</sup> Nadeem Masih, had served as a daily-wage worker for 17 years, while Faisal was a permanent worker. Despite Nadeem's long service, his family received only PKR 500,000 (USD 1,790) as an out of court settlement after filing criminal charges against the municipal corporation. By contrast, Faisal's family received PKR 1.9 million (USD 6,795), all because of his permanent worker status.<sup>384</sup>

Pakistan has not ratified the Employment Injury Benefits Convention (ILO Convention 121)<sup>385</sup> or the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 155),<sup>386</sup> but Pakistan is obligated under the ICESCR to provide adequate compensation for workplace-related injuries. General Comment 23 states that in case of injury or death workers and dependants should receive adequate compensation, including for costs of treatment, loss of earnings and other costs, as well as access to rehabilitation services under the right to just and favourable conditions of work.<sup>387</sup> Furthermore, General Comment 19 states that the right to social security includes the protection of workers injured in the course of employment and the “social security system should cover the costs and loss of earnings from the injury or morbid condition and the loss of support for spouses or dependents suffered as the result of the death of a breadwinner”.<sup>388</sup>

## 5.7 UNIONS AND WORKER REPRESENTATION

Although not part of the initial research focus, lack of worker representation emerged as a theme in the research process. While Pakistan is a party to the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise (ILO Convention 87) and the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention (ILO Convention 98), which uphold workers' rights to form and join unions freely, Pakistan's labour laws provide minimal support for the effective operation of worker unions, particularly for sanitation workers. Labour union membership in Pakistan is generally low. According to a report published by the ILO in 2018, 2.32% of the

<sup>380</sup> Pakistan, Workmen's Compensation Act 1923 (previously cited), section 2(n).

<sup>381</sup> Interview in person, male sanitation worker, 20 February 2024, Lahore.

<sup>382</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 23 April 2025, Lahore.

<sup>383</sup> Dawn, “Sanitation workers left underpaid, unprotected in pandemic: report”, 21 November 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1659236>

<sup>384</sup> Al Jazeera, “How death and despair haunt Pakistan's Christian minority”, 9 April 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/9/how-death-and-despair-haunt-pakistans-christian-minority>

<sup>385</sup> ILO, Employment Injury Benefits Convention (ILO Convention 121), 1964, [https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx\\_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312266:NO](https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312266:NO)

<sup>386</sup> ILO, Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 155), 1981, [https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx\\_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312300:NO](https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312300:NO)

<sup>387</sup> CESCR, General Comment 23 (previously cited), para. 29.

<sup>388</sup> CESCR, General Comment 19 (previously cited), para. 17.

total workforce was unionized.<sup>389</sup> Pakistan is obligated under Article 8 of the ICESCR and Article 22 of the ICCPR to ensure that everyone has the right to form and join trade unions of their choice. Article 17 of the Constitution of Pakistan grants every citizen the right to form associations and unions, but it is unclear whether the Industrial Relations Act 2012 (IRA),<sup>390</sup> and its accompanying provincial versions, which governs labour union activities, applies to daily-wage or third-party hired workers given its definition of worker. The ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations noted in 2023 that the definition of worker under the IRA was restrictive.<sup>391</sup> A study on labour unions observed that membership of workers concentrated in the sanitation sector was low because the work was largely contractual in nature.<sup>392</sup>

Seventeen respondents said that there was no union in their workplace and none reported any efforts underway to form one, revealing a vacuum of collective organization and protection. In focus groups discussions, workers shared experiences of being targeted for exercising their right to freedom of association. In Peshawar, male workers said that there had been a union previously in the government department where they worked, but not anymore. They stated that if any worker raises a complaint or speaks out, they are fired.<sup>393</sup> Workers in Umerkot and Islamabad stated that they had faced consequences for protesting. During the FDG in Umerkot, a worker shared that workers were fired after they protested the death of Irfan Masih (whose case is referred to in section 5.6.2).<sup>394</sup> A worker in Islamabad stated that a First Information Report, the first step in filing a criminal complaint, was filed against him for taking part in a protest demanding regularization of the workforce.<sup>395</sup>

Data collected for this research suggests union presence and effectiveness for sanitation workers is limited in terms of representation, protection and advocacy for workers' rights. Although 30 out of 66 respondents said that there was a union at their place of work, only 14 reported that the union had ever successfully addressed or remedied their concerns. FGD participants expressed concerns regarding the effectiveness of unions, a situation compounded by the composition of union leadership in which sanitation workers were rarely represented. A female worker in Islamabad remarked that union leaders remain confined to their offices and do little to address workers' grievances.<sup>396</sup> Another worker from Islamabad reported that her concerns and issues are not reflected as union priorities:

**“At the time of elections, they said they will build washrooms for the female workers, but after they get their seats, then they were nowhere to be seen. You can imagine how many problems do we [women] have to face without washrooms.”<sup>397</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Islamabad

None of the participants in the study reported instances of sanitation workers as leader of general unions at their workplaces. Even when they are part of leadership structure in gender unions, a worker from Bahawalpur highlighted the complex power dynamics at play:

**“Our union representative is useless. He himself used to work in sewers, but now he is afraid of being asked to go into the sewers again. So, he is just a yes-man of the higher officials and does not care**

<sup>389</sup> International Labour Organization, *A Profile of Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations in Pakistan*, 2018, <https://www.ilo.org/publications/profile-trade-unionism-and-industrial-relations-pakistan>, p. 9.

<sup>390</sup> Pakistan, Industrial Relations Act, Act No. X of 2012, 2012, [https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1335934287\\_218.pdf](https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1335934287_218.pdf)

<sup>391</sup> ILO, *Application of International Labour Standards 2023*, 2023, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed\\_norm/%40relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_868115.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_868115.pdf), p. 200.

<sup>392</sup> Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, *Mapping Labour Unions in Pakistan*, December 2021, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/19148.pdf>, p.66.

<sup>393</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 6 March 2025, Peshawar.

<sup>394</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 24 February 2025, Umerkot.

<sup>395</sup> FGD in person, male sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>396</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.

<sup>397</sup> FGD in person, woman sanitation worker, 4 March 2025, Islamabad.



**about the workers. He is so helpless he cannot fight for our rights even though we are on the side of truth.”<sup>398</sup>**

A male sanitation worker in Bahawalpur

The General Secretary of Pakistan United Workers Federation, Muhammad Saad, noted that although sanitation workers often lack a voice in general unions, sanitation workers’ unions do successfully address the specific issues they face:

**“While general unions will talk about their own issues and we’ve seen that sanitation workers are not accepted as leaders of unions; however, we’ve seen sanitation workers’ unions focusing on issues such as overtime compensation for working on public holidays like Eid.”<sup>399</sup>**

Muhammad Saad, General Secretary of Pakistan United Workers Federation, 6 June 2025.

During the FGD in Islamabad, participants reported that there were three worker unions at their workplace, but none specifically represented sanitation workers. They expressed the need for a “Christian union”, stating that only such a union could effectively advocate for their rights considering the unique intersectional issues they face. When dedicated unions do exist, progress has been reported. Muhammad Saad noted that since the establishment of a separate union for sanitation workers in Lahore, workers have been empowered to talk about their benefits and allowances. However, he also said, that the participation of sanitation workers in unions and their effectiveness are dependent on wider social change and the dismantling of the structural discrimination these workers face in society.<sup>400</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the IRA places limits on the registration of trade “where there are two or more registered trade unions in the establishment”.<sup>401</sup> These requirements could impede the ability of sanitation workers within a workplace to form their separate union if general unions already exist.

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<sup>398</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 12 June 2024, Bahawalpur.

<sup>399</sup> Interview by phone call, Muhammad Saad, General Secretary of Pakistan United Workers Federation, 6 June 2025.

<sup>400</sup> Interview by phone call, Muhammad Saad, General Secretary of Pakistan United Workers Federation, 6 June 2025.


<sup>401</sup> Pakistan, Industrial Relations Act, 2012, Section 8(2)(b).



“

**The entire country is clean because of us.  
Treat us with respect.”**

- A woman sanitation worker in Islamabad

 ↑ *Three sanitation workers wading water to clean a water stream in Lahore. Photo: Center for Law and Justice/ Amnesty International*

# 6. CONCLUSION

The research finds that Pakistan lacks the legal instruments and processes to address the unique forms of discrimination and exclusions that sanitation workers experience in the country. The human rights violations highlighted in this report are complex, often stemming from societal prejudices that exclude workers on the basis of class, caste and religion. Given the intersectional and systemic nature of the problem, embedded within social, historical and economic structures, Pakistan's legal system as it stands proves inadequate to address these issues holistically.

As discussed earlier in this report, Pakistan lacks laws and mechanisms to address discrimination, particularly caste-based discrimination. In General Recommendation No 29, CERD calls on member states to consider an explicit prohibition of descent-based discrimination in their national constitutions. It further calls on states to "review and enact or amend legislation in order to outlaw all forms of discrimination based on descent".<sup>402</sup> It is posited that in the absence of legislation or mechanisms that recognize caste or descent-based discrimination, those impacted by such discrimination lack the language within the law to address harms stemming from the discrimination.

Furthermore, the research demonstrates that, despite having ratified the ICCPR and ICESCR, Pakistan falls short of its commitments under these UN treaties. Article 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan provides a larger framework for approaching non-discrimination, but the absence of laws to operationalize the right has meant that any remedy for discrimination on the basis of fundamental rights would need to be addressed to the Supreme Court or High Courts under Article 184 or 199 of the Constitution, which allow for laws, policies or practices to be challenged on grounds of constitutionality. Pursuing these remedies requires enormous amounts of resources and time, a luxury not available to sanitation workers.

The second bucket of violations faced by sanitation workers falls under the labour laws that address a vast array of issues including fair wages, safety, medical benefits, worker welfare and social security, work hours, compensation, occupational safety and right to freedom of association within the workplace. In Pakistan, these laws are a patchwork of various acts, ordinances and regulations, which have been made more complex ever since labour was designated as a provincial subject in 2010 through the 18th Amendment.<sup>403</sup> This legal maze makes it difficult to ascertain the application of laws to sanitation workers, particularly given that the laws often do not explicitly mention sanitation work nor accommodate the specific and varied nature of sanitation work. The various definitions of worker under different laws make it unclear whether sanitation workers would be considered "workers" under the laws. Moreover, the lack of mechanisms to capture non-regularized, daily-wage and informal-sector workers within the ambit of these laws means that they only offer partial and, at times, ineffective protections to sanitation workers. There is a need to review these acts, ordinances and regulations to remove ambiguities and loopholes that exclude sanitation workers.

The failure to implement these laws to sanitation work, when they do apply, is partly due to challenges posed to labour inspections in Pakistan. The ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations expressed concern in its report for the 113th International Labour Conference Session in 2025 that there has either been a decrease in the number of labour inspectors in all provinces or that they have remained the same.<sup>404</sup> Labour departments are already severely under-resourced and under-staffed. In the context of sanitation workers, it is unclear whether labour inspections occur at all and whether inspectors are trained and equipped to adequately inspect sanitation work given its various forms and unique occupational safety requirements. Additionally, given that a significant part of sanitation work occurs in

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<sup>402</sup> CERD, General Recommendation 29: Discrimination Based on Descent, 2002, UN Doc. A/57/18, para. 1(c).

<sup>403</sup> Pakistan, Constitutional (Eighteenth Amendment) Act 2010.

<sup>404</sup> ILO, *Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations*, ILC.113/III(A), 2025, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Report%20III%28A%29-2025-%5BNORMES-241219-002%5D-EN\\_0.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Report%20III%28A%29-2025-%5BNORMES-241219-002%5D-EN_0.pdf), p. 827.

informal settings, there are significant challenges to inspecting that work, particularly in domestic settings. The lack of effective labour inspections runs contrary to Pakistan's obligations under ILO Labour Inspection Convention 1947 (ILO Convention 81), which Pakistan ratified in 1953.

**Table 9: Labour inspectors by province and year<sup>405</sup>**

PROVINCE	2022	2021
BALUCHISTAN	89	141
PUNJAB	225	225
SINDH	208	212
KHAYBER PAKHTUNKHWA	Data not available	-

Although Pakistan has ratified 38 ILO conventions, there are several key conventions that it has not signed, which are pertinent to sanitation workers and their rights. These include the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 155), the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention (ILO Convention 187), the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention (ILO Convention 102), and the Protection of Wages Convention (ILO Convention 95). Ratifying these conventions, while ensuring effective implementation of the conventions that Pakistan has already ratified, is crucial to strengthen Pakistan's protections for sanitation workers.

Additionally, despite the increasing privatization of sanitation work in Pakistan, the Pakistani authorities cannot absolve themselves of responsibility under international human rights law by outsourcing this work to private entities. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights obligate member states to "protect against human rights abuse within their territory and/or jurisdiction by third parties, including business enterprises".<sup>406</sup> The Pakistani state's reliance on corporations and third parties to employ sanitation workers does not remove its obligations to hold these authorities accountable for their failure to uphold human rights.

There is no comprehensive law designating manual scavenging and cleaning of drains and gutters as hazardous work. Given the heightened risks involved in the work and the inhumane and profoundly unsafe working conditions, manual scavenging must be designated as a different type of work from other forms of sanitation work and treated separately in terms of occupational health and safety protections.

In sanitation work, labour law violations run parallel to and feed into the discrimination faced by the workers. Labour laws that see the rights of sanitation workers as solely a labour issue, that can be solved by simply following labour codes and increasing oversight through inspections, will only address part of the problem. The Pakistani authorities need to approach this as both a labour and discrimination issue, taking into account the holistic and full spectrum of harm experienced by sanitation workers. Furthermore, while these intersectional issues must be addressed through laws that focus on specific concerns of sanitation workers in line with Pakistan's international human rights law obligations, the authorities must also develop programmes and resource interventions that address the social and cultural aspects of this discrimination.

The study confirms existing research that sanitation work is often marked by religious, class and caste-based discrimination and that sanitation workers are likely to be exposed to hazardous working conditions and exploitative employment structures. The report seeks to frame these experiences of sanitation workers within international law human rights standards. Sanitation workers who took part in the questionnaire and interviews for this research emphasized that their work is essential: without sanitation workers, cities across Pakistan would be flooded with rubbish and waste. Workers expressed a desire for respect, dignity and humane treatment in their work. Many spoke not only of the intensity of the physical labour they perform but also of the emotional toll of being treated as inferior, "dirty" or less than human. More than 25 questionnaire respondents highlighted the importance of their work:

<sup>405</sup> ILO, *Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations* (previously cited), p. 827.

<sup>406</sup> UN, Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework, 2011, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf), Principle 1.

## **“The entire country is clean because of us. Treat us with respect.”<sup>407</sup>**

A woman sanitation worker in Islamabad

Workers highlighted the need for better benefits, increased salaries, access to medical care, and safer working conditions. The responses reflected a clear understanding among sanitation workers about the need for a human rights approach to their work. Further, participants in the study were acutely aware of the state’s responsibility towards them. The report notes that a majority of the respondents to the questionnaire said that it was the state’s responsibility to ensure workplace safety. This report calls for a holistic, human rights-based approach that combines anti-discrimination practices with enforcement of labour laws to address the historical, social and economic harms experienced by sanitation workers in Pakistan.

## **6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Amnesty International calls on the Pakistani authorities to abide by international human rights law and standards and extend rights to sanitation workers without discrimination on the basis of class, caste and religion. To that end, Amnesty International makes the following recommendations:

### **TO THE PAKISTANI AUTHORITIES**

- Immediately and fully regularize sanitation workers in line with Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance 1968 and ensure mandatory requirements on employers to provide written contracts for sanitation workers.
- Eliminate manual scavenging and cleaning of drains and gutters and introduce machines to perform these tasks while ensuring that sanitation workers are employed to run and maintain these machines without directly coming in contact with chemicals, excreta and household waste. Provide existing sanitation workers employed in the manual cleaning of drains and gutters with training and skills to operate these machines.
- Amend the Constitution to explicitly include protection against caste-based discrimination as part of the fundamental rights chapter and pass legislation recognizing caste-based discrimination as per Pakistan’s international human rights obligations, particularly ICERD and ILO’s Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (ILO Convention 111), to address the unique intersection of discrimination faced by sanitation workers and with communities associated with sanitation work. Any legislation passed must include a definition of caste that corresponds to the local social context and in meaningful consultation with local communities facing this discrimination. Laws addressing discrimination must also contain accessible and independent mechanisms for reporting, investigating and addressing discrimination to provide remedies to individuals and communities impacted by it.
- Take steps to impose a ban on all discriminatory job advertisements that make caste and religion a criterion for employment and develop mechanisms to report any discriminatory practices during the recruitment process for jobs.
- Carry out a substantive and consultative review and amend the labour law framework in Pakistan to address the particular issues of safety, mistreatment and discrimination that sanitation workers face. Sanitation work should be designated as hazardous work under national laws and concurrent safety codes in each province must be developed to address occupational safety and health, taking into account the varied workplaces of sanitation work.
- Implement government-mandated minimum wage for all workers, regardless of their employment status and strengthen measures to ensure oversight and inspections to ensure effective implementation and to ensure that no unlawful deductions take place. The authorities must take steps to address the gender pay gap in line with its obligations under CEDAW.

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<sup>407</sup> Questionnaire by voice call, woman sanitation worker, 12 June 2024, Islamabad.

- Implement mandatory obligations for all employers to provide appropriate PPE for sanitation workers, regardless of their employment status. PPE must be replaced immediately in case of damage or loss without any penalty to the worker.
- Provide resources to provincial labour departments to implement effective and independent labour inspections. Ensure training of labour inspectors to address violations of labour laws that specifically impact sanitation workers and develop mechanisms to reach sanitation workers in informal settings including domestic.
- Take steps to strengthen protections extended to sanitation workers working in informal settings, expand social protection programmes for informal workers, and create effective mechanisms for monitoring such settings.
- Ensure mandatory enrolment of all sanitation workers, regardless of employment status, in social security and worker welfare schemes.
- Conduct educational and awareness campaigns for sanitation workers in accessible languages, including regional ones, regarding social services and worker welfare facilities and rights available to them.
- Develop awareness-raising campaigns, including changes to school curricula, to combat stereotypes against non-Muslims and stigmatized castes, as well as prejudices associated with sanitation work, to dismantle systemic racism.
- Allocate funds and resources to provide opportunities to sanitation worker communities and their children through affirmative action programmes, including quotas taking into account caste identity, and robust educational opportunities.
- Ensure that leave is provided to all sanitation workers, particularly for religious holidays, as per national and international law requirements.
- Provide information and data regarding sanitation work in all government departments, agencies and entities. Ensure this information is made public with segregated data for religion, caste and gender, while taking into account that all personally identifying information, such as names, are removed from datasets. Data must include information on workplace injuries, complaints regarding harassment and discrimination, and the number of regularized workers.
- Make public data on the constitution of harassment committees in all workplaces employing sanitation workers in line with the obligations of the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 and CEDAW. Empower Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Ombudspersons to require workplaces to constitute inquiry committees and issue guidelines to ensure committees are trained to consider the intersection of caste, religion and gender-based harassment.

## **TO COMPANIES AND EMPLOYERS**

- Ensure that their policies and practices for recruitment, remuneration, promotion and working conditions do not discriminate directly or through indirect practices against sanitation workers on the basis of caste, religion and gender. Accountability mechanisms must be developed to ensure that workers are able to report discriminatory practices at the workplace.
- Establish committees for reporting workplace harassment as per the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act and create an enabling environment for reporting incidents of harassment.
- Ensure all workers are regularized and given permanent status without discrimination and all workers are provided written contracts. Any workers employed on a non-permanent basis, either through contractual work or on a daily wage, must be given their full rights such as fair wage, job security, social security benefits and safe and healthy working conditions. Furthermore, employers must take steps to ensure that suppliers, partners and contractors uphold these rights as well.
- Take all necessary measures to ensure safe and healthy working conditions and provide mandatory, regular and comprehensive training to all sanitation workers. Ensure adequate compensation is provided for injury or death, regardless of employment status.
- Establish mechanisms to effectively monitor compliance with domestic laws and international human rights standards and make all information and compliance publicly available.

- Take steps to ensure that all employees are able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, as well as a fair means of collective bargaining without discrimination, including the right to form trade unions and to strike.

## **TO UNIONS**

- Ensure inclusivity of all workers and take additional steps to include sanitation workers in leadership positions of unions, particularly when they form a significant part of the workforce. Extend membership of unions to all sanitation workers, including non-permanent workers and particularly those working on daily wage or informally.
- Create awareness among membership and leadership of unions regarding the caste-based discrimination that a majority of sanitation workers face. Proactively integrate the demands of sanitation workers into the agenda and priority demands of the union as part of its collective bargaining.



## ANNEX: INFORMATION REQUEST RESPONSES

Table 10: Selected Employee Data from the University of the Punjab, obtained September 2024

SCALE	CADRE	TOTAL EMPLOYEES	MUSLIMS	CHRISTIANS	HINDUS
1	Sanitation Workers	400	4	396	0
1	Naib Qasid	385	366	19	0
1	Gardener	345	335	10	0
11	Jr. Clerks	480	468	12	0
14	Sr. Clerk	249	245	4	0
16	Assistants	190	187	3	0
20	Directors	6	6	0	0

Table 11: Employee Data of miscellaneous, ministerial, technical and menial staff from Punjab Police, obtained September 2024

SCALE	TOTAL EMPLOYEES	MUSLIMS	CHRISTIANS	HINDUS	OTHERS
1	7649	6119	1675	73	1
2	733	644	84	5	0
3	289	226	61	2	0
4	166	15	0	0	0
5	407	399	7	1	0
7	2866	2847	18	1	0
9	383	379	4	0	0
11	1288	1269	19	0	0
12	257	253	3	0	1
14	859	853	6	0	0
15	236	236	0	0	0
16	478	476	1	0	1
17	204	203	1	0	0
18	Miscellaneous, ministerial, technical and menial staff	10	0	0	0

Table 12: Employee Data of Establishment-II Branch, CPO from Punjab Police, obtained September 2024

SCALE	CADRE	TOTAL EMPLOYEES	MUSLIMS	CHRISTIANS	HINDUS	OTHERS
BS-11	Executive	15006	14966	36	0	4
BS-14	Executive	9161	9076	76	6	3

Table 13: Employee Data of Establishment-III, CPO from Punjab Police, obtained September 2024

SCALE	CADRE	TOTAL EMPLOYEES	MUSLIMS	NON-MUSLIMS
7	Constables	125368	123996	1372
7	Traffic Assistants	2916	2881	35
9	Head Constables	19493	19387	106
9	Sr. Traffic Assistants	294	292	2

Table 14: Selected Employee Data from Punjab Forensic Science Authority, obtained August 2024

SCALE	CADRE	TOTAL EMPLOYEES	MUSLIM MALES	MUSLIM FEMALE	CHRISTIAN MALE	CHRISTIAN FEMALE	HINDU MALE	HINDU FEMALE
1	Sweeper	33	10	0	19	4	0	0
1	Naib Qasid	40	33	5	2	0	0	0
1	Gardener	10	9	1	0	0	0	0
2	Lift Operator	6	6	0	0	0	0	0
4-5	Driver	87	85	0	2	0	0	0
4	Security Guard	155	123	24	7	1	0	0
11	Junior Clerk	9	8	1	0	0	0	0
11	Sanitary Supervisor	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
16	Assistants	34	29	4	1	0	0	0
SPECIAL PAY PACKAGE	Forensic Scientist	138	105	30	3	0	0	0
SPECIAL PAY PACKAGE	Junior Forensic Scientist	246	186	49	7	2	1	0
SPECIAL PAY PACKAGE	Managers	7	5	2	0	0	0	0

Table 15: Selected Employee Data from Water and Sewerage Authority, obtained September 2024

SCALE	CADRE	TOTAL EMPLOYEES	MUSLIM MALES	MUSLIM FEMALE	NON-MUSLIM MALE	NON-MUSLIM FEMALE
1-2	Asstt. Pipe Fitter	385	339	2	44	0
1-4	Gardener	14	13	0	1	0
1-5	Sanitation Workers (Various types)	1937	596	5	1311	25
1-5	Security Guard	91	87		4	0
1-5	Naib Qasid (Office Messenger)	98	75	13	6	4
1	Mechanical Helper	86	73	0	13	0
3	Assistant Sanitation Supervisors	48	6	0	42	0
4	Pipe Fitter	143	129	0	14	0
4	Dispatch Rider	7	7	0	0	0
5	Veh. Driver	185	169	0	16	0
5	Jr. Pump Operator	1152	1115	2	35	0
9	Head Motor Driver	51	47	0	4	0
9	Inspector	223	212	2	9	0
11	Junior Clerk	102	80	19	1	2
14	Senior Clerk	77	74	1	1	1
15	Accountant	36	35	1	0	0
16	Assistant	73	70	2	1	0
17	Assistant Directors	137	126	9	2	0
17	Accounts Officer	10	10	0	0	0
18	Directors	73	62	10	1	0
19	Directors	17	16	0	1	0
20	Managing Directors	1	1	0	0	0
TOTAL		4946	3342	66	1506	32

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# **“CUT US OPEN AND SEE THAT WE BLEED LIKE THEM”**

## **DISCRIMINATION AND STIGMATIZATION OF SANITATION WORKERS IN PAKISTAN**

Sanitation work in Pakistan is disproportionately assigned to non-Muslims who belong to so-called “lower castes”, often without real choice in the matter. This report explores how communities in Pakistan that are marginalized due to their caste and religious identities experience compounded discrimination in Pakistan’s sanitation sector.

For this research Amnesty International partnered with the Center for Law & Justice (CLJ), a human rights organization in Pakistan working for the rights of religious communities and women, and labour rights. This research found evidence that sanitation work in Pakistan is marked by caste-based discrimination. Furthermore, sanitation workers in the study reported being exposed to hazardous working conditions and exploitative employment structures. The research finds that Pakistan lacks the legal instruments and processes to address the unique forms of discrimination and exclusions that sanitation workers experience in the country.

Pakistani authorities must abide by international human rights law and standards and extend rights to sanitation workers without discrimination on the basis of class, caste and religion through specific legislative action to address caste-based discrimination, treating sewerage work as hazardous and ensuring effective implementation of labour laws to sanitation work.