

Precarious labour and silenced workers



The position of workers from Scheduled Caste communities in the textiles and garment industry in Pakistan

Arisa

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Colophon

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About Arisa

Arisa – Advocating Rights in South Asia – works to improve respect for human rights and labour rights in global supply chains. Working with civil society partners in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, among other countries, we expose human rights and labour abuses in the production of garments, leather, natural stone and vegetable seeds, and we call on companies and governments to ensure that rights are respected. We prioritise the position of the people in the most vulnerable situations in global supply chains and work to eliminate child labour, forced labour and caste discrimination. For more information, see www.arisa.nl.

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1 Introduction

Hundreds of millions of people in South Asia are affected by caste-based discrimination. Many of those at the bottom of the caste system, known as Dalits, work under some of the most difficult conditions in global supply chains. In South Asia, the majority of those trapped in modern slavery, including child labourers, forced labourers and people engaged in hazardous work, are from caste-affected communities. Caste discrimination is often at the root of other labour rights violations.¹

In Pakistan, although there is no official recognition that caste-based practices exist, discrimination against minorities, particularly Scheduled Caste Hindus and Christians, remains prevalent. Traditionally, these groups are relegated to low-paying jobs, often working as daily wage labourers in agriculture and brick kilns, as sanitation workers, or as cleaning staff in offices and industrial workplaces.²

With limited livelihood opportunities in impoverished rural areas, many individuals from rural Scheduled Caste communities migrate to cities like Karachi in search of employment. In Karachi, they increasingly find work in garment factories.

This report explores caste-based discrimination and challenges that Scheduled Caste workers face in Karachi's export-oriented textiles and garment industry. While previous research has examined informality and marginalisation in the sector, there have been no previous studies of factors like race and ethnicity, religion and caste, beyond gender.

1.1 Methodology

This report is written by Arisa, the Knowledge Forum and the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network. This brief and exploratory study is based primarily on interviews with workers, the majority of whom belong to Scheduled Caste communities in Pakistan. It is also informed by interviews with experts in labour rights, minority rights and gender. The interviews were carried out by The Knowledge Forum and the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network.

The interviews with workers took place in the first quarter of 2024. There were also four focus group discussions, each with eight to ten participants, and eleven small group interviews or discussions, with three to six participants each.

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- 1 Ethical Trading Initiative, *Base Code Guidance: Caste in Global Supply Chains*, 2019 <https://www.ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared_resources/ETI%20Base%20Code%20guidance%2C%20caste%20in%20global%20supply%20chains.pdf>
 - 2 Zulfiqar Shah, *Long Behind Schedule: A study on the plight of scheduled caste Hindus in Pakistan*, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), 2007 <https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/Old_files/asia/pdf/Long_Behind_Schedule.pdf>

In total, 94 respondents participated in the workers' study: 76 male workers and 18 female workers, reflecting the gender distribution in the industry. The interviewed workers held a range of job roles, including as machine operators, helpers, sweepers, quality checkers and labellers. Additionally, three respondents were employed as contractors, while two worked as supervisors.

All the respondents identified as Hindu. Except for two respondents, all came from Scheduled Caste communities: Bagri, Bheel, Kohli, Meghwar, Oad and Rajput. Two respondents were Hindus from communities that are not classified as Scheduled Castes.

There were six key informant interviews with experts on labour rights, minority rights and gender. The experts were representatives of government departments, civil society organisations, trade unions and industry. The interviews with experts took place in March and November 2024.

This report continues with an introduction to Pakistan's religious minorities and to the manifestation of caste-based practices in the country (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 starts with a description of the export-oriented textiles and garment industry in Pakistan and subsequently presents the findings from the interviews. The report concludes with a summary of findings and recommendations (Chapter 4).

2 Religious minorities in Pakistan

Pakistan became a separate state in 1947, following the partition of the Indian subcontinent into the independent states of Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.³ Despite their differing religious majorities, the two countries share a rich common history, culture, traditions and societal framework.⁴

Pakistan is home to several key linguistic and ethnic groups, or nationalities, including Baloch, Pashtuns, Punjabis, Saraikis, Sindhis and Urdu-speaking Muhajirs, who migrated to Pakistan during the partition.⁵

Pakistan's Constitution recognises Islam as the state religion.⁶ While the Constitution guarantees religious freedom and the right of minorities to practise their faith, in reality, these rights are often undermined. Religious minorities in Pakistan often face discrimination and may encounter restrictions that limit their freedoms, despite the constitutional protections in place.

According to its 2023 census, Pakistan's population exceeds 240 million, with around 4 per cent belonging to minority groups. Among these groups, Hindus make up about 1.6 per cent of the country's population and Christians around 1.4 per cent.⁷ Many members of Pakistan's Christian community trace their origins to the Hindu Dalit population. Over time, many Hindu Dalits have converted to Christianity in search of social mobility and equality. Other minority groups include the Ahmadiyya,⁸ Parsi and Sikh communities.

In addition, the census classifies 1.3 million people (0.6 per cent) as belonging to Scheduled Caste communities. In 1956, the Pakistan government declared 32 castes and tribes to be Scheduled Castes (see Box 1). The majority of them are Hindus from historically marginalised caste communities such as Bagri, Balmaki, Bheel, Jogi, Kohli, Meghwar and Oad.⁹

The number of people belonging to Pakistan's Scheduled Caste communities is, however, estimated to be much higher than reflected in the official census. According to experts, 80 to 90 per cent of the Hindu community belong to Scheduled Caste communities.¹⁰

3 C. Ryan Perkins, "1947 Partition of India and Pakistan", Stanford University Libraries, no date, <<https://exhibits.stanford.edu/1947-partition/about/1947-partition-of-india-pakistan>>

4 Shah, *Long Behind Schedule*.

5 Shah, *Long Behind Schedule*.

6 The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf>

7 Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_9_national.pdf>

8 The 500,000-strong Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan is a religious minority that considers itself Muslim but is barred under Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws from referring to itself as such and from practising aspects of its faith. See Amnesty International, "Pakistan: Authorities must end escalating attacks on minority Ahmadiyya community", June 2024 <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/06/end-escalating-attacks-on-minority-ahmadiyya-community>>

9 Shah, *Long Behind Schedule*.

10 Key informant interview with expert on minority rights, November 2024.

Box 1. Caste terminology

Dalits

The term Dalit literally means “broken people” and is a self-designation adopted as part of the growing self-awareness and self-empowerment of the Dalit movement.

Caste-affected communities do not use any single term to describe themselves. The terms used vary from country to country across the world.

Scheduled Castes

In Pakistan, Dalits are officially called ‘Scheduled Castes’. However, they are more commonly identified by the specific community to which they belong, such as Bheel, Kohli or Meghwar.

Caste hierarchies and discrimination also persist within the Muslim majority, although research on this is limited.

Learn more about caste terminology on the website of the [International Dalit Solidarity Network \(IDSN\)](#).¹¹

The census in Pakistan distinguishes between the “Hindu” category and the “Scheduled Caste” category, which has led to confusion among individuals regarding which group they should identify with. Many people either find it difficult to determine where they belong or may be reluctant to identify as part of the Scheduled Caste community because of the social stigma. As a result, it is likely that the census undercounts the Scheduled Caste population.¹²

Further, a significant portion of the Christian community in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas, consists of people from Scheduled Caste communities who have converted from Hinduism to Christianity. Scheduled Caste Hindus who have converted to Islam or Christianity are not officially recognised under the Scheduled Caste category, which creates an issue of invisibility and underrepresentation

2.1 Caste-based discrimination

The caste system in Pakistan is a complex and often overlooked aspect of the country’s social fabric. While it is most commonly associated with the Hindu community, caste divisions also exist among Muslims and Christians in Pakistan, as well as in other religious groups.

The Pakistan government does not officially acknowledge caste as an issue and denies the existence of caste-based discrimination in the country. However, caste continues to play a significant role in determining people’s social status. Pakistan society is sharply divided along lines of class, with additional divisions based on religion, gender, urban versus rural background, and caste. The state’s denial of these issues has exacerbated the situation, as successive governments have failed to implement adequate legislative or legal measures to effectively address caste- and descent-based discrimination.¹³

11 IDSN, “Terminology”, no date <<https://idsn.org/terminology/>>

12 The Friday Times, “Scheduled Castes or Hindus? Digital Census Sparks Debate Among Minority Communities”, 18 March 2023 <<https://thefridaytimes.com/18-Mar-2023/scheduled-castes-or-hindus-digital-census-sparks-debate-among-minority-communities>>

13 Shah, *Long Behind Schedule*.

Caste-affected communities in Pakistan face persistent discrimination and severe socioeconomic hardship. As the IDSN has highlighted, these communities often live in rural, segregated areas of Punjab and Sindh provinces and endure extreme poverty, landlessness, illiteracy and deeply rooted discriminatory practices, including forms of “untouchability” (see Box 2). When disasters strike, Scheduled Caste communities are frequently the last to receive relief, exacerbating their vulnerability and marginalisation.¹⁴

Box 2. Untouchability practices

A key aspect of caste discrimination is the practice of “untouchability”, which arises from the belief that different caste groups possess varying levels of purity and impurity. Dalits and other marginalised caste groups are considered so impure that they can pollute other groups.¹⁵

Common untouchability practices include:

- Segregation in housing, schools and cremation grounds.
- De facto prohibition of inter-caste marriage.
- Limitation or prohibition of access to public places such as roads, temples and tea houses.
- Denial or limitation of access to public services such as water taps, health care and education.
- Restrictions on occupations and assignment of the most menial, dirty and dangerous work as defined by the caste hierarchy,
- De facto prohibition of access to ownership of land.

Many Dalits are trapped in cycles of bonded labour, especially in the agriculture and brick kiln industries. For Hindu and Christian minorities, forced marriage and conversion, particularly targeting women and girls, are disturbingly common. There are frequent reports that girls and young women belonging to these minorities are kidnapped, subjected to physical and emotional abuse, and coerced through threats of violence.¹⁶

Limited political representation further hinders the ability of these marginalised groups to advocate for their rights effectively, while the absence of comprehensive data on their socioeconomic conditions obstructs the creation of policies and interventions tailored to their needs.

Caste and labour

Dalits in Pakistan work predominantly in the agricultural sector, where bonded labour is prevalent. Like their counterparts across South Asia, Dalits in Pakistan bear the heavy burden of the hierarchical caste system, which often confines them to occupations that are menial and considered degrading such as manual scavenging, sewage cleaning, sweeping, cleaning, and leather work. In search of better economic and livelihood opportunities, many Dalits migrate to cities like Karachi and other industrial centres.

Scheduled Caste workers in Pakistan endure double discrimination both as Hindus in a Muslim-majority society and as lower-caste individuals within the Hindu community. This dual marginalisation exacerbates their vulnerability. Women face additional challenges due to gender discrimination.¹⁷

14 IDSN, “Pakistan”, no date <<https://idsn.org/countries/pakistan/>>

15 IDSN, “Caste discrimination”, no date <<https://idsn.org/caste-discrimination/>>

16 IDSN, “Child, Early and Enforced Marriages – Conversions and Forced Marriages in Pakistan: Call for submission for two reports on the issue of child, early and forced marriage”, submission to OHCHR, February 2022 <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/women/cfi-adverse-impact-forced-marriage/csos_submission_forcedmarriage-cso-International%20Dalit%20Solidarity%20Network.docx>

17 IDSN, “Pakistan”.

3 Scheduled Caste communities in Pakistan's textiles and garment industry

This chapter starts with a short introduction to Pakistan's export-oriented textiles and garment industry and then continues with the findings from the interviews and discussions with workers and experts.

3.1 Pakistan's cotton, textiles and garment industry

Accounting for more than half of Pakistan's total export revenue, with the European Union and United States of America as its main markets, the cotton, textiles and garment industry is a pillar of Pakistan's economy and an important source of industrial employment.

Due to its unique geography, climate and demography, Pakistan has a largely vertically integrated supply chain, in which production activities, ranging from cotton farming to yarn spinning, textile production, sewing and recycling, are present domestically.¹⁸ While Pakistan's economy is not highly export driven, with exports accounting for only 10.4 per cent of total gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023, the cotton, textiles and garment industry, annually worth more than USD 18 billion, makes up roughly 60 per cent of that.¹⁹ As Pakistan ran a total trade deficit of more than USD 27 billion in fiscal year 2023, the country is extremely dependent on the industry as its primary source of export revenue and foreign currency.²⁰

The cotton, textiles and garment supply chain, which caters primarily to the international market, is estimated to employ up to 15 million people, with 2.2 million working in garment production and 1.8 million in textile manufacturing.²¹ Nearly 90 per cent of Pakistan's garment exports are directed to the EU, the USA and the United Kingdom, with the EU comprising the largest market, accounting for over 40 per cent of total exports.²²

In Punjab the industry is clustered in Lahore, Faisalabad and Multan, while in Sindh most garment production takes place in the country's economic capital, Karachi.

18 Fair Wear Foundation, *Pakistan country study 2021* <<https://api.fairwear.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021-CS-PAKISTAN.pdf>>

19 World Bank, "Exports of goods and services (% of GDP) – Pakistan"; and UN Comtrade database, data for product groups with HS codes 52–63 <<https://comtrade.un.org/>>

20 XinhuaNet Asia & Pacific news, "Pakistan's exports rise over 10 percent in FY 2023-24", July 2024 <<https://english.news.cn/asiapacific/20240704/a1a053eb9d7e4d2285c228ebe4e8540b/c.html>>

21 FEMNET and European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), *No Contracts, No Rights: How the Fashion Industry Avoids Paying Minimum Wages in Pakistan*, 2023 <https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/No_Contracts_No_Rights_ECCHR_FEMNET_study_final_EN.pdf>; and Clean Clothes Campaign, "A decade after deadly Ali Enterprises fire, Pakistan's garment workers report shocking lack of fire exits", 2022 <<https://cleanclothes.org/news/2022/report-a-decade-after-deadly-ali-enterprises-fire-pakistans-garment-workers-report-shocking-lack-of-fire-exits>>

22 UN Comtrade database, data for product groups with HS codes 61 and 62 <<https://comtrade.un.org/>>

For more information on Pakistan's cotton, textiles and garment industry, read Arisa's report *Trends in Production and Trade – Cotton, Textiles and Garments from Pakistan*.²³

3.2 Labour migration, recruitment and job assignment

Although Scheduled Caste communities' share in the workforce remains small, and exact figures are unavailable, there has been a growing presence of workers from these communities in Karachi's garment sector in recent years.²⁴ Most of these workers hail from the Mirpur Khas, Sanghar, Tharparkar and Umerkot districts in Sindh, and many have migrated in search of better employment opportunities and improved economic prospects.

Many of our survey interview respondents worked in agriculture before arriving in Karachi, where they struggled to make a living. During a group interview with female workers, the participants, who were currently employed as sweepers in garment factories, provided this account:

"We became tired of working in the fields without any gain. Whole families, including children, used to work for the landlord. But at the end of year we didn't get anything – instead, we were always held in debt. People of our community were in trouble. We are landless so when we stopped working on their lands, the landlord made us leave our houses because we were living on the landlord's land."²⁵

Respondents explained that, initially, men migrated to Karachi for work but struggled with the high cost of living. As a result, women began to join them, seeking employment to support their families back home.

The primary drivers of this migration are the lack of rural job opportunities, widespread poverty, and environmental challenges like floods and other climate change impacts, which have devastated livelihoods.

In the Thar region, in Tharparkar district, the introduction of coal projects has further disrupted the socioeconomic and cultural fabric, displacing people and forcing them to migrate and seek employment elsewhere.

Access to work

Some workers mentioned during interview that they faced challenges securing employment in garment factories because of their religious and caste background.

One respondent stated:

"I was denied a job at a garment factory. When the interviewer got to know my name, he could easily identify me as a Hindu. I am sure that he didn't hire me because I am a Hindu. My neighbour, who is also a Hindu, was able to get a job in the same factory as her name is a common Muslim name."

During a focus group discussion with 10 female workers, participants explained that Hindu workers sometimes use Muslim names to conceal their Hindu identity:

"We try to hide our Hindu background in the factory. We do so by using Muslim names. For example, if your name is Heema, you will introduce yourself as Hina, as that is a Muslim name."

23 Arisa, *Trends in Production and Trade – Cotton, Textiles and Garments from Pakistan*, 2024
<<https://arisa.nl/publications/?lang=en>>

24 Key informant interviews, March 2024.

25 Extract from group interview transcript.

In one of the group discussions with eight women from the Kohli community, the women said that when they were recruited they were asked about their caste and religion. The women did not mention that they belonged to the Kohli community, which is at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Instead, they said that they belonged to the Gujarati community, which is higher in the hierarchy and predominantly urban.

Respondents further explained that they faced difficulties in finding work due to a lack of connections within the workplace. It is common, they said, for junior to mid-level managers, such as supervisors, to rely on personal references when recruiting workers. However, since workers from Scheduled Caste communities are underrepresented in mid- and senior-level positions, they are unable to take advantage of these networks.

In a group interview, workers said that Scheduled Caste workers who have come to Karachi from rural areas are asked to pay bribes to get jobs in garment factories. They cannot afford not to have a job, so they feel they have to do this.

Low-paid and low-valued jobs

Workers from Scheduled Caste communities are often disproportionately represented in low-paid and undervalued occupations, including roles such as sweepers and helpers in garment factories.

Historically, people from Scheduled Caste communities have been confined to occupations deemed “unclean”, including cleaning and sanitation work.

Respondents reported that cleaning and sweeping staff in garment factories are predominantly from the Kohli community, many of whom previously worked in agriculture or brick kilns as bonded labourers. Additionally, Christians are also employed in sweeping and sanitation roles within these factories.

Several women, all from the Kohli community, shared their experiences:

“We wanted to do another job, but the contractor asked us for 5,000 rupees [EUR 16]²⁶ if we wanted to do other work. We couldn't pay that, so we're stuck with sweeping.”

“Before, we used to work in agriculture for landlords. The major difference is that now we have cash in our hands. When we worked for the landlord, we never had any money. But in terms of rights violations, there is no difference.”

“We earn between 20,000 and 21,000 rupees [EUR 65 to 69] per month. The factory may give more to the contractor, but this is all we get. When there is an audit in the factory, we are told to say that we are being paid minimum wages of 32,000 rupees [EUR 104]. If we tell the truth, we may lose our jobs. We have small children to feed and must pay the rent, so we can't afford the loss of a job.”²⁷

Limited access to supervisory roles

Respondents said that supervisors almost always had a Muslim background and they hardly ever encountered a supervisor from Scheduled Caste communities. They attributed their very restricted opportunities for advancement to middle-level positions to their educational background. Most of these positions require at least a matriculation (upper-secondary-level) certificate, but due to their financial constraints, respondents were unable to pursue the necessary education.

In a group interview with four male workers, two mentioned that they worked as supervisors but were not given this designation. They said that they were expected to work as a supervisor for one year on non-supervisor's pay and then they might be promoted to supervisor and get a wage increment.

26 For all currency conversions, the conversion rate of 15 January 2024 has been used: PKR 1 = EUR 0.003263 <www.xe.com>

27 Extracts from group interview transcript.

However, they were concerned that their promotion would never materialise. They did not dare raise this issue out of fear of losing their job.

In a focus group discussion with nine male workers, the participants stated that people from Scheduled Caste communities would not apply for managerial roles because they thought workers from majority groups would not listen to them and would create problems.

3.3 Employment relations

Approximately half (48 out of 94) of the interviewed individuals were employed by a contractor rather than directly by the factory. Several respondents said that they were unable to secure direct employment in garment factories and permanent positions remained inaccessible to them.

Contract workers do not receive any benefits such as social security cover, health insurance or paid leave, which leaves them without crucial financial and medical safety nets. Their employment is often precarious, as they can easily be laid off without notice. They work on a daily wage or piece rate basis. If there is insufficient work, they may be sent home and left without any earnings for the day. In addition, as 14 workers mentioned, contract workers do not have access to transport facilities, whereas direct employees receive this benefit.

Respondents reported that a significant number of people from Scheduled Caste communities lack proper identification documents, which severely hinders their ability to secure formal employment. Another key factor is the need to travel back to their home villages. Taking time off for events such as religious festivals, weddings or funerals – which often require additional travel time if a return to their village is involved – is not feasible for direct employees. As a result, many workers prefer to work on a daily wage basis or with contractors who are more flexible and can accommodate such leave.

In one group interview, participants said that during audits, contract workers were asked not to come to work as the auditors should not interact with them.

Experts consulted for this research confirmed that workers from Scheduled Caste communities are predominantly employed on a contract basis in the Pakistan garment industry.²⁸ While contractualisation is a broader trend in the sector, Scheduled Caste workers are especially affected, often being hired exclusively on a casual basis.

Opinions on the impact of contract-based work varied. Some experts pointed out that the flexibility of contract employment allowed Scheduled Caste workers to manage personal responsibilities, such as travel to their home villages. However, others highlighted the significant vulnerabilities, including job insecurity, long hours, low wages, and lack of benefits like health insurance, retirement plans and paid leave, which exacerbate their economic instability.

Wages

At the time of the interviews, the minimum wage for unskilled workers in Sindh's ready-made garment industry was PKR 32,000 per month (EUR 104). Statutory monthly wages for semi-skilled, skilled and highly skilled workers ranged from PKR 33,280 (EUR 109) to PKR 42,860 (EUR 140), depending on the job type.²⁹

28 Key informant interviews, March 2024.

29 FEMNET and ECCHR, *No Contracts, No Rights*.

In several focus group and small group discussions and interviews, contract workers reported monthly earnings below the minimum wage. These workers reported monthly wages between PKR 15,000 (EUR 49) and PKR 22,000 (EUR 72). Such low wages were reported by 28 workers. Some of these workers indicated that there is not always work for them which negatively affects their monthly earnings. Other workers referred to contractors who allegedly take a share of their earnings.

Interviewed workers stated that, while the factory may pay the contractor the minimum wage, the contractor negotiates with the workers and provides them with much lower wages. The lowest reported wages, at PKR 15,000 (EUR 49) per month, were earned by female workers from the Kohli community.

One of the interviewed workers explained:

“If one denies these terms and conditions, another will agree. We have no bargaining power.”

Some respondents referred to contractors as *“mafia”* and *“giant crocodiles waiting to exploit vulnerable people”*.

In one group interview, participants said that contractors may offer advances of up to PKR 200,000 (EUR 653), with the condition that the worker must continue working for the contractor until the debt is repaid. However, due to the low wages, workers may find themselves trapped in a cycle of perpetual debt. This creates a significant risk of bonded labour, as workers are unable to escape the financial burden imposed by the advance.

The respondents who were hired directly by the factories earned monthly wages between PKR 32,000 (EUR 104) and PKR 35,000 (EUR 114) for a regular working week of 48 hours. With overtime earnings, monthly wages could add up to PKR 45,000 (EUR 147). Overtime hours are not always paid, however.

Leave

Despite the fact that the Pakistan government recognises Hindu festivals like Holi and Diwali as public holidays for religious minorities, only one of the interviewed workers mentioned that he was able to make use of this.

One worker said that he was given a warning when he took a day of leave for a Hindu festival. Some workers knew of people who had lost their jobs due to taking leave on religious festivals.

Untouchability practices

Respondents noted that, while untouchability practices remain prevalent in their rural home towns and villages, these practices are generally not observed in garment factories. However, there were some exceptions. In three group interviews, respondents mentioned that they were expected to bring their own food, water and utensils to work. One group said that other workers refused to allow them to drink from the same glass or eat from the same plate.

In a group interview, female sweepers explained that they were specifically instructed to bring their own food and utensils:

“We were told to bring our own food, water and utensils. They also told us that we cannot eat or drink in the canteen because of the work we do.”

In another group interview, workers explained that they preferred to bring their own food and utensils, as the canteen served both beef and non-beef dishes using the same utensils.

3.4 Not in a position to speak up

Respondents highlighted a common perception that Hindus, especially those from Scheduled Caste communities, are hardworking and typically do not resist increased workloads. Due to their vulnerability, they seldom voice complaints or demand their rights, making them easy targets for contractors and employers who may assign them more work for lower pay.

During a group interview with five male workers, one participant explained:

"Factory management prefers Scheduled Caste workers because of their competence, hard work and dedication. They know that workers from oppressed caste communities are more obedient. They do not waste their time in strikes or create any resistance against exploitation."

Another worker added:

"We don't have any other job opportunities, so it's better to avoid undesired situations and not raise our voices."

One of the interviewed workers believed that the vulnerable position of workers from Scheduled Caste communities ultimately benefitted the company:

"We are considered voiceless and suppressed. That's why management prefers to work with us. They offer us low rates because we cannot raise our voices. We need to tolerate this exploitation."

Workers also reported that favouritism is common in the workplace. Workers who are favoured by supervisors are given lighter workloads and better treatment. In contrast, workers from Scheduled Caste communities or from other minority groups are viewed as weaker and are less likely to bargain for their rights, leaving them at a distinct disadvantage.

One interviewed worker explained:

"Sometimes, the supervisor hires his own people and gives them less workload while assigning more work to the Scheduled Caste workers. The favourite workers also get more break time."

These practices were also highlighted in two other group interviews, where workers added that there was a threat of dismissal if they refused to accept additional workload:

"Scheduled Caste Hindus are considered weak. When the company needs overtime work, they know that we cannot refuse it."

Most respondents indicated that senior management did not actively encourage discrimination; instead, unfair treatment is primarily perpetuated by middle management. Some respondents also noted that the attitude of supervisors and in-charges towards workers from Scheduled Caste communities was often negative, and they felt unable to voice complaints due to fear of retaliation:

"The in-charges and supervisors hate us when they come to know that we are lower-caste Hindus."

One respondent shared an experience where he was once denied water from a company-provided glass, but after complaining, the issue was resolved. However, interviewed workers generally avoided filing complaints due to a lack of confidence in their effectiveness.

One worker mentioned filing a complaint about payment deductions, but it was ignored by the company. Another group of workers expressed fear that, if the factory owner learned that a worker had complained, that person risked being fired. They noted that, while Muslim women have complained about harassment, Scheduled Caste women typically remain silent, fearing job loss and damage to their reputation.

One male focus group participant said:

"If we want to survive in this country, we must be silent."

According to another:

"If a Scheduled Caste worker raises his voice against misconduct and gets dismissed because of it, he will not be able to gather support or sympathy."

During the key informant interviews, the lack of representation of Scheduled Caste workers in the trade union movement was repeatedly mentioned. Experts pointed out the absence of any Scheduled Caste trade union leaders in the garment sector.

The overall level of unionisation among garment workers is low, and all workers face significant barriers to exercising their rights to organise and bargain collectively, with fear of reprisals or job loss discouraging them from participating in collective actions. These barriers are even more pronounced for people from Scheduled Caste communities, who face additional layers of discrimination and vulnerability.

3.5 Impact on children

In some of the interviews and group discussions, participants brought up the situation of their children.

Some workers were unable to bring their children to Karachi, leaving them behind in their native villages in interior Sindh. In a group interview with six male workers, participants said that their children, who had stayed behind, were not enrolled in school. Instead, they helped to support their families by collecting firewood, working in agriculture or labouring in brick kilns. Similarly, during a focus group discussion with eight male workers, participants mentioned that their children were working to contribute to the family income.

In a separate focus group discussion with eight female workers, participants revealed that they had migrated to Karachi with their children. However, their children did not attend school because they lacked the necessary documentation, such as identification cards and birth certificates. The women explained that without these documents their children were unable to access formal education:

"Our children are not registered and do not have birth certificates, so they are unable to enrol in school. While we are at work for eight hours a day, and sometimes even longer, our children are left unattended. Anything could happen to them."

4 Conclusions and recommendations

The interviews and group discussions undertaken for this report revealed that people from Scheduled Caste communities in Pakistan face barriers in securing permanent direct employment in garment factories. Instead, they are often hired through contractors, a practice that excludes them from crucial social security benefits and job protection. Moreover, interviewed contract workers reported extremely low wages.

Certain caste groups, such as the Kohli community, are disproportionately concentrated in low-status, low-paying roles, such as cleaners and helpers, with limited opportunities for advancement to higher-paying positions.

Job prospects for workers from Scheduled Caste communities are particularly constrained due to their marginalized position in society, especially after migrating from rural areas. In Karachi, where they often lack strong social networks and have limited representation in trade unions, they feel pressured to accept whatever terms and conditions are offered.

This marginalised position leaves them unable to raise concerns or advocate for their rights, further intensifying their vulnerability in the workplace. As a result, they endure low wages and persistent poverty.

Some interviewed workers reported that their children are unable to attend school, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and restricting future opportunities for social mobility.

4.1 Recommendations

Recommendations to the Government of Pakistan

The Government of Pakistan should formally recognise caste identity within its policy frameworks. It should integrate this recognition into national legislation and public policies to address the specific challenges marginalised caste groups face. By officially acknowledging caste-based disparities, the government can ensure targeted social protection and education aimed at reducing discrimination and promoting equality.

Additionally, the government should launch special training programmes to enhance the skills of people from Scheduled Caste communities, thereby improving their employability and providing access to better job opportunities within the textiles and garment industry and other sectors, fostering greater economic inclusion.

Recommendations to textile and garment factories in Pakistan

Companies should develop and implement anti-discrimination and equal opportunities policies that explicitly address all forms of discrimination, including religious and caste-based discrimination. These policies should include clear implementation measures and be regularly monitored to ensure effectiveness. This includes revising human resources policies, particularly with regard to leave (time off work), to ensure fair treatment.

Management and employees need to become fully aware of caste dynamics at the workplace and should be sensitised about religious and caste-based discrimination. Factory owners and management should provide workplace equality training at all levels (senior management, mid-management and shop floor). This training could be delivered by civil society organisations specialising in addressing caste-based discrimination.

Companies should ensure there are grievance mechanisms in place that support socially excluded groups in raising their concerns.

Companies should map their operations and supply chains to assess the status of the most vulnerable and socially excluded workers and to identify the extent of discrimination in their operations and supply chains.

Recommendations to international brands and retailers sourcing from Pakistan

Brands and retailers sourcing from Pakistan should be aware of the risk of religious and caste-based discrimination in their supply chains. They should integrate the issue in their due diligence policies and practices and ensure people affected by religious and caste-based discrimination have access to remedy.

Brands and retailers should make concerted efforts to identify vulnerable workers in their supply chains. This includes:

- Mapping and tracing the entire supply chain, including all tiers of production and any work outsourced to informal workplaces or homeworkers.
- Understanding workers' backgrounds – identifying the caste communities workers belong to and whether they have migrated from other regions.
- Reviewing recruitment processes – analysing how workers are recruited and hired, whether directly by the factory or through contractors.
- Checking whether workers have formal employment contracts, proof of employment and access to social security, and if employers keep records of workers.
- Examining wages and advances – investigating workers' wages and incomes and any advances to identify risks of bonded labour.

Brands and retailers often rely on social compliance audits for risk assessment, but these do not usually identify caste issues. The most vulnerable workers often remain invisible in such audits. Workers' voices should be better included in risk assessments through off-site interactions. Further, companies should initiate constructive dialogue with their suppliers on religious and caste-based discrimination.

Brands and retailers need to ensure that rights holders, and organisations representing or supporting them, have a decisive voice at all stages of the due diligence cycle. They should pay special attention to the voices of vulnerable workers. Companies should engage with labour rights organisations led by and/or representing caste-affected workers and with Dalit organisations. These organisations can inform companies about caste dynamics and discrimination in supply chains and provide guidance on how to identify and address discrimination.

Recommendation to trade unions

Trade unions should incorporate the concerns of workers from minority groups into collective bargaining processes, fostering their representation and participation in decision-making. ◀