

SOUTH PUNJAB EXCLUDED, EXPLOITED

An HRCP fact-finding report



South Punjab: Excluded, exploited

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Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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Introduction

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) conducted a high-profile fact-finding mission to South Punjab during 4–8 March 2022. The mission—which comprised chairperson Hina Jilani, Punjab chapter vice-chair Raja Muhammad Ashraf, Council members Nazir Ahmed, Salima Hashmi and Naazish Ata-Ullah, regional coordinator Faisal Tangwani, staff member Salman Sikandar, and HRCP volunteer Lubna Nadeem—was constituted to assess the overall human rights situation in the region, including women’s vulnerability to harmful customary practices, forced conversions among local Hindu communities, the poor working conditions of industrial workers and bonded labourers, and allegations of unfair land allotment in Cholistan at the expense of local communities.¹ To this end, the team visited Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Jampur, Rajanpur, Bahawalpur, Yazman and Mithri (Cholistan), where it held a series of focus group discussions, consultations and key informant interviews. The mission concluded with a press conference held in Multan on 8 March 2022. This report draws primarily on respondents’ oral testimonies and key informants’ analysis of the human rights situation.

Among the respondents to whom HRCP spoke were members of civil society, lawyers, students, workers and farmers. The team also met a number of government officials, including the deputy commissioner of Dera Ghazi Khan, Hamza Salik; the commandant of the Border Military Police, Muhammad Akram Malik; the district police officer (DPO) for Dera Ghazi Khan, Ali Waseem; and the managing director of the Cholistan Development Authority, Saif Ullah Bhatti. HRCP is grateful to all those respondents who took the time out to speak to the team or helped obtain information on the situation of human rights in South Punjab.

Seraiki identity

Across all the sites it visited, the mission observed that the long-standing concern of recognition of the Seraiki identity remains unresolved. The demand for a separate Seraiki province has not been adequately addressed at the federal or provincial level. The political representation of South Punjab’s people is still dominated by its regional elite—a key part of the problem in

¹ HRCP is immensely grateful to all the mission members for their time and effort and to its Multan regional office staff for organizing the team’s visit to the region. We would also like to thank all the respondents who took the time to attend the mission’s meetings, consultations and interviews, and share their insights and experiences.

the context of continuing social and economic exploitation and disempowerment.

Women

The mission was gravely concerned to learn that women in the Seraiki tribal belt bordering Balochistan in the Koh-i-Suleman area remained vulnerable to harmful customary practices such as *wani*, *kala kali* and *swara*, even though such practices are illegal. A journalist from Multan told the mission that a significant proportion of gender-based violence went unreported in the region for fear of reprisals by tribal elders, local administrations and political leaders. The institution of the panchayat—which is commonly responsible for handing down punishments such as ‘revenge rape’—still holds sway despite having been declared illegal by the Supreme Court in 2019.

The mission received reports that child marriage remained a serious concern and, like other forms of gender-based violence, was underreported because local journalists feared reprisals by influential perpetrators. One journalist emphasized that culprits often went unpunished due to loopholes in existing laws.



Mission members Hina Jilani and Salima Hashmi at Aurat March Multan, with women's rights and trans rights activists

Responding to the concerns voiced by the mission, the DPO for Dera Ghazi Khan confirmed that serious deficiencies in existing laws meant that victims of gender-based violence were often denied adequate relief and protection, with low rates of prosecution for perpetrators. Worryingly, he pointed out that many women and girls risked harm at the hands of their relatives if they

were produced before a magistrate, for instance, in cases where they had contracted a marriage of their own choosing. He was of the view, however, that legal and other alternatives, such as women's shelters, were available.

Women's inheritance rights in South Punjab are rarely enforced. One respondent cited a recent case in Shujabad, Multan, in which a woman was denied her share of property after her husband's death. Another activist from Jampur alleged that women were often forced to give up their rightful claim to inheritance. In some cases, he said, women were even prevented from marrying for fear that their family's property would then be divided.

Women labourers fare little better: a brick kiln worker in Multan told the mission that women working at brick kilns had no access to basic amenities such as washrooms.

A women's rights activist from Multan claimed that many women eligible for social security payments were not registered with the Ehsaas Programme (formerly the Benazir Income Support Programme), especially those from religious minorities. She said that most employers did not let them register on the pretext that they would have less incentive to work if they were receiving social security payments. Female literacy in the region, she added, was far lower than the male literacy rate, while working women's problems were compounded by the lack of facilities, such as hostels for women in Multan.

The mission was also alarmed to learn that most women in South Punjab's tribal areas lacked computerized national identity cards (CNICs), which not only deprived them of the benefits of citizenship, but also prevented them from voting in elections.

Women throughout the region face a number of barriers in accessing justice. Apart from restricted mobility and restrictive cultural norms, respondents alleged that the police were not trained or sensitized to address women's complaints, while an activist in Rajanpur said that most police stations lacked women police officers, although they were supposed to be specially appointed to respond to crimes involving female victims.

The mission also noted a significant disparity between male and female access to healthcare. Respondents cited a serious shortage of gynaecological facilities in most tehsil headquarter hospitals, particularly in areas such as Yazman, Rajanpur and Cholistan. A journalist from Jampur claimed that women were often forced to wait long hours at hospitals or to pay bribes to be seen by a doctor. In some cases, this meant that patients either received no medical care or were compelled to travel farther afield for medical assistance.

State representatives generally felt that women's situation had improved. Muhammad Akram Malik, commandant of the Border Military Police (BMP) in Dera Ghazi Khan, claimed that a growing number of women were now

seeking education, taking up professions and overseeing their children's education. He admitted, however, that forced marriages remained a serious problem.



HRCP chairperson Hina Jilani with members of the Dera Ghazi Khan Bar Council

The mission also met the deputy commissioner of Dera Ghazi Khan, Hamza Salik, who explained that, since the district had porous borders, it was easier for perpetrators of gender-based violence to escape, adding that, in some instances, members of the BMP were complicit. He claimed, however, that crimes against women were not as common as was perceived, that it was now easier for women to approach local police stations and that the BMP had become more efficient in dealing with such cases because its officials had some degree of influence over local tribes. His claim that women had access to healthcare facilities across the region, including areas such as Taunsa, was not supported by reports received from social and political activists as well as human rights defenders.

Transgender persons

As in the rest of the country, transgender persons in South Punjab continue to face systematic discrimination and violence, both at social and institutional levels. Many are denied CNICs because of lack of documentation such as birth certificates. Certain NADRA offices have still not begun to implement

the state policy of officially recognising the third gender. As a result, the transgender community has inadequate access to social safety net programmes such as the Ehsaas Programme. One transgender rights activist claimed that not a single transgender person was registered with the Ehsaas Programme in Multan, although this could not be verified independently. Another activist from Multan told the mission that many transgender persons had chosen to boycott social welfare registration until their entire community had obtained CNICs.

Even more serious than the denial of citizenship rights is the continuing problem of violence against the transgender community and the impunity that prevails in such cases. The HRCP team was appalled by credible reports of constant police harassment and violence, including sexual abuse, targeting transgender persons attempting to earn their livelihood through performances at public gatherings.

Religious minorities

Religious minorities in the Seraiki belt comprise both Hindu and Christian communities and appear to be especially at risk of forced conversion, forcible occupation of their lands, intimidation by far-right outfits, and discrimination in employment. One human rights defender in Bahawalpur described the discrimination against these communities as ‘religious apartheid’ that was imposed either with the collusion of state actors or because of state neglect and failure to protect. Confirming this observation, another activist from Dera Ghazi Khan felt that the situation of religious minorities in the region had worsened in recent years.

Girls, not brides

In one case brought to the mission’s attention, a landlord in Bahawalpur was alleged to have forcibly married the underage daughter of one of his Hindu tenants. After a petition was filed, the girl was produced in the high court but claimed she had married of her own free will. Her parents’ counsel requested the court that she be given some financial security. The court ordered that the girl be given four acres of land. The landlord divorced her instead.

The civil society actors to whom the mission spoke claimed that certain seminaries were encouraging forced conversions by giving fatwas [religious edicts] in favour of this practice. Seminaries were also alleged to have illegally occupied land owned by Hindu families—a practice largely ignored by state authorities and sometimes effected with their complicity. The administration rarely investigates serious allegations of the forcible occupation of land owned by religious minorities: in 2020, for example, an entire colony belonging to Hindu families in Liaquatpur tehsil near Rahim Yar Khan was

burned down by Muslims and the land given to a seminary. The perpetrators went unpunished.

The HRCP team was deeply concerned by complaints made by several respondents regarding the imposition of the Single National Curriculum, under which children from Hindu and Christian households were compelled to study Islamic content in many subjects. In many instances, schools did not exempt them from Islamiyat classes, nor was the option to study ethics provided as an alternative. The team was told that this problem was particularly acute in the Yazman area of Bahawalpur. One resident claimed that faith-based discrimination in schools contributed to the drop-out rate among students from religious minorities.

High unemployment rates among religious minorities are symptomatic of faith-based discrimination in South Punjab, as in the rest of the country. Sonya Zafar, a resident of Yazman, told the mission that even educated, qualified jobseekers from religious minorities faced significant discrimination, with many educated women and girls compelled to accept lower-paid employment as domestic workers.



The mission meets representatives of the local Hindu community in Yazman

Several respondents interviewed by the mission in Yazman complained that the government job quotas reserved for religious minorities were seldom applied; even when employed, most Christians or Hindus were limited to

low-paid Grade 4 jobs. One respondent drew the mission's attention to a job advertisement for sanitation workers specifying that 'only non-Muslims may apply'.

The illegal and forcible occupation of land owned by religious minorities emerged as a serious issue that remains unaddressed by the authorities. Many Hindu and Christian respondents cited instances in which people had been driven from their lands by threats of blasphemy charges and other forms of harassment and intimidation. Residents of Mithri, Cholistan, claimed that the Hindu community in Chak 98 had been allotted land by the government in 2012. Many people had even paid the allotment fees. However, the order was cancelled by the government in 2018 and the land allotted to local Muslim residents instead.

Dire consequences

One case reported to the mission was that of Padmaram, a resident of Yazman. When his land was occupied by a local landlord, he protested and was threatened with dire consequences. A few days later, he was accused of having defiled the Holy Quran and was nominated in a police report for the alleged offence under Section 295B of the Pakistan Penal Code. Padmaram was later released on bail, but is now homeless and fears for his physical security.

The mission also learnt of instances in which Hindu or Christian graveyards had been occupied or access to these obstructed by the unauthorized occupation of surrounding areas by local Muslims. 'Such problems are increasing by the day. When an old Hindu women living in Ahmedpur tehsil passed away, the local clerics prevented her family from burying her in the area's graveyard,' reported one resident. Another Hindu resident of Yazman alleged that the community's graveyard in Chak 89-D had been desecrated by local Muslim residents.

Additionally, respondents from all religious minorities complained about the extent of discrimination in the right to representation, demanding that they be allowed to vote for their own candidates rather than parties appointing candidates—who did not represent them in a political sense—to reserved seats.

Environment and health

Prominent among the concerns raised by respondents was the region's declining reserves of potable water and related health problems. A journalist from Bahawalpur explained that the water table there was now as low as 200 feet deep, while the only river in the region (the Sutlej River) had long been depleted, thereby contributing to falling groundwater reserves. He added that groundwater in Bahawalpur had become polluted due to the use of fertilizers.

The use of arsenic in pesticide sprays for cotton production and its ecological impact was also identified as a concern. The mission was informed that, even though the government had set up 32 water filtration plants, these were not enough to cater to the needs of the whole region, especially when most of these plants were not even functional.

Civil society activists in Jampur told the mission that the tribal areas²—particularly Pachat, Dhajal and the surrounding areas—had little to no access to potable water; there were even areas where residents had resorted to using the same ponds as their animals for drinking water. Respondents also pointed to the health hazards posed by high levels of air pollution in the region.

The lack of adequate health facilities was underscored as a grave concern. The mission was informed that the Jampur dialysis centre had only three dialysis machines, which were not enough to cater to the area's needs—according to a hospital report, seven to ten patients visit the hospital daily for dialysis. Women face an especial problem because of inadequate, poorly staffed and poorly resourced gynaecological facilities across the South Punjab region. This has resulted in a high number of pregnancy-related deaths, claim respondents. Women in Jampur have reportedly had to bribe hospital staff to avail medical treatment. Respondents also claimed that certain health facilities had refused to attend to gynaecological patients after 9 pm. There were also reports of discrimination on the basis of economic status and social background—some respondents in Yazman alleged that women wearing traditional dress had been turned away by hospital staff.

Education

In many areas, lack of infrastructure appears to be an underlying reason for low levels of literacy. Schools are located far away from residential areas, particularly in South Punjab's tribal areas and in villages such as Yazman, where commuting to and fro is difficult for both students and teachers. The mission was told that there were only two high schools for girls in Jampur, and no hostel facilities that would enable them to access schooling in nearby districts. In Rajanpur district, the school enrolment rate among girls is only 38 percent compared to 62 percent for boys, according to a respondent citing data from the Punjab Education Department. Drop-out rates are also affected by poverty levels: one brick kiln worker the team interviewed in Multan said that, after the Covid-19 pandemic, many children were

² There are 14 tribes settled on the peripheries of Dera Ghazi Khan, all of whom own their own land. A separate force, the Border Military Police, is responsible for maintaining law and order in this belt. Punjab's tribal areas fall under the jurisdiction of the Punjab government.

compelled to leave school because their families were too poor to continue paying tuition fees.

One respondent from Cholistan, Imrana Kausar, told the mission that the standard of education in South Punjab had been pulled down by poor teaching. Teachers were not always appointed on merit and were often recruited from far-off areas rather than locally, she explained. Amin Anjum, a journalist from Rajanpur, told the mission that the running of thousands of schools had been handed over to an NGO, PEMA, in 2016, which had caused a shortage of teachers in government schools in the region.



HRCP mission members at a seminar to investigate human rights issues in Multan

The mission discussed the education crisis in the region with the commandant of the BMP in Dera Ghazi Khan, Muhammad Akram Malik. He said that there were 360 government schools and 900–960 teachers at the primary and secondary levels in the district. However, since most teachers were settled in either Dera Ghazi Khan or Taunsa, commuting to schools in the tribal areas was difficult.

Students at higher education institutions appear to face the added problem of restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly. Several students in Multan cited instances of punitive action by the Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) administration for having organized peaceful student marches. One female student complained of harassment and threats of punitive action against her if she participated in the Aurat March. On coming before a disciplinary committee, she was told not to participate if she wished to continue her studies. Female students also alleged that sexual harassment was a serious concern at BZU and that there was no information available to students about harassment committees on campus. Law students at BZU claimed they had been denied the opportunity to sit their exams because affiliated colleges had exceeded their allocation of admissions.

A student from Rajanpur told the mission that there was only one public university in Dera Ghazi Khan, which did not have the capacity to accommodate most students, implying that many young people had to relocate to pursue higher education. The mission also noted that young women's restricted mobility meant they rarely had this option, given the region's conservative culture and shortage of nearby educational institutions.

Workers

The situation of brick kiln and power loom workers appears to have worsened in recent years. A brick kiln workers' representative from Multan told the mission that a number of organizations engaged in advocating the rights of brick kiln workers had been banned by the government, making it much more difficult for workers to lobby for higher wages and better working conditions. One brick kiln worker explained that the district vigilance committees mandated by law to monitor working conditions remained dysfunctional. Even when they held rare meetings, he said, workers had limited access to these committees and any action in response to workers' grievances was slow to come.

Among the concerns raised by brick kiln workers were the absence of facilities such as clean drinking water and nearby dispensaries for sick or injured workers. Many workers complained that they had been unable to access CNICs because they could not furnish documents such as birth certificates, while NADRA had no alternative plans or policies in place to accommodate such applicants. As a result, such workers could not register with social safety net programmes such as the Ehsaas Programme.

The mission also spoke to workers in the power loom sector, who alleged that the factory owners had threatened to terminate any workers who attempted to unionise. Reportedly, over 300,000 workers in this sector in South Punjab lack access to social security, including compensation in case of injury or accidental death at the workplace.

Farmers

The farmers to whom the mission spoke identified several key concerns, including the drastic increase in fertilizer prices, which had affected small farmers immensely, and serious water shortages, particularly in areas such as Jampur and Cholistan. A farmer from Jampur complained that the government had taken no action to resolve the shortage of fertilizers, as a result of which farmers were being forced to queue for scarce supplies. Another farmer from Rajanpur alleged that fertilizers were hoarded by big businessmen and sold to small shopkeepers at a huge profit, who then sold

them onto farmers at a high price. Additionally, he said, farmers had no say in determining the price of crops they produced.

Law and order

The mission was alarmed to hear from many respondents that remote areas in South Punjab—which account for a high concentration of rights violations—lacked effective administrative oversight. A journalist from Multan told the mission that, in areas such as Rajanpur, the police stations were over 25 km from the peripheries of the city, making it very difficult for people to register police reports. He also said that there was only one officer staffing the Cybercrime Wing, which was therefore unable to handle the volume of complaints emanating from the whole region. One human rights defender from Dera Ghazi Khan claimed that the police had taken over the work of *patwaris* and attempted to resolve land-related issues in police stations.



The mission's press conference in Multan

A peasants' rights activist from Jampur told the mission that he had been nominated in 28 false cases, while one of his relatives was currently in jail on false charges. The mission noted that this was a commonly used tool to suppress dissent. In one case, for instance, protesting farmers were detained illegally and, when a bailiff was appointed by the court to recover them from detention, they were charged under false FIRs to defeat the habeas corpus writs.

Many activists voiced their apprehension over the role of the BMP in the tribal region of the Seraiki belt, especially their capacity—and willingness—to take action against perpetrators of honour crimes and the trafficking and sale of women. At a meeting with the HRCP mission, the president of the bar association of Dera Ghazi Khan alleged that people were not recruited to the BMP on merit, while another activist claimed that the BMP stations were

‘being run by feudal lords.’ If anyone dared raise their voice, he added, they were threatened with reprisals.

The mission also met the commandant of the BMP, who admitted that panchayats, while declared illegal, continued to extend patronage to the BMP. He maintained that the government was attempting to mainstream the BMP: its judicial powers had been curtailed and prosecution took place in civil courts. He claimed, however, that the BMP took swift action in cases of crimes against women.

Invisible communities: A case study of Cholistan

Cholistan is one of the most deprived regions in the country and the HRCP mission was specifically mandated to assess the extent to which people here are able to exercise their economic, social and political rights. In addition to speaking to people from the area at different meetings held in Dera Ghazi Khan and Bahawalpur, the mission travelled to Mithri—a small village in the Cholistan desert—to assess the human rights situation there. The team met local community leaders, including representatives of religious minorities, women, educationists, students, political activists, human rights defenders as well as the local authorities.

The Cholistan region

Cholistan covers an area of about 6.6 million acres spread over three districts of Southern Punjab—Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar and Rahim Yar Khan. The nearest major city is Bahawalpur. The desert stretches across about 480 km, with a width varying between 32 and 192 km. The current population is estimated at 2.5 million. Hindus comprise the largest religious minority in this region, with a population estimated between 25,000 and 30,000. Indigenous Cholistanis are considered those who are Cholistani by birth and are owners (or descendants of owners) of ponds known as ‘tobas’.

Land allotments

An overarching concern in Cholistan is that of land allotment and use,³ specifically with regard to reports that large tracts of land are being allotted to

³ Land allotment schemes are initiated and implemented by the Cholistan Development Authority, whose main office is located in Bahawalpur. The first allotment scheme for the allocation of land to indigenous Cholistanis under a ‘grow more’ programme was launched in 1959. The criteria for allotment included payment of *trini* (a tax payable on livestock), registration as a voter in the local area and possession of a CNIC. The scheme thus excluded outsiders from any land allotment.

non-locals, that land allotment to locals is being arbitrarily delayed, or that land is being occupied forcibly.

A local activist from Mithri told the mission that the Cholistan Development Authority, originally an independent body, was now under the district commissioner and civil administration. It was headed by a managing director—an honorary post generally held by retired army officers. He maintained that the ambiguity surrounding the allocation of authority in this office had impeded the implementation of any development schemes in the region.



Residents of Mithri village gather to speak to the HRCP mission

Based on discussions with local activists, the team also noted the incidence of irregular allotments. ‘Even after more than 60 years, land has yet to be allotted to applicants who had applied under the 1959 scheme,’ said one activist. At the same time, records of the 1959 allotments appear to have been ‘lost’ and ‘fake’ allotments arbitrarily added, he said, adding that the records had not been corrected to date. Local residents alleged that, in 1978, land was allotted to people from outside Cholistan, using false CNICs to justify these

The *trini* tax was abolished in 1973 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s government, but was reimposed in 1991. This tax is paid to the Forest Department.

irregular allotments. This contravenes the stated policy of allocating land to indigenous Cholistanis.

Ceding ground

One of the residents to whom the mission spoke in Mithri alleged that the process of scrutiny (for land allotment applications) was a sham and that all decision-making power in this respect was exercised by the village elder. If he were to decide that an applicant was 'not from Cholistan', then that person would be deprived of their land. The process, he said, was dependent on the ability of applicants to pay bribes to the authorities concerned.

A particularly disturbing allegation made by residents was that some 400,000 acres of land had been given to the military, of which there are no public records. The mission also heard allegations of illegal occupation of land by the military, either given to the latter by the CDA or taken over arbitrarily after declaring them 'no-go' areas. One respondent claimed that, in Moj Garh village, military personnel had opened fire on people who were attempting to graze their animals on this illegally occupied land. Such illegal occupation of land and intimidation and harassment of locals by outsiders has reduced the pasture area available to locals for grazing livestock.

Another respondent alleged that thousands of acres had been allotted to the wildlife department, although the land did not serve any purpose for wildlife preservation. Residents insisted that such allotments were not justified and should be cancelled and discontinued.

The managing director of the Cholistan Development Authority, however, claimed that only about 74,000 acres of land had been allotted to the military and that this allotment was carried out under the Army Schedule for Shuhada service rules, adding that the authority only handed over the land and played no role in deciding who got it. He also confirmed local reports that land in Cholistan was being allotted to foreigners on the recommendation of the Wildlife Department and the Foreign Office, with thousands of acres of land reportedly being allotted to Chinese nationals for plantations and used for hunting by Emirati nationals from Abu Dhabi.

According to the activists HRCPC consulted in Mithri, about 54,000 applications for land allotment were submitted in 2013, of which some 22,000 applications were approved. However, after the PTI government came into power in 2018, it nullified these allotments on the grounds that they were 'bogus', although the activists to whom the mission spoke allege that only a fraction were false. Another cycle of applications started in 2018 and about 64,000 applications were submitted. Four years later, these applications remain pending. Respondents say that residents who approach the authorities to submit their applications are told that their paperwork is incomplete or faulty. Allegedly, this is a means to extract bribes from the

applicants. ‘The allotment is verified some 15 times just to create problems for people,’ one local Cholistani contended.

The mission noted that the Cholistan Development Authority has allowed outsiders to purchase land in the area, although under the law, Cholistani residents can sell their allotted land only to other Cholistanis. This has increased the number of landholdings by people from outside region. The gravity of the situation is compounded by respondents’ claims that even local Cholistani landholders are compelled to sell their land because they lack access to adequate water to sustain cultivation.

The HRCP mission met the managing director of the Cholistan Development Authority to discuss the concerns raised by local residents with regard to the allotment of land. He confirmed that the scrutiny of over 64,000 allotment applications received in 2018 was still in process, but said that the criteria for allotment was the same for all, regardless of their religion. ‘Anyone who belongs to Cholistan and has less than 4 acres of land is eligible to apply,’ he added. Although he explained that a master plan was being developed to address local land-related issues, he could not confirm how much longer this—or the scrutiny of applications received—would take. The managing director verified the allegation of the local Hindu community concerning the illegal occupation of their graveyards, but claimed that the authorities halted this practice when any complaints were received.

Access to education, health and water

A key concern underscored by residents was the inadequacy of infrastructure for schools and appointment of teaching staff. A local teacher complained that most schools in Cholistan did not have enough teachers, resulting in low attendance among pupils. She explained that teachers were normally appointed from outside the area. Discouraged by the difficult commute, she added, most teachers were apt to seek transfers to urban areas soon after their initial appointment in Cholistan.

Cholistan continues to suffer a serious lack of healthcare infrastructure. Most facilities are located too far from residential areas, making it extremely difficult for the local population to access these facilities. Transporting patients to these facilities, in particular, is problematic and poses grave risks for patients needing emergency care. Because of ill-equipped and understaffed facilities, medical care in serious cases can only be obtained from hospitals in the nearest urban centre. The mission was told that, except for one hospital in Ruthri Bangla, none of the local health facilities had a qualified doctor. Lack of maternity care facilities in the area also poses a serious risk for expecting mothers and is likely one reason for the high maternal mortality rate.

The water crisis in Cholistan warranted the team's attention. A *nambardar* in Mithri informed the mission that, although former president Pervez Musharraf had approved the passage of 2,800 cusecs of canal water through the Drawer and Silari branches of the Chenab River, no work had been carried out on this project. Cholistan remains dependent on floodwater channels. Another respondent pointed out that a water tube had been installed in Mailsi by the previous PML-N government, but the project was stopped by the PTI government. He also said that drinking water in the area was contaminated and there were no filtration plants to make it potable. The lone water pipeline remained out of order due to a shortage of diesel for the pumps, he added. Grazing lands, too, are dry because of the lack of water, resulting in loss of livestock as well as wildlife.

When asked about the water problem in Cholistan, the managing director of the Cholistan Development Authority said that work on access to water was 'in progress' but gave no details as to the nature of this work or how far it had come.

Religious minorities

The mission observed that, although Cholistan enjoyed somewhat better levels of inter-faith harmony, religious minorities in the area continued to be neglected by the state. One such indication was access to burial sites for the Hindu community. One resident of Mithri told the mission that there were only three graveyards in Cholistan, all of which were in poor condition.⁴ Land for cremation sites (*shamsban ghats*) was not available in some areas, with families compelled to travel 20 km or more to bury or cremate their dead. Although the area has an ancient Hindu temple, Hilao Rania Mandir, it is in very bad condition and access to the site is difficult because no proper road or pathway leads there. The temple also lacks access to water and electricity, making it unusable for worshippers.

⁴ Some local Hindu communities bury their dead and do not practice the usual Hindu ritual of cremation.

Recommendations

The right to identity

- Political dialogue on the question of a separate Seraiki province must be opened with all stakeholders' participation, both at the federal and provincial levels.

Law and order

- The BMP deployed in the tribal areas of South Punjab should be disbanded and the region brought under the normal policing system.
- The number of police stations should be increased to ensure easy access to people of the area.
- A sufficient number of women police personnel should be posted at all police stations and their presence on duty ensured to address crimes against women more effectively.
- The National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) and the National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR) to visit South Punjab's tribal area to assess the role of the law enforcement agencies in preventing crimes or human rights violations.

Women's rights

- An effective women's protection system should be installed in all districts of South Punjab and a well-functioning oversight mechanism established.
- Women's crisis centres and shelters should be upgraded and made available in the region at the district level.
- NGOs must report on gender-based violence, women's right to inheritance, harmful customary practices as well as discrimination and impediments in women's access to justice or their due rights as equal citizens and share these reports with the NCHR and NCSW. Together they should run campaigns to change social mindsets.
- Particular attention needs to be paid to the situation of women from the non-Muslim communities, who become victims of double discrimination.
- The NCSW must recommend measures for swift registration (CNICs) of women, especially in the neglected regions of South Punjab.
- The Punjab Assembly must pass legislation increasing the minimum age of marriage of girls to 18 years. Criminal sanction for engaging in the practice of child marriage should be introduced and strictly enforced.

Transgender rights

- The NCHR must undertake special surveys to assess the situation of transgender persons in the South Punjab region and to make recommendations or issue directions, where it is so authorized, to remedy the grievances of this community so that their rights to human dignity, to equal treatment and opportunity and to personal security are fully recognized and protected.
- Protective legislation to preserve the rights of the transgender community must be adopted in the Punjab and uniformly enforced with special attention to the more remote regions, including South Punjab.
- Law enforcement agencies must ensure there is no impunity for crimes against the transgender persons.

Religious minorities

- HRCP reiterates its demand for the establishment of a national commission for minorities' rights with statutory authority.
- All religious minorities in South Punjab must be protected against humiliation, exploitation, discrimination in employment and harassment by malicious use of the blasphemy laws, forced conversion and forced marriage, as well as land grabbing.
- Special cells must be created within the administrative machinery of districts of South Punjab where there is a concentration of religious minorities—such as Yazman and Cholistan—for receiving complaints and redressing their grievances.
- The Single National Curriculum must be reviewed and all material that violates the right of minorities guaranteed under Article 22 of the Constitution should be weeded out from subjects that are meant for learning by all students.
- Content that promotes such values as tolerance and accommodation of diversity should be added to the school curriculum.

Labour and bonded labour

- The rights to social security, adequate wages, hours of work, compensation for accidents during work and workers' unions for power loom workers must be fully respected and implemented.
- The Punjab government must report to the provincial assembly on the progress in adoption and implementation of the Provincial Plan of Action to Combat Bonded Labour; and actions planned should be given priority effect in South Punjab.

- The Labour Department must ensure that its district offices in South Punjab have functional legal aid service units to help victims of bonded labour.
- An initiative to register all brick kiln workers and their families must be undertaken by NADRA, so that they are entitled to benefit from all government welfare schemes.
- The district vigilance committees should be made fully functional and district level oversight of these bodies should be arranged throughout the region.
- The district administration in districts of South Punjab should form a committee with the inclusion of bonded labourers and NGOs to ascertain the needs (through credible data gathering) and recommend and implement measures for the rehabilitation of freed bonded workers.
- The Human Rights Committee in the Punjab Assembly must call upon MPAs from this region to present a report to the Assembly on the situation of bonded labour, especially of those working in brick kilns.

Farmers

- District-level committees comprising farmers and relevant government authorities should be established to redress the grievances of farmers, especially about farm supplies, in the region. These committees should prevent hoarding and overpricing of farm commodities and ensure safe pesticides or other chemicals that do not harm human health or the environment.
- Farmers in South Punjab must be given due representation in decisions on determination of the price of their products.

The right to health

- Immediate attention must be given to improvement of health infrastructure in the region. The government must ensure budgetary allocations for progressive up-gradation of health facilities in the rural and urban areas.
- Women's reproductive health and child health care must be given special attention.

The right to water

- HRCP recommends the establishment of a special commission of experts by the provincial government to ascertain the scale of water issues as they affect people's health or their livelihoods, environment and preservation of wild life. The recommendations of the commission

should be implemented and sufficient budgetary allocations should be made to improve the dire condition prevalent in the region.

- The provincial government should ensure that all existing water filtration plants in the region are working and install more where needed.

The right to education

- The right to education as guaranteed by Article 25A of the Constitution should be fully available to children in the region.
- The number of schools should be increased as per child population in each local area.
- Educational facilities for girls should be increased and attention must be paid to ensure that schools have all the necessary facilities needed by female students. Measures should also be taken to provide girls safe commuting facilities to their schools.
- Recruitment of teachers from the local population should be encouraged. Merit for recruitment should be reviewed and teachers' training programs initiated in all local areas.
- Frequent transfers of teachers should be curtailed and school inspections be conducted with regularity to ensure that schools are properly functional.

Students' issues in higher education

- Universities must restore students' freedom of association and their representation in decision-making bodies in higher education institutions.
- Students from rural and far-flung areas of the region attending higher education institutions in Multan and other cities of the region must have functional hostels.
- No punitive action should be taken against students for participating in peaceful protests or in marches organized to commemorate special days, such as the Aurat March. Accountability for any such negative actions must be ensured.
- Universities such as BZU must have strong implementation tools for colleges affiliated with them to follow the rules. Students should not suffer because of maladministration on the part of the university or college authorities.
- Serious note must be taken of sexual harassment complaints in universities and colleges. Every educational institution should have

inquiry committees on sexual harassment, and information on such committees should be widely disseminated amongst students.

Illegal occupation of land

- HRCP recommends necessary reforms in the provincial legal framework to facilitate processes for ending illegal occupation, especially of agricultural and farm lands that are taken over using political influence or military clout for building housing societies and colonies.

Cholistan

- The provincial government must ensure the independence and efficiency of the Cholistan Development Authority; its mandate must be clearly enunciated by law and its powers conferred by statute.
- The post of managing director of the Authority must be a permanent post, assigned to a high level civilian officer. HRCP considers the appointment of retired military officers to this post a conflict of interest because of the controversial allotments made to the military without any legal sanction and through non-transparent processes.
- If land is to be allotted, it should be done under the legal sanction of a law to be passed by the provincial assembly. Such legal sanction should not in any way undermine the right of ownership or other interests of the native Cholistani population.
- Land in the Cholistan area must be allotted only to indigenous Cholistanis and without discrimination on the basis of religion.
- The scrutiny of allotment applications received in 2018 should be processed without any further delay.
- HRCP recommends that the Punjab Assembly hold a special session on the problems faced by the people of Cholistan, and undertake promulgation of appropriate laws to redress the longstanding grievances of this population.