

# A BID FOR CHANGE

Documenting the Right to Freedom  
of Peaceful Assembly in Pakistan



Human Rights  
Commission  
of Pakistan





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of Peaceful Assembly in Pakistan

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# INTRODUCTION

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly allows a democratic society to function smoothly by giving every citizen the chance to express their beliefs, convey their grievances and pursue change collectively. This right also facilitates a participatory form of government and is simultaneously dependent on other rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, movement and association.

People's freedom to assemble peacefully is enshrined in Article 16 of Pakistan's constitution as follows:

*Every citizen shall have the right to assemble peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of public order.*

This right is also preserved by international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of which Pakistan is one of the founding signatories. The UDHR, together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), form the 'International Bill of Human Rights' and together enumerate a series of rights, including the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, that call upon state parties to protect, respect and fulfil these rights. Pakistan ratified the ICESCR in 2008 and the ICCPR in 2010, hence undertaking an obligation to bring domestic law related to freedom of peaceful assembly in consonance with international standards and best practices.<sup>1</sup>

This catalogue contains the winning entries of a photo-essay competition instituted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in 2021 to create greater awareness of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see: HRCP, *Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Pakistan: A Legislative Review, 2022*.  
<https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2022-Freedom-of-peaceful-assembly-in-Pakistan.pdf>

Chapter 1 contains a photo-essay submitted by Sibth Ul Hassan Turi that depicts land dispossession in Rawalpindi's villages. Chapter 2 comprises a photo-essay submitted by Muskan Firdous that depicts a rally by women labourers. Chapter 3 includes a photo-essay submitted by Aun Jafri on marches for women's rights in Lahore.

These entries were selected as the winner and runners-up by an independent panel of artists, photographers and human rights defenders, and illustrate how the right to freedom of peaceful assembly is exercised in Pakistan by everyday people.

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# CHAPTER 1

## RAWALPINDI UNDER SIEGE

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A view of Dadhochha, Bharwala, Khanpur, Dhadhar Najaar, and Mohra Wains villages close to the Rawat industrial area in Rawalpindi.



A view of the construction site of the Dhadhochha dam.



On 3 January 2021, the residents of the village Dadhocha gathered to protest against the dispossession of their homes in their village.



Local farmers and villagers said that the Punjab government and district administration had commenced construction of the dam without any settlement with local inhabitants or a resettlement plan.

They were being offered a pitiful Rs 5,000 per marla for their agricultural land, which was a fraction of its actual market value.



The same agricultural land in the area under the Defence Housing Authority (DHA)'s possession was being valued by the latter at nearly 80 times that price.



The locals were being dispossessed of land that was even beyond the limits of that demarcated for the dam, ostensibly for commercial purposes.



Some residents spoke of how the adjacent DHA Valley had also occupied their ancestral lands despite the fact that a court had already ruled that it belonged to the villagers.

They said this occupation by DHA was preventing them from resettling their households in the nearby location.





The locals are not against dam construction to benefit Rawalpindi's residents but said that it should not be done at the cost of the forced displacement of local inhabitants, who should instead be justly compensated and resettled within the area.

The residents were not even sure if they could now bury their deceased in the local graveyard as that too would soon become submerged after the dam's construction.

After the public meeting, the villagers undertook a peaceful march to the site of the dam construction. The construction site is some distance from the villages, so many people rode their motorcycles while marching.



The Frontier Works Organization (FWO) had set up its camp. The locals called on the on-site officers to abide by court orders and not begin construction of the dam without reaching a just consensus-based settlement with the local residents.





The residents of the affected villages forced the FWO to stop work on the site. They also spoke to the deputy commissioner of Rawalpindi. The protestors vowed that if the construction did not stop, they would organise a march to Islamabad.



The locals have erected watch towers to protect their communal lands from land grabbers.



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## CHAPTER 2

# THE INVISIBLE LABOUR OF WOMEN WORKERS

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On International Women's Day, 8 March 2022, the Home-Based Women Workers' Federation (HBWWF) took out a rally in Karachi and marched from Fawara Chowk to the Arts Council.





This rally, called the Mehnat Kash Aurat Rally, involved slogans raised against patriarchy and injustice in Pakistan.



There were chants and performances underscoring the need for women's socioeconomic independence.



A theatre performance was also staged to highlight the unjust and unequal treatment of women, which stems from deep-rooted patriarchal mindsets, in both rural and urban settings.





Depicted here is a participant calling for peace, bread and equality for all.



Verses from Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry were quoted frequently in posters as a medium of resistance for female labourers.



A transgender activist played a tambourine while chanting for trans rights and visibility.





Posters demanded the criminalisation of violence against women, children and minorities.

Women representatives of the rally discussed the direct impact of poverty, inflation, unemployment and environmental degradation on women and children.





Children engaged in informal labour also carried flags and posters of the HBWWF.



A vibrant performance was staged to Faiz Ahmed Faiz's historic poem of resistance Hum Dekhain Ge.





HBWWF posters called out the social oppression of women while other participants demanded fair wages.



This poster demanded that the Sindh government register home-based women workers within the Employees Old-Age Benefits Institution system.



Protestors carried a banner advancing demands for equal pay and social security.



Rally participants also demanded the registration of home-based workers and *haris* [peasants] for social security and pensions.

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## CHAPTER 3

# RECLAIMING GENDERED SPACES IN LAHORE

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On 8 March 2021, the Aurat March Lahore chapter marked International Women's Day in Lahore with their fourth annual demonstration, which set out from the press club.



Participants assembled behind the Aurat March banner in a sea of placards and flags.





Aurat March Lahore volunteers reenacted an Urdu performance of the Chilean anti-rape anthem 'The Rapist is You' [Aur Rapist Ho Tum] under a public display of painted women's garments titled 'Dirty Linen' depicting real-life accounts of abuse that women, transgender persons and children had experienced.

That year, the Mehnat Kash Aurat Rally also observed International Women's Day in Lahore on 7 March 2021 in front of Lakshmi Chowk.

Their demonstration included a street theatre performance depicting the plight of female bonded labourers.





Another performance at the Mehnat Kash Aurat Rally 2021 was a dance performance that honoured marginalised working classes.



In 2022, on International Women's Day, a unit of women police officers provided security protocol for the Aurat March Lahore demonstration amid heightened threats to the organisers and participants.



The Aurat March Lahore demonstration in 2022 carried slogans drawn from the Aurat March manifesto, as various media personnel covered the event.





Aurat March Lahore's own security team is also visible here, wearing green high-visibility vests to allow participants to spot them easily as they directed people to be seated for the performances.



A key performance during Aurat March Lahore's 2022 demonstration was that conducted by the transgender community.



Performers scattered rose petals to highlight the wave of killings of transgender people during the past year and to honour their memory.



# CONCLUSION

Pakistan's citizens continue to exercise their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. However, it is incumbent on the state and law enforcement authorities to protect and uphold this right to ensure its unhindered enjoyment.

Currently, the regulatory legal landscape in Pakistan is marred by over-legislation, red-tape and lack of clarity, all of which threaten to compromise the spirit of freedom of peaceful assembly. A complete review of various pieces of legislation and ancillary laws is required to ensure that they are in accordance with each other and Article 8 of the Constitution, which renders any law inconsistent with a fundamental right null and void.

Different disproportionate curbs on the exercise of this fundamental right also persist, such as excessive use of force, arbitrary and politically motivated arrests and detentions, registration of criminal or terrorism charges, and the imposition of moratoriums on assemblies for extended periods without valid reason. To counter this, better protocols for law enforcement agencies that involve training in human rights and crowd-management practices, with an emphasis on minimal use of force, must be created and enforced. There must also be unrestricted media and digital access to assemblies, and the state must facilitate free speech and movement for all assemblies rather than impose content-based restrictions or blockade routes.<sup>2</sup>

Taking these steps will ensure that the essence of freedom of peaceful assembly remains intact and can continue to be exercised for generations to come.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, see: HRCP, *Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Pakistan: A Legislative Review, 2022*.  
<https://hrp-web.org/hrpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2022-Freedom-of-peaceful-assembly-in-Pakistan.pdf>









