

## **Labour abuse**

THROUGH interviews with 118 garment workers from 25 factories, union heads, labour rights activists and government spokespersons, a recent report by Human Rights Watch highlighted rampant abuse in the garment industry. Pakistan's highly competitive textile industry is a major source of foreign exchange earnings, as well as a beneficiary of government concessions and tax cuts, and yet it perpetuates some of the worst forms of exploitation. Workers in the sector remain invisible in the national discourse. Meanwhile, the government continues to turn a blind eye to unfair labour practices, as do international brands that outsource labour to developing countries like ours. The garment industry is one of the largest employment sectors, with a workforce of an estimated 15m people. Workers complain of being paid less than the minimum wage, forced to work overtime, and denied pension, maternity leave and breaks. They are not allowed to form independent unions; they face intimidation and threats and arbitrary dismissal when they try to organise for their rights. There is also evidence of minors being hired in the industry.

Evidence of exploitation often gets muted in much of the mainstream media due to conflict of interest and pressure from powerful factory owners. Workers complained of arbitrary dismissal, unsanitary working conditions, long working hours, and being paid less than the minimum wage. In a rare example, protests by the employees of a clothing manufacturer drew attention to the plight of its workers in 2017. But their difficulties were quickly buried and forgotten, as much as abuse and human rights violations in this country are. Even one year on, there are claims that those workers are being denied their rights mandated by law. It seems as if nobody cares until there is a tragedy one cannot look away from — when it is too late — which is exactly what happened five years ago, when 255 workers perished after a fire erupted at Ali Enterprises at Baldia Town. There were no emergency exits or safety mechanisms in place. The HRW report is correct to point out that the primary responsibility for protecting the rights of workers rests with the government, and then with domestic and international companies that are bound by domestic and international labour laws. All stakeholders must remember that all too often workplace 'accidents' turn out to be cases of criminal negligence.

## **Editorial**