

Occupational safety

ONE of the most neglected areas of governance in Pakistan is that of inspection and monitoring of the labour force employed in hazardous occupations. The highest incidence of injuries occurs in the agriculture and fisheries sector due to suboptimal conditions, obsolete machinery, and unhygienic environments, especially in the fish processing units where mainly women and children are employed.

However, fatalities and accidents related to construction and mining, boiler blasts, gases emitting from untreated sewerage, unregulated factory environments, unregistered brick kilns, and unsafe ship breaking operations are everyday occurrences.

The Global Rights Index 2016 of the International Trade Union Confederation ranked Pakistan among the worst countries in the world for workers, with a ranking of four on a scale of five. According to Labour Watch Pakistan, more than 200 Wapda workers die each year due to electrocution, and many more are disabled. Silica-related lung disease and deaths in the stone crushing sector are so common that the Supreme Court ordered all provinces to follow safety guidelines for prevention of silicosis, but in the absence of legislation and implementation mechanisms, not much headway has been made.

Lessons must be learnt from tragedies like the Baldia fire.

In the mining area alone, coal dust and methane gas inhalation, explosions, cave-ins, poisonous gas leakages and haulage accidents occur frequently because of poor operational standards. While laws regulating working conditions do exist, such as the Mines Act, 1923, Factories Act, 1934, and the Hazardous Occupation Rules, 1963, these are not effectively enforced, nor are any prohibitive penalties imposed on contractors.

The ILO's Decent Work Country Programme Report states that in 2014 there were only 547 labour inspectors in Pakistan against 23,983 factories and 327,706 shops/other establishments. This works out to an average of one inspector looking after 643 commercial and industrial units. A large number of posts for labour inspectors in the provinces are lying vacant since the last many years, and there is a chronic shortage of testing instruments, vehicles and competent technicians.

In addition, provincial labour departments have weak oversight: the lists of establishments visited by certifying surgeons in Sindh are lengthy but meaningless, as they contain no reports whatsoever on the state of health of the workers visited.

Advertisements relating to safety and health guidelines are directed at workers, not employers whose responsibility it is to train workers in safety protocols. These are also in English; most workers are from rural areas, with less than three years of schooling.

A report by the ILS Unit at the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis & Human Resource Development states that 24 per cent of injuries/diseases were caused due to the workers' lack of literacy and training, while unsafe working conditions included defective tools, equipment or material (28pc), slippery surfaces (22pc), inadequately guarded machinery (9pc) and non-provision of necessary protective equipment (7pc).

The findings of a Master's thesis submitted to the Norwegian University of Health Sciences in 2015 show that only 4pc of the surveyed construction firms in Lahore had accident reporting mechanisms in place; only 20pc of the labour had access to personal protective equipment and only 19pc had ever been given first aid.

The propensity of employers to cut costs at the expense of workers' lives needs to be firmly curbed, and stringent regulations introduced by the state to discourage the multi-layered sub-contracting system prevalent in the country. The government must ratify the ILO Convention on Occupational Health Safety (OSH 155), enact a stand-alone law on occupational safety and health covering all sectors, and develop a national policy on the subject.

Lessons must be learnt from the Baldia factory, Gadani scrapyard, Sundar Industrial Estate tragedies, and other preventable accidents. It is imperative for all provinces to legislate on OSH and set up independent provincial labour inspection authorities instead of the present system in which each department such as mines, environmental protection, etc has their own outdated rules of inspection.

Sindh is the only province to have passed an Occupational Safety and Health Act in 2017, although it does not cover mines. However, the act mandates detailed procedures and protocols; fines for non-adherence to safety protocols have been increased; units with over 49 workers are to employ qualified OSH officers; hygiene cards have to be issued to workers for check-ups and maintenance of medical records, and treatment of occupational diseases is to be at the employer's cost. There is also an OSH Council to monitor implementation. If only the Sindh government can also develop its inspection capacity with the support of ILO, it will be able to produce a template for other provinces to follow.

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