

# **Pakistan: Seven years after Baldia fire, garment workers still without safety**

Sunday 15 September 2019, by [UR-REHMAN Zia](#) (Date first published: 12 September 2019).

**A report launched on the seventh anniversary of the deadly fire in Baldia Town's garment factory that killed over 250 labourers says that although multiple initiatives aimed at addressing workplace safety have been initiated in Pakistan since then, they lack the necessary elements that must be in place to ensure safety.**

The report titled 'Pakistan's garment workers need a safety accord' has jointly been published by the Clean Clothes Campaign, Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research, the Labour Education Foundation, the International Labor Rights Forum, and the National Trade Union Federation.

Prominent labour rights and trade union leaders, including Zulfiqar Shah, Habibuddin Junaidi, and Nasir Mansoor, launched the report at a press conference at the Karachi Press Club on Wednesday. The report reviews current risks and violations in Pakistan's textile and garment factories and assesses several current initiatives in the industry that include safety aspects, analysing their commitments and performance.

The report says the initiatives established in the past years have failed to put workers and the unions that represent them in the centre of their programmes and therefore will fail to meaningfully address the industry's safety issues. Unions and labour education organisations in Pakistan are calling for a mechanism modelled on the safety programme put into place in 2013 after Bangladesh's deadly Rana Plaza building collapse.

The report highlights that although multiple initiatives aimed at addressing workplace safety have been initiated in Pakistan since 2012, all of them have limited transparency and none are enforceable. Most importantly, none of them have been developed with the participation of unions or other labour rights groups in Pakistan.

Worker representation is missing not only in their design, but also in their implementation and governance.

"Pakistan primarily produces low-priced items in garment manufacturing and does not rely on high-skilled workers or advanced technology. The country's textile and garment workers come from a predominantly low education background," the report observed. "The sector absorbs the largest segment of the workforce following the agricultural sector, where production is also characterised by low skill requirements and low technology. The textile and garment workers are generally from the low strata of society and many are originally from Pakistan's rural areas."

In Karachi, the country's largest industrial base and most culturally diverse city, many workers come from migrant communities, ranging from Afghanistan, controversially-titled Bengali and Burmese migrants, and people from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These communities are extremely economically vulnerable and marginalised, the report says.

Brands and retailers continue to channel their energies through the very same corporate auditing schemes that have failed to meaningfully improve the industry or prevent mass casualties in the past. Pakistan's government inspectorates remain understaffed, underfunded and unable to meaningfully cover a growing industry. In the meantime, workers continue to risk their lives in unsafe factories and mills every day.

The report urges brands and retailers sourcing from Pakistan to heed Pakistan's labour movement's calls to support the formation of a legally-binding agreement between apparel brands and local and global unions and labour rights groups to make workplaces safe. Such an agreement must draw upon lessons from the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, which amounts to putting transparency, enforcement, commercial obligations, and worker participation at the centre of the programme.

It is essential for the safety of workers that local unions and other local workers' rights organisations be involved in the conceptualization, design, governance, and implementation of any initiatives aimed at improving occupational health and safety in the country.

The report also recommends that Pakistan's national and provincial governments take a series of steps to enhance compliance in factories that would not be covered by the foreseen labour-brand accord.

The report states that governments in countries that headquarter major garment brands and retailers can and must end unaccountable self-monitoring by major actors in the garment industry by putting in place mandatory human rights due diligence legislation, thus enforcing supply chain accountability. To make a real difference in the field of worker safety, social auditing firms must furthermore be held liable for faulty audits that might cost lives.

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• The News. September 12, 2019:  
<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/525051-seven-years-after-baldia-fire-garment-workers-still-without-safety-programme>