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Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up to and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement submitted by International Support For Human Rights, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status*

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[9 August 2026]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Intersection of Caste and Religion in Discrimination Against Sanitation Workforce in Pakistan

The protection of the fundamental rights, dignity, and physical security of all workers is a foundational obligation of any state governed by the rule of law. Under international human rights law most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Pakistan is a State party, governments are legally bound to guarantee the right to work, just and favourable conditions of work, equality before the law, and freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or discrimination of any kind.

These grave concerns comes under the Human Rights Council under Agenda Item 4. It is evident that the State of Pakistan continues to commit and tolerate widespread, systemic violations of these core international instruments:

1. Violations of ICESCR Article 6 and Article 7 (Right to Work and Just/Safe Conditions):* Article 6 recognises the right to work, while Article 7 guarantees the right to fair wages and safe, healthy working conditions. Pakistan's municipal sectors and private contractors routinely subject sanitation workers overwhelmingly non-Muslim minorities to hazardous manual sewer cleaning without personal protective equipment (PPE), exposing them to toxic gases and fatal risks.

2. Violations of ICESCR Article 2(2) and ICCPR Article 26 (Non-Discrimination and Equal Protection):* State institutions and public-sector bodies actively perpetuate structural discrimination through discriminatory municipal job advertisements explicitly targeting non-Muslims or specific lower-caste backgrounds, institutionalising hereditary disadvantage in direct contravention of non-discrimination mandates.

3. Violations of ICCPR Article 6 and Article 7 (Right to Life and Freedom from Degrading Treatment):* The state's persistent failure to ban hazardous manual scavenging and enforce occupational safety results in regular, preventable worker deaths from asphyxiation, violating the inherent right to life and subjecting marginalised groups to degrading conditions. Rather than upholding these binding international commitments, Pakistan presides over a rigid, caste-marked labour market where religious and social minorities are trapped in structural subjugation. When public employment advertisements codify religious segregation and workers die in manholes due to institutional negligence, it demonstrates a systemic human rights crisis requiring urgent Council intervention. Recent comprehensive documentation by Amnesty International, the Centre for Law & Justice, the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), and independent occupational health studies highlights an entrenched structure of discrimination, hazard, and impunity within Pakistan's sanitation sector.

4. Fatalities and Severe Safety Violations (ICCPR Art. 6 & ICESCR Art. 7):* Sanitation workers in Pakistan continue to face life-threatening working conditions due to the widespread practice of manual sewer cleaning without adequate safety measures. Since April 2026 alone, 16 deaths have been reported among sanitation workers due to sewer suffocation and toxic gas exposure. This builds upon a broader historic trajectory: long-term documentation records 84 sewer worker deaths across 19 districts over a five-year period, alongside 14 deaths documented between 2022 and 2024 in an NCHR-related report. Judicial observations from the Islamabad High Court reveal that over 70 Christian sanitation workers have died since 1988 due to exposure to toxic gases. Empirical data from the NCHR underscores this systemic neglect: 78.6% of sanitation workers reported never receiving Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and 57.1% reported suffering workplace injuries. In a targeted NCHR Karachi survey of 42 sanitation workers, 33 out of 42 lacked PPE, and 24 out of 42 reported job-related injuries. Broader regional assessments mirror these alarming metrics: a Khyber Pakhtunkhwa occupational health study tracking 502 sanitation workers found that only 23.1% reported consistent PPE use, 14.7% had witnessed a co-worker's death during duty, and 77% paid healthcare expenses entirely out of pocket, alongside high burdens of endemic diseases (including 50% reporting a history of dengue infection, 14.4% typhoid, and 5.4% hepatitis. Similarly, Lahore-based workforce analyses indicate that 81.5% of

surveyed workers reported poor working conditions and ergonomic strain, 84.8% faced occupational health risks, 84.4% noted inadequate organizational safety measures, and 57.3% suffered profound social stigma or financial distress.

5. Systemic Hiring Bias and Economic Exploitation (ICESCR Art. 2 & ICCPR Art. 26):*

The sanitation workforce is affected by deep-rooted patterns of identity-based discrimination and economic marginalization. While approximately 2% of Pakistan's population is estimated to work in sanitation-related occupations, an overwhelming around 80% of these sanitation workers are Christians, despite Christians comprising only about 1.37% of the national population. Quantitative findings indicate that 55% of surveyed workers reported caste or religious identity as a direct factor in being pushed into sanitation work, and 44% experienced daily discrimination. Historical caste-origin stigmas continue to shape recruitment via municipal practices and job postings. Economic vulnerability is acute, with monthly incomes restricted to a meager PKR 18,000–25,000, forcing workers into deep destitution. Furthermore, municipal bodies routinely exploit workers through 89-day contracts designed explicitly to avoid long-term employment benefits, pensions, and statutory labor protections.

6. Structural Violence and Legal Loopholes:* The employment system surrounding sanitation work traps workers in perpetual precarity through temporary hiring, termination before regularization, and re-employment via contractors. Fear of income loss discourages workers from reporting unsafe conditions, as complaints result in instant dismissal or loss of livelihood. Legal protections remain limited; although Pakistan's Constitution guarantees equality, explicit statutory protections against caste- or descent-based discrimination remain absent.

7. Constitutional and Legal Challenges:* In response to these conditions, human rights institutions have intervened actively. The National Commission for Human Rights has petitioned the Federal Constitutional Court seeking a complete ban on manual sewer cleaning. The petition argues that forcing workers into toxic environments without machinery, training, and PPE violates fundamental constitutional rights to life, dignity, and equality.

8. A Continuing Struggle for Equality and Dignity:* The experiences of sanitation workers reflect a broader pattern of institutionalized discrimination, unsafe labor conditions, and economic exclusion. Ongoing legal challenges represent an essential push toward transforming sanitation work into dignified employment protected by enforceable safety standards.

The compounding crisis of caste-based hiring, institutional neglect, and fatal occupational hazards in Pakistan's sanitation sector represents an egregious, systemic breach of international human rights law under Agenda Item 4. This Council cannot remain silent while marginalised religious minorities are structurally relegated to deadly, dehumanising labour with complete impunity.

In light of these grave violations of the UDHR, ICESCR, and ICCPR, we respectfully urges the United Nations Human Rights Council and its member states to take the following urgent actions:

1. Mandate a Special Investigation: Request the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, alongside the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, to conduct an official country visit to investigate caste and religion-based labor exploitation in Pakistan.^[1]^[SEP]
2. Enforce Legislative and Constitutional Protections: Call upon the Government of Pakistan to enact dedicated federal and provincial legislation explicitly criminalising caste-based discrimination, banning discriminatory municipal job advertisements, and legally abolishing hazardous manual scavenging in compliance with International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards.
3. Hold the government of Pakistan Accountable: Demand transparent judicial accountability, adequate financial compensation, and institutional reform regarding municipal authorities and private contractors responsible for

deploying workers into unmonitored, toxic sewer systems without protective equipment.

4. Ratify Core Labour Conventions: Urge Pakistan to immediately ratify and implement key international instruments, including ILO Convention No. 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work, to ensure comprehensive safety, fair wages, and human dignity for all sanitation personnel.

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