

Threads of Struggle

Challenges & Solutions: Home Textile Factory Workers in Pakistan

White paper

The global demand for home textiles has surged in recent years and propelled Pakistan into the world's top three exporters, following China and India. The industry is a cornerstone of Pakistan's economy, renowned for its high-quality cotton products like bed linens and towels. But despite its importance for the economy, home textile factory workers face low wages, job insecurity, and a pervasive fear of organising. These conditions mirror the challenges faced by workers in the fashion industry, but have, in general, been receiving less attention from policymakers and media.

This white paper draws on first-hand experiences from workers and interviews with experts. It aims to shed light on the specific hardships faced by home textile workers in Pakistan, and explores potential solutions to improve their working conditions. The paper is part of an ongoing project between civil society organisations AwazCDS-Pakistan and Swedwatch and will be followed by more thorough analysis and recommendations.

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper draw on first-hand experiences of workers as well as interviews with experts. Research was conducted by AwazCDS-Pakistan between January to June 2023. Interviews were done through four different focus group discussions with 48 participants (50% female/male) from seven factories located in the district of Faisalabad, all of which are responsible for the final manufacturing of home-textile and exporting to the EU market. In addition, ten in-depth expert interviews were conducted with national stakeholders involved in the industry. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.



COMMON CHALLENGES IN THE INDUSTRY

2. EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS

Workers in the home textile industry face several issues related to employment contracts. Many workers do not have formal employment contracts, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. Even when contracts are provided, they are often not standardized, leading to inconsistencies in terms and conditions across the workforce. The absence of standardized contracts undermines workers' job security and their ability to advocate for fair treatment and adequate compensation. Additionally, Employee's Old-Age Benefits Institution (EOBI) and social security benefits are often not provided to the workers, indicating that the factory may be failing to fulfil its legal obligations.

The industry has a growing issue with daily contracted workers, operating under informal arrangements. They are frequently paid lower wages compared to permanent employees and do not have legal access to the same benefits as permanent employees, such as social security, pension or paid overtime. While day labour is not inherently illegal, these types of contracts pose significant issues in terms of workers' rights. In many cases, the legal framework does allow for day labourers to be employed under specific conditions. This increases the likelihood that factories are exploiting daily contracted employees to avoid providing the protections and benefits to workers required by law. This situation creates a grey area where the employment of day workers is technically legal but practically falls short of the legal standards meant to protect workers' rights.

2. COMPENSATIONS AND BENEFITS

Many workers do not receive fair compensation, benefits, or job security. Workers often face extended working hours, exceeding the legal limit of 48 hours per week, with insufficient breaks and inadequate compensation for overtime. This extended, and irregular, work schedule places a substantial burden on the workers, affecting their overall quality of life. Interviewees reported wages averaging around PKR 20,000- 30 000 (66-99 EUR) per month, which does not reflect the intensity and hours of their labour.

The workforce includes a significant number of women. However, there is notable gender pay gap, up to 50% difference between men and women. Overall, earnings are often insufficient to cover employees' expenses for their families. The lack of financial stability and security leaves workers vulnerable and unable to plan for their futures.

Many workers are aware that they have the right to be compensated for overtime but have difficulties claiming their rightful compensation and/or benefits. One problem is the absence of formal contracts, another one is that even if grievance mechanisms are in place they are slow and perceived as corrupt, and therefore mistrusted by employees.

In addition, some people were told to lie to auditors about their payment, stating that they do get paid for overtime, or get annual bonuses, even though they do not.

"In a factory, the rights for men and women should be the same. But there is differentiation here. They make women work more."

3. HEALTH AND SAFETY

Health and safety measures within the industry have seen some improvements due to collaboration with the labour department and the implementation of compliance audits. However, these measures are still not enough. Harassment and unsafe working conditions continue to be widespread, adversely affecting the overall well-being of workers.

One major issue is the overcrowded and poorly ventilated factory environments, which can lead to respiratory problems and other health issues. Inadequate lighting in these workplaces contributes to eye strain and accidents. The sanitation facilities are often insufficient, with a lack of clean and accessible bathrooms particularly impacting female workers who face long distances to bathrooms. Restricted access to clean drinking water also remains an issue. These insufficient facilities significantly impact the daily lives of workers, particularly women, making it difficult for them to maintain basic hygiene.

Another significant problem is the lack of proper safety measures and equipment, which exposes workers to potential injuries. Factories frequently do not provide satisfactory safety gear, such as gloves or masks, increasing the risk of work-related injuries and illnesses. Additionally, there are not enough facilities for breaks, meaning workers cannot rest properly during their shifts, which can lead to fatigue and increase the risk of injuries.

Harassment in the workplace is another prevalent issue, creating a stressful and unsafe environment. The absence of effective harassment committees, unions and proper health and safety protocols means that incidents of harassment often go unreported and unaddressed, further compromising the health and safety of workers. Female workers are especially affected by harassment.

“We have been made mental slaves, the concept of what to do if there is a problem has been removed from us.”

4. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Training opportunities for workers in the home textile industry are limited, particularly for female workers. There is a pressing need for formal training programs and skill development initiatives to help workers improve their skills and advance in their careers. However, such opportunities are currently scarce, leaving workers without the necessary tools to progress and improve their employment prospects.

Additionally, workers lack awareness of their legal rights and the grievance mechanisms available to them. This lack of awareness, coupled with a fear of retaliation, often prevents workers from reporting issues and advocating for their rights. Effective harassment committees and privacy protections are necessary to support workers who come forward with complaints.

5. TRADE UNION RIGHTS

There is a lack of support for union formation, making it difficult for workers to organize and collectively advocate for their rights. Many workers are unaware of their rights and the benefits of union membership due to a lack of awareness programs. Furthermore, those who are aware often fear retaliation from employers, which discourages them from joining or forming unions. Additionally, existing unions may lack the resources and influence needed to effectively address workers' issues and push for meaningful changes in working conditions, compensation, and job security. This combination of fear, lack of awareness, and weak union structures leaves workers without a strong collective voice to negotiate better terms and protections.

“There are no functional unions in the factories, only paperwork is completed to avoid inspections. Anyone who joins a union is fired from service, even employees who speak up for their rights are also fired.”



NEED FOR A MORE PROACTIVE APPROACH TO TACKLE CHALLENGES

The situation for home-textile workers, as outlined in this paper, shows the clear need for a more proactive approach by stakeholders (suppliers and importers/buyers but also trade unions and public authorities). Below are some suggested actions that could help create a more respectful, equitable, and healthy work environment for home textile workers.

DECENT WORKING CONDITIONS

- Ensure adequate facilities in small and medium-sized factories, such as proper lighting, ventilation, and clean facilities.
- Ensure access to clean drinking water within the plant or hall and improve the accessibility and hygiene conditions of washrooms, especially for female workers.
- Create designated areas or a canteen for breaks, including tea or lunch breaks.
- Take measures to create a safer and more respectful work environment for female workers.

EQUITABLE COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

- Address the pay gap between male and female workers and provide fair compensation and benefits, including overtime compensation, and maternity and paternity leaves.
- Implement standard operating procedures and employment contracts to ensure job security in compliance with minimum wage requirements and social security benefits.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- Establish regular and consistent work schedules to improve work-life balance.
- Establish day-care centres within factory premises for workers' children.

EFFICIENT GRIEVANCE AND COMPLAINT MECHANISMS

- Create a safe and supportive environment for workers to report harassment and other issues without fear of retaliation.
- Improve the accessibility and hygiene conditions of washrooms, especially for female workers.
- Raise awareness among workers about their rights and available complaint mechanisms.
- Support the formation of unions and strengthen their role in resolving issues.

ACCESS TO TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

- Establish formal training programs for operating new machinery, providing guidance and support for skill development.
- Expand training opportunities beyond basic safety training to comprehensive skill development.

- Collaborate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide workshops and training sessions on workers' rights.
- Ensure equal training and promotion opportunities for female workers in home textile mills.

EQUITABLE COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

- Provide information sessions and training within the factory to increase awareness of legal rights.
- Ensure facilities such as water, canteens, children's rooms, and social security benefits are provided to workers.
- Improve communication and implementation of policies on sexual harassment, anti-discrimination, and workers' legal rights.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Sofia Käll, Programme Officer Swedwatch, sofia@swedwatch.org
Zia Ur Rehman, CEO AwazCDS-Pakistan, zia@awazcds.org.pk
www.swedwatch.org

