

**Exploring the Working Conditions in the Garments Industry:
Identifying the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Status in the Garments
Industry In Pakistan**

Nasir Javaid, `Senior Research Analyst, Urban Unit, Planning and Development Board, Government
of Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: 20180032@lums.edu.pk

Sumaira Riaz, Healthcare Manager, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan.

Email: 20190005@lums.edu.pk

Abstract:

This article investigates the current working conditions and the status of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) standards in the garment industry of Pakistan. Due to the dearth of research conducted on exploring the working conditions in the garments industry in relation to OSH, this article contributes meaningfully to the scholarly literature. The findings of the research have inferred that the implementation of OSH is significantly lacking not only in the garment industry but also in other sectors of the country. The laborers are exploited as they are paid low wages, are bound to work in hazardous conditions neglecting OSH requirements, face harassment, and are given unsafe work environment. Many workers are forced to work overtime often without compensation, because they are required to complete the apparel orders within their assigned deadlines. Workplace conditions also hazardously affect workers' health. Moreover, labor unions have lost their centralized power to provide a platform to workers to raise voices for their rights. Considering this, we suggest that either new policies or amendments to the existing laws should be made to foster unionization since unions can ensure that workers' rights are protected. OSH adoption at workplaces will not only improve the

working conditions but will also enhance the labor productivity and consequent profitability of the businesses.

Keywords: Labor working conditions, Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), garment industry, workplace hazards, and labor unions.

Introduction:

The garments industry holds key importance in the economy of Pakistan. It contributes to around 8.5-10% in the national GDP and approximately 60% of national exports per annum (Watson et. al., 2016). Pakistan is also ranked as the fifth largest producer of raw cotton worldwide (The leading cotton producing countries are China with 6,423,000 mt, India with 6,162,000 mt, US with 3,181,000 mt, Brazil with 2,341,000 mt, and then, Pakistan at the fifth place with 980,000 mt. Source: Statista, 2022.) as it produces around 980,000 metric tons (mt) of cotton (Statista, 2022). Moreover, Pakistan is also the eighth largest exporter of garments products in Asia (ILO, 2014; Watson, et. al., 2016).

Due to the prevalent adoption of the profit maximization principle, the managers of production units in Pakistan focus more on increasing production, improving revenue, and reducing costs (Gayer, 2019). With that agenda, they do not work on improving the working conditions for their laborers considering it as an expense (Gayer, 2019). As a result, the laborers continue working on low wages in hazardous working conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Many workers at the small and large factories are hired without any contracts and are paid low wages. Unfortunately, workers are also forced to do overtime work, because they do not question any such exploitation and continue working timidly out of the fear of losing their job (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These issues demand that the Occupational Safety and Health standards should be enforced at the garment factories.

At present, the Pakistan Occupational Health and Safety Act has not even become a law yet and it is still a bill that is still awaiting the attention of the assembly members for enactment. Furthermore, there is a significant dearth of research conducted on exploring the working conditions in the garments industry in Pakistan in relation to studying the implementation of Occupational Safety and Health standards (Kabir, et. al., 2019). Therefore, this article adds

value to the literature by identifying working conditions and the status of OSH in garments factories in Pakistan. In what follows we will explain the research methodology. Next, we shall elucidate the findings of the primary research conducted for this article. An analysis of the findings will be conducted to present key recommendations in the next section after which the inferences will be drawn.

Research Methodology:

The research methodology adopted for this article was qualitative in nature. Primary and secondary research was conducted to identify the working conditions in the garments industry.

The Scope and Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of the research was to evaluate the working conditions and the status of the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) at the garment industry workplaces. Thus, the scope of this research is limited to the garments industry includes the production and value-chain of fabric, clothes, and textiles, and the embroidery and embellishment of clothing, the fashion industry, apparel stores, and cloth retailers (Michigan State University, 2022). Therefore, interviews were conducted of those workers and individuals whose employment is related to these sectors and who have detailed knowledge of the issues of the working conditions in these sub-sectors; for example, the labor working in the garment factories as machine operators, feedo operators, quality checker of cloth/clothes, cloth-cutters, sewing masters, etc., their supervisor and managers, and the people connected to the labor organizations that have already conducted a significant amount of research on labor issues in each industry.

Primary Research:

Detailed qualitative interviews were conducted with the laborers, supervisors, managers, and owners at the workplace. Transcripts of interviews were also maintained as record. The

interviews investigated the working conditions in the garment industry and the state of implementation of the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) there. The total number of interviews conducted was 76.

The Participants of the Interviews:

Seventy-six people were interviewed for this research.

Table 1:

Male Labors	46
Female Labors	19
Management officials (supervisor, HR manager, and owner)	3
Personnel from labor organizations (including the Director of LEF and Director of Mazdur Mahaz Union)	3
The person working with Labor Court	1
Official in the Labor Department interviewed	1
Persons with OSH Certification interviewed	2
Former employee at engineer rank in a garment factory	1

Categorization of Labor:

Since labor is the largest group of respondents who participated in the interviews, therefore, it was essential to categorize them by bringing diversity in their pool to avert biasness towards a certain identity of the labor. Therefore, we ensured diversity in selecting the pool of the labor. Further details about labor are provided in the below table:

Table 2:

<u>Diversity of the Criterion</u>	<u>Participants in the Pool</u>
Religion	17 Christians; 49 Muslims
Skillset	42 Skilled, 12 semi-skilled, 12 unskilled
Demographics	South Punjab, Central Punjab, and North Punjab; KPK
Age	Minimum age: 18, Maximum age: 50
Ranks	Supervisor, HR-Managers, Feedo operators, Machine operators, Quality Checkers, Cutting Masters, Helpers, Loaders, etc.
Number of factories	19 (The names, addresses, and major functions of factories are provided in the Appendix-II.)

In addition to the above categorization of labor, the below tables present the labor as per their skills: Table 3:

Skilled labor	No. of Laborers
Machine operators	32
Quality checker	2
Cutting master	3
Feedo operators	5

Table 4:

Semi-skilled labor	No. of Laborers
Cropper	4
Overlock operator	8

Table 5:

Unskilled labor	No. of Laborers
Helper	3
Clipper	4
Cleaner	2
Touching man	1
Loaders	2

Ethical Strength of the Questionnaire:

It is pertinent to mention here that all the questions that were asked to the laborers were first approved by the “Office of Research” of the Suleman Dawood School of Business (SDSB) at LUMS through the “IRB Ethics Approval Form” that entailed the “Protection of Human Subjects and Animals from Research Risks”. That is, it was assured that the research will cause no harm to the employment, well-being, or life.. Therefore, the required level of care was adopted for interviewing the workers.

Selection of Labor and Workplaces:

The laborers were selected based on their current employment status at garment factories. That is, only those laborers were interviewed who are currently working at garment factories. They were chosen randomly based on whomever we could approach and find contact. Due to short amount of time and lack of budget, the factories located in the outskirts of Lahore were selected for this article.

Precautions

All the respondents, including workers, representatives of labor organizations, supervisors, management officials, and personnel with OSH certification were first described about the nature, scope, and purpose of the research before interviewing them. Any respondent who was hesitant to give the interview was given the full choice to leave the interview. Thus, they were given free will to give the interview.

Workers used to get free in the evening or on Sunday from work and they were interviewed at that time. We made sure that the identity of workers is hidden from their employers and no information about them reaches to their employers, because the workers shared their fear of losing their employment if their employer would get to know about their answers to the questions of the interview guide. This issue of firing workers has also been highlighted in the literature, for example, by Zulfiqar (2019).

Secondary Research:

The secondary research comprised of consulting with the research collections of the labor organizations, such as, Pakistan Institute of Labor Education and Research (PILER), Labor Education Foundation (LEF), and Fair Wear Foundation were also consulted. The reports published by international organizations, such as, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), were also consulted as these reports entailed up-to-date and accurate data and information about the current working conditions of laborers.

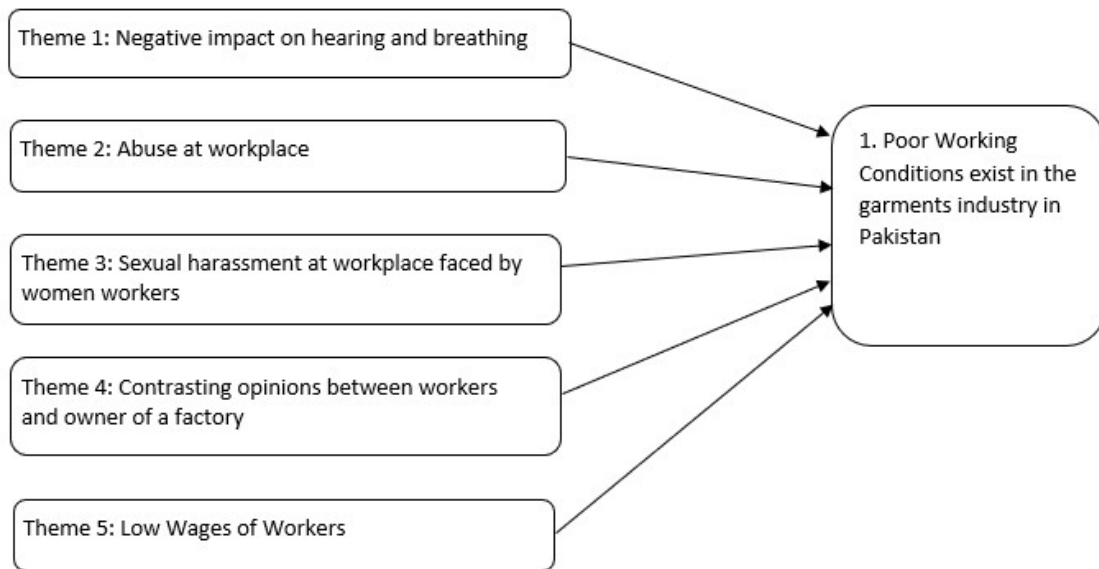
Findings and Analysis

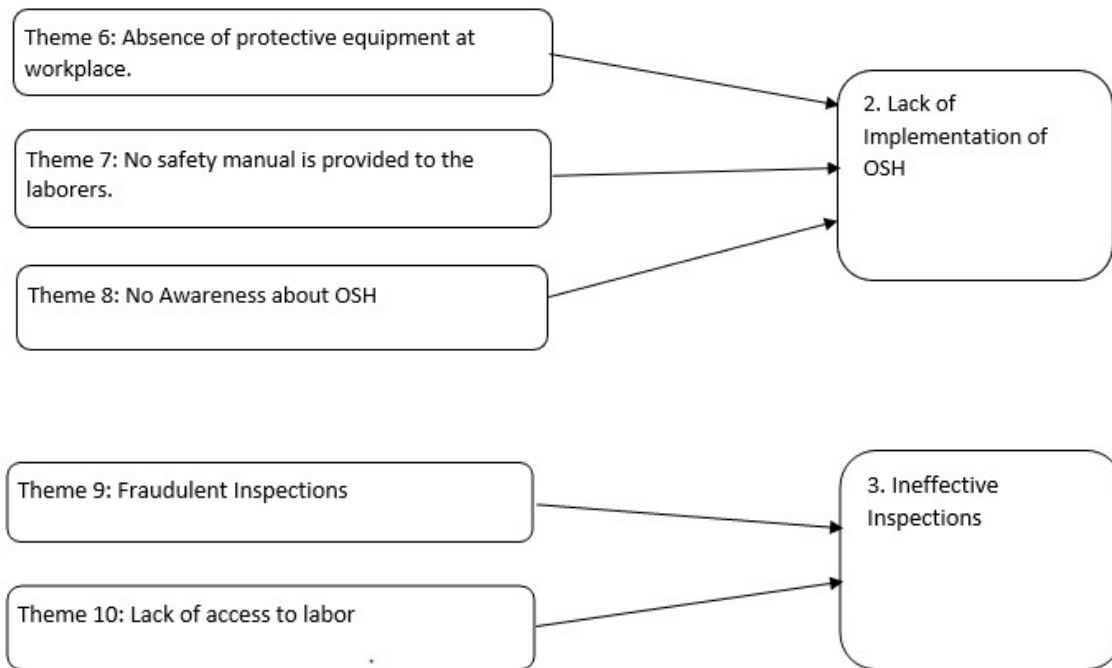
This section of the article identifies the key findings deduced from primary research. In addition, it also explains the state of implementation of labor laws.

Thematic Analysis of Findings:

This research study identified ten key themes pertaining to the working conditions in the garments industry. When the themes were evaluated and compared with each other, these themes brought us three main findings which are mapped in the below diagram. These themes have also been connected to the literature sources.

Figure 1:





Main Findings #1: Poor Working Conditions in the Garments Industry

Theme 1. Negative impact on hearing and breathing

53 laborers (80% of the sample) complained that the noise was too high. Of these, 29 laborers (44% of the sample) reported issues with hearing due to noise. In addition, 15 laborers (23% of the sample) reported difficulty in breathing due to the fluff of cloth and dust of cotton. The fluff creates dust that spreads in the surroundings of the workers, thus creating an environment that contains unrefresh air to breathe. The particles of the dust caused by the fluff of the cloth creates difficulty in breathing when the air containing this dust is inhaled by the workers. Inhaling this dust for a longer period of time on continuous or daily basis can lead to issues such as Asthma and lung cancer, as reported by Yeomans (2020) and Singh and Chadha (2016). Thus, both, i.e., the literature sources and the primary research point out that the workers in the

garments industry face the risk of hearing loss and diseases such as Asthma and lung cancer too.

Theme 2. Abuse at workplace

In this research, 63 laborers i.e., 96% of the sample of workers reported that the behavior of the managers and supervisors is rude to them. This finding of the primary research is also backed by the research conducted by Human Rights Watch (2019) on the garments sector in Pakistan.

Both, Muslim and Christian female workers do not feel comfortable in such environment. For instance, 70% of the female workers who were interviewed reported that the foul language is being used by their managers and supervisors which makes the work environment quite abusive for women workers. Even, male workers, including Muslims and Christians, complained about the foul language used by the supervisors and management officials. This issue of usage of abusive language is also reiterated by a member of the Labor Education Foundation who affirmed that the laborers are victims of facing abusive language at the workplace (Field Organizer, LEF).

Theme 3. Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

In this research, 30% of the female workers who were interviewed confirmed that they faced harassment at their workplace. In addition, another 25% of workers were not sure whether what they faced was harassment or not. This indicates the high prevalence of harassment of female workers at the workplace. This issue has also been highlighted by the research studies conducted by the Human Rights Watch and by labor organizations such as PILER and Labor Education Foundation that the female workers face the issue of sexual harassment in the garments factories (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

It is unfortunate to mention here that all the female workers who faced harassment at the workplace never reported it, because they feared that reporting would cost them their job.

Especially, when the harasser turned out to be their manager or supervisor, they never reported it (Yasmin, 2018).

The female workers continue working despite facing harassment at the workplace, because their poverty forces them to bear such things. As the scope of this research is limited to the garments industry, therefore, we can only infer such situation about the garments sector. It would be horrendous if such a situation prevails in other industries, too.

Theme 4. Contrast Between Opinions of Laborers and the Owner of a Factory

It is pertinent to mention here that contrasting narratives were found between the information provided by the management officials of factories and the labor. For example, the owner of a factory who was interviewed when asked whether the factory has a doctor present in the factory. The owner replied in positive affirmation and even stated that there is a dispensary in the factory where the doctor sits in. However, when some laborers of that factory were interviewed outside the premises of the factory and were asked about the presence of the doctor, they replied that they never saw any doctor in the factory. Pertinently, all the laborers of the sample size confirmed the absence of doctor or dispensary in their factory premises.

Theme 5. Low Wages of Workers

In this regard, interviews were conducted from 66 workers including supervisors employed in the garments industry. The monthly wages of the workers were found to be in the range of 15,000 PKR (\$74.50) to 25,000 PKR (\$124). Even, the supervisor mentioned his monthly income as 25,000 PKR (\$124). This salary bracket is not farther from the minimum wage parameter that is only 17,000 PKR. This indicates towards the low wages of workers in garments industry. In addition, workers are required to work for 10 hours on average on daily basis to get the meager monthly income. The wages data is further provided in the below table and salaries mentioned in Rupees. The Feedo operators have the highest wages, that is, in the

range of 28,000 to 35,000 Rupees, while the salaries of machine workers varied from 20,000 to 30,000 Rupees.

Main Finding#2: Lack of Implementation of OSH

Theme 6. Absence of Protective Equipment at Workplace

It is pertinent to mention here that 100%, i.e., all the laborers who were interviewed, affirmed that there is no protective equipment provided to them at the workplace. This non-availability of protective equipment is also pointed out by the members and directors of the labor unions who were interviewed.

Theme 7. No Safety Manual is Available to the Workers

The OSH guidelines demand that the workers should be provided with the safety manual and then, should be given proper training to understand the provided safety manual. However, all the laborers who were interviewed stated that they were provided with no safety manual.

Theme 8. Lack of Awareness and Implementation of OSH

For this research, sixty-six Laborers were interviewed including one supervisor. All the laborers were employed in different factories. When enquired about the OSH standards, all the laborers responded that they had no idea what OSH is and that they had never even heard this term before. So, they were unaware of OSH standards and their implications.

However, when the managers and owner were asked about OSH, they were aware of the OSH. Nonetheless, the owner of the factory responded that they are more eager to implement the local laws instead of OSH or some other international standard or law. This response indicates a lack of implementation of the OSH standards in the garments industry.

Main Finding#3: Ineffective Inspections

Theme 9. Fraudulent or Colluded Inspections

According to the workers who were interviewed, they confirmed that regular visits of the inspecting teams occur at their workplaces. However, they also reported that whenever the visit or inspection is about to happen, the factory owners and managers usually get to know about in advance. Therefore, they make special arrangements to make every aspect of the factory look perfect and safe before the inspecting teams. For instance, a worker reported, “visiting teams come for inspecting the workplace but the management tries to show everything alright to them. Management adopts special measures for this.” (Kishwar, Feedo operator, Nishat Apparels). Thus, before the inspection’s day, according to the interviewed workers, the factory is washed, and proper safety arrangements are shown at the workplace. However, when the visit is over, the factory comes back to its routine work environment.

This illustrates that the inspections are not helping in identifying the true picture of the working conditions at the garments factories. This makes inspections as collusion between the inspecting agency and the owners of the workplaces, which spoils the true spirit of inspections.

Theme 10. Lack of Access to Labor

Some of the laborers who have been interviewed mentioned that it is not allowed to the laborers to meet or talk with the inspectors who visit the factory for inspection. For instance, a worker said, “team-visits take place. Managers are around them, whenever a team visits. Workers are not allowed to approach or talk to them.” (Quality Checker, Comfort Knitwear). This illustrates that the one-sided picture is provided to the inspectors about the working conditions.

Recommendations

This section presents suggestions for improving the working conditions and for ensuring the OSH compliance at workplaces.

Labor Unions

The labor unions are representatives of labor and therefore, they work for the protection of labor rights. However, the labor unions in Pakistan lack strength. Only 1 percent labor in Pakistan is unionized (Azeem, 2021), which illustrates that the laborers do not have a solid platform to coordinate and raise their issues. Pertinently, the labor laws allow formation of labor unions but in the form of work councils that are formed on workplace basis and lack a joint central democratic power (Azeem, 2021). Therefore, we suggest that new legislation should be made that remove the restriction of forming labor union as ‘work councils’ only. The new legislation should provide the opportunity to the laborers to form labor union on an industry basis rather than on workplace basis. This can provide a central power to the laborers who can raise their voice for their rights more forcefully, and it can also give power to the labor unions.

Ratification of ILO Conventions

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), Pakistan has not ratified almost 58 conventions that are related to ensuring occupational safety and health at the workplaces (ILO, 2022). If Pakistan ratifies some or all of these conventions, then Pakistan will be bound to update the ILO authorities about the progress of implementing the guidelines of the ratified conventions at the workplaces in the country. Failure to ensure the implementation of guidelines can cause a further disrepute the country. Thus, the conventions have not been ratified to evade the extra burden of accountability.

We suggest that the government needs to ratify the conventions and then, must comply with the underlying requirements set by the ILO for improving the working conditions. Thereby, it will also need to tweak labor policies and OSH laws for ensuring the enforcement of the said ILO conventions for improving the working conditions across all industries.

OSH Awareness

It is essential that the laborers and employers should have adequate understanding about OSH. Herein, the awareness of OSH can be spread by using the mass media, for example, through running advertisements on television and also giving ads in newspapers. For this purpose, either the government can run its sponsored advertisement on TV channels, or it can outsource this task to some other institute, such as, to the SAA-CIWCE to raise awareness among the public and especially, among the laborers about the OSH.

Inspections of Factories

Inspections should be carried out at factories. Surprise visits should be made by the inspectors to identify the true picture of the working conditions.

Conclusion

This article has elaborated on the working conditions in the garments industry. It followed qualitative research study method. Interviews of all key stakeholders of the study, that is, laborers, supervisors, human resource managers, factory owner, representatives of labor welfare organizations, and of OSH certified professionals were conducted for this study. The findings of the interviews were deduced and, then, recommendations were made based on the findings. Around ten key themes were identified from the interviews, which led to three main findings of the study. These are: 1) there exist poor working conditions in the garments industry in Pakistan, 2) there is lack of implementation of occupational health and safety standards at garments industry workplaces in Pakistan, 3) the inspections that are being carried out at workplaces are ineffective in ensuring implementation of OSH and in improving working conditions in the garments industry in the country.

In addition, labor unions should be strengthened through legislation. Moreover, the federal government needs to ratify the ILO conventions. At present, Pakistan has not ratified 58 ILO conventions that seek to ensure the implementation of OSH standards at workplaces (ILO, 2022). Without the ratification of these ILO conventions, the ILO guidelines pertaining to the OSH standards implementation cannot be enforced legally at the workplaces in Pakistan.

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