

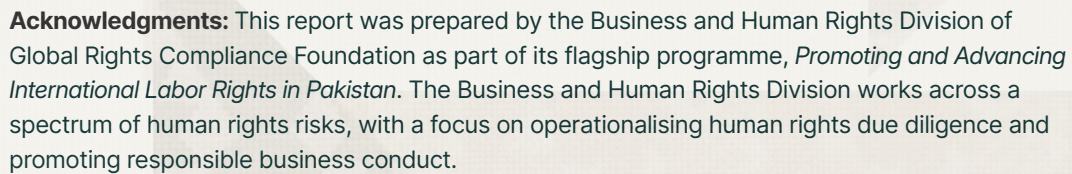
From Complaint to Redress

Routes to Remedy for
Garment Workers
in Pakistan

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Key advisors: Saqib Ali Khan and Lara Strangways

Design and editorial support: [MeThree](#)

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Table of Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations.....	1
Executive Summary.....	2
Intended audience	3
Methodology.....	3
Introduction	5
Labour Rights in Pakistan.....	8
The Garment Industry in Pakistan	
Pakistan's Commitment to Remedy.....	
The Role of Trade Unions	
Remedy through State-Based Judicial and Quasi-Judicial Mechanisms	15
The Labour Courts	
The Federal Ombudsman's Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment	
The National Commission for Human Rights	
The National Industrial Relations Commission	
Remedy through State-Based Non-Judicial Mechanisms.....	22
The Labour Departments	
Alternative Dispute Resolution	
Social Protection Institutions.....	
The Employees' Old Age Benefits Institution	
The Employees' Social Security Institutions	
The Workers' Welfare Fund	
Remedy through Non-State-Based Mechanisms	32
Company-based Operational Grievance Mechanisms	
Mechanisms Operated through Industry, Multi-Stakeholder, or Collaborative Initiatives ...	
Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives.....	
Global Framework Agreements	
Community-based Grievance Mechanisms	
Strategic Litigation and International Avenues.....	
Recommendations.....	42
For Pakistani Policy Makers	
For Companies.....	
Conclusion.....	45
Endnotes	46

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Accord Pakistan Accord on Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry

ADR Alternative Dispute Resolution

BESSI Balochistan Employees' Social Security Institution

BHR Business and Human Rights

CBA Collective Bargaining Agent

CBM Community-based monitoring

CCC Clean Clothes Campaign

CSDDD Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive

CSOs Civil Society Organisations

ECCHR European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights

EOB Employees' Old-Age Benefits

EOBI Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution

ESSIs Employees Social Security Institutions

FoA Freedom of Association

FOSPAH Federal Ombudsman Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment

GDP Gross Domestic Product

GFA Global Framework Agreement

GRC Global Rights Compliance

GSP+ Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus

HBWWF Home-Based Women Workers Federation

HRDD Human Rights Due Diligence

ICT Islamabad Capital Territory

ILO International Labour Organisation

IRA Industrial Relations Act

IRO Industrial Relations Ordinance

KPESSI Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Employees' Social Security Institution

LAS Legal Aid Society

LEF Labour Education Foundation

LHC Lahore High Court

MNE Declaration ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy

MSI Multi-Stakeholder Initiative

NAP-BHR National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights

NCHR National Commission for Human Rights

NCP National Contact Point

NGO Non-Governmental Organisation

NHRI National Human Rights Institution

NIRC National Industrial Relations Commission

NTUF National Trade Union Federation

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OECD Guidelines OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct

OGM Operational-level Grievance Mechanism

OSH Occupational Safety and Health

PESSI Punjab Employees Social Security Institution

PILER Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research

PKR Pakistani Rupee

PWWBs Provincial Workers Welfare Boards

RMG Ready-Made Garment

SDGs United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

SESSI Sindh Employees Social Security Institution

TU Trade Union

UNGPs United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

WWF Workers' Welfare Fund

Executive Summary

Pakistani garment workers face persistent labour rights violations -ranging from wage theft and unsafe conditions to harassment and the denial of social protections- yet practical barriers often prevent them from accessing effective remedies.

Drawing on findings collected by Pakistani civil society organisations ('CSOs') and trade unions ('TUs') through GRC's community-based monitoring ('CBM') programme, this report aims to provide clarity on what an effective remedy looks like for workers in the garment sector in Pakistan. The programme has been piloted for over three years in Pakistan, with data collected through a digital tool, MyVox. The data shows that while workers are increasingly aware of their legal rights, institutional fragmentation, cost barriers, and fear of retaliation continue to limit their access to justice. Building on these insights, the report analyses the key pathways to remedy that garment workers attempt to navigate and offers practical recommendations on strengthening remediation frameworks in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights ('UNGPs').

To this extent, the report is guided by three key questions:

- **What are the main barriers that currently prevent workers from using state-based and non-state-based mechanisms?**
- **Which remediation mechanisms are currently the most accessible and effective?**
- **What steps can be taken to strengthen the accessibility and effectiveness of these mechanisms?**

To answer these questions, the report examines key state-based judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms, state-based non-judicial mechanisms, and non-state-based grievance mechanisms available to garment workers at both federal and provincial levels.

- **State-based judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms** analysed include provincial labour courts, the Federal Ombudsman's Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment ('FOSPAH'), the National Commission for Human Rights ('NCHR'), and the National Industrial Relations Commission ('NIRC').
- **State-based non-judicial mechanisms** analysed include Labour Departments, alternative dispute resolution ('ADR') processes, and social protection institutions, including the Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution ('EOBI'), social security institutions, and the Workers' Welfare Fund ('WWF').
- **Non-State-based mechanisms** analysed include company-level operational grievance mechanisms ('OGMs'), collaborative initiatives, including Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives ('MSIs') and Global Framework Agreements ('GFAs'), and international avenues including the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association and urgent appeal mechanisms.

Findings show that, while many state-based mechanisms face capacity constraints and delays, Labour Departments remain an important entry point to remedy due to their provincial presence and ability to support negotiated outcomes. ADR mechanisms have also expanded in recent years, offering a more accessible and less adversarial pathway for workers. In harassment cases, FOSPAH provides a relatively effective model, though the report argues that Labour Departments should also be empowered to address harassment complaints, reflecting the reality that workers often face multiple overlapping violations.

Overall, the report emphasises that while there is no single model for effective remedy, outcomes depend on a combination of mechanisms (dependent on the nature of the violations reported), with TUs serving as one of the most effective entry points. In a context where workers often face obstacles in forming or joining unions, the presence and engagement of TUs can determine not only the effectiveness of grievance processes, but also a workers' ability to access them to begin with.

In addition, the report provides practical recommendations aimed at strengthening existing remediation pathways rather than creating new ones. For Pakistani policymakers, these include prioritising access to remedy in the next Business and Human Rights National Action Plan with measurable targets, improving coordination between federal and provincial labour institutions, strengthening transparency through public reporting on grievance outcomes, and further institutionalising ADR mechanisms. The report also recommends establishing stronger oversight to ensure key mechanisms, such as the workplace Anti-Harassment Committees and the labour inspections are functioning, ratifying key ILO conventions on occupational safety and health and social protection, expanding the mandate and capacity of Labour Departments (including to address harassment cases), and improving worker access to social protection institutions through digitisation, transparency tools, and reduced processing delays. It also calls on brands to engage with worker-led grievance processes, adopt responsible purchasing practices that enable remediation, and use supply chain leverage transparently to improve accountability.

The report concludes that improving access to effective remedies for garment workers in Pakistan requires coordinated action by the government, international brands, TUs, and CSOs. These efforts must focus on improving institutional capacity, addressing barriers to access, protecting freedom of association, and ensuring that remediation pathways are accessible, rights-compatible, and responsive to workers' lived realities.

Intended Audience

This report is designed as a policy-relevant resource for institutions and actors involved in strengthening access to remedy for garment workers in Pakistan. It is primarily aimed at supporting Pakistani government institutions and bodies responsible for developing, implementing, and enforcing laws and policies to uphold labour and human rights. It is also intended for domestic legal practitioners and bodies involved in monitoring compliance with national laws and promoting responsible business conduct. Beyond state institutions, the report is relevant to business enterprises operating in Pakistan's garment supply chain (including manufacturers, exporters, suppliers, and global brands), as well as industry associations, TUs, CSOs, worker-led groups, and international partners working to advance accountability, decent work, and respect for human rights in the sector.

Methodology

The report combines data from GRC's ongoing programme in Pakistan, alongside findings from stakeholder consultations and desk-based research, to provide an evidence-based analysis of available and effective routes to remedy for workers and communities in the garment and textile sector.

A core element of GRC's programme is the operation of MyVox, a community-based monitoring tool that collects information related to labour rights violations in garment factories across Karachi, Lahore, and Faisalabad. Since 2022, GRC has been working with local CSOs and TUs – Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research ('PILER'), National Trade Union Federation ('NTUF'), Home-based Women Workers Federation ('HBWWF') and Labour Education Foundation ('LEF') – to implement the tool through a network of trained paralegals. Paralegals operate across a total of 22 legal aid centres in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab, collecting complaints directly from workers. These first-hand accounts capture individual grievances and a prevalent pattern of labour rights violations,

forming the backbone of the analysis and allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges workers face in seeking remedy. The records also generate real-time insights into the main pathways that workers pursue to seek remedy. The data includes workers from both the formal and the informal garment sector.

To support this analysis, GRC also conducted consultations with a diverse range of actors, including civil society organisations, legal practitioners, academics, as well as representatives from the Pakistani government, and international brands and suppliers in Pakistan. These interactions provided critical insight into how remediation mechanisms operate and informed recommendations for their improvement.

Complementing the primary data, desktop research was conducted, drawing on reports, datasets, and analyses produced by non-governmental organisations ('NGOs'), TUs, international organisations, and industry bodies. This secondary data situates the findings within broader policy, regulatory, and sectoral contexts and highlights gaps in enforcement, procedures, and accountability frameworks.

The report also includes selected case studies that illustrate how workers navigate existing remediation mechanisms, the barriers they encounter, and the role that state-based and non-state grievance mechanisms currently play. These narratives provide a human lens through which the reader can understand the effectiveness and limitations of existing routes to remedy in Pakistan's garment sector.



MyVox Data

As of December 2025, MyVox has recorded **5,082 complaints**, corresponding to 11,604 labour rights violations, as each complaint typically involves more than one type of violation. Of these, **4,170 cases** (82%), corresponding to 8,855 violations, have been referred to a remediation channel.

Limitations of the Report

The findings presented in this report are based on data collected through the MyVox tool and the network of paralegals operating in Sindh and Punjab, where the legal aid centres are located. The complaints were gathered based on the accessibility of workers to these centres and outreach efforts, rather than through a randomly selected sample. Consequently, while the data can provide valuable insights into labour rights violations and remediation pathways in the garment sector, they cannot be generalised to represent the entire country. The experiences captured reflect only the regions where GRC operates, and the findings should be interpreted as indicative of trends within these areas rather than as a national overview.



Photo source: Unsplash, Basil Minhaj

Introduction

Global garment supply chains are complex and interconnected, with high levels of informality and fragmentation. While the garment and textile sector has generated significant economic opportunities for many countries, it has also exposed workers and communities to serious risks of exploitation, wage violations, unsafe working conditions, and compliance gaps related to basic labour rights.

In recent years, expectations on international brands and their suppliers to respect labour rights and address these gaps has increased, driven primarily by increasing regulation and consumer expectations for responsible business conduct.

Three key international frameworks underpin global expectations of responsible business conduct: the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights ('UNGPs'), the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy ('MNE Declaration'), and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct ('OECD Guidelines'). These instruments establish clear obligations for states and standards for how businesses should identify, prevent, mitigate, and address adverse human rights impacts throughout their operations and supply chains.

A fundamental principle in these frameworks is the right to access effective remedy, by the two duty bearers. States have a duty to ensure that victims of business-related abuses within their territory or jurisdiction have access to an effective remedy^[1] and companies have a responsibility to cooperate in providing remedy where they cause or contribute to the human rights harm.^[2] However, in practice, persistent barriers, such as fear of retaliation, lack of awareness and weak enforcement mechanisms continue to hinder victims' access to justice.

This report aims to highlight both the progress made and the gaps that remain in Pakistan's approach to effective remedy for labour rights violations in the garment industry. The following chapters present a picture of the most frequent labour rights violations documented and an examination of how existing routes to remedy respond to these complaints in practice.

What do we mean when we say remedy?

Remedy refers to the ways in which people who have suffered harm can seek and obtain redress, justice and restoration. In the context of business and human rights, remedy is not only about recognising harm, but about ensuring that those affected by business-related harms receive outcomes that meaningfully address the harm and help prevent it from happening again. The right to an effective remedy is a core pillar of the UNGPs (Pillar III) and is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights^[3] and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.^[4]

The right to an effective remedy has two dimensions:^[5]

- The *procedural element* refers to the availability and accessibility of processes through which individuals can claim their rights. This requires clear, fair, and timely procedures for lodging complaints and pursuing claims, whether through courts, tribunals, or other mechanisms.^[6] It also includes equality before the law, meaning people should not face unnecessary barriers – such as high costs, excessive delays, or discriminatory treatment – when seeking remedy.^[7]
- The *substantive element* concerns the outcome of the process, meaning the actual relief or justice provided. International legal instruments identify several forms of remedy that may be used individually or in combination, depending on the harm and context.^[8] These include restitution,^[9] compensation,^[10] rehabilitation,^[11] satisfaction,^[12] or guarantees of non-repetition.^[13] To meet international standards, remedies must be adequate,^[14] effective,^[15] and prompt (provided in a timely manner).^[16] Crucially, substantive effectiveness also depends on enforceability: a remedy must not only be granted on paper but also be capable of being implemented in practice.^[17]

Grievance mechanisms under the UNGPs

The UNGPs identify three types of grievance mechanisms: (i) State-based judicial mechanisms, (ii) State-based non-judicial mechanisms, and (iii) non-State-based mechanisms and sets several criteria for their effectiveness. To be effective:

- **State-based judicial mechanisms** must operate with impartiality, integrity, and respect for due process, while reducing legal and practical barriers that could deny access to remedy. States should ensure that courts remain independent, free from corruption or undue economic or political influence, and that the legitimate activities of human rights defenders are not obstructed.^[18]
- **Non-judicial mechanisms** (both state-based and non-state-based) must follow the seven effectiveness criteria:^[19] legitimacy, accessibility, predictability, equitability, transparency, rights-compatibility, and continuous learning. For company-level OGMs, an additional requirement applies: they must be based on engagement and dialogue, meaning that affected stakeholders, and their representatives, should be consulted in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the mechanism.^[20] Understanding what constitutes meaningful redress is essential to ensure outcomes are not only technically adequate but genuinely responsive to workers' needs,^[21] with particular attention to vulnerable or marginalised groups and those facing additional barriers to remedy.^[22]

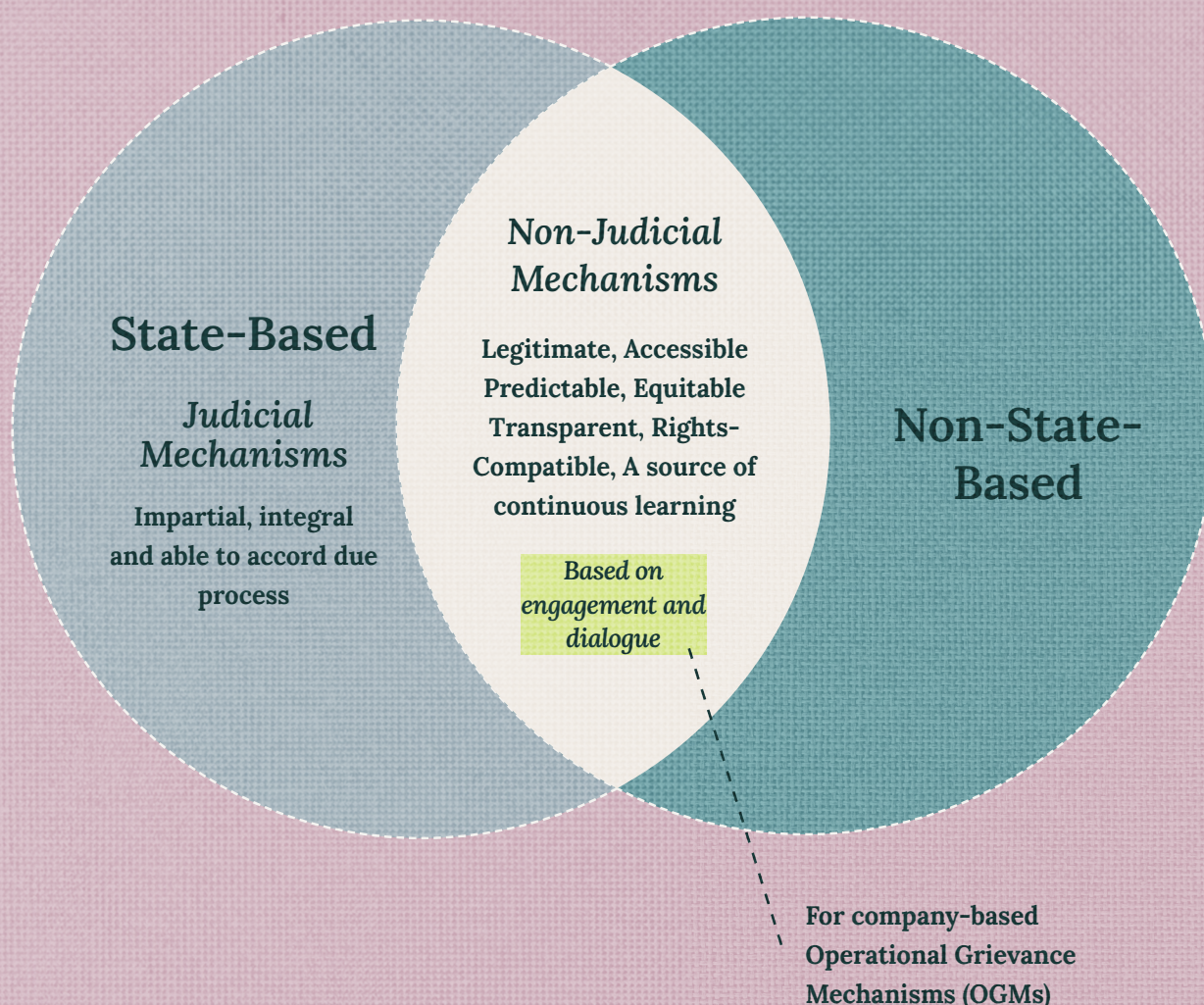


Table: UNGPs effectiveness criteria for judicial non-judicial grievance mechanisms

State-based Mechanisms	Judicial Mechanisms	Impartial, integral and able to accord due process	Reducing legal, practical and other barriers that could lead to a denial of access to remedy or to prevent legitimate cases from being brought before the courts Ensuring that the provision of justice is not prevented by corruption of the judicial process Ensuring that courts are independent of economic or political pressures from other State agents and from business actors Ensuring that the legitimate and peaceful activities of human rights defenders are not obstructed
	Non-Judicial Mechanisms	Legitimate	Enabling trust from the stakeholder groups for whose use they are intended, and being accountable for the fair conduct of grievance processes
		Accessible	Being known to all stakeholder groups for whose use they are intended, and providing adequate assistance for those who may face particular barriers to access
		Predictable	Providing a clear and known procedure with an indicative time frame for each stage, and clarity on the types of process and outcome available and means of monitoring implementation
		Equitable	Seeking to ensure that aggrieved parties have reasonable access to sources of information, advice and expertise necessary to engage in a grievance process on fair, informed and respectful terms
		Transparent	Keeping parties to a grievance informed about its progress, and providing sufficient information about the mechanism's performance to build confidence in its effectiveness and meet any public interest at stake
		Rights-Compatible	Ensuring that outcomes and remedies accord with internationally recognised human rights
Non-State-Based Mechanisms		A source of continuous learning	Drawing on relevant measures to identify lessons for improving the mechanism and preventing future grievances and harms
	For OGMs	Based on engagement and dialogue	Consulting the stakeholder groups for whose use they are intended on their design and performance, and focusing on dialogue as the means to address and resolve grievances.

Labour Rights in Pakistan

In recent years, Pakistan has taken important steps to embed responsible business conduct in its national frameworks, with access to remedy identified as a core pillar of these efforts.

The adoption of the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights ('NAP-BHR') 2021-2026, marked a significant milestone, positioning Pakistan as the first country in South Asia to publish a NAP-BHR aligned with the UNGPs.

The NAP-BHR acknowledges long-standing and structural barriers to remedy, including unequal access for women and marginalised groups, high litigation costs, protracted judicial proceedings, and limited awareness of available grievance mechanisms.^[23]

In response, it committed the State to strengthening both judicial and non-judicial avenues for redress. Proposed measures included mapping existing remedial mechanisms, improving transparency and predictability, and expanding labour courts, reflecting an understanding that access to remedy is central to the credibility and effectiveness of the broader BHR framework.^[24]

Alongside the NAP-BHR, Pakistan developed the Business and Human Rights Guidelines for Businesses in Pakistan^[25] which have sought to operationalise the corporate responsibility to respect human rights under the UNGPs. The Guidelines focus on the general duty of businesses to respect internationally recognised human rights and implement Human Rights Due Diligence ('HRDD') as the primary means through which they identify, prevent, mitigate, and address adverse human rights impacts linked to their operations and business relationships.

Yet implementation remains uneven. While the NAP-BHR sets out a clear diagnosis of structural weaknesses, progress in translating policy commitments into tangible improvements in workers' access to remedy has been limited. These gaps are further accentuated by Pakistan's position as a non-member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ('OECD'), and a non-member adherent to the OECD Guidelines.^[26] Against this backdrop, the ongoing review of the NAP's implementation and the preparation of a successor action plan represent a critical juncture. This process offers an opportunity not only to assess delivery against stated commitments, but also to refocus attention on practical effectiveness of these mechanisms, especially in high-risk sectors.

The Garment Industry in Pakistan

A major export sector and cornerstone of the national economy, the garment and textile sector contributes roughly 8.5% of the country's gross domestic product ('GDP')^[27] and accounts for more than 60% of Pakistan's total exports, illustrating the sector's deep integration into the Pakistani economy and its exposure to global expectations on responsible business conduct. Key export markets include the United States (26.42%), the United Kingdom (10.42%), Germany (8%), the Netherlands (6.71%), and China (5.55%).^[28]

The garment and textile workforce is consequently among the largest segments of Pakistan's labour force. It employs an estimated 15 million people - around 30% of the national workforce^[29] - yet operates within a labour market shaped by informality, precarity, and persistent inequality. For example, gender disparities in the workforce are particularly pronounced with women accounting for just 6-8% of Pakistan's garment workers, a small number in comparison with other Southeast Asian countries.^[30] This aligns with broader national patterns, where female labour force participation is approximately 21.5%.^[31]



Worker Testimonies

“I work in a textile factory as a machine operator. I stitch pants and receive PKR 120 per piece. I stitch around 700 to 800 hundred pieces daily and if I work overtime, I reach 1000 pieces. I hardly earn 25,000 – 30,000 PKR per month [USD 88.30 – 106].”

Male worker, 31-40, Lahore

“I have been working in the threading department for the past two years. I work on a contract basis. My fixed monthly salary is 15,000 PKR, but every day I am required to complete 1,100 – 1,200 pieces on a piece-rate basis. After 15 days, I received only 1,000 PKR [USD 3.53]. The piece rate is extremely low. My duty hours are from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., but I work an additional two hours every day after 6:00 p.m. The break time is only 20 minutes.”

Female, 31-40, Faisalabad

“I have been working in a garment factory for over two years. The management regularly summons me for duty even on the weekly rest day, and if I refuse, I am humiliated and threatened with dismissal. I am neither given a substitute rest day for working on my weekly off nor paid overtime as required by law. During my nine-hour shift, I am given less than one hour for a break – most often only half an hour.”

Male, 31-40, Lahore

Nationally, around 72% of workers (across all non-agriculture sectors) are engaged in the informal economy, meaning many workers lack written contracts, social security registration, health insurance, and other statutory protections^[32]

Pakistan's ratification of 38 ILO Conventions (32 currently in force) and one Protocol^[33] reflects a strong formal commitment to international labour standards, while implementation continues to evolve across sectors and regions.

However, the garment and textile sector continues to reflect a pattern of labour rights violations. For over a decade, CSOs and TUs have documented persistent violations such as wage theft, forced overtime, unsafe working conditions, lack of employment benefits, and the systematic repression of TUs.^[34] This is particularly true for women who are often concentrated in the lowest-paid and least secure roles and frequently face additional and disproportionate barriers, including discrimination, harassment, and exclusion from union structures.^[35] Pakistan's rating of 5 (“no guarantee of workers' rights”) in the 2022 ITUC Global Rights Index underscores the need to strengthen enforcement of labour protections.^[36]

Pakistan's legal framework includes provisions for minimum wages,^[37] working hours^[38] and paid time off (including annual,^[39] casual and maternity leave^[40] and paid festival holidays^[41]) as well as freedom of association. However, often these protections remain largely unenforced. Weak enforcement by the regulatory institutions, capacity issues, inadequate number of labour inspections, and employer impunity contribute to a system where workers' rights are routinely violated.

Addressing labour rights complaints therefore represents an important opportunity to further strengthen Pakistan's approach to effective access to remedy and ensuring that responses are not only procedurally sound but also effective for complainants.

MyVox Data

Data collected between 2022 – 2025 through GRC's MyVox platform illustrates the pattern of labour violations in the industry. Between July 2023 and December 2025, **5,082 complaints** were documented from garment workers in Lahore, Karachi, and Faisalabad, linked to **11,604 individual violations**.

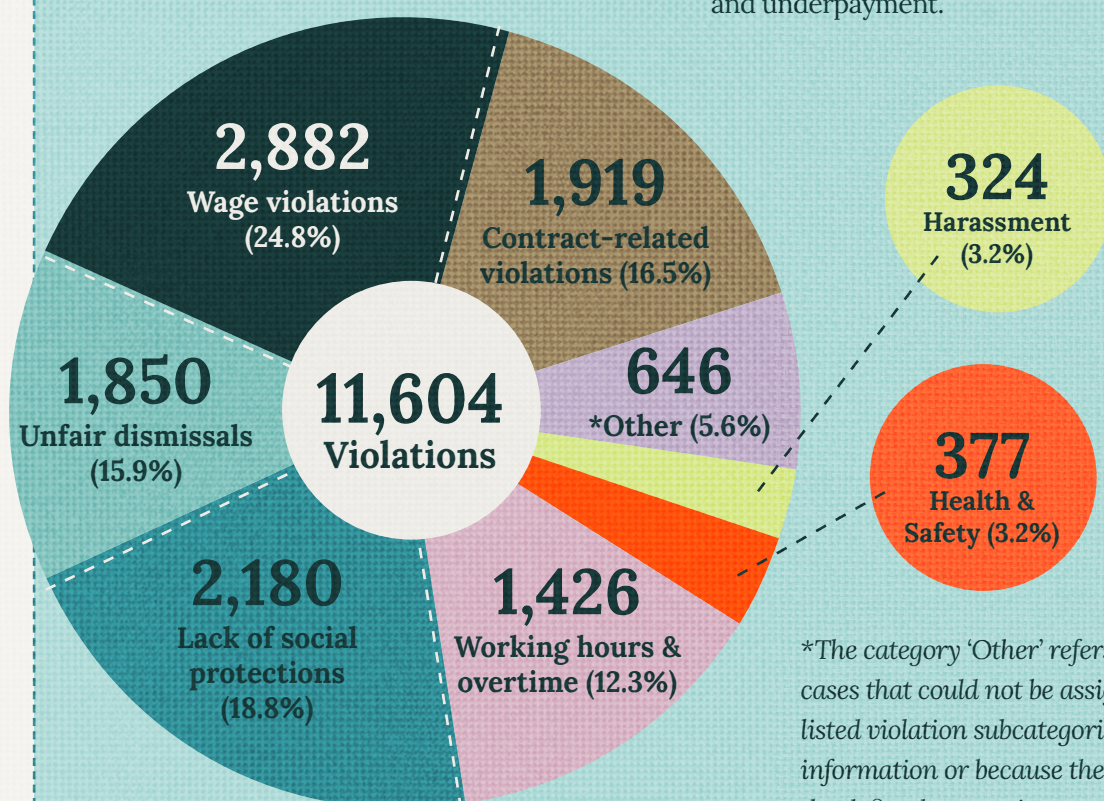
Wage violations emerged as the most frequently reported issue, with a total of 2,882 violations documented, representing 24.8% of the total violations reported. Of these, 1272 cases (44.1%) relate to the non-payment or delayed payment of wages, 805 cases (27.9%) concerned violations of the statutory minimum wage, 567 cases (19.7%) involved the absence of overtime pay, and 120 cases (4.2%) referred to unlawful wage deductions. Piece-rate workers were found to be in a considerably less favourable position: reported piece rates ranged from PKR 0.80 to 1.20 per unit, compelling many workers to work excessive hours merely to achieve the legal minimum wage.

Even where minimum wages are paid, workers report that earnings remain insufficient to support an adequate standard of living, highlighting a significant living wage gap.^[42]

Recent benchmarks place the living wage for the RMG sector at approximately PKR 55,012 (USD 194) per month in Lahore and Karachi, far above what most workers earn in practice.^[43]

The second most common category of violations relates to the **denial of employment benefits**, accounting for 2,180 cases (18.8% of all reported violations) reported. Despite legal requirements on employers, many workers are not registered with social security or pension schemes, leaving them without access to healthcare, injury compensation, or retirement benefits. Weak enforcement and employer evasion are recurring themes in these cases.

Violations related to **working hours and overtime** constitute another large category, with 1,426 violations reported (12.3% of all reported violations). Workers frequently report being required to work beyond legal daily and weekly limits, including on weekly rest days, without overtime pay or substitute rest. Refusal is often met with threats, humiliation, or dismissal, undermining the voluntary nature of overtime. In many cases, even prolonged overtime does not result in wages meeting the legal minimum, trapping workers in cycles of overwork and underpayment.



Pakistan's Commitment to Remedy

Through its NAP-BHR, Pakistan has committed to strengthening the effectiveness of its judicial and non-judicial grievance mechanisms and has signalled expectations that businesses will reduce barriers to remedy.

In practice, unequal access to remedy for women and vulnerable or marginalised groups, major lack of labour rights awareness and existing remedial mechanisms among garment workers, as well as the extremely high rates of informal workers continue to undermine the legal protections of many of the existing legal frameworks.

“The NAP-BHR of Pakistan was based on the assumption that courts and NHRIs already provided an adequate framework for remediation. However, the real issue is effective access to those remedies, not just their existence on paper”.

Stakeholder consultation

At the same time, translating this broad framework into consistent outcomes requires navigating a complex governance environment. Following the devolution of labour regulation to the provincial level under the 18th Constitutional Amendment, provinces have assumed the responsibility for labour regulation and enforcement.

This shift has enabled more localised decision-making and the potential for more responsive approaches, while also creating variations across provinces in institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and implementation priorities. In practice, this can mean that the availability and effectiveness of protections and grievance pathways may differ depending on location and sector.

Several institutional and operational factors also shape how workers experience access to remedy in Pakistan. Labour departments and related institutions face resource and capacity constraints, including understaffing, limited financial resources, and inadequate inspection systems, reducing their ability to proactively enforce labour standards.

In parallel, the mandates of different institutions, such as Labour Departments, social security institutions and Employees' Old Age Benefits Institution ('EOBI') can overlap in ways that are not always easy for workers to navigate, particularly where complaints involve multiple issues (for example wages, benefits registration, and workplace safety) and questions arise for workers about which institution to approach for specific violations. Strengthening coordination and information-sharing between federal and provincial bodies could help streamline complaint handling and support more timely and effective resolution of workers' grievances.

Social and structural barriers in the labour market also materially affect willingness to report violations and access remedy. In particular, informal work arrangements – often characterised by the absence of written contracts or official employment registration – undermine access to remedy by making it difficult for workers to prove an employment relationship. In turn, this prevents the complainant from falling within the jurisdiction of labour institutions or qualifying for statutory protections and social security systems.

Women and other marginalised groups face additional barriers, including mobility constraints, concerns about retaliation, and limited awareness of their rights and availability of grievance mechanisms. Addressing these barriers through targeted awareness efforts, worker-facing guidance and safe, accessible mechanisms, can further advance the objectives of the NAP-BHR and strengthen access to remedy.

Overview of key routes to remedy available to garment workers in Pakistan and key stakeholders that play a significant role in shaping their accessibility and overall effectiveness.

Type of mechanism	Remediation pathway		Stakeholders' influence in accessing remedy		
State-based Mechanisms	Judicial	Labour Courts	Pakistani Policy Makers	Trade Unions	
	Quasi-Judicial	Federal Ombudsman's Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment			
		National Commission for Human Rights			
		National Industrial Relations Commission			
	Non-Judicial	Labour Departments			
		Alternative Dispute Resolution			
		Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution			
		Social Security Institutions			
		Workers Welfare Fund			
Non-State-Based Mechanisms	Company-level Operational Grievance Mechanisms	Operational Grievance Mechanisms	Civil Society	Companies	
	Mechanisms Operated through Industry, Multi-Stakeholder, or Collaborative Initiatives	Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives			
		Global Framework Agreements			
		Strategic Litigation			
	International Avenues	International Mechanisms			

The Role of Trade Unions

Trade unions continue to play a central role in securing remedies where workers experience labour or human rights abuses, particularly within the garment sector where employment is often precarious. This contribution is twofold: (i) direct, case-level intervention to resolve issues as they arise; and (ii) broader strategic support that enables workers to pursue redress collectively and, where necessary, across borders. To this extent, TUs are well positioned to negotiate with both employers and provincial and government institutions on behalf of workers.

A significant finding from our research is that, in Pakistan, most remediation pathways rely to some extent on the involvement of TUs. On the ground, union-linked legal aid and worker support hubs – such as GRC’s legal aid centres– illustrate how remediation is often achieved day to day.

Beyond individual cases, TUs play a critical enabling role by strengthening workers ability to seek remedy through collective action (such as GFAs) and strategic advocacy. Research from ILO indicates that collective actions, such as strikes, coordinated protests, and communication campaigns, account for roughly 28% of all documented remedy-seeking efforts, meaning that in nearly one-third of documented cases, workers mobilised through unilateral action to demand justice.^[44] This reflects a practical reality: where violations are widespread, retaliation risks are high, or employers are unresponsive, collective action can be the only viable way to compel attention, secure negotiations and achieve outcomes.

At the same time, the ability of unions to act as facilitators of remedy is closely linked to the degree that workers can organise safely.

Workers who attempt to organise or voice concerns about conditions can face intimidation, physical abuse, and dismissal. Union-busting practices, such as hiring on short-term contracts to prevent union formation or establishing employer-controlled "yellow unions," are common despite constitutional protections and Pakistan's ratification of ILO Conventions No. 87 and No. 98.^[45] Recent research by Amnesty International highlighted that Pakistan's laws regarding unionisation contradict international law and ILO Conventions, under which states cannot unduly restrict union formation or interfere in its activities.^[46]

While Pakistan’s legal framework formally recognises freedom of association, workers and stakeholders consistently report a restricted environment.

Worker representation through TUs is likely to become even more significant as emerging human rights due diligence legislation increasingly requires businesses to engage with stakeholders –including TUs– in order to comply with their legal obligations. This creates a strategic opportunity for TUs not only to engage directly with brands, translating workers’ demands into pressure points at the parent-company level, but also to hold them accountable, including through participation in strategic litigation where companies systematically violate labour rights.

Together with collective bargaining, public campaigning, and participation in collective and multi-stakeholder initiatives, these tools can be used by TUs to facilitate workers’ right to effective remedy. When deployed in combination often through deliberate strategic sequencing, such as pairing local industrial action with international advocacy their impact can be significantly amplified.

MyVox Data

Although it does not systematically capture this type of violation as a distinct category, MyVox data points to restrictions on freedom of association, with 44 reported cases involving the harassment and/or intimidation of workers for joining trade unions. These incidents were recorded as harassment cases, as they manifested in forms of physical or emotional abuse. An additional 26 cases refer to workers who have been dismissed, as a retaliation measure for participating in union activities.

However, MyVox data further suggest that union intervention, where achieved, can offer a safer and more credible route for certain complaints, including harassment, where workers may prefer resolution through supported engagement with factory management rather than going through company-based OGMs.

For example, in 2024, a female garment worker experienced harassment by her factory in-charge and supervisor, including the misuse of digital communications and pressure to meet them alone outside the workplace. Feeling unsafe and unable to approach management directly, she sought support through the National Trade Union Federation Pakistan ('NTUF'), which then referred the case to the Home-Based Women Workers Federation ('HBWWF'). HBWWF formally submitted the complaint to the Employers' Federation, triggering an internal inquiry by the factory's senior HR management. The investigation substantiated the allegations: both the in-charge and supervisor were dismissed, while another manager was suspended. The worker was provided protection and was able to continue her employment.



Photo source: Unsplash, Shazaf Zafar

Remedy through State-based Judicial and Quasi-judicial Mechanisms

What do we mean by “state-based judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms”?

State-based judicial mechanisms are formal legal systems within a country, such as courts, that handle legal disputes and enforce laws.^[47] These institutions are a cornerstone of access to effective remedy, with authority to make legally binding decisions and provide a range of remedies depending on the nature of the violation and the applicable law.^[48] In most jurisdictions, domestic judicial mechanisms include civil, criminal, constitutional, and administrative courts, as well as specialised courts or tribunals that deal with specific areas such as labour, environmental, or consumer protection law.^[49]

Judicial mechanisms are unique in that they can impose criminal liability on companies or individuals responsible for business-related human rights abuses that amount to crimes under national laws.^[50] On the other hand, civil courts play an essential role in providing financial compensation, issuing injunctions to stop harmful practices, or ordering specific actions. At the same time, they can reinforce the outcomes of other mechanisms such as mediation, arbitration, or company-based mechanisms, by ensuring that their results are legally recognised, enforceable, and consistent with human rights standards.^[51]

In Pakistan, the constitutional and legal framework encompasses core principles of remediation, such as the independence of the judiciary and adequate access to justice. While the core state-based judicial mechanisms are the labour courts and tribunals, the NAP-BHR highlights three additional mechanisms that are granted quasi-judicial powers: the Federal Ombudsperson (including the Federal Ombudsman's Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment), the National Commission for Human Rights ('NCHR') and the National Industrial Relations Commission ('NIRC'). For the purposes of this report, due to their quasi-judicial nature, these mechanisms are treated as 'state-based' judicial mechanisms.

The Labour Courts

The primary State-based judicial avenue for workers seeking remedy is through the Labour Courts, established initially under the Industrial Relations Ordinance ('IRO') 1969 and later retained in the Industrial Relations Act, 2012. However, following the 18th Amendment to the Constitution each province developed laws and established labour courts under their respective industrial relations laws.^[52]

The provincial labour courts provide an important forum for resolving a wide range of employment-related disputes, including wrongful dismissal or termination without due process, non-payment of wages^[53] or benefits, breaches of employment contracts, occupational safety and health concerns and industrial disputes involving employers, workers or TUs.

Labour courts are typically presided over by a single judge, with proceedings beginning when a worker or trade union files a petition, outlining the grievance and the remedy sought. The court then issues a notice to the employer, who submits a written response. Hearings follow, during which both parties present evidence and arguments, after which the court issues a binding decision. Depending on the circumstances, remedies may include reinstatement, compensation or other appropriate orders. Where appropriate, parties may file an appeal before the Labour Appellate Tribunal, headed by a judge, and whose award is generally treated as final. Where a tribunal decision involves imprisonment, or a fine exceeding PKR 15,000, an appeal may be made to the High Court.^[54]

In practice, however, labour courts are not always the first route pursued by workers when seeking remediation. A number of factors impact this:

First, representation requirements limit who can appear before courts on behalf of workers. Under prevailing labour law, apart from the workers themselves, only lawyers or an executive member of a registered trade union may represent them in

court. This can constrain the ability of other actors to directly file petitions or represent workers in these proceedings.

Second, the costs of bringing a case and being represented by a lawyer are a significant barrier to remedy, as recognised in Pakistan's NAP-BHR.^[55] Stakeholder consultations not only emphasised the costs of legal representation and court fees, but also other associated costs, including transport and loss of income when attending court. This is particularly true in the case of workers that live outside of the major urban areas where the courts are typically located.

“Many workers cannot afford to hire lawyers, and often the lawyer takes a percentage of the settlement.”

Stakeholder consultation

While Pakistan's institutional framework, as well as civil society and legal aid organisations facilitate access to justice in some cases, these practices are not widespread among garment workers. Therefore, many workers still lack professional legal representation, ultimately affecting the outcome of their cases.

The Legal Aid and Justice Authority Act

The Legal Aid and Justice Authority Act, 2020, provides an institutional framework to facilitate legal assistance, representation, and access to justice for individuals who are unable to afford legal services. The Authority established under the Act presents a significant opportunity to enhance access to redress mechanisms, including in cases relating to labour rights violations, by institutionalising state-supported legal aid and representation thereby strengthening the protection of vulnerable and marginalised workers.

At the same time, employers, especially larger corporations or influential industry players, may have greater access to legal representation, resources, and political influence, which can contribute to a perceived or actual imbalance in the court proceedings, in turn affecting worker confidence in judicial pathways.

These challenges are compounded by persistent delays in labour court adjudication, with cases often taking months or years to be resolved, discouraging workers from pursuing claims and weakening the effectiveness of legal remedies. To this extent, it also remains to be seen how the establishment of the Federal Constitutional Court, introduced through the 27th Amendment to Pakistan's Constitution, will affect the handling of labour cases with regard to the speed of judicial proceedings.

MyVox Data

MyVox data shows that, of the 4,170 cases referred to a remediation channel through the app, only 143 cases (3.4%) were referred to the labour courts. These referrals included a range of issues, with employment benefits being the most common (44%), followed by the absence of employment contracts (19%) and unfair dismissals (16%).

Labour courts continue to play a critical role in the overall remedial architecture available to workers, particularly due to their link to provincial appellate tribunals and ability to enforce legal outcomes in complex disputes and cases where other mechanisms do not produce satisfactory resolution.

However, there is significant scope to enhance their accessibility, efficiency, and credibility as a remedy pathway. Key areas for improvement include simplifying representation requirements to allow a broader range of worker-support actors to assist claimants, reducing procedural delays through clearer timelines and case management practices, and lowering the financial barriers associated with filing and pursuing claims. Expanding access to legal aid support would also help address disparities in representation and improve worker confidence in judicial processes.

“Even if a worker decides to challenge the management, they often lack the money for basic expenses, such as transport to the Labour Court, especially since their wages are usually stopped as soon as they raise a complaint. They also cannot afford court fees or hire lawyers.”

Stakeholder consultation

The Federal Ombudsman's Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment

The Federal Ombudsman Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment ('FOSPAH') is an autonomous, quasi-judicial body, headed by the Federal Ombudsperson, an officeholder with a status equivalent to a High Court judge. Among Pakistan's Ombudsman Offices, FOSPAH has the clearest mandate to adjudicate workplace-related issues,^[56] particularly harassment and related forms of intimidation and discrimination. Established under the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, FOSPAH is mandated to help ensure safer workplaces by providing oversight and adjudication where harassment complaints arise.^[57]

Under the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, complaints related to workplace harassment can be filed directly before the Ombudsperson as an alternative to approaching the factory-based Inquiry Committees.^[58] The Ombudsperson is then required to issue a show-cause notice within three days, receive a written defence within five days, (after which ex-parte proceedings may be initiated) and decide complaints or appeals within ninety days.

FOSPAH is widely regarded as the most suitable mechanism for harassment cases, due to its specialised mandate and expertise. It serves as an important external avenue for redress, particularly where the committees to address workplace harassment complaints have not been established, are not functioning effectively, or do not provide credible outcomes.



MyVox Data

MyVox data is limited on this subject, with harassment complaints representing a relatively small proportion of workers complaints. The app has recorded 324 such violations, accounting for 2.8% of the total 11,604 violations reported. These cases include various forms of harassment, most commonly verbal abuse, threats, physical violence, or the creation of a hostile work environment. Of these, 32 cases (9.9%) relate specifically to gender-based harassment.

The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010

The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act is Pakistan's primary law addressing workplace harassment and gender-based discrimination. In 2022, it expanded coverage to include formal and informal workplaces, home-based workers, and employees hired through third-party contractors. It has also recognised gender-based discrimination beyond sexual harassment, including unequal pay and biased treatment.

Low numbers of gender-based violence or harassment should not be understood as an indicator of low prevalence but instead reflective of the deep social stigma and fear that keep such experiences hidden.^[61] The workers who report unfair dismissals or non-payment of wages, often mention harassment as a secondary concern. As a result, the complaints are often referred to the Labour Department as the initial pathway for remediation, rather than FOSPAH.

As filing a case before the Ombudsperson requires formally notifying the employer, this alone is enough to discourage many workers from pursuing the process. Those who attempt to file complaints are frequently blacklisted, denied future employment, or pressured to resign, reassigned to less favourable roles, or subjected to more subtle forms of pressure, such as workplace isolation, hostile behaviour from supervisors, or manipulated performance evaluations. In some cases, they are even dismissed without any formal procedure, inquiry, or legal justification.

Women in low-wage and contract-based employment reported to feel particularly vulnerable because their economic stability depends heavily on the goodwill of supervisors and management.^[63] In 2019, Human Rights Watch reported that many garment workers had little to no awareness of their rights under the law, and most had never received any form of preventive training on gender-based violence and harassment. Even where workers understood their rights, they often stayed silent as without strong protections against retaliation, filing a complaint was reported to be more dangerous than enduring the abuse.^[64]

Even where complaints are referred to the FOSPAH, opportunities to improve the timeliness of the case handling, in line with the effectiveness criteria for grievance mechanisms under the UNGPs, exist. Although the law stipulates that cases should be resolved within three months, in reality it can take longer for the FOSPAH to issue a decision. Enhancing oversight mechanisms could help ensure that complaints are addressed within statutory timeframes, reducing prolonged uncertainty for complainants and the social, economic, and psychological burdens that delays can place on those seeking remedy.

Despite these challenges, compared to internal Harassment Committees, which are often controlled by the employer and suffer from a lack of independence, FOSPAH is generally viewed as a safer and more neutral avenue. However, accessing this mechanism requires that workers feel sufficiently empowered to speak up, understand their legal rights, and trust that they will be protected from retaliation throughout and after the complaint process.

The fear of retaliation is widely recognised as the single biggest barrier to seeking remediation for workplace harassment.^[62]



Photo source: Unsplash, Muhammad Shamaoon Malik



Worker Testimonies

“I am being harassed by my supervisor but have not reported the case to the anti-harassment committee because some colleagues told me that it would be a futile exercise and I would rather be victimised by the supervisor and other senior staff for the complaint.”

Female, 31-40, Lahore

“I have been harassed and beaten by a senior colleague at least twice for not going out of the way to help him in his duty. I repeatedly complained to the management against the abusing colleague but to no avail. When I again complained, I was forced to resign instead of taking action against the abuser. I was forced to leave the factory immediately.”

Male, 18-30, Lahore

“I am a widow with five dependent children working in a textile factory as a Checker Final After Wash. My supervisor tried to harass me while working in the factory. I submitted an oral and written complaint to the complaint cell, but they asked me to give them a favour rather than to deny their offers. I refused to take any unethical position, so they fired me.”

Woman, 41-50, Lahore

“My supervisor and Assistant Manager regularly ask me to go out with them. I politely refused multiple times. But now they have started threatening to fire me. The supervisor and Assistant Manager are targeting me and two friends of mine if we don't comply with their demands.”

Woman, Lahore

The Inquiry Committees for Harassment of Women at the Workplace

The Inquiry Committees for Harassment of Women at the Workplace is mandated by the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act. Under the Act, organisations must adopt a Code of Conduct and designate a Competent Authority to implement the law.

Upon receiving a written complaint by a worker, the Inquiry Committee must, within three days, notify the accused in writing and provide the statement of allegations. The accused must submit a written defence within seven days, failing which the Committee may proceed *ex parte*. The Committee's findings are then shared with the designated Competent Authority within thirty days of initiating the inquiry. If the accused is found guilty, the Committee may recommend minor or major penalties.^[59] Employees may file a petition to the District Court if employers fail to comply, with fines ranging from PKR 25,000–100,000 for violations. In situations where the complainant is experiencing trauma, employers are obligated to arrange psychosocial counselling, medical treatment, or additional medical leave. Compensation for loss of salary or damages may also be offered by the organisation.

During the entire process, the Committee is responsible for conducting a fair inquiry and may consider oral and documentary evidence submitted by either party, which shall remain confidential. The Committee must also ensure that no retaliatory action is taken against the complainant or witnesses and must prevent any hostile environment that could discourage the complainant from pursuing the case.

Despite the Act's clear requirements, however, evidence suggests that many factories have either not established these committees or they have been established only symbolically. Reports from both government and independent observers note that in some cases, the committees that are formed lack female representation or operate sporadically.^[60]

Overall, there is no strong enforcement mechanism to compel compliance by employers, and the law leaves much of the practical execution to the “goodwill” of management rather than to independent oversight, so the formal procedures often remain on paper rather than in effect. To this extent, enforcing oversight mechanisms by the provincial government to ensure that these Committees are properly established and functioning would help close this gap.

The National Commission for Human Rights

The National Commission for Human Rights ('NCHR'), established in 2015 under the National Commission for Human Rights Act, 2012, is one of the four NHRIs^[67] in the country and serves as an independent federal institution for the protection and promotion of human rights. Its broad mandate includes monitoring, investigation, inquiry, and quasi-judicial functions, empowering it to address human rights violations committed by both state and non-state actors.

These rights are defined under Section 2(d) of the Act as rights related to life, liberty and dignity of individuals guaranteed by international instruments. In this context, labour rights fall within the domain of the Commission's mandate, as they constitute an integral component of the broader framework of human rights, particularly in relation to dignity, equality, and just conditions of work. The NCHR has been established as an independent State body with an extensive mandate to protect and promote human rights. The NCHR has been granted a quasi-judicial competence to investigate violations of human rights abuses and, in principle, extends to labour rights violations.

What are National Human Rights Institutions?

National Human Rights Institutions ('NHRIs') are independent state-established bodies mandated to promote and protect human rights. Operating under constitutional or legislative authority and guided by the UN-endorsed Paris Principles^[65], credible NHRIs must be independent, adequately resourced, and equipped with broad investigative and advisory powers.^[66] In Pakistan, NHRIs serve as an important route to remedy by monitoring the human rights situation, advising the government on compliance with international standards, and providing accessible mechanisms for individuals and groups to raise concerns.

The NCHR's complaint redressal function has a quasi-judicial as well as an investigative and monitoring role. In terms of remediation, this function operates through three main types of interventions:

- **Inquiry or Court Role:** The NCHR can act as an inquiring body or court, initiating cases either upon receiving a complaint or through suo moto action.
- **Court Interventions:** The NCHR can intervene in ongoing judicial proceedings involving human rights concerns, including those linked to labour and workplace rights.
- **Investigative Role:** It may independently investigate human rights violations, collect evidence, and make recommendations to relevant authorities.

Under the NCHR Act, the Commission has powers equivalent to those of a civil court, allowing it to summon witnesses, call for documents, gather evidence, and require the furnishing of information. These powers provide the NCHR with the tools to pursue well-substantiated and persuasive cases, including those related to the conditions of workers in the garment sector.

Despite this robust legal framework, the NCHR's practical engagement on labour rights issues remains limited. Its casework has primarily focused on grave human rights violations such as bonded labour, child labour, and OSH-related issues.^[68]

While these interventions demonstrate the potential to provide redress where other mechanisms fall short, the NCHR has not yet systematically addressed structural labour rights issues such as unpaid wages, gender-based discrimination, workplace harassment, or the denial of collective bargaining rights. Institutional and operational challenges contribute to this gap. The Commission faces resource and capacity constraints, limited coordination with provincial labour departments and judicial forums, and low awareness among workers - especially those in the informal or export-oriented garment sector - regarding its complaint mechanisms.

To strengthen its role in protecting labour rights and ensuring supply chain accountability, the NCHR could institutionalise specialised capacity within its complaints mechanism (dealing with labour rights violations), enhance coordination with key labour authorities and courts, and serve as a convening platform for dialogue among brands, government bodies, and worker representatives, particularly in export-oriented sectors.

The National Industrial Relations Commission

The National Industrial Relations Commission ('NIRC') is a key federal avenue for addressing labour rights violations that involve unfair labour practices, union-busting, or trans-provincial disputes. Its mandate is set out in the Industrial Relations Act ('IRA') 2012,^[69] which established the Commission as a parallel forum to provincial Labour Courts for matters falling within Federal or trans-provincial jurisdiction. Under the Act, the NIRC is required to perform adjudicatory, regulatory, and facilitative functions, including resolving industrial disputes in the Islamabad Capital Territory ('ICT') and trans-provincial establishments, registering trade unions, determining collective bargaining agents ('CBAs'), addressing unfair labour practices,^[70] and adjudicating individual grievances.^[71] The NIRC may also impose penalties,^[72] inspect workplaces, initiate proceedings on application or on its own motion (suo motu), withdraw cases from provincial labour courts, and grant interim relief.^[73]

Unfair labour practices and individual grievances are heard by a Single Bench, with appeals proceeding to a Full Bench^[74] and onward to the High Court and the Supreme Court of Pakistan.^[75] A worker may submit a written grievance to their employer, directly^[76] or through a collective bargaining agent (CBA), within ninety days of the cause of action.^[77] Employers must respond within fifteen days for direct submissions, or seven days if raised through a CBA. Where no response is provided, or the worker is dissatisfied, the grievance may be referred to the NIRC within sixty days. The Commission is empowered to investigate, issue appropriate orders, and must issue a decision within seven days.^[78] Non-compliance with NIRC decisions constitutes an offence punishable by imprisonment, a fine up to PKR 75,000, or both. A Tripartite Council in the ICT also reviews worker grievances, with representation from workers, employers, and government.^[79]

Industrial disputes can only be formally raised by a CBA^[80] or an employer.^[81] Federations of TUs can act as CBAs and bring disputes affecting all workers or employers they represent. Disputes are first addressed through bilateral negotiations, either directly or via the Works Council,^[82] and if unresolved, parties may issue a strike or lock-out notice, simultaneously notifying the Conciliator and the Commission.^[83] The Conciliator convenes meetings to facilitate settlement.^[84] Where conciliation fails, disputes may be referred to arbitration, with an arbitrator issuing a final, binding award within thirty days (or a mutually agreed extension), valid for up to two years.^[85] NIRC's proceedings conclude once a decision is delivered. While the NIRC could in theory be an important remediation pathway, particularly for cases involving trans-provincial establishments and freedom-of-association related concerns, in practice, its utilisation as a remediation pathway appears limited. Following the enactment of the IRA 2012, its mandate focuses primarily on trans-provincial establishments, leaving a large portion of the workforce dependent on provincial labour courts. This has reduced the NIRC's overall relevance and left workers uncertain about where to seek redress.^[86]



MyVox Data

MyVox data indicates that referrals to the NIRC accounted for only 16 cases (0.4%) out of the 4,170 cases selected for remediation, highlighting its limited use among garment workers.

Operational factors may also influence NIRC's accessibility. Stakeholders have highlighted the impact of a backlog of cases, persistent delays, adjournments and communications gaps with workers, especially low-income workers who may travel long distances to attend hearings. For example, it is reported that the Karachi bench of the NIRC has been operating with only one presiding officer, resulting in substantial delays. Hearings are frequently adjourned for four months or more, and as of mid-2025, more than 2,000 grievance applications were pending. There is also no effective system for notifying litigants of scheduling changes. As a result, many low-income workers -often traveling long distances- arrive in Karachi only to discover that their hearings have been postponed. These unnecessary trips impose significant financial and personal hardship, further limiting workers' ability to access timely and effective remediation.^[87] These weaknesses are further compounded by the reality that the NIRC now functions mostly in a semi-judicial/ adjudicatory capacity.^[88] TUs have also highlighted the appointment of retired or contract-based judges who are often not sensitised to labour rights and are rarely observed to make efforts to update or expand their understanding of labour law. This lack of specialised capacity reduces confidence in the institution and contributes to decisions that may not fully reflect workers' rights or contemporary labour standards.^[89]

Strengthening the Commission will therefore require not only institutional and procedural reforms but also ensuring that adjudicators are trained in labour rights, improving communication with workers, and closing loopholes that undermine genuine TU activity.

Remedy through State-Based Non-Judicial Mechanisms

What are state-based non-judicial grievance mechanisms?

State-based non-judicial grievance mechanisms^[90] are established or overseen by government authorities, which operate outside the formal court system. They offer individuals and communities accessible, less formal, and often quicker ways to raise complaints and seek resolution.^[91] Such mechanisms may take several forms: they include ombud services, regulatory bodies, human rights bodies and other governmental initiatives and tribunals falling outside of the formal judicial system, such as OECD National Contact Points ('NCPs'),^[92] where those exist. Some are empowered to impose sanctions or corrective measures, including fines, licence suspension or revocation, or exclusion from public contracts. Others focus on prevention and restoration by requiring companies to prepare and implement remediation or compliance plans to address systemic issues. Importantly, even when these mechanisms cannot directly provide remediation, they can play a facilitative role in ensuring access to remedy.^[93] This may include referring cases to judicial authorities, initiating investigations, or supporting victims in gathering evidence and preparing claims. When effectively coordinated with judicial and non-State based grievance mechanisms, they can form a vital component of a comprehensive national remedy framework.

The Labour Departments

Following the 18th Amendment, labour administration in Pakistan has been largely devolved to the provincial governments. Each of the four major provinces administers labour regulation through their respective Labour and Human Resources Department. These departments oversee labour offices responsible for workplace inspections, enforcement of labour laws, and resolution of labour disputes within their province. More specifically, they are responsible for registering commercial entities, as well as home-based and agricultural workers, the registration and regulation of TUs, federations, and confederations, and oversight of the democratic election of CBAs to ensure fair worker representation.

With respect to garment workers, labour departments decide on compensation cases, resolve disputes through conciliation, and adjudicate claims involving gratuity, bonuses, provident funds, group insurance, and compensation for injury or death.

Whenever a case is related to a wage claim, it is referred to the Payment of Wages Authority of that department. These authorities are not a separate independent body, but part of the labour administration tasked with enforcing the Payment of Wages Act, 1936,^[94] and related provincial legislation. Their main functions include:

- Ensuring timely payment of wages to workers.
- Addressing wage-related complaints, including non-payment or delayed payment.
- Taking action against employers who violate wage laws, including fines and legal proceedings.

The Authority notifies employers, reviews evidence, and may order payment of withheld wages along with compensation. It exercises powers similar to a civil court and its decisions may be appealed within a prescribed period to the relevant court, subject to deposit of the disputed amount. If no appeal is filed, the Authority's decision becomes final.

The Payment of Wages Act, 1936

The Act allows workers or their representatives to seek redress for delayed or unlawfully deducted wages by applying to the Payment of Wages Authority. Wage disputes generally begin with conciliation by labour officials and, if unresolved, proceed to labour courts or industrial tribunals for adjudication. Claims may be filed by workers, their representatives, TUs, inspectors, or other authorised persons, including joint applications for multiple workers, and must usually be submitted within twelve months, subject to condonation of delay.

Provincial Labour Departments remain one of the most promising avenues for worker remediation. Their mandate covers a wide spectrum of workplace issues, including wage violations, unfair dismissals, OSH breaches, and unpaid overtime allowing workers to pursue multiple types of grievances through a single institutional channel.

They are also relatively easy for workers to access, with simpler procedures and offices located closer to where workers live and work. This combination of broad coverage and accessibility makes Labour Departments one of the strongest options for resolving workplace grievances.

Notably, harassment cases are generally not taken up by Labour Departments, as they fall outside their mandate under the current legal framework. As a result, workers are often directed to the Ombudsperson for Workplace Harassment, which in principle can offer a more specialised and secure avenue for redress. However, consultations highlighted that this institutional separation creates significant access barriers for workers, particularly in factory and informal-sector settings where awareness of, or confidence in, the Ombudsperson mechanism is low.

Stakeholders therefore emphasised the importance of enabling Labour Departments to receive and address workplace harassment complaints, positioning them as a holistic first point of contact for workers.

One way to achieve this would be to explicitly incorporate workplace harassment into existing labour laws. This would allow workers to choose whether to pursue their complaints through the Ombudsperson for Harassment or through the Labour Department, depending on their circumstances and perceived safety.

Such an approach would also require labour inspection processes to include the investigation of harassment within factories, integrating harassment prevention and redress into routine labour compliance checks rather than treating it as a standalone or exceptional issue. This could significantly improve early detection, reduce retaliation risks, and strengthen accountability at the workplace level.



MyVox Data

MyVox data indicates that 3,499 cases (approximately 84% of the total 4,170 violations opted for remediation) have been referred to the relevant provincial Labour Departments, including the Payment of Wages Authority. The majority of these cases (25%) concern wage violations (25%), followed by unfair dismissals (19%), the absence of employment contracts (18.7%), and the lack of employment benefits (16.6%).

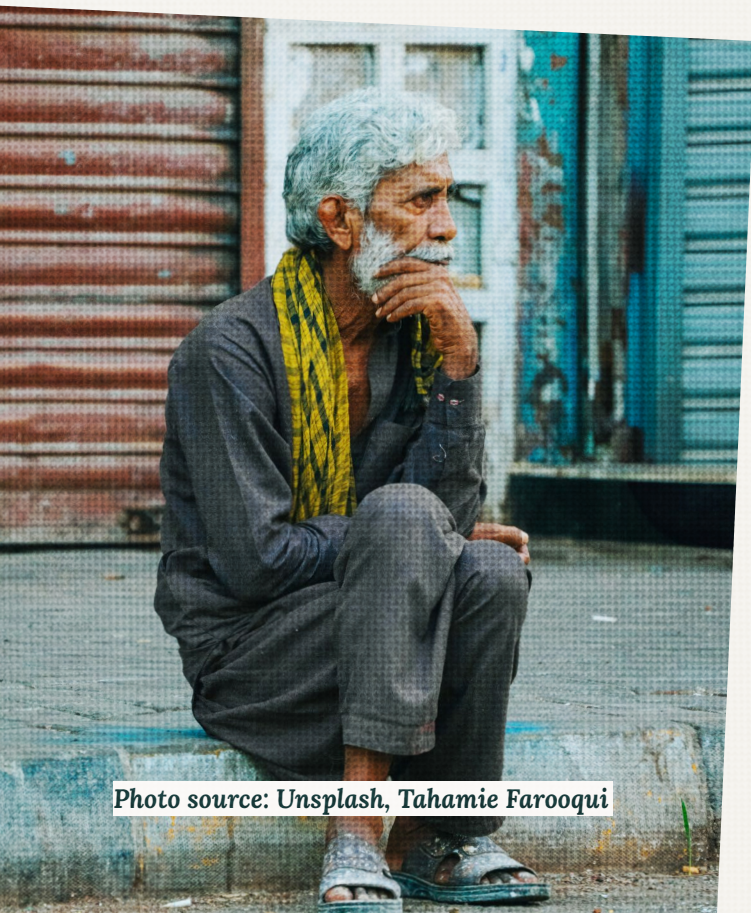


Photo source: Unsplash, Tahamie Farooqui

In addition, while Labour Departments play an important role in putting labour policies into practice, their effectiveness is often limited by a lack of resources, weak enforcement systems, and capacity constraints. As a result, their performance differs from one province to another, leading to uneven implementation of labour laws and welfare programs.

While the Labour Department does offer a more accessible, less costly avenue for workers, legal fees can still be a barrier. In particular, workers face challenges in obtaining and paying for legal representation. While in theory workers are able to represent themselves at the Labour Department, cases may require a lawyer if they are escalated to higher courts.

A key accessibility issue is that the departments tend to be most effective when complaints are facilitated through TUs. Although the process itself is relatively straightforward, many workers remain unaware of the proper procedures, making the presence and support of a trade union a critical factor in successful remediation.

Another procedural issue is proving the relationship between the worker and employer. The absence of formal employment contracts in many cases remains one of the most pervasive

structural problems in providing remedy to workers in Pakistan's garment sector. Without this documentation, workers are left with no evidence of their employment including their terms of employment, wages, benefits, or protections against unfair dismissal. This not only weakens workers' bargaining power but also makes it difficult for them to seek justice when labour rights are violated.

The Legal Landscape on Employment Contracts

Employment contracts in Pakistan are regulated by the Industrial and Commercial Employment Ordinance, 1968 at the federal level, and corresponding provincial laws in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa^[95], Sindh^[96], Balochistan^[97] and Punjab.^[98] These laws require employers to issue a written appointment letter to every worker, clearly setting out the terms and conditions of employment. They mandate fair procedures for termination, discipline, and grievance handling, including valid reasons and notice requirements. Employers must provide or update the contract at the time of appointment, promotion, or transfer, and notify employees of any changes in their terms of service.

MyVox Data

On MyVox, 1,919 workers submitted complaints related to contract issues, representing 16.5% of all reports. The lack of employment contracts and employment through third-party contractors represent 22.8% (437 cases) and 9.2% (176 cases) of these cases respectively, while the majority of complaints – 68.1% (1,306 cases) – involved unfair termination or forced transfers from one factory department or position to another.

However, based on the previous findings, this data reflects only a small fraction of the actual number of workers who do not have employment contracts. In practice, the lack of contracts is a cross-cutting issue that is often captured indirectly through reports of wage violations, withheld benefits, or other employment-related grievances.

A study conducted in Karachi by the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights ('ECCHR') between January and June 2023 illustrates the scale of the problem. Surveying 357 workers employed in factories supplying international brands and retailers, the research uncovered profound gaps in labour documentation: 97% of workers reported having no written employment contract, 80% did not receive pay slips, and 29% were hired through third-party intermediaries, a practice that further obscures the employer–employee relationship and shields factory owners from accountability.^[99] In 2019, Human Rights Watch ('HRW') similarly found that many workers – especially women – were hired informally, often on verbal agreements that offered no stability or legal protection.^[100] In this environment, workers have little recourse when wages are withheld, when they are unfairly dismissed, or when workplace abuses occur.



Worker Testimonies

“I work on a piece rate basis in the finishing department of a garment factory. There are very high temperatures at my workplace, and the situation becomes miserable during summers as there is no arrangement to bring down the temperatures. Me and many of my colleagues have fainted in the press hall due to the heat, and we are not allowed to take breaks for drinking water once or twice during our shift. When I would go to the doctor to express my condition, the doctor would recommend rest (leave from duty). But if I had taken leave as per the doctor’s recommendation, the management would issue me a warning notice”.

Male worker, 18-30, Lahore

“The factory does not offer me all the material required for cleaning or any safety gadgets such as masks, gloves, etc. while handling different materials, including chemicals. During sweeping of the floor, the presence of cotton and thread in the air intensifies and I have to mask my nose with a handkerchief or any other cloth, but nothing is given to me to prevent the fluff settle in the air or into my eyes.”

Male, 31-40, Lahore

“Today, the roof of the factory collapsed. A 66-year-old worker was killed, and another one was injured when the roof collapsed. Our correspondent shifted the injured and slain worker to the hospital. The Labour Director immediately sent a report to the Labour Officer and sought a report.”

Male, 31-40, Faisalabad

“I work in a garment factory as a machine operator. My monthly salary is only 25,000 Rupees. I have no social security card or appointment letter.”

Male, 31-40, Faisalabad

Finally, a significant challenge is the uneven implementation of inspections within factories, which lead to systemic violations of OSH violations. During GRC’s consultations with stakeholders, it was highlighted that labour inspections with the Labour Departments have encountered constraints in providing effective oversight to factories. The Departments cannot hire the number of inspectors that would be required to efficiently enforce their mandate. Sometimes, inspectors must drive very long distances from one factory to another, and the Departments do not have the capacity to provide them with means of transportation either.

A study conducted by the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development and the ILO^[101] shows that Pakistan has only a partially functioning OSH system. Major shortcomings include significant legislative gaps, limited coverage of inspected facilities (meaning that the number of inspectors are unable to cover all factories)^[102], and weak compliance, particularly in informal and small-scale industries. The infrastructure needed for effective OSH implementation- such as inspection services, regulatory bodies, and training institutions -is inadequate, and human and technical resources remain insufficient. OSH awareness and training are low, systems for reporting and recording occupational injuries and diseases are lacking, and worker participation and representation are limited.

The importance of proper OSH procedures has been underscored by Pakistan’s long history of deadly industrial disasters. The 2012 Ali Enterprises factory fire, in which over 250 workers were killed due to the absence of basic firefighting equipment and emergency exits,^[105] remains one of the worst industrial tragedies in the country’s records. Despite years of advocacy by TUs and civil society groups for safer working conditions in the garment sector, meaningful change has been slow. The pattern of preventable accidents has continued to this day: between 2020 and 2024, numerous boiler explosions in industrial hubs such as Faisalabad, Lahore, and Karachi have resulted in repeated fatalities and injuries.^[106]

Legislation on Occupational Health and Safety

Following the devolution of powers in 2010, occupational safety and health in Pakistan became a provincial responsibility, with all provinces enacting dedicated OSH laws between 2017 and 2026.^[103] While the Punjab and KP Acts adopt a proactive approach by establishing OSH Councils with explicit mandates to develop effective complaint and reporting mechanisms, Sindh and Balochistan's Councils are limited to advisory functions, with no adjudicatory powers. The Punjab and KP Councils are also tasked with compiling data on violations of the Act and associated rules and ensuring that individual grievances of employees suffering from occupational injuries or illnesses are addressed efficiently and effectively. This distinction is critical for workers' access to remedies, as it positions the Punjab and KP Councils not merely as advisory bodies but as institutional mechanisms that facilitate grievance redress and strengthen accountability in workplace safety compliance, whereas Sindh and Balochistan rely on other channels for enforcement and resolution of complaints.

Workplace safety is also governed by the Factories Act, 1934, which applies mainly to manufacturing establishments with ten or more workers and covers core requirements such as sanitation, ventilation, fire safety, machinery safeguards, and controls on hazardous substances, along with inspections of equipment and protections against common workplace risks.

Pakistan has not ratified key ILO OSH conventions, resulting in gaps in alignment with international safety standards.^[104]

Taken together, this evidence highlights the dual reality of Pakistan's Labour Departments: while they represent one of the most accessible and potentially effective institutional pathways for worker remediation, their impact is significantly constrained by structural weaknesses.

MyVox Data

MyVox has recorded 377 OSH-related violations, representing about 3.2% of all reported cases. These violations commonly involve poor working conditions, inadequate health and safety measures, unhygienic or poorly prepared food, lack of clean drinking water, and work performed under extreme temperatures. Additional issues include unsafe construction practices, such as collapsing roofs, insufficient personal protective equipment, poor ventilation and lighting, and hazardous machinery.

Workers are not provided with proper equipment needed for their jobs, exposing them to the risks of performing their duties without adequate safety measures. These conditions have at times resulted in serious injuries and even fatalities.

However, it is worth noting that OSH concerns are rarely reported as stand-alone complaints on MyVox; workers typically visit the centres to address wage disputes, excessive overtime, or issues with benefits, during which OSH problems emerge as secondary concerns.

In many cases, the success of a complaint before the Labour Department is heavily dependent on whether the workers have an employment contract in place, and whether a trade union is involved.

Enhancing the effectiveness of Labour Departments requires a coordinated, system-wide approach that aligns legal mandates, institutional capacity, and worker engagement. Clarifying and expanding the role of Labour Departments to address a broader range of labour rights violations, including workplace harassment, would also strengthen their protective function. Reinforcing institutional coordination and operational capacity could also further support more consistent and credible enforcement. Finally, deeper engagement with workers through collaboration with trade unions and accessible points of contact can help ensure that labour rights and available remediation mechanisms are widely understood and effectively used.

Alternative Dispute Resolution

Alternative Dispute Resolution ('ADR') refers to a range of processes used to resolve legal disputes outside the formal court system. As an alternative to adversarial litigation, ADR emphasises collaborative and negotiated solutions. It has become an increasingly important feature of modern legal systems due to its efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and flexibility in achieving timely resolutions.^[107]

Formal ADR mechanisms have gained more attention in the past couple of years in Pakistan and ADR centres can be found all over the country. Related legislation has been adopted in Islamabad Capital Territory (2017), Punjab (2019) and Sindh (2018). For instance, since 2017, the Lahore High Court in Punjab has initiated mainstream 'court-annexed mediation', a procedure whereby judges refer cases to mediators assigned by the Lahore High Court. In Punjab only, Official Alternative Dispute Resolution Centres are operational in all its 36 districts, staffed by judges who serve as mediators. Among the commonly used ADR methods are mediation, arbitration, and conciliation.

Although ADR has only been formally recognised in recent years, informal dispute resolution practices have deep historical roots in Pakistan's garment sector. Such agreements can ensure some level of compensation for the worker, but the amounts given as compensation have been seen to be generally lower than what the law entitles them to, with the process also less likely to deter future violations. Consequently, many settlements do not constitute "effective remedy," as workers often agree under pressure, negotiate without full knowledge of their legal entitlements, or accept terms out of fear of retaliation or job loss if they refuse.

These findings point to the need for strengthening ADR mechanisms, to ensure workers' rights are protected during negotiations with employers.

Such mechanisms could provide a neutral setting, where the mediator has no ties to either party, helping restore balance to the process.

Case Study: Legal Aid Society's Mediation Centres in Sindh

The Labour Alternative Dispute Resolution Centre ('LAS') in Sindh provides a credible, rights-based model for resolving labour disputes - very different from the informal, employer-controlled "mediations" that often take place inside factories. LAS is recognised by the Sindh High Court and the Ministry of Law and Justice, and operates under strict rules of neutrality, confidentiality, and accountability. Its procedures include regular reporting and performance evaluations, which strengthen transparency and trust.

LAS's panel of independent mediators and arbitrators is central to its integrity. Companies or member organisations have no influence over who is appointed or how decisions are made. All mediators at LAS are accredited, having completed mandatory training in negotiation and mediation and being formally recognised by the courts. The centre's roster of around 300 mediators is organised by expertise (labour, commercial, contractual, family), and parties jointly select their mediator from a shortlist. Every mediator signs a confidentiality agreement and must remain neutral. Compared to untrained factory-level mediators, LAS provides a professional, safe, and worker-centred alternative that ensures disputes are handled fairly and independently. Judges now routinely inform parties about mediation options and often refer cases to LAS, encouraging parties to attempt mediation before returning to court.

"Even though around 190 labour-related laws exist in Pakistan, and labour matters became a provincial subject after the 18th Amendment in 2010, settlements often take place within factory premises under conditions that lack neutrality. Workers, often from marginalised backgrounds and earning minimum wage, face company representatives or factory owners, creating an unfair dynamic".

Stakeholder consultation

In addition, ADR offers faster and more efficient pathways by allowing parties to set timelines independent of court schedules. ADR is also more cost-effective than formal litigation, reducing financial barriers to justice through streamlined procedures and fewer formal requirements. In addition, its flexibility allows parties to tailor dispute resolution processes and outcomes to their specific needs, supporting more participatory and context-sensitive solutions. Together, these features position ADR as a more accessible, timely, and responsive complement to Pakistan's remediation system.



MyVox Data

A consistent trend observed in MyVox data is that, once workers file complaints with the Labour Department - which triggers a formal notice to the employer - cases frequently shift toward out-of-court settlement. MyVox reveals that 232 cases (5.6%) of the cases that were opted for remediation proceeded with informal settlements between workers and employers.

In practice, two main scenarios commonly unfold: either the employer immediately proposes a settlement to avoid further scrutiny, or they challenge the Labour Department's decision by appealing to the Labour Courts. In many instances, employers simultaneously file an appeal and approach workers informally to negotiate an out-of-court settlement while the case is still pending.

This practice of these out-of-court settlements has become a routine method. Many workers accept settlements in a desire to avoid prolonged, costly, and exhausting legal proceedings, especially considering the potential power imbalance with employers and uncertainty of outcomes through the courts.

Social Protection Institutions

The Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution

Established in 1976, the Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution ('EOBI') is Pakistan's statutory pension scheme for private sector employees and a cornerstone of the national social protection system. It provides old-age pensions, survivors' benefits, and invalidity coverage to millions of registered workers. The scheme is funded through mandatory contributions from employers (5%) and employees (1%), EOBI's core functions include identifying and registering establishments and insured persons and administering the collection and management of contributions.

Access to EOBI benefits is fundamentally contingent on registration of workers. In practice, workers can claim pensions and related entitlements only where employers have registered them with EOBI and deposited them in line with EOBI requirements. Ensuring accurate registration and regular contributions is therefore essential to the effectiveness of the scheme and to workers' ability to access their legal entitlements.

However, non-registration of workers by employers seeking to avoid EOBI contribution payments remains a persistent challenge. Underreporting of workforce and partial registration, especially for contract or temporary workers, is a commonly reported issue. Survey findings from the Pakistan Workers Confederation suggest that only 33% of workers are registered with EOBI and registration rates for women workers are lower, reported at 11%, reflecting wider gendered labour-market barriers.^[108] In addition, following the devolution of labour welfare matters, the EOBI has encountered jurisdictional and operational challenges that have affected the consistency of its coverage. As a result, a substantial portion of Pakistan's labour force, particularly workers in informal or contract-based employment, remain outside EOBI's reach.

For workers who are registered, eligible and have completed their service, the timely processing of pension claims is a critical component of effective access to remedy. Stakeholder and worker accounts highlight that prolonged delays in pension processing can create serious hardship, particularly for elderly and low-income retirees who depend on these payments.^[109] Often these cases can take years to resolve, forcing workers to navigate multiple offices and procedures to access their legal entitlements.

The combination of poor registration compliance, administrative and institutional constraints, and financial sustainability problems severely undermine EOBI's effectiveness.

Overall, EOBI remains a system with significant potential as one of the few formal institutional routes in Pakistan with the capacity to provide remedy for a broad category of labour-related issues linked to old age, disability, or employer non-compliance with contributory obligations.

With targeted reforms that build on its existing institutional framework, EOBI could significantly enhance its accessibility, effectiveness, and impact. Strengthening enforcement of employer registration and contribution requirements, alongside improvements in transparency, record-keeping, and case processing, would reinforce trust in the system and improve outcomes for workers.

The Employees' Old Age Benefits (EOB) Act

Under the Employees' Old-Age Benefits (EOB) Act, 1976, employers with five or more workers must register employees with the EOBI and contribute 5% of wages (workers contribute 1%) to secure pensions, invalidity benefits, and survivor support. Benefits include old-age pensions or grants, invalidity pensions, and lifelong survivor pensions for spouses and, in some cases, children or parents.



MyVox Data

From July 2023 to December 2025, MyVox recorded 2,180 violations related to employment benefits (18.8% of the total of 11,604 reported violations). Of these, 782 cases (35.9%) relate to the non-payment of contributions to the EOBI. However, only 91 cases have been formally referred to the EOBI. In many cases, workers only become aware of the issue when seeking to claim pensions, at which point missing contribution histories can prevent them from receiving their benefits.

This problem is particularly acute for workers hired through third-party contractors. These workers frequently report having no visibility over whether EOBI contributions are being deposited on their behalf. The absence of itemised pay slips and limited information about deductions or entitlements creates a structural gap that weakens protection of workers and undermines effective remedy.

In practice, however, cases that fall within EOBI's mandate are not always channelled directly to the institution. A key reason is that worker grievances often involve multiple overlapping violations, such as unpaid minimum wages, unpaid overtime, and OSH breaches, alongside missing employment benefits. In such cases, workers commonly approach the Labour Department as the first point of recourse.

Key opportunities for improvement include expanding worker access to clear information on registration, contributions, and eligibility; leveraging digitisation to support more consistent employer compliance and real-time contribution monitoring; streamlining benefit and pension processing through service standards and claim-tracking mechanisms; and strengthening coordination between EOBI and Labour Departments through referral and information-sharing arrangements. Together, these measures would help consolidate EOBI's role as an effective and dependable mechanism for worker protection and remediation.

The Employees' Social Security Institutions

In Pakistan, remediation for social security-related violations is channelled through the provincial Employees' Social Security Institutions ('ESSIs') – namely the Punjab Employees' Social Security Institution ('PESSI'), the Sindh Employees' Social Security Institution ('SESSI'), the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Employees Social Security Institution ('KPESSI'), and the Balochistan Employees' Social Security Institution ('BESSI') – operating under the Social Security Ordinance of 1965. These institutions are mandated to secure workers statutory entitlements, including medical care and cash benefits such as injury compensation, sickness benefit, maternity and Iddat benefits, disability pensions, and survivors' (widow's) grants.

While the law obliges employers to provide social security cards, the reality is that this is not properly implemented. A 2021 study by the ILO found that only 1.8 million workers in the formal economy are covered by social security. This represents just 32% of the 5.2 million employees who are eligible for coverage, including those earning up to the province-specific income thresholds.^[110]

Where a worker experiences a social security violation, such as denial of registration, delays in receiving benefits, incorrect recording of wages, or exclusion from medical services, they may file a with the relevant ESSi office. The ESSi is then required to investigate the complaint, including examining wage records, verification of employment status, assessment of employer compliance. Following this review, the institution is expected to issue a written decision explaining the reasons for its conclusions.

Where disputes remain unresolved, workers and employers can pursue formal judicial remedy through Social Security Courts, established by provincial governments. These courts operate as specialised forums with the full powers of civil courts, including the ability to summon witnesses, compel the production of documents, take evidence under oath, and issue enforceable orders. Workers may be represented by lawyers or TUs. Appeals to the Social Security Court commonly arise in relation to wage and contribution assessments, benefit eligibility, and the duration and benefits awarded.

The Social Security Ordinance, 1965

The Social Security Ordinance, 1965 requires employers to register all eligible employees with provincial institutions, providing access to medical care, sickness and injury benefits, maternity support, disability coverage, and survivor pensions. Employers are responsible for contributions regardless of hiring arrangements, and failure to comply may result in penalties. Pakistan has not ratified the ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102).

If a party remains dissatisfied following the Court's decision, a further appeal may be made to the High Court, typically limited to substantial questions of law.

Beyond complaints handling, ESSIs also play a proactive enforcement role, in relation to employers' legal obligations. Where establishments fail to produce required records, do not cooperate with inspection requests, or fail to respond to written notices, ESSIs may escalate through show-cause notices. Continued non-compliance can then trigger proceedings,^[111] including penalties linked to non-payment of contributions, obstruction of ESSi officials, submission of false returns, or unlawful deduction of contributions from workers' wages.

The post-devolution landscape of labour welfare has underscored the need to further strengthen and rationalise provincial ESSIs. Jurisdictional and operational challenges faced by federal-level institutions like EOBI in the aftermath of devolution have, at times, resulted in gaps in coverage and uncertainty for workers seeking access to social protection benefits. In this context, improving the capacity, outreach, and institutional coherence of provincial ESSIs is critical to ensuring continuity of benefits, enhancing access to remedies, and providing workers with clear, reliable, and locally responsive pathways to social protection.

MyVox Data

MyVox data shows that out of the 4,170 cases opted for remediation, a total of 142 cases (3.40%) has been referred to social security institutions. The majority of these cases concern the lack of social security cards.



“I have worked in different textile mills for more than 30 years, but when I applied for old age pension at the age of 60, it was found that the company had approved an old age grant instead of a pension and that too for as little as if I had worked for only a few years.”

Male, 60, Karachi

“The company I work for employs both permanent employees and those hired through third-party contractors. Permanent staff receive full employment benefits, but the situation is different for workers engaged through contractors. These workers are unsure about the deductions for EOBI and social security contributions from their wages, as contractors do not provide us with a detailed breakdown of our earnings.”

Male, 18-30, Lahore

“I have been working for one year but still do not have a social security card. There are 400 workers, but only a few have social security cards. Out of 400 workers in the factory, only 65 are registered with social security.”

Lahore

The Workers' Welfare Fund

In addition to the ESSIs, the Workers' Welfare Fund ('WWF') constitutes a key component of Pakistan's social protection framework. Originally established under the Workers' Welfare Fund Ordinance, 1971 as a federally managed fund to, the WWF provides low-cost housing and other welfare benefits to industrial workers, including educational benefits (such as scholarships), death grants and marriage grants.^[112] Since January 2024, the WWF has introduced its own platform for the submission and processing of education, death, and marriage grant claims, allowing workers to submit claims online.^[113]

Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment the WWF framework has undergone significant transformation. As labour welfare became a devolved subject, provinces enacted their own Workers Welfare Fund laws,^[114] vesting authority for the collection, administration, and utilisation of welfare contributions in provincial governments. Within this framework, provincial Workers Welfare Boards operate as statutory bodies, responsible for administering and delivering welfare schemes financed through the respective provincial Workers Welfare Funds.

Notwithstanding this devolution, the WWF, whether operating through federal or provincial arrangements, remains an integral part of the broader social protection ecosystem, with access to its benefits generally contingent upon workers being registered with the EOBI and the provincial social security institutions and carrying a social security card.^[115] In practice, this conditionality means that workers who are not registered with these institutions, often due to systemic barriers such as informality, weak enforcement, or administrative exclusion, may be effectively denied access to the WWF's benefits. This interdependence underscores the interconnected nature of Pakistan's social protection architecture and illustrates how gaps in coverage or enforcement within one institution can undermine access to welfare entitlements across the system.

MyVox Data

MyVox data indicates that, among garment workers, the WWF is most commonly accessed for cases related to death and marriage grants. Of the total 4,170 cases referred to remediation, 103 cases (2.5%) were referred to the WWF, primarily in connection with marriage and death grant claims.

Remedy through Non-State-Based Mechanisms

What are non-state-based grievance mechanisms?

Non-State-based grievance mechanisms^[116] are designed, managed, or overseen by non-State actors, including companies, industry associations, worker organisations, TUs, and multi-stakeholder initiatives ('MSIs').^[117] These mechanisms typically function closer to where the harm occurs, and therefore, can in principle provide more flexible and timely avenues for raising concerns.^[118] A defining feature is that they are intended to operate on an ongoing, institutionalised basis rather than as an ad hoc response.^[119] These mechanisms broadly include:

- Company-based operational-level grievance mechanisms.^[120]
- Mechanisms operated through industry, multi-stakeholder or collaborative initiatives.^[121]
- Regional and international human rights bodies.^[122]

The limitations of non-State-based grievance mechanisms are that they often cannot address criminal conduct, impose penalties, or mandate structural reforms, functions that require State authority or judicial powers.^[123] They may also lack the mandate to deliver full or enforceable remedies, particularly where harms are widespread, supply chains are complex, or violations require binding sanctions and public accountability.^[124] In such cases, these mechanisms may provide only partial remedy and should be understood as complementary rather than as substitutes for State-based judicial and administrative mechanisms.

Non-state-based grievance mechanisms are especially relevant where State-based mechanisms are difficult to access or slow to deliver effective outcomes. In such circumstances, they help address immediate gaps, support early problem-solving, document patterns of harm and help triage cases, while more serious or systemic violations are escalated to State mechanisms for investigation, enforcement and binding remedies.

Company-Based Operational Grievance Mechanisms

Operational grievance mechanisms ('OGMs') can play a meaningful role in delivering remedy when a company has caused or contributed to harm.

At their core, OGMs are structured, workplace-level processes through which workers can raise complaints, receive a response within a defined timeframe and get feedback on outcomes. Typically, this involves an internal procedure through which complaints are submitted, reviewed and remediated. When properly designed and implemented effectively, OGMs can function as valuable early warning systems for businesses, surfacing risks and recurring patterns in violations that can inform wider human rights due diligence efforts.

"When brands require stronger grievance systems, factories improve. Brand engagement has played a role in strengthening our internal processes."

Stakeholder consultation

At the same time, they can provide a more timely and accessible route for recourse and resolution, compared to state-based mechanisms.

OGMs are established and administered by companies often in response to buyer requirements or as part of a company's HRDD commitments. As such, they exist within a complex "remedy ecosystem" shaped by laws, policies, institutions, and social expectations.

However, their company-based nature often limits their effectiveness in addressing labour rights violations. Stakeholder accounts indicate that workers frequently approach OGMs with deep mistrust. Many perceive them as employer or brand-controlled processes that lack independence and therefore are unlikely to deliver impartial outcomes, particularly where the grievance concerns management conduct,

wage practices, disciplinary action or freedom of association. In these contexts, fear of retaliation is a central deterrent. Workers' report concerns that raising complaints may end in harassment, dismissal, or informal blacklisting across local factory networks. Where whistle-blower safeguards are weak and access to external support is limited (including access to unions and worker organisations), OGMs can risk becoming procedural "tick-box" exercises rather than credible pathways to accountability and change. These power imbalances can discourage workers from using the mechanism even when it is formally compliant. This is particularly true where OGMs are designed without meaningful participation from TUs. This lack of participation further undermines legitimacy and the mechanism's ability to address grievances effectively.

“Mechanisms launched by brands will not work without true representation. Though they exist on paper, workers are reluctant to report due to threats and identification concerns.”

Stakeholder consultation



Voices from the Ground

In July 2024, GRC visited legal aid centres in Karachi and conducted interviews with workers

They reported that, in many cases, auditors do not speak Urdu, and translation is handled by factory management. As a result, information is often misinterpreted or selectively translated, creating a misleading picture of actual conditions.

Workers also mentioned that they are not free to speak openly with auditors. Even when auditors approach them directly, the language barrier allows managers to control the communication.

One contractor shared that, during his time as a manager, he was instructed to provide false information to auditors.

The Role of Social Audits

Social audits can play a valuable role in driving collective remediation at the factory level, identifying systemic labour rights issues and guiding corrective action plans that improve overall working conditions. When effectively implemented, they help brands and suppliers address structural risks and create safer, fairer workplaces.

However, in practice, the role of audits is limited. Deceptive practices by suppliers, such as coaching workers, keeping separate sets of records, or temporarily relocating vulnerable staff, can create a misleading picture during inspections. When audits are announced in advance, the likelihood of such practices may increase.^[126] In addition, audit reports are not made publicly available, leading to a lack of transparency, preventing workers and local unions from tracking progress or verifying improvements. Finally, audits have a limited scope, meaning that findings are reported only to the commissioning brand or supplier, leaving actual remediation dependent on their willingness to act.

For these reasons, audits cannot be relied upon as a credible means for remediation. Their limitations in scope, transparency, and enforcement mean that even thorough audits cannot ensure that workers' rights are fully respected or that affected individuals receive remedies.

Audits are most effective when integrated into a broader compliance strategy that includes grievance mechanisms, worker representation, and active engagement by brands to enforce corrective actions and strengthen labour standards across supply chains, but companies should not rely on audits as a sole means of identification or remediation.

Another practical barrier is duplication and fragmentation of OGMs. In factories supplying multiple brands, several grievance channels (i.e. hotlines) can operate in parallel – often with different rules, escalation procedures and follow up expectations. This can confuse workers, fragment information and create parallel processes that prevent systemic problems from being identified and addressed. Mechanisms designed without a sufficient understanding of local culture, workplace dynamics, language needs and social norms can also fail in practice, producing reporting tools and “solutions” that workers cannot safely or realistically use.

“If all brands [sourcing from the same factory] had one mechanism, it would be easier, as workers are sometimes confused about which channel to follow. Coordinating grievance mechanisms would strengthen remediation and make access to remedy clearer and more effective for workers.”

Stakeholder consultation

The existence of an OGM does not itself guarantee access to remedy.

Worker awareness and confidence are equally important determinants of effectiveness. Workers need to understand their rights, recognise which issues can and should be raised as grievances and feel confident about when and how to report. This requires sustained and practical training so that knowledge is reinforced over time, uptake can be assessed and workers can build the confidence to use the mechanism. Without this, even formally compliant systems may remain unused and only used for low-risk issues.

The standard should be practical effectiveness: whether the process can deliver outcomes that address harm and where possible, restore the affected individual or group to their pre-harm position. To be effective in Pakistan’s current context, OGMs must therefore go beyond formal design features, actively address power imbalances, ensure clear communication to workers, and include worker and union involvement in both design and implementation.^[125]

Mechanisms Operated through Industry, Multi-Stakeholder, or Collaborative Initiatives

Mechanisms operated through industry, multi-stakeholder, or collaborative initiatives are recognised under UNGP 30 as an additional means of facilitating remediation for adverse human rights impacts. The effectiveness of these mechanisms lies in their relatively rapid accessibility, low cost, and transnational reach. Crucially, they often involve the participation of workers’ organisations, including TUs, which introduces an additional pressure point for businesses that have failed to meet their obligations under international standards. While OGMs are directly linked to individual enterprises and their supply chains, industry-wide and multi-stakeholder initiatives can be understood as complementary pathways for remediation and accountability.

Case Study: The Hamary Awaz Helpline

Hamary Awaz is a collaboration among three partners – Baidarie, a Pakistani CSO specialising in workers’ rights, LRQA, and the Cahn Group. Launched in June 2023, Hamary Awaz provides a platform for reporting and resolving workplace concerns. It is currently implemented in 70 garment factories in Sindh and Punjab, covering over 172,000 workers. As of April 30, 2025, 1,262 grievances have been received from workers, on a range of issues including unpaid overtime, severance payments, failure to pay minimum wage, and harassment at the workplace.

Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives

A multi-stakeholder initiative (‘MSI’) is an organisation or a platform that brings together diverse stakeholders to collaboratively address specific issues. In practice, the term is often used to refer to initiatives that include, at a minimum, representatives from both the private sector and civil society. According to the UNGPs, MSIs that are based on respect for human rights can

play an important role in holding corporations accountable for their human rights responsibilities. MSI grievance mechanisms are also seen to have significant advantages when compared with companies' internal operational grievance mechanisms because of their higher levels of independence and efficacy.^[127]

MSIs, particularly those that are industry-focused, can serve as a useful alternative pathway to remediation where cases need to be escalated beyond the factory level to brands or MNEs and where company-level OGMs are unavailable to workers or prove insufficient. However, their effectiveness as a route to remediation is often constrained by several challenges. These include weak or uneven participation by stakeholders, difficulties in reaching decisions, particularly where timely action is required, and power imbalances among stakeholder groups. Questions have also been raised about their long-term sustainability, as many MSIs operate on a short-term or project-based basis.^[128] In addition, as with other collaborative initiatives, MSIs often struggle to become sufficiently visible and accessible to workers. In this regard, TUs and local CSOs can play an important role in improving awareness, accessibility, and worker engagement.



Voices from the Ground

During GRC's field visit to Pakistan in July 2024, paralegals highlighted that referencing the GFA in letters sent to factories regarding the harassment of women workers has proven highly effective in securing remediation. Suppliers appear to be particularly responsive, and in some cases apprehensive, when the GFA is invoked.

Global Framework Agreements

The ILO defines a Global Framework Agreement ('GFA') as "an instrument negotiated between a multinational enterprise and a Global Union Federation ('GUF') to establish an ongoing relationship between the parties and ensure that the company respects the same standards in all the countries where it operates".^[129]

Due to their global nature, GFAs are able to set high standards for the health, safety and wellbeing of employees across a supply chain. These types of agreements can help to raise standards across industries, particularly if suppliers adhering to GFA requirements supply products to multiple companies.

A brand can turn a GFA into an effective platform for ensuring workers' rights and resolving workplace disputes.

An example of such initiative in Pakistan's garment industry is the IndustriALL Global Union, which serves as a vital bridge to global-level accountability. IndustriALL negotiates and monitors GFAs with multinational apparel and manufacturing brands. To date, IndustriALL has signed 44 GFAs with multinational companies, reaching more than 50 million workers worldwide.^[130] For instance, in 2015–2016, a GFA between IndustriALL and H&M was used to secure the reinstatement of 88 workers at a Pakistani garment factory after they had been sacked for demanding wages, social security, and fair treatment. Through the combined efforts of IndustriALL's regional office and its local affiliate, the NTUF, the workers were reinstated with full pay starting from their original dismissal date.^[131]

Beyond individual factory disputes, IndustriALL's GFAs deliver structural protections: they embed binding commitments to respect trade union rights, guarantee collective bargaining and union access, and apply health, safety, and labour standards globally.

The fact that GFAs are rooted in collaboration with TUs ensures a degree of independent oversight and a focus on long-term, sustainable labour relations. This structure can provide workers with a more accessible pathway to remediation that extends beyond the factory level and, in

Case Study: The Pakistan Accord

The Pakistan Accord is an agreement^[132] between UNI Global Union, IndustriALL, and more than 140 global brands, designed to improve health and safety in Pakistan's textile and garment industry. As of December 2025, it covers 663 factories across the country. Compared to other GFAs, its uniqueness and success lies in the fact that it is legally binding for the signatory brands.

The Accord strengthens workplace safety by implementing fire, electrical, structural, and boiler safety measures, providing workers with training on their rights, common risks, and evacuation procedures, and fostering long-term industry-wide improvements through collaboration with local institutions. A key component is its complaints mechanism, which allows all workers in Accord-covered factories to raise occupational safety concerns. Complaints are handled by independent, trained staff who ensure impartial investigations and maintain confidentiality. When hazards or violations are confirmed, the mechanism provides resolutions that remediate risks and address harm.

some cases, beyond state-based mechanisms. GFAs can therefore not only complement State-based avenues where these prove ineffective or inaccessible, but also support companies in fulfilling their responsibilities under international standards, including the UNGPs and the OECD Guidelines for MNEs. In this way, regardless of whether equivalent protections exist in individual production countries, companies that enter into GFAs take proactive steps to safeguard workers' rights across their global operations and supply chains.

However, the effectiveness of GFAs as pathways to remediation depends largely on how their provisions are negotiated and implemented. As GFAs vary significantly in scope and in the obligations they impose, it is important that they adhere, at a minimum, to certain core principles. The ILO has suggested that GFAs should include clear and precise language; extend to the entire supply chain,

rather than being limited to direct suppliers; clearly define the MNE and its entities covered by the agreement; be widely communicated at the local level; and set up adequate processes for monitoring their implementation. In addition, the meaningful involvement of local TUs, alongside GUFs, in the negotiation and implementation of GFAs is essential to their effectiveness.^[133]

Community-Based Grievance Mechanisms

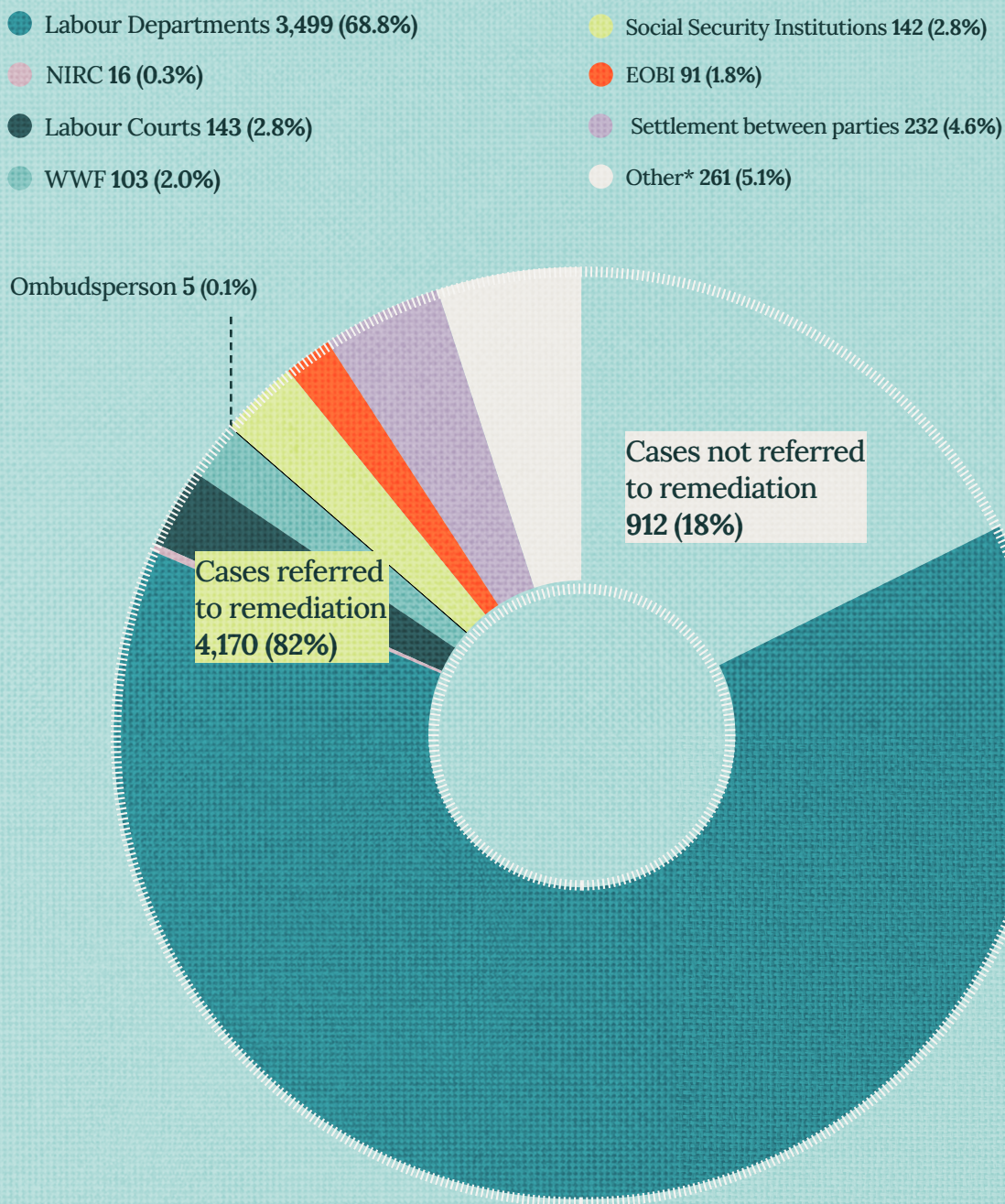
Community-based grievance mechanisms are a relatively novel method where workers and their communities are empowered to play an active role in the monitoring and remediation process. One of the key factors of success is the empowerment of local community members to act as a liaison. This allows the process to benefit from insight and experience of local contexts and cultural norms, increasing both data reliability and worker trust. Where complaints are gathered and addressed locally and informally, they can also often offer faster relief to affected parties. Crucially, community-based grievance mechanisms are a cost-effective process, leveraging existing community structures and resources, thus reducing the need for extensive external oversight.

Case Study: GRC's Community-Based Monitoring Programme

The model implemented by GRC and its partners provides a good example of how community driven grievance mechanisms can work in practice. Through legal aid centres operated in collaboration with local TUs and CSOs and the work of dedicated community members, the programme has shown that reporting of grievances can be achieved where a trusted interface for workers is provided, particularly where workers are unable to approach formal channels. Workers can also be supported to file applications with the Labour Department and other authorities, negotiate with employers, issue grievance notices to factories, and engage directly with management.

Out of a total of **5,082 cases** recorded on MyVox, **82% (4,170 cases)** were opted for remediation. These cases correspond to **8,855 individual labour rights violations**, as typically, each complaint refers to more than one type of violation.

The figure to the right represents the different remediation channels recorded on MyVox:



**The category “Other” refers to a wide range of actions that do not fall under a specific mechanism. It includes supportive interventions such as providing general legal guidance to workers drafting legal notices to factories, referring complaints to other organisations, as well as cases in which workers chose not to pursue the matter further.*

Worker Stories from the Ground

Story #1: Ahmed*, Machine Operator at Garment Factory

I first heard about GRC's legal aid centre through a Field Organiser, who lives near my house. At the time, I was working in a different factory, where they didn't pay us for two months, and the legal aid clinic helped get the payment. The centre helped me write an application to the HR department of my old factory. They also helped me file a complaint with the Labour Department. A paralegal from the clinic even came with me to talk directly to the officer in charge at the factory. Thanks to their help with negotiations, I was finally able to get my two months' salary. This was a big relief for me. I was able to clear some of the debts I had, and it took away a lot of the tension I was feeling due to not receiving my salary.

The legal aid centre is now for me a centre to solve issues of workers, a place where we can sit, talk and share our challenges. I brought some of my friends here to be more united among us and so that more people could benefit from the legal support. For example, one of my friends had an issue related to bonus and overtime payment, and with the clinic's help, he was able to get what he was owed as well.

Looking ahead, I hope the legal aid centre continues to promote awareness and unity among workers. This can make a big change. I believe this place can become the foundation for a larger movement for workers' rights. I feel that the centre is a supportive place, where we are listened to and encouraged to share our problem, and to receive always an encouraging response.

Story #2: Hassan*, Machine operator at garment factory

I worked as a machine operator at a garment factory for almost six years, earning a salary of PKR 32,000 per month. One day, the factory manager fired me without giving an explanation and refused to pay my legal dues. Another worker told me about a centre in Karachi that helps workers for free. When I visited the

centre, the staff told me that the factory had no legal right to fire me without notice, and they reassured me that they would do everything they could to help me. The paralegal helped me file an application to request my job back and accompanied me to submit it to the Labour Department. When the factory received the notice from the labour department, the HR manager, who had previously ignored me, was forced to attend a hearing. At the hearing, the labour officer told the manager that firing me without notice was against the law. The factory manager asked for time to consult with his superiors.

Later that day, I got a call from the factory asking me to come in. When I arrived, the HR manager offered to settle my dues in exchange for withdrawing the case. At first, I was hesitant because I wasn't sure how much I was owed. I returned to the centre, where they helped me calculate my legal entitlements, including gratuity, bonuses, and vacation pay. The factory had initially offered only a portion of what I was owed, but with the clinic's guidance, I was able to negotiate and settle for a much better amount. In the end, I received all my dues.

Thanks to the legal aid centre, I could receive a lot of information that I didn't have otherwise. And that I can now also share with other workers around me. When I arrived at the Paralegal Clinic, I had no knowledge and I was in a bad financial situation. Now I work in another factory, I am aware of my labour rights, and I also told other workers about this. I hope that the centre will be able to help other workers like they did with me.

I have experienced how important it is for workers to know the law and their rights. Many workers are fired on a daily basis and having a place like the legal aid centre is no less than a blessing for us. Some workers do not even have money to hire a lawyer, so having free legal aid makes a big difference. Now I also participate in the training sessions that the centre offers.

**To protect the workers' identity, pseudonyms are used instead of real names.*

Strategic Litigation and International Avenues

International strategic litigation has emerged as an important route to remedy where domestic grievance mechanisms fail to deliver adequate remedies for workers. These pathways are often pursued by international CSOs in close collaboration with local TUs, using transnational legal frameworks and due diligence obligations to hold multinational brands accountable.

Strategic litigation often occurs when a brand fails to conduct adequate human rights due diligence - increasingly required under emerging laws globally - making it liable for both its own actions and those of its suppliers.

What makes litigation 'strategic' is that it pursues objectives that extend beyond the immediate outcome for the affected rightsholders. That said, apart from remedying harm, strategic litigation can raise public awareness of labour rights violations, influence corporate culture and contribute to the development of laws and policies.^[134] In addition, it can be used by civil society to challenge inadequate state oversight and enforcement.^[135]

Case Study: Remedy in the Ali Enterprises Case

In Pakistan, a prominent example of strategic litigation is the work of the ECCHR on the so called 'Baldia factory fire'. In 2012, following the deadly fire at the Ali Enterprises garment factory in the district of Baldia in Karachi, which killed over 250 workers, ECCHR supported affected families and Pakistani labour rights groups in bringing legal action against the German retailer KiK, the factory's main buyer. ECCHR argued that KiK had breached its duty of care by failing to ensure fire and building safety in its supply chain. The case helped establish international recognition that brands can be held legally responsible for human rights violations occurring in supplier factories. Although the German court ultimately closed the case due to statutory limitations, KiK agreed to pay compensation to victims' families through the ILO-coordinated compensation programme.



Photo source: Unsplash, Muhammad Shamaon Malik

The list of successful strategic litigation examples is long and spans multiple jurisdictions and contexts. From the post-Rana Plaza collapse actions in Bangladesh, which led to the legally binding Accord on Fire and Building Safety,^[136] to cases against German retailers over labour violations on banana plantations in Costa Rica and Ecuador,^[137] and criminal complaints in Germany and the Netherlands against brands for Uyghur forced labour in China's Xinjiang province,^[138] strategic litigation has consistently pushed for systemic reform.

These cases illustrate how strategic litigation, often aligned with advocacy and worker organising, can go beyond individual remedies to stimulate industry commitments to safety, due diligence, and worker protections, reshape corporate behaviour, and attract legislative attention to supply chain abuses.

Where national grievance and adjudication mechanisms are slow, inaccessible, or ineffective, international avenues can also provide important complementary pathways to remedy. These mechanisms help elevate labour rights violations beyond domestic contexts, enabling international scrutiny and pressure on both states and multinational brands. The examples outlined below are not exhaustive; rather, they illustrate international mechanisms that have shown particular relevance and effectiveness in the Pakistan context and can inform broader strategies for seeking remedy and accountability.

Case Study: The ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association

The ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association ('CFA') represents an important international avenue for seeking remedy where violations of freedom of association and collective bargaining cannot be effectively addressed at the national level.^[139] Mandated by the ILO Constitution, the CFA examines whether national laws and practices comply with core principles on the right to organise and bargain collectively, regardless of whether the relevant ILO Conventions have been ratified. This makes the mechanism particularly accessible, as trade unions can directly pursue this avenue without the need to exhaust national remedies, allowing it to operate as an effective parallel means of applying pressure on a Member State for compliance even while domestic procedures are still ongoing.^[140]

The CFA investigates complaints submitted by workers' or employers' organisations, establishes the facts in dialogue with the government concerned, and issues conclusions and recommendations to the ILO Governing Body. Governments are expected to report on steps taken to implement these recommendations, giving the process practical follow-up and influence. Where the relevant Conventions have been ratified, the Committee of Experts may also monitor compliance. Over nearly seven decades, the CFA has reviewed more than 3,300 cases, with over 60 countries across five continents –including Pakistan–reporting tangible improvements in respect for freedom of association.^[141]





Photo source: Unsplash, Umar Farooq

Case Study: The Clean Clothes Campaign's Urgent Appeal System

In addition, the Clean Clothes Campaign's ('CCC') Urgent Appeal System, is a long-standing mechanism, used to mobilise rapid international solidarity in cases of labour rights violations in global garment supply chains. Urgent appeals are initiated at the request of workers or their representative organisations, ensuring that agency and decision-making power remain with those directly affected. Through this system, the CCC develops and circulates appeals containing specific worker-led demands, such as reinstatement of dismissed union members, cessation of anti-union practices, or payment of legally owed wages, and encourages supporters to take targeted action. This can include sending protest letters to factory owners or public authorities, pressuring multinational brands sourcing from the violating factories, or participating in broader public campaigns.^[142] Because international garment brands are highly sensitive to reputational risk, even modest public pressure can influence how they respond to labour disputes in their supply chains.

Although strategic litigation and global campaign mechanisms can be lengthy and resource-intensive, they remain powerful tools for systemic change. They signal to brands that failure to uphold due diligence responsibilities such as the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive ('CSDDD') and similar laws in France, Germany, and the Netherlands may lead not only to reputational harm but also legal liability. As mandatory due diligence frameworks expand globally, international brands operating in Pakistan must increasingly ensure that working conditions within their supply chains comply with international labour standards. In this way, strategic litigation serves as a vital pressure point, incentivising brands and suppliers to adopt safer, more responsible, and more transparent practices.

Recommendations

For Pakistani Policy Makers

The following recommendations are addressed to relevant policymakers and authorities at both the federal and provincial levels, reflecting the shared and overlapping responsibilities for labour governance and access to remedy in Pakistan. They are aimed at strengthening and improving the effectiveness of the remediation mechanisms outlined below, ensuring these mechanisms are accessible, coordinated, and capable of delivering meaningful and timely remedies for garment workers.

Overarching Recommendations

- Explicitly prioritise access to effective remedy in the next NAP-BHR, with measurable targets and timelines.
- Formally recognise and support worker representatives as part of the national access-to-remedy ecosystem.
- Strengthen federal coordination and oversight of provincial labour enforcement through minimum national standards on inspections, complaints handling, and remedies.
- Establish transparency and reporting mechanisms on grievance outcomes across state-based mechanisms, including disaggregated data by gender, sector, and type of violation.
- Improve coordination between provinces and with the federal government on labour law implementation, including standardised procedures for filing grievances before Labour Departments across Pakistan.
- Establish oversight mechanisms to ensure that the Anti-Harassment Committees with factories are properly established and functioning.
- Ratify all fundamental ILO Conventions, including the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155) and its Protocol of 2002, the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187) and the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102).
- Strengthen and institutionalise ADR mechanisms to complement judicial remedies by advocating for court-connected mediation in labour issues, carrying out BHR-informed capacity building of judges and lawyers, and introducing company-level grievance mechanisms aligned with human rights due diligence standards.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Labour Courts

- Strengthen the Legal Aid and Justice Authority, by making it fully operational across jurisdictions to ensure its mandate is effectively realised. To this extent, consider establishing a national legal aid fund for labour rights cases, prioritising dismissed workers and wage-related claims, to cover transport, court fees, and basic legal representation.
- Enable worker representatives (apart from TU leaders) to represent workers before the labour courts.

Recommendations for Strengthening the National Industrial Relations Commission

- Ensure that unions are adequately protected and the process of forming and joining unions is gender inclusive.
- Fill all judicial vacancies without delay, ensuring appointments are made strictly on merit and based on objective criteria. Judicial officers should be held accountable for resolving cases within the legally prescribed three-month timeframe.
- Enable remote adjudication by allowing worker cases to be heard via video link where feasible
- Improve communication with workers by implementing an effective notification system (e.g., email or WhatsApp) for hearing dates and schedule changes, reducing uncertainty and travel burdens.
- Improve jurisdictional clarity and referral pathways, including simple guidance for workers and frontline institutions on when matters fall within NIRC's jurisdiction and how cases can be transferred efficiently where appropriate.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Labour Departments

- Expand the Labour Department's mandate to cover harassment cases, including remediation and factory inspections, and ensure inspectors are trained to identify and address such violations. This could be done by incorporating the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010 into the existing labour laws.
- Establish referral mechanisms with formal mediation and alternative resolution processes.

- Increase inspectorate capacity by recruiting additional labour inspectors, strengthening training, establishing clear procedures for independent and credible inspections, and expanding resources to enable effective monitoring.
- Strengthen the Labour Departments' outreach by collaborating with TUs to raise awareness among garment workers about available remediation mechanisms and establishing worker-facing help desks or focal points to provide guidance on where and how to file complaints.
- Adopt time-bound procedures for handling complaints, with safeguards against deliberate delays by employers or legal representatives.
- Improve coordination between provinces and with the federal government on labour law implementation, including standardised procedures for filing grievances across Pakistan.
- Strengthen existing tools, such as the Labour Management Information System ('LMIS'), to ensure that there is an effective centralised system in place to monitor labour rights cases.

Recommendations for Strengthening the National Commission for Human Rights

- Establish a dedicated labour rights and business accountability desk within its complaint mechanism and build internal technical expertise to address supply chain-related grievances.
- Enhance coordination with the Payment of Wages Authority, provincial labour departments, and labour courts.
- Facilitate dialogue between brands, government bodies, and worker representatives in cases involving supply chains and export-oriented factories.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Federal Ombudsperson Secretariat for Protection Against Harassment

- Establish robust oversight structures within FOSPAH to ensure complaints are handled timely, within the three-month period required by the law.
- Enhance institutional safeguards within FOSPAH by strengthening confidentiality protocols and enforce anti-retaliation measures to ensure that workers can safely report harassment and abuse.

- Empower women workers with information and confidence by providing training and awareness campaigns so women understand their rights, know how to access FOSPAH, and feel confident seeking justice.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Social Protection Institutions

General

- Reduce processing delays and establish time standards, including a tracking portal to allow workers to check the status of their claims for social protection entitlements.
- Strengthen coordination between social protection institutions and the Labour Departments, via introducing referral mechanisms.

Employees Old-Age Benefits Institution

- Expand worker-facing transparency and access, such as a simple tool for workers to confirm registration status and contribution payments, as well as clear guidance on eligibility and claims procedure.
- Enforce mandatory registration of all eligible establishments by digitising contribution records and introducing real-time monitoring, while also providing access to workers for tracking whether contributions are made on their behalf.

Employees' Social Security Institutions

- Improve the capacity, outreach, and institutional coherence of provincial ESSIs to ensure continuity of benefits, enhancing access to remedies, and providing workers with clear, reliable, and locally responsive pathways to social protection.

Workers' Welfare Fund

- Remove administrative and registration barriers that prevent workers—particularly those in informal employment—from accessing WWF benefits by interconnecting WWF with EOBI and ESSIs.
- Introduce alternative eligibility pathways for workers who lack formal registration with the EOBI or a social security card.

Recommendations for Companies

Brands have significant influence over labour conditions in their supply chains and can play an important role in strengthening access to remedy by using their leverage, purchasing practices, and partnerships in ways that support workers' rights and safety. To strengthen their role in providing effective remediation, brands should:

- Engage in GFAs and other MSIs to ensure their suppliers comply with both international and domestic legislation.
- Recognise and engage with worker-led and union-supported grievance processes, including those operating outside factory-level structures. To this extent, consider participating and supporting community-driven grievance mechanisms, operated by MSIs.
- Use purchasing practices to support remediation, including price adjustments or advance payments where suppliers cite financial constraints.
- Publicly disclose how brand leverage has been used to resolve specific labour disputes, enhancing accountability.
- Move beyond audits toward worker-driven grievance mechanisms, ensuring workers and unions are actively involved in their design and governance.
- Use leverage consistently and transparently, including requiring suppliers to issue appointment letters, recognise unions, and cooperate with State-based mechanisms.
- Contribute financially to safety upgrades and establish effective inspection mechanisms that ensure workers have access to remedy within the factories they source from.
- For brands sourcing from the same supplier(s), coordinate factory-level remediation efforts (e.g., through joint grievance mechanisms operated by independent third parties).

Conclusion

Pakistan has developed an ecosystem of laws, institutions and mechanisms intended to address business-related human rights abuses. From the different mechanisms examined, it seems that the challenge is not the absence of different routes to remedy, but rather the fragmentation, uneven implementation and limited accessibility of those that already exist.

It is apparent that workers frequently lack information about their rights, are uncertain which mechanism to approach, and face procedural delays, jurisdictional barriers, and employer resistance that undermine the adequate, effective and prompt remedies they deserve.

At the same time, the findings also highlight that domestic remedy mechanisms can work when they are accessible, properly resourced, and workers are informed about their rights. Labour departments, labour courts, the Ombudsperson, and social protection institutions have all delivered meaningful outcomes in individual cases, particularly where workers were supported by TUs or CSOs. These examples reinforce the importance of strengthening domestic remedies avenues for workers to obtain remedy.

The experiences documented through MyVox reveal patterns of harm that are systemic, overlapping, and often normalised, ranging from wage violations and harassment to constraints on freedom of association. These violations rarely occur in isolation, underscoring why remedy mechanisms cannot operate in silos or rely solely on formal legal procedures. Tools such as MyVox can play a critical role in making these patterns more visible, grounding remedy discussions in what is happening on the ground and highlighting where existing mechanisms succeed and where they fail to respond effectively.

These challenges are further compounded by the absence of unified or standardised approaches to grievance handling across brands, suppliers, and State institutions. Workers are often confronted with multiple, parallel, and inconsistent channels, none of which are sufficiently visible, harmonised or worker centred. This fragmentation places a disproportionate burden on workers and trade unions to navigate complex systems, delaying resolution and weakening trust in formal remedies.

Effective remedy therefore requires more than the existence of mechanisms. It depends on worker empowerment, clear and accessible information, predictable procedures, mechanisms that can address multiple violations, robust coordination across institutions and outcomes that are enforceable, timely, and meaningful from the perspective of rights-holders. In this context, TUs remain one of the most effective entry points to remedy. Cross-border coordination among unions, particularly when targeting multinational enterprises, can create powerful pressure points, extending accountability not only to the parent company but also across entire supply chains. Through solidarity networks, international union federations, and global campaigns, TUs can influence corporate behaviour, reinforce workers' demands, and strengthen the overall system of protection for labour rights across borders.

As Pakistan prepares the next phase of its NAP-BHR, there is a clear opportunity to move beyond policy and commitments and prioritise effective remedy. Ultimately, there is no recipe for a "perfect" remedy, but strengthening access to effective remedy in Pakistan requires a shift in focus: from creating new mechanisms to making existing ones work better, faster, and more consistently effective for workers.

Endnotes

- [1] Guiding Principle 1 calls on States to take “appropriate steps to prevent, investigate, punish, and redress” business-related human rights abuses within their jurisdiction, reinforcing the idea that remedy is not merely a reactive process but an integral part of the broader human rights protection system. Guiding Principle 22 emphasises that business enterprises, when they have caused or contributed to adverse human rights impacts, they should provide or co-operate in remediation efforts through legitimate processes, while Guiding Principle 25, mentions that States should “take appropriate steps” to guarantee that individuals harmed by business-related human rights abuses within their territory or jurisdiction are able to obtain an effective remedy.
- [2] UN General Assembly, *Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises (A/72/162)*, para 14. docs.un.org/en/A/72/162
- [3] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 8.
- [4] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 2(3).
- [5] See UN General Assembly supra note 2, para. 15.
- [6] UN General Assembly, *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation (A/RES/60/147, 2005)*, para. 12 and 14; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 2(3); General Comment No. 31 of the UN Human Rights Committee (2004), para. 15.
- [7] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 2(1) and 26 and UNGPs, Commentary to Principle 25.
- [8] Including the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law, UN General Assembly Resolution 60/147, 2005, legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/ga_60-147/ga_60-147_ph_e.pdf
- [9] Restore an affected person or group to their original situation before the violation occurred, for instance through reinstatement of employment.
- [10] Provide monetary reparation for harm that can be economically assessed, such as physical or mental injury, loss of income, or moral damages.
- [11] Supports recovery through medical, psychological, legal, or social services.
- [12] May include cessation of ongoing abuses, public acknowledgment of the harm, apologies, declarations restoring dignity and rights, or symbolic measures.
- [13] Aims to prevent recurrence of similar harms, for example through legal reforms, institutional changes, or adjustments to corporate practices.
- [14] Meaning proportionate and appropriate considering the degree of illegality or blameworthiness of the conduct and the seriousness of the harm suffered.
- [15] Capable of bringing an end to the wrongful acts and restoring the affected person or community, as far as possible, to the situation they would have been in had the violation not occurred.
- [16] OHCHR, *Access to Remedy in Cases of Business-Related Human Rights Abuse: An Interpretive Guide*, p. 20. media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/access-to-remedy-bhr-interpretive-guide-advance-version.pdf See also, UN General Assembly, A/RES/60/147, 2005, *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation*, paras. 14 and 18-23. ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/N0549642.pdf; and General Comment No. 31 of the UN Human Rights Committee, 2004, para. 15. digitallibrary.un.org/record/533996?l=en&v=pdf
- [17] Ibid. See also ICCPR, Article 2(3)(c).
- [18] Guiding Principle 26 of the UNGPs.
- [19] Guiding Principle 31 of the UNGPs.
- [20] See UN General Assembly supra note 2, paras 18-54.
- [21] See *Stitch, Technical Guidance on Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement in Garment, Apparel and Textile Sectors*, September 2025, p. 91. stitchpartnership.org/mse-technical-guidance
- [22] Ibid, para. 11
- [23] Ministry of Human Rights, Government of Pakistan, National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (2021-2026). globalnaps.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/NAP-Pakistan-2021-2026-English.pdf
- [24] Ibid, p. 70.
- [25] Business and Human Rights Pakistan, *Guidelines for Businesses in Pakistan*. bhrpak.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/BHR-Guidelines.pdf
- [26] OECD (2023), *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct*, p. 10, para 2, available [here](#); see also OECD Declaration on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises. bhrpak.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/BHR-Guidelines.pdf. In countries where they exist, NCPs operate as State-based, non-judicial grievance mechanisms: they receive complaints on business-related human rights harms, facilitate mediation, and issue public final statements assessing corporate conduct. The absence of such a mechanism in Pakistan removes one of the few internationally recognised and relatively accessible routes to remedy available to workers, TUs, and civil society in other contexts.
- [27] Invest Pakistan, *Textile Sector Brief*, invest.gov.pk/textile; see also the Express Tribune, *Despite pandemic, textile sector bounces back*, December 2020. tribune.com.pk/story/2277549/despite-pandemic-textile-sector-bounces-back
- [28] Asia Garment Hub, Pakistan country profile. asiagarmenthub.net/agh-countries/pakistan

[29] Iqbal, S., Sheeraz, M., Karim, T., Saleh, M., Naqvi, S. Z. H., Wazir, S., & ul Islam, M. (2023). *Critical evaluation of textile sector Pakistan and way forward*. Khyber Journal of Public Policy, 2(2, Special Issue), Summer 2023, p. 250. nipapeshawar.gov.pk/KJPPM/PDF/CIP/36th/P9.pdf

[30] Asia Garment Hub, Pakistan country profile. asiagarmenthub.net/agh-countries/pakistan

[31] Ali, A., Javed, M. A., Khurshid, W., Hussain, S., & Khan, M. R. & Islam, M. U, *Critical evaluation of labour-related policies, regulations, practices, and welfare activities in the context of industrial development and social protection in Pakistan*, Khyber Journal of Public Policy, 4(1), Spring 2025. nipapeshawar.gov.pk/KJPPM/PDF/CIP/RG-6.pdf

[32] Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), *Labour Force Survey 2024-2025*. pbs.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/LFS-2024-25-Annual-Report.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[33] ILO, *ILO in Pakistan*, August 2025. [ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/ILO in Pakistan.pdf](http://ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/ILO%20in%20Pakistan.pdf)

[34] See, for instance, Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Bargain: Unfair and Abusive Labor Practices in Pakistan*, January 2019. hrw.org/report/2019/01/23/no-room-bargain/unfair-and-abusive-labor-practices-pakistan; Human Rights Watch, *Pakistan: Garment Workers' Rights at Risk*, January 2023. hrw.org/news/2019/01/23/pakistan-garment-workers-rights-risk; Labour Behind the Label, *Hanging on by a Thread*, September 2023. labourbehindthelabel.org/report-hanging-on-by-a-thread/; see also Labour Behind the Label, Report: *Unboxing Marketplace Fashion-Worker Rights in the Supply Chains Behind Online Fashion Consumption*, July 2025. labourbehindthelabel.org/report-unboxing-marketplace-fashion/; Labour Behind the Label, *Hanging on by a Thread*, September 2023. labourbehindthelabel.org/report-hanging-on-by-a-thread/; Labour Behind the Label, Report: *Unboxing Marketplace Fashion-Worker Rights in the Supply Chains Behind Online Fashion Consumption*, July 2025. labourbehindthelabel.org/report-unboxing-marketplace-fashion/; Arisa, *Overworked and Underpaid: Excessive hours, wage theft and poor working conditions in Pakistan's garment export factories*, July 2025. arisa.nl/wp-content/uploads/Overworked-and-Underpaid-2025.pdf; European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) and Femnet, *No Contracts, No Rights: How the Fashion Industry Avoids Paying Minimum Wages in Pakistan*. ecchr.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/No_Contracts_No_Rights_ECCHR_FEMNET_study_final_EN.pdf; European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) and FEMNET, *Unpicking the German Supply Chain Act: How the fashion industry is failing to address labor rights violations in Pakistan*, 2025. ecchr.eu/en/publication/unpicking-the-german-supply-chain-act-how-the-fashion-industry-is-failing-to-address-labor-rights-violations-in-pakistan/; and Pakistan Institute of Labour Education & Research (PILER), *Status of Labour Rights in Pakistan*, 2014, s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/2070301/status-labour-rights-in-pakistan-the-year-2014.pdf

[35] Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), *Gendered Situation Analysis in the Textile Sector of Pakistan*, 2010. [sdpi.org/gendered-situation-analysis-in-the-textile-sector-of-pakistan/project_detail%5d\(https://sdpi.org/gendered-situation-analysis-in-the-textile-sector-of-pakistan/project_detail](http://sdpi.org/gendered-situation-analysis-in-the-textile-sector-of-pakistan/project_detail%5d(https://sdpi.org/gendered-situation-analysis-in-the-textile-sector-of-pakistan/project_detail). See also The Guardian, *Pakistan's textile industry is in crisis – and women are bearing the brunt of its decline*, February 2023. theguardian.com/global-development/2023/feb/01/pakistan-textile-industry-crisis-women

[36] International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), *Global Rights Index 2022: The World's Worst Countries for Workers, 2022, Pakistan country rating "5 – No guarantee of rights"*. ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/2022_ituc_rights_index_exec_summ_en.pdf?29890/255af5bbe87812b2ea1f8b7af4f28ab-982d819522d15c29486bf74bb8a712f84

[37] The main law related to fixation and payment of wages for garment workers is the Minimum Wages Ordinance 1961. Since the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan was enacted in 2010, minimum wage setting is the responsibility of provincial governments. Minimum wages in Pakistan are fixed based on the recommendations of Minimum Wages Boards which are tripartite in nature, comprising the representative of Government, employers and employees. Section 3 of Minimum Wage Ordinance 1961. These Boards are constituted and mandated under different laws at the provincial level: the Sindh Minimum Wages Act, 2015, the Punjab Minimum Wages Act, 2019, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Minimum Wages Act, 2013 and the Minimum Wages Ordinance, 1961 (applicable in ICT and Balochistan). However, delays in issuing the official Gazettes have often led to inconsistencies in enforcement across provinces, a concern regularly raised by trade unions. As of July 1st, 2025, the minimum wage for unskilled workers in any industry in Pakistan has been set at PKR 40,000 per month (for 48 working hours per week, with 1 day off). In Punjab, however, the last notification – issued in 2024 – was withdrawn this year. The justification for withdrawing the notification was that skilled workers can bargain for their wages with their employers.

[38] Pakistan's labour laws regulate working hours and overtime through the Factories Act, 1934, the Industrial and Commercial Employment Ordinance, 1968 and provincial legislation. Under the Factories Act, adult workers may not be required to work more than 48 hours per week, with limited exceptions for seasonal factories (50 hours per week) and in cases the work is of a continuous nature (56 hours per week). Daily working hours may not exceed 9 hours a day – and 10 hours for seasonal work. Accordingly, overtime must be compensated, and workers are entitled to weekly rest days and adequate breaks. Where overtime is worked, the rate paid should be double, and triple where overtime takes place on Sundays or on public holidays.

[39] Factories Act, 1934, Section 49. Employees who complete 12 months of continuous service are entitled to 14 consecutive days of paid annual leave. A worker shall be deemed to have completed a period of twelve months continuous service in a factory notwithstanding any interruption in service during those twelve months brought

about by sickness, accident or authorised leave not exceeding ninety days in the aggregate for all three, or by a lock-out, or by a strike which is not an illegal strike, or by intermittent periods of involuntary unemployment not exceeding thirty days in the aggregate.

[40] Maternity Benefit Ordinance, 1958, Section 5. Women workers are entitled to paid maternity leave, comprising six weeks before and six weeks after childbirth, and are protected from dismissal during this period. In addition, workers may avail paid casual leave for urgent personal needs and sick leave at half pay upon submission of a medical certificate, which employers are not permitted to refuse when properly supported.

[41] Section 59 of the Factories Act, 1934, provides for paid festival holidays declared by the government, and employees required to work on such holidays are entitled to an additional paid day off along with a substitute holiday.

[42] Under the ILO definition, a living wage refers to a level of remuneration that enables workers and their households to meet their basic needs and maintain a decent standard of living, reflecting local economic and social conditions. It is calculated on the basis of income earned during normal working hours and is intended to cover essential costs such as food, housing, healthcare, education, and other necessities, without reliance on excessive overtime. See ILO website, *Living Wages*. ilo.org/living-wages

[43] See Sayyed, A., Dawani, K. (2024). Working paper series, No. 12. *Living Wage in Pakistan: Estimates, Adoption, and Policy Challenges*. ankerresearchinstitute.org/working-papers/pakistanwpn12. See also Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI), *Exploring the socio-economic impact of the living wage gap: case studies from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan*. ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared_resources/Living_wage_gap_-_case_studies_from_Bangladesh%2C_India_%26_Pakistan.pdf

[44] ILO, Social Dialogue, *Collective Bargaining and Responsible Business Conduct: Promoting the strategic use of International Instruments for trade unions' action*, 2020. ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_dialogue/@actrav/documents/publication/wcms_722744.pdf

[45] Constitution of Pakistan, Article 17. provides the right to association as a fundamental freedom for all citizens.

[46] Amnesty International, *South Asia: Stitched up: Denial of freedom of association for garment workers in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka*, November 2025. amnesty.org/en/documents/asa04/8929/2025/en/

[47] OHCHR, *Access to Remedy in Cases of Business-Related Human Rights Abuse: A Practical Guide for State-Based Judicial Mechanisms*, September 2024. ohchr.org/en/publications/reference-publications/access-to-remedy-bhr-practical-guide-judicial

[48] OHCHR, *Access to Remedy in Cases of Business-Related Human Rights Abuse : An Interpretive Guide*, 2024, p. 42. ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/access-to-remedy-bhr-interpretive-guide-en.pdf

[49] Ibid.

[50] OHCHR supra note 48, p. 44-45.

[51] Ibid, p. 45.

[52] Provincial industrial relations laws include: the Punjab Labour Code, 2026; the Sindh Industrial Relations Act, 2013; the Balochistan Industrial Relations Act, 2010, subsequently revised and updated as the Balochistan Industrial Relations Act, 2022; and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Industrial Relations Act, 2010.

[53] Although labour courts do deal with these cases, non-payment of wages is not directly dealt under the IRA acts. In fact, the jurisdiction to labour courts is awarded through other laws on minimum wages and other relevant legislation.

[54] Industrial Relations Act (IRA) 2008, Section 55.7

[55] The NAP-BHR notes that potential barriers include the costs of litigation, delays and limited awareness among rights-holders regarding rights and available remedy mechanisms. See NAP-BHR Pakistan supra note 23, p. 13.

[56] The Federal Ombudsman (Office of the Wafaqi Mohtasib) handles cases of general injustice or maladministration by federal agencies.

[57] FOSPAH's jurisdiction was expanded through the Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act, 2020, which authorises it to adjudicate cases concerning women's inheritance and property rights.

[58] Protection against Harassment of women at the Workplace Act, 2010, Section 8.

[59] See Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, Section 4. Minor penalties may include censure, withholding of promotion or increments, stoppage at an efficiency bar, or recovery of compensation payable to the complainant. Major penalties may include reduction to a lower post or timescale, compulsory retirement, removal or dismissal from service, cancellation of a professional licence, or imposition of a fine, which may be payable directly to the complainant in cases where the accused is the employer. The Competent Authority must impose the recommended penalty within one week.

[60] See The Express Tribune, Sexual harassment law remains unimplemented at workplaces, January 2026. tribune.com.pk/story/1831170/sexual-harassment-law-remains-unimplemented-workplaces?

[61] As reflected by stakeholder consultations.

[62] See Human Rights Watch, *Combating Sexual Harassment in the Garment Industry*, February 2019. hrw.org/news/2019/02/12/combating-sexual-harassment-garment-industry. See also World Economic Forum, *Workplace harassment in South Asia restricts female progress: here's how to make workspaces safer*, February 2024. weforum.org/stories/2024/02/workplace-harassment-south-asia-safer-workspaces/

[63] See UN Women and ILO, *Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment*, which notes that nearly 60% of women's employment is in the informal economy, available here. See also ILO, *Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture (third edition)*, 2018, p. 58. ilo.org/sites/default/files/

wcmssp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf

[64] See Human Rights Watch *supra* note 34.

[65] NHRIs are accredited by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) – either as ‘A status’ (full compliance) or ‘B status’ (partial compliance) – based on the extent to which they meet the requirements of the Paris Principles. Pakistan’s NCHR has been accredited by GANHRI with an ‘A’ status.

[66] See Asia Pacific Forum, *A Manual on National Human Rights Institutions*, May 2015 (updated May 2018). cdn.sanity.io/files/upt0oqh4/production/ccc6555dd8f7d78e0a525461f9c1e5f5b81805d8.pdf

[67] Other NHRIs include the National Commission on Child Welfare and Development (NCCWD), the National Commission on the Rights of the Child (NCRC), and the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW). Additionally, the process is underway for the reconstitution of Pakistan’s National Commission on Minorities (NCM), after the last NCM completed its tenure on 10 October 2023.

[68] Particularly those affecting sanitation workers.

[69] The Industrial Relations Commission was established through amendments in the Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969 in 1972, mainly with the mandate to deal with issues of registration of industry-wise trade unions and national-level trade unions and federations. Later on, it was entrusted with cases of unfair labour practices in all establishments. The Commission was retained under the Industrial Relations Ordinance (IRO), 2002, and Industrial Relations Act (IRA), 2008. After the 18th Constitutional Amendment, when the subject of labour welfare was devolved to the provinces and the Industrial Relations Act (IRA), 2012, was enacted for dealing with labour issues in the ICT and trans-provincial establishments, NIRC was established under Section 53 of the Act with a fresh mandate.

[70] *Ibid*, Sections 31 and 32

[71] *Ibid*, Section 33.

[72] *Ibid*, Sections 67–78. See also Section 57, which includes imprisonment of up to six months, a fine of up to PKR 50,000, or both in cases where any person obstructs or abuses NIRC’s processes or disobeys its orders or directions.

[73] IRA 2012, Section 67.

[74] *Ibid*, Section 55. The Full Bench is comprised of at least three members.

[75] *Ibid*, Section 58.

[76] A memorandum of grievance must be clearly written, organised in numbered paragraphs, and include the full names, addresses of each party, the relief sought, and supporting documents (such as the grievance notice and proof of its service, relevant employer orders, and any other relevant evidence). It must be signed or thumb-impressed by the petitioner and submitted in multiple copies, including one for each respondent. See NIRC’s website, nirc.gov.pk/

[77] IRA 2012, Section 30(1).

[78] *Ibid*, Section 33.

[79] *Ibid*, Section 33(10).

[80] Under the IRA 2012, Section 2, a “Collective Bargaining Agent” in relation to an establishment, group of establishments or industry, means the trade union of the workmen which under Section 19, is the agent of workmen in the establishment or industry, in the matter of collective bargaining.

[81] IRA 2012, Section 34(1).

[82] *Ibid*, Section 35(1). Where the views are so communicated to the Works Council, a copy of the communication shall also be sent to the other party.

[83] *Ibid*, Section 35(2)(3).

[84] *Ibid*, Section 38(1).

[85] *Ibid*, Section 40.

[86] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Pakistan Office, *Mapping Labour Unions in Pakistan*, December 2021, p. 35. collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/19148

[87] See The Dawn, NIRC’s Plight, May 2025. dawn.com/news/1909964

[88] See Business Recorder, *NIRC, labour courts must speed up case disposal*: SC, November 2024 brecorder.com/news/40334132/nirc-labour-courts-must-speed-up-case-disposal-sc

[89] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung *supra*-note 86.

[90] OHCHR, *Accountability and Remedy Project II: Enhancing effectiveness of State-based non-judicial mechanisms in cases of business-related human rights abuse*. ohchr.org/en/business/ohchr-accountability-and-remedy-project/phase2-state-based-non-judicial-mechanisms

[91] OHCHR, *Access to Remedy in Cases of Business-related Human Rights Abuse: An Interpretive Guide*, 2024, p. 51. ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/access-to-remedy-bhr-interpretive-guide-en.pdf

[92] OHCHR *supra* note 48, p. 52.

[93] See OHCHR *supra* note 48, page 57.

[94] The Payment of Wages Act, 1936 is designed to protect workers’ rights regarding the timely and full payment of wages. The Act seeks to prevent wage exploitation, promote fair labour practices, and ensure economic security for workers, particularly those employed in factories and industrial establishments such as those in Pakistan’s garment sector.

[95] Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 2013.

[96] Sindh Terms of Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 2015.

[97] Balochistan Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 2021.

[98] These topics are included in the Punjab Labour Code 2026, which came into effect in early 2026. The Punjab Labour Code 2026 is a major legislative reform consolidating 26 provincial labour laws into a unified framework to enhance worker rights, ensure fair wages, and abolish child/forced labour.

[99] ECCHR and FEMNET, *No Contracts, No Rights: How the Fashion Industry Avoids Paying Minimum Wages in Pakistan*.

ecchr.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/No_Contracts_No_Rights_ECCHR_FEMNET_study_final_EN.pdf

[100] Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Bargain: Unfair and Abusive Labor Practices in Pakistan*, January 2019. hrw.org/report/2019/01/23/no-room-bargain/unfair-and-abusive-labor-practices-pakistan

[101] Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis & HRD and ILO, *Pakistan national profile on occupational safety and health*, 2022. [ophrd.gov.pk/SitelImage/Misc/files/Ministry%20of%20Overseas%20Report%20Final-Print%20\(1\).pdf](https://ophrd.gov.pk/SitelImage/Misc/files/Ministry%20of%20Overseas%20Report%20Final-Print%20(1).pdf)

[102] In 2012–2013, the ILO reported that Pakistan had only 337 government inspectors for the entire country, around one for every 250,000 workers – see ILO Country Office of Pakistan, *Labour Inspection System in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities*, 2016. ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40asia/%40ro-bangkok/%40ilo-islamabad/documents/publication/wcms_532847.pdf? Data on inspections or reports on behalf of the Labour Department are very limited, if not unavailable.

[103] Sindh enacted the Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2017, Punjab followed with the Punjab Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2019, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa introduced the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2022, and Balochistan enacted the Balochistan Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2022.

[104] Pakistan has not ratified the fundamental OSH Conventions C155 (Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981) and C187 (Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006).

[105] See Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), *Seven years after deadly fire, garment workers in Pakistan still need a worker-led factory safety programme*. cleanclothes.org/news/2019/seven-years-after-deadly-fire-garment-workers-in-pakistan-still-wait-for-a-worker-led-factory-safety-programme

[106] See the Dawn, January 2025. dawn.com/news/1887784

[107] Jurgees, S. M. M. R., Suleman, S., & Shahid, A. (2024). *The Role of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in Pakistan's Legal System*. *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 5(1), 194–202. doi.org/10.55737/qjssh.733319300

[108] See FairWear, *Pakistan country study* 2021, p. 39. api.fairwear.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021-CS-PAKISTAN.pdf?utm

[109] The Dawn, *NA body directs EOBI to expedite pension cases*, August 2025. dawn.com/news/1938096

[110] See ILO, *Pocket book for effective compliance with and the enforcement of social security laws in Pakistan*, June 2021. social-protection.org/gimi/Media.action?jsession-id=SmF-u0o9VJslINYl8qc8PFb8n3lo9pJLwECuTmb-h8m90Hgo1zOe86!-458942951?id=18509

[111] Social Security Ordinance, 1965, Section 66.

[112] See ILO, *Mapping Social Protection Systems in Pakistan*, 2019. ilo.org/publications/mapping-social-protection-systems-pakistan-status-current-systems-line-un

[113] Through the portal mis.wwf.gov.pk.

[114] Punjab Workers Welfare Fund Act, 2019 and Sindh Workers Welfare Fund Act, 2014.

[115] See Wage Indicator Foundation, Workers Welfare Fund. paycheck.pk/labour-laws/social-security-1/workers-welfare-fund

[116] See OHCHR, *Accountability and Remedy Project III: Enhancing effectiveness of non-State-based grievance mechanisms in cases of business-related human rights abuse*, p. 33–35. ohchr.org/en/business/ohchr-accountability-and-remedy-project/phase3-non-state-based-grievance-mechanisms

[117] Guiding Principle 28 of the UNGPs.

[118] See OHCHR supra note 48, p. 61.

[119] OHCHR, *Improving Accountability and Access to Remedy in Cases of Business Involvement in Human Rights Abuses: Accountability and Remedy Project Phase III—Enhancing the Effectiveness of Non-State-Based Grievance Mechanisms: Scope and Programme of Work*, 2018, p. 11–17. ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Business/ARP/ARPIII-PoW.pdf?utm

[120] These may include factory-level helpdesks, digital complaint systems, confidential hotlines, human resources departments, or brand complaint channels. According to the Commentary of the UN Guiding Principle 29 these mechanisms fulfil two essential functions within a company's human rights due diligence process. First, they help identify and analyse potential and actual adverse human rights impacts by creating a channel through which individuals can signal those. This information can reveal systemic or emerging risks that formal assessments may overlook. Second, they create opportunities for early and direct resolution of grievances, allowing companies to address harms before they escalate.

[121] Jointly established by multiple actors who commit to common standards of conduct rooted in internationally recognised human rights and provide sectoral or cross-sectoral resolution. They include mechanisms established by certification bodies, multi-stakeholder initiatives, global framework agreements, and independent accountability mechanisms within multilateral development institutions. While these mechanisms do not typically issue legally binding orders, they may facilitate dialogue, mediation, or arbitration, sometimes leading to tailored solutions including apologies, compensation, reinstatement of workers, or commitments to change business practices. In initiatives with stronger accountability frameworks, remedies may be formalised through agreements that can later be enforced, including contractually.

[122] Established through intergovernmental agreements and may, in some cases, administer procedures resembling judicial processes. However, unlike domestic courts they do not belong to the judiciary of any single State and remain structurally independent both the governments that established them and the national legal systems they monitor. Examples include regional human rights commissions or courts, United Nations treaty bodies, and the spe-

cial procedures of the Human Rights Council. While they do not always have the power to issue binding legal remedies, they play a significant role in assessing human rights violations, making recommendations for corrective action, and guiding States' obligations to protect individuals against corporate-related human rights abuses. Their influence lies in their ability to shape jurisprudence, promote accountability, and reinforce international human rights standards.

[123] See OHCHR *supra* note 48, p. 66.

[124] *Ibid.*

[125] OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct, p. 19. oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2018/02/oecd-due-diligence-guidance-for-responsible-business-conduct_c669b-d57/15f5f4b3-en.pdf.

See also International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), *ITUC legal guide for setting up an operational-level grievance mechanism for the world of work in the context of business and human rights*, p.7. ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_legal_guide_grievance_mechanism_en.pdf

[126] Human Rights Watch, *Obsessed with Audit Tools, Missing the Goal: Why Social Audits Can't Fix Labor Rights Abuses in Global Supply Chains*, November 2022. hrw.org/report/2022/11/15/obsessed-audit-tools-missing-goal/why-social-audits-cant-fix-labor-rights-abuses

[127] Harrison J., Wielga M., *Grievance Mechanisms in Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives: Providing Effective Remedy for Human Rights Violations?*, *Business and Human Rights Journal* 8 (2023): 43–65. cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/82FE88CF2EF-758F8A3EBF9CFBDC09533/S2057019822000372a.pdf/grievance-mechanisms-in-multi-stakeholder-initiatives-providing-effective-remedy-for-human-rights-violations.pdf

[128] Northumbria University, *Multi-stakeholder Initiatives*. hosting.northumbria.ac.uk/impactplusnetwork/multi-stakeholder-initiatives/

[129] See ILO, *Global framework agreements: achieving decent work in global supply chains*, 2016. researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/encyclopediaEntry/Global-framework-agreements-achieving-decent-work/995219386902676

[130] IndustriALL's Global Framework Agreements. [admin.industrialunion.org/issues/confronting-global-capital/global-framework-agreements](https://industrialunion.org/issues/confronting-global-capital/global-framework-agreements)

[131] IndustriALL, *Agreement with H&M proves instrumental in resolving conflicts*, January 2016. industrialunion.org/agreement-with-hm-proves-instrumental-in-resolving-conflicts-0

[132] Pakistan Accords on Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry, January 2023. internationalaccord.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Pakistan-Accord-on-Health-and-Safety-in-the-Textile-and-Garment-Industry-2023_public-version.pdf

[133] ILO, *Global framework agreements: achieving decent work in global supply chains*, 2016, p. 41. researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/encyclopediaEntry/Global-framework-agreements-achieving-decent-work/995219386902676

[134] The Freedom Fund, *The Impact of Strategic Human Rights Litigation on Corporate Behaviour*, November 2023. cdn.freedomfund.org/app/uploads/2024/03/litigationimpactreport-2023.pdf

[135] Carolijn Terwindt and Christian Schliemann-Radbruch, *Transnational Strategic Litigation: An Emerging Part of Civil Society's Repertoire for Corporate Accountability*, in *State of Civil Society Report 2017*, ed. CIVICUS. civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2017/essays/transnational-strategic-litigation-an-emerging-part-of-civil-society/C3%A7%C3%B6s-repertoire-for-corporate-accountability.pdf

[136] Signed by many major brands to improve safety standards and enforce corrective measures at supplier factories, with mechanisms for independent inspections and worker recourse.

[137] Zahn T., *Aldi-Bananen: Lieferkettengesetz wirkt auf Plantagen in Costa Rica*, Oxfam Deutschland, 6 November 2025. oxfam.de/blog/aldi-bananen-lieferkettengesetz-wirkt-plantagen-costa-rica. See also Business and Human Rights Resource Center, Costa Rica: *Affected rightsholders receive payments from banana producers after filing complaint under German Supply Chain Act*. business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/costa-rica-lieferkettengesetz-wirkt/

[138] European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), *Human rights violations off the rack: European brands allegedly rely on forced labor*. ecchr.eu/en/case/china-zwangsarbeit-uyghuren/

[139] ILO, *Special procedures for the examination of complaints alleging violations of freedom of association*, para 14. normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=1000:62:0::NO:62:P62_LIST_ENTRIE_ID:4046805:NO. See also ILO, Committee on Freedom of Association (CFA) ilo.org/international-labour-standards/ilo-supervisory-system-special-procedures/committee-freedom-association-cfa

[140] European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), *Strategic Litigation Guide for Trade Unions and Workers' Rights*, October 2024. etuc.org/sites/default/files/publication/file/2025-04/EWI0006_ETUC%20PUBLICATION%20Def%2005-Spreads.pdf

[141] See ILO's website, *Freedom of Association Cases, Pakistan*. normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=1000:20060::FIND:::

[142] See Clean Clothes Campaign, *The Clean Clothes Urgent Appeals System*. cleanclothes.org/file-repository/resources-publications-ua-leaflet.pdf/@download/file



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