

STATUS OF MIGRATION & HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN PAKISTAN



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Pakistan is a source, transit, and destination country for migration and human trafficking. The Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment of Pakistan registered 325,142 Pakistani workers for foreign employment abroad in 2024. Saudi Arabia has the highest number of Pakistani migrant workers, which is 226,372 followed by UAE (48261), Oman (38381) and Qatar (20210).¹ European countries are also major destinations for Pakistan but lack regular channels for migration. A total of 20,250 undocumented Pakistani nationals were found in Europe in 2020.²

Every year, tens of thousands of people in Pakistan are trafficked across and within national borders, where men and boys tend to be trafficked into forced labour, and women and girls into forced sex.³ The 2024 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report from the US Department of State⁴ shows that an estimated 4.5 million workers nationwide are trapped as bonded labour, out of which 700,000 are children. In the context of overseas employment, the government investigated 1,588 trafficking cases under the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018 (282 for sex trafficking, 1,035 for forced labour and 271 for unspecified forms of trafficking).

Pakistan is the fifth largest refugee hosting country providing safety to some 1.38 million registered refugees and asylum seekers who were forced to flee their countries⁵. Adding to it, Pakistan also hosted 3.1 million Afghans in 2023.⁶ The government rolled out the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan in October 2023. As a result, between 15 September 2023 and 21 July 2024, 669,900 Afghans have returned to Afghanistan.⁷ Likewise, Pakistan also experienced the highest absolute numbers of disaster displacements in 2022 (approximately 8.2 million).⁸

Human trafficking and unsafe migration: Vulnerability factors

Distressing home conditions resulting from socio-economic, political, and ecological turmoil have often forced people to migrate as a longer-term survival strategy. In particular, poverty, illiteracy, debt bondage, economic marginalisation, livelihood crisis, vulnerable working conditions, and extreme weather events in the home country are referred to as major structural factors leading to human trafficking and unsafe migration in Pakistan.⁹ Political instability along with cultural and family pressure for employment abroad have also made some Pakistani people desperate to migrate abroad through the use of regular as well as irregular channels. The refugee crisis and disaster-induced displacements have

1 country.pdf (beoe.gov.pk)

2 Pakistan-Migration-Report-202216941.pdf (gids.org.pk)

3 UNFPA Pakistan | We must win the battle against human trafficking

4 Pakistan - United States Department of State

5 Pakistan: Factsheet | Global Focus (unhcr.org)

6 Document - Pakistan - Afghanistan Situation Refugee Response Dashboard, as of December 2023 (unhcr.org)

7 Operational Update - July 2024.pdf

8 World Migration Report 2024 (un.org)

9 Pakistan – Survey on Drivers of Migration: Regional Evidence for Migration Analysis and Policy (REMAP) 2019 - Pakistan | ReliefWeb

also contributed to an increase in human trafficking incidents in Pakistan. The rise of violent extremism and its subsequent impacts is also referred to as the newest dimension of trafficking and forced labour in the country. Likewise, increased use of social media and online platforms by the traffickers to facilitate the transportation of people to the desired destinations, but weak monitoring of such activities from the government authorities has also prompted trafficking in the country. Other operational factors such as the inefficient implementation of relevant laws and policies, the culture of impunity to the alleged perpetrators, the practice of visa trading, and the higher influence of intermediaries over the state authorities have further triggered unsafe migration and trafficking within and beyond the national border.

Policy frameworks to combat human trafficking and manage migration

Pakistan has adopted a number of laws and policies for combating human trafficking and ensuring safe migration. Some core ones are as follows;

- ❑ **Pakistan Penal Code (PPC)¹⁰:** Under Sections 371A and 371B, the PPC has criminalised the buying and selling of a person for prostitution and prescribed penalties of up to 25 years of imprisonment and fines. Likewise, section 374 has criminalised unlawful compulsory labour and prescribed penalties of up to five years imprisonment, a fine, or both.
- ❑ **Constitution of Pakistan¹¹:** It prohibits slavery, forced labour, and trafficking in human beings.
- ❑ **The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2018¹²:** This Act has criminalised sex and labour trafficking and prescribed penalties of up to seven years imprisonment, a fine of up to 1 million Pakistani rupees (PKR) (\$3,620), or both, for trafficking crimes involving adult male victims, and penalties of up to 10 years imprisonment, a fine of up to 1 million PKR (\$3,620), or both for those involving adult women or child victims¹³.
- ❑ **The Prevention of Trafficking in Person Rules, 2020:** It provides a procedural framework for the enforcement of TIP 2018. It also has provisions related to the roles and responsibilities of law enforcement agencies. It also establishes procedures for victim identification, protection and rehabilitation and guidelines for inter-agency coordination are included.
- ❑ **The federal Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act 1992¹⁴:** Criminalised bonded labour, with prescribed penalties ranging from two to five years of imprisonment, a fine, or both.
- ❑ **The Emigration Ordinance of 1979 (updated 2023)¹⁵:** This act prohibited unregulated and unregistered sub-agents, allowed licensed employment promoters to charge migrant workers for all costs associated with overseas employment, as well as a service fee of 15,000 PKR (\$54.30) for a welfare fund to compensate workers' families in case of the workers' death abroad and manages the emigration process through seven Protectorate of Emigrants Offices.

10 Pakistan - United States Department of State

11 1333523681_951.pdf (na.gov.pk)

12 administrator2daeb72ce7dfc4fe730a2244b617a129.pdf (pakistancode.gov.pk)

13 Pakistan - United States Department of State

14 administrator193484c31f7b4b5c5cbd0aae5038201e.pdf (pakistancode.gov.pk)

15 Emigration_Rules_1979_Updated_2023.pdf (beoe.gov.pk)

- ❑ **Procedure for Overseas Employment¹⁶:** It grants and renews overseas employment promoter's license, verifies and approves manpower demand and monitors SOPs regarding One Window Facilitation Desks (OWFDS) at all International Airports.
- ❑ **National Policy for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) 2018¹⁷:** This policy focuses on preparing the trained workforce for domestic and foreign employment.
- ❑ **Skills for All Strategy 2018¹⁸:** This focuses on enhancing workforce expertise.

Institutional mechanisms to combat trafficking and manage migration

A number of state institutions are active in Pakistan for migration management and trafficking control initiatives. One such institution the Anti-Trafficking Unit (ATU), is functioning as an autonomous body under the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA)¹⁹ with key roles related to the investigations and prosecutions of anti-terrorism, migrant smuggling and human trafficking. It operates an Integrated Border Management System (IBMS) at all FIA checkpoints to track undocumented migrants. ATU has also established its link offices in Oman, Iran and Greece to coordinate regional efforts to curb human trafficking and provide necessary support to trafficking victims. It also operates national Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Hotline.²⁰ A total of 26 Anti-Human Smuggling and Trafficking Circles (AHTCs) in seven provincial zones and Police Stations are also established under the ATU.

Minister of the Interior²¹ has established the National Coordination Committee on Trafficking in Persons and Provincial and district Anti-Human Trafficking and Anti-Bonded Labour Monitoring Committees with a mandate of facilitating the national registration, naturalisation, immigration, and regulation of entry and exit of foreigners and setting up anti-smuggling measures.

The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment is established under the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development²² to control and regulate emigration and monitor and supervise overseas employment promoters. It also provides pre-departure orientation regulates licenses to Overseas Employment Promoters (OEPs) and has the responsibility of signing MoUs with Foreign Countries. The Overseas Employment Corporation (OEC)²³ department also operates under the same ministry to facilitate government-to-government recruitment programs and manage and regulate Overseas Employment Promoters (OEPs). Moreover, Community Welfare Attaches (CWAs)²⁴ under the Migrant Resource Centre serve as a focal point at different embassies/missions abroad for any dispute resolution or welfare-related issues that emigrants face.

¹⁶ Untitled (beoe.gov.pk)

¹⁷ TVET Policy 2018_0.pdf (punjab.gov.pk)

¹⁸ National Skills for All Strategy.pdf (tvetreform.org.pk)

¹⁹ Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) - Pakistan Forces

²⁰ FIA launches TIP hotline to combat human trafficking - Pakistan - Dunya News

²¹ <https://www.unodc.org/pakistan/en/stories/provincial-anti-human-trafficking-committees-participate-in-national-consultation-workshop.html>

²² Functions - Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (beoe.gov.pk)

²³ OEC

²⁴ Community Welfare Attachés - MRC Pakistan

All these institutions are operating a number of preventive and curative initiatives for combating trafficking. For instance, FIA organises nationwide awareness-raising campaigns in all provinces by distributing pamphlets and sending about 2 million SMS messages. The government has also developed a National Action Plan (2021-2025) to combat human trafficking and smuggling. Fencing of the borders with Afghanistan and Iran is part of the action plan.

The government has also established a victim reception centre at Taftan in collaboration with UNODC.²⁵ Likewise, the government's provincial departments are working towards the implementation of standard operating procedures (SOPs) on victim identification and referral.

Gaps in policies and practice

Despite the existence of numerous policies and institutional bodies to promote anti-trafficking and safe migration initiatives, Pakistan has a long way to go to achieve the desired result in these areas. Pakistan falls short of revisiting its migration policies, Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) and MoUs as per the changing global dynamics. Pakistan has yet to strengthen its mechanisms to control the influence of human smugglers in the catchment area. The existing institutional response is also quite inadequate to identify and protect the victims of trafficking and criminally investigate, prosecute, and convict the perpetrators. Lack of coordination and partnership among the law enforcement agencies, absence of a reliable database on trafficking and the poor implementation of anti-trafficking laws have created favourable situations for smugglers/traffickers to operate in impunity.²⁶ A strong nexus between human traffickers and corrupt government officers has further contributed to a rise in the number of human trafficking incidents.²⁷

Recommendations

- ❑ Review and amend the existing anti-trafficking and labour migration policies with equal attention being paid to the internal, cross-border, and transnational migration and trafficking dimensions.
- ❑ Put efforts to review and sign the new bilateral labour agreements with all labour-sending countries in the changed socio-political and global context, in particular with some strict provisions around protecting workers of all genders from forced labour, sexual exploitation, and smuggling in third countries.
- ❑ Conduct comprehensive audits of existing institutions working towards migration management and trafficking response. Based on the findings from the audit, reform the existing migration governance practices. Allocate sufficient resources and train the human resources to make all relevant institutions functional and result-driven.
- ❑ Develop a new and comprehensive national action plan with the incorporation of preventive and curative initiatives, including some solid provisions for the prosecution of perpetrators and protection efforts.
- ❑ Dedicate human and financial resources to enhance victim care, which also includes gender-friendly shelter homes for all trafficking victims, including adult male victims, foreign victims, victims exploited abroad, and victims intercepted in border areas.
- ❑ Increase the quality and availability of trafficking-specific services, in particular, on issues around victim's identification and referral to care.
- ❑ Implement measures to address corruption and external influence in law enforcement processes

25 Pakistan-Migration-Report-202216941.pdf (gids.org.pk)

26 Pakistan's Struggle with Illegal Migration: Addressing Push Factors, Smuggling Networks, and Policy Reforms - Stratheia

27 "Perils of Hope: Unraveling Pakistan's Human Trafficking Web and Its Deadly Consequences" | South Asia Press

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