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Dignity Denied: Amnesty Exposes Sanitation Workers' Plight

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A recent report by Amnesty International, in partnership with the Center for Law & Justice (CLJ), highlights glaring injustices faced by sanitation workers in Pakistan many of whom are from lower-caste Christians and Hindus. Sanitation work, including cleaning drains and sewers, remains a dangerous and dehumanizing task, frequently imposed on minorities through discriminatory hiring practices and systemic exclusion. The report, based on interviews with over 230 workers across Lahore, Bahawalpur, Karachi, Umerkot, Islamabad, and Peshawar, unveils a deeply troubling pattern.

Government recruitment often specifies non-Muslim candidates only, institutionalizing segregation and marginalising these communities. Many workers lack written contracts and stable employment; only 44 percent are permanent, while a significant portion remain without any formal protection.

Occupational hazards are widespread. Many lack personal protective equipment, leading to health issues such as skin burns, respiratory problems, and severe injuries. One worker in Islamabad, for instance, lost a finger handling a contaminated syringe without gloves. Despite these dangers, around 70 percent felt unable to refuse unsafe tasks due to job insecurity.

Compounding these hardships, sanitation workers endure strong social stigma. More than 55 percent reported being hired based on their faith or caste identity. Workers have been subjected to verbal abuse with slurs like “chuhra” or “bhangi,” and excluded from shared meals or utensils because of their background. Women face triple-layered discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, and gender.

Amnesty warns that Pakistan’s fragmented and province-based labour laws fail to address these deep-seated inequities. Neither the Constitution nor existing legislation recognises caste as a protected category, nor does it adequately safeguard sanitation workers leaving them vulnerable to abuse.

Isabelle Lassée, Deputy Regional Director for South Asia at Amnesty International, called the situation a violation of international human rights law, demanding immediate legislative reforms to eradicate caste-based hiring, enforce occupational safety, and grant sanitation workers equal labour protections.