



Government of Sindh

# Sindh Human Rights Commission

## Seminar: Increasing Incidents of Suicides and Launch of Annual Report 2018-2019

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## **About the Sindh Human Rights Commission**

The Sindh Human Rights Commission is a statutory body with a mandate to protect fundamental human rights in the province of Sindh, as enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The Commission is empowered to hold inquiry, suo moto or on a petition, into cases of human rights violations, recommend to the government remedial measures, review policies and legislation on human rights protection from the perspective of human rights, undertake research and promote awareness of laws, procedures and safeguards available for human rights protection. The Commission is also mandated to visit government facilities and institutions (i.e. jails, shelters) to review living conditions of inmates and make recommendations for improvements.

Established in 2013 under the Sindh Protection of Human Rights Act 2011, the Commission functions under the Sindh Human Rights Commission Rules 2013.

The Commission is led by Chairperson, Justice (Retd) Majida Razvi, and supported by six members. Out of six members, two are full-time members qualified as District and Sessions judges - Syed Hassan Shah Bukhari - District and Session Judge (Retired), Muhammad Aslam Shaikh - Additional District and Session Judge. Two members come from the Provincial Assembly - Kulsoom Akhtar Chandio - MPA, Sindh, Farhat Seemen - MPA, Sindh. And two are drawn from the civil society - Syed Zulfiqar Shah - Human Rights and Civil Society Activist, Pushpa Kumari - Civil Society and Minority Rights Activist; and Ms Abida Lodhi is the Secretary of the Commission.

As an independent body delegated to work for the protection and promotion of human rights in the province, the Commission extends its services indiscriminately to all individuals reaching out for petitions.

Since its establishment, the Commission has undertaken close to over 800 cases. It has led review of laws and implementation mechanisms, capacity building programmes of stakeholders in public and civil society sectors, and also led the process of review of mechanisms for implementation of the conventions related to the trade incentive of GSP+, extended to Pakistan.

As per law, the Commission conducts board meetings every quarter. It also follows an annual work plan drawn from its consultation-led 5-year Strategic Plan. SHRC also takes out annual report every year to share its activities and future plans with stakeholders and general public.



## Proceedings: Seminar on ‘Increasing Incidents of Suicides and Launch of Annual Report 2018-2019

The Sindh Human Rights Commission organized an event to launch its 5th Annual Report 2018-2019 and a seminar titled ‘Increasing Incidents of Suicides’ to highlight the issue of suicides in Sindh, as well as initiate dialogue surrounding its roots.



Participants at the event included members of SHRC, other commissions of the Government of Sindh, members of the civil society, government officials, public representatives, health professionals and media. The panel speakers included Dr Haroon Ahmed, Pakistan Association of Mental Health; Mr Azhar Mirza, General Secretary, Pakistan Medical Association; Karamat Ali, Executive Director, Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research; Anis Haroon, Former Member National Human Rights Commission; and Justice (Retd) Shahnawaz Tariq, Provincial Ombudsman, The Protection Against Harassment of Women at The Workplace. The event was moderated by researcher Zeenia Shaukat and Zulfiqar Shah, Member Commission representing the Civil Society.

To commence the proceedings of the event, Zeenia Shaukat presented an overview of the Commission’s work in the past five years and also briefly shared the summary of the Annual Report 2018-2019 with the participants.

## Background: Annual Report 2018-2019

The Sindh Human Rights Commission has been regularly publishing its annual report since the time it started its operations in 2014. The report covers details of the Commission’s activities. The report serves the interest of transparency and presents the Commission’s obligation to serve the public.

During the period of 2018-2019, the





Commission monitored at least 337 cases of human rights abuses across Sindh, with Karachi leading with 114 cases, followed by Umerkot, Qambar Shahdadkot and Tando Allahyar with 24, 18 and 17 cases, respectively. With respect to women rights violations in Sindh, the Commission documented at least 114 cases. Sexual harassment, domestic violence, illegal occupation on property, inhumane treatment as workers and labourers, as well as murder led as the most pertinent challenges for women across Sindh.

Considering the rising incidents of suicides in the province recently, especially in Tharparker, the Commission visited the district. SHRC met with stakeholders and held sessions with local communities in an effort to understand the causes behind the suicides. Even though the key findings behind suicides in the district were identified as related to poverty and marginalization, poor mental health was also observed to be an issue. Therefore, the Commission considered it necessary to look into the challenges of mental health at a deeper level.

Mental health relates to the right to health, right to life, and right to live with dignity. All of these rights are a part of Pakistan's constitution, as well as the country's obligations as a signatory to human rights charters in the world. Considering all of these dynamics, the Commission tried to initiate a discourse on mental health, comprehend its situation in Sindh and explore solutions to contain it. As a part of the dialogue on the subject, the Commission invited professionals and leading figures from the health sector to share their expertise regarding mental health in Pakistan, particularly focused on Sindh, as well as members of the civil society to share their viewpoint on the issue. In the Commission's view, the deliberations will lead to the development of an informed discourse and recommendations on the issue, guiding the government in addressing mental health challenges in the province.

### **Welcome note by Justice (Retd) Majida Razvi – Chairperson, SHRC**

The Chairperson of SHRC Justice (Retd) Majida Razvi welcomed the attendees at the event. During her welcomes note, the Chairperson spoke about the increase in awareness among the public regarding human rights.



Chairperson SHRC Justice (Retd) Majida Razvi speaks at the event

“Even the families living in the *katcha* areas of Shikarpur, with no roads and communication access, are reaching out to the Commission for the redressal of their grievances. Therefore, it has also led to an increase in our responsibilities,” she said.

The Chairperson went on to share the details of the Commission's work in the past two years which have been documented in its annual report. Apart from taking notice and actions on individual human rights violations, the Commission has held

several public hearings in different provincial districts, intervened in the cases of human rights violations pertaining to minorities, paid attention to the water and sanitation woes of the people of Sindh, addressed the problems of sanitary workers, kept a close watch on the issues involving the environment, public education, labour rights violations, and the impact of jirga system on human rights in Sindh.

In the past five years since its inception, the Commission has conducted inquiry into 877 cases involving human rights abuses across Sindh. Every year, the Commission, led by the Chairperson or Judicial Members, visits at least five provincial districts to monitor the state of human rights situation in Sindh.

The Chairperson also highlighted how the Commission has made efforts to address rights violations of women in its agenda.

“We believe that crimes against women are connected with the tribal system. Majority of the karo kari cases and other crimes against women are reported from the tribal areas. Therefore, the Commission has moved to work on tribal conflict. We plan to finalize our recommendations very soon,” she stated.

She then went on to highlight other important issues brought under SHRC’s notice and also shared how the Commission is committed to deal with them.

“During public hearings in the last year, we identified the issues of sanitary workers, agricultural labour, water and sanitation deficits, and environment degradation. I feel proud to announce that the Commission has already finalized its recommendations for the rights of the sanitary workers in the Sindh Province with the support of the Strengthening Participatory Organization,” she announced and added, “With regard to water and sanitation issues, the Commission also recommended the Provincial Government that the findings of the Water Commission’s report should be amalgamated into the Sindh Drinking Water Policy, in order to address the long standing issue of ‘Right to Life’.”

Highlighting the alarming issue of suicides in the province, especially in Tharparkar, the Chairperson said, “The masses are so vulnerable to mental health issues, particularly anxiety, because they are not ready to accept the ongoing social change,” she said and shared SHRC’s concerns regarding the growing number of suicide cases in the district. She said that it is important now, more than ever, for the government to address mental health as a health issue as a priority. “We need to do better to serve our people and mental health is one of the most worrying problems of our time,” said the chairperson.

“We, at the SHRC, have realized that this issue needs to be taken care of by experts in the field, which is why we have called upon stakeholders to discuss its causes and how we can move forward by gathering effective solutions to curb the issue,” she said.

Towards the end of her welcome note, the Chairperson congratulated the Government of Sindh for passing the Women Agriculture Workers Act, 2019. It was also one of the recommendations made by SHRC to address the issues of agriculture labour and farmers. She referred to it as a milestone with respect to human rights achievements in the province.

## Keynote speech by Syeda Shehla Raza – Minister for Women Development, Sindh

The Chief Guest of the event was Ms Shehla Raza, the Provincial Minister for Women Development. While sharing her views on the topic of the seminar Ms Raza shed light on the gender aspect of suicides in the province. She said, “When I visited Tharparkar last year, I found out that it’s not only women who are committing suicides; men too, are doing so,” she said and added that poverty is the main reason why people attempt to take lives. “Poverty is the root cause of all the issues. People do not have anything to eat or wear. A man killed himself because he could not afford to buy warm clothing for his children,” she shared.

She highlighted child marriage and domestic violence as reasons for women committing suicides in the province.

“At least 10 women hang themselves each month. Poverty, customs and traditions have led women to take their own lives. However, nobody is willing to take the responsibility when it comes to women committing suicides in our society,” she said and added, “Child marriages are also related to the issue. At least 60 cases have been reported and we have thankfully managed to stop several of the cases. Despite the law introduced to address domestic violence in Sindh, we continue to witness several cases of suicides that are connected with the issue.”



When talking about her Ministry’s work towards women development, Ms Raza said, “Even though my Ministry’s staff is short in numbers, we have managed to establish complaint cells in 14 districts across Sindh.”

Ms Raza asked for the police to cooperate in tackling the menace and also urged for citizens to be more aware about such incidents. She highlighted how rape cases, too, lead to suicides where the victim usually finds herself completely helpless as compared to the culprit.

She said, “No matter how many laws we make, such incidents remain prevalent. The police always support the culprit rather than the victims, while MLOs are also not cooperative. When it comes down to the courts, we cannot guarantee anything at all. Therefore, we need to ensure our check and balance everywhere.”



## Panel Speakers

Excerpts from the remarks of the esteemed panellists of the event are being shared below:

### Dr Haroon Ahmed, Pakistan Association of Mental Health

The President of Pakistan Association of Mental Health Dr Haroon Ahmed appreciated the efforts of the Commission with respect to initiating the much-needed discourse on mental health. He said it is commendable what SHRC is doing to identify the reason behind the increasing number of suicide cases in Sindh.

Talking about his own experience as a mental health professional Dr Haroon said, “In 1964, a survey found very low cases of suicides. A 1975 survey found that the ratio of suicide cases recorded by the police was 0.001 per 100,000. According to HRCP, 1338 and 780 cases of suicides have been documented in the year 2018 and 2019, respectively. Needless to say, it is very difficult to quantify the number of suicide cases in Pakistan,” he said.

“Since suicide is considered a crime, more so as a sin, there is a stigma attached to it. We have requested that the issue to be considered a mental health issue because people who attempt suicide are mentally ill. Globally, every three seconds people attempt suicide and every 40 seconds they lose their life. In 2020, suicide is the second leading cause of death after heart attack,” he further shared.



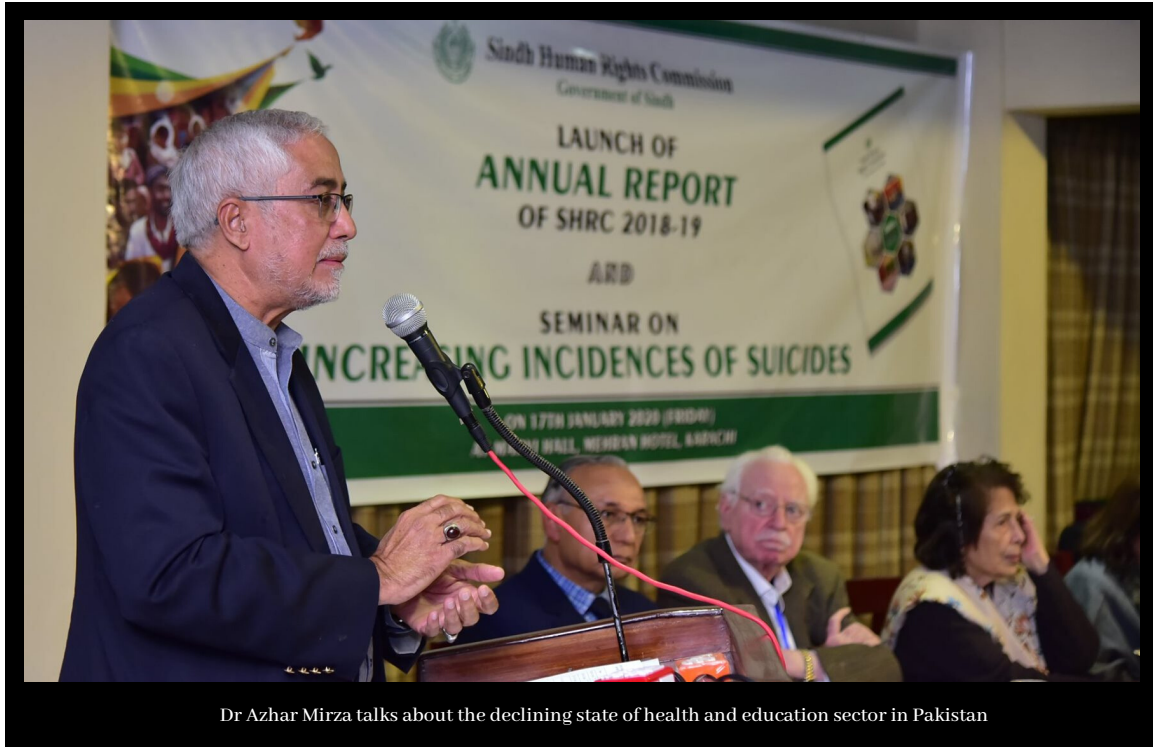
Dr Haroon shares his experience of working towards issues of mental health

Dr Haroon stated that since the major cause of suicide in Sindh is depression, there is need to ensure facilities for citizens to avail treatment for mental illnesses. He said that when someone says they will attempt suicide, our society often shrugs off the subject. He emphasized on the term “psychological post-mortem”, which in mental health terms means the identification of all available information regarding a victim by conducting research interviews with family, relatives, friends and healthcare professional attending them. He also quoted the issue of Indian farmers attempting suicides on a massive level due to poverty and debt.

He also shed light on the ways people have attempted suicides over the years. “In earlier days, people would use copper sulfate and kerosene oil to kill themselves. In the 70s, they took pills. Now they either hang themselves or use firearms to end their lives. It is therefore imperative to place a ban on weapons to evade suicides,” he said and added, “The reasons, too, need to be identified in order for proper treatment and counselling of mental health patients. We cannot write off cultural and social motives when the issue increases in our society. There should be a comprehensive survey to estimate accurate number of suicides across Sindh.”

## **Mr Azhar Mirza, General Secretary, Pakistan Medical Association**

When addressing attendees at the seminar, Mr Azhar Mirza spoke about the various general health issues that people in Sindh are suffering from and also shed light on the lack of sufficient healthcare facilities in the province. He said that the Government should pay attention towards the health and education sectors and prioritise the security of a citizen's life.



Dr Azhar Mirza talks about the declining state of health and education sector in Pakistan

He lamented about the non-existence of a comprehensive health policy in the country stating that this amounts to denying citizens their basic human right. “There is no way we can separate one’s health from their mental health. The indicators of health show how bleak the situation is in Pakistan. it is high time for us to consider these important issues and address the rights of the people in this country,” he said.

## **Karamat Ali – Executive Director, PILER & Member, Provincial Commission for Public Safety and Police Complaints**



Executive Director of PILER Mr Karamat Ali address attendees at the event

Mr. Karamat Ali, Executive Director of the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) represented the Provincial Commission for Public Safety and Police Complaints at the event. He said that until and unless there is an improvement in the system of policing, the society will not progress. “The Commission for Public Safety and Policing has a role to play in containing the number of suicides in the province and we will ensure any support that we can lend to address the issue.

The Commission can take a suo moto notice on issues of denial of fundamental rights of the citizen, especially their right to life,” he added.

Mr Ali observed that suicides have increased on a rapid pace and physical insecurities among the public have increased. He also expressed his view that policing needs immense improvement. “We are all at the mercy of the powerful people and law enforcement agencies have played their role in aggravating the insecurities among citizens. It is important for the public to be aware about their rights and know that anyone who does not adhere to the rule of law is punishable by law.”

### **Anis Haroon – Senior Human Rights Activist, Former Caretaker Provincial Minister for Women Development and Human Rights & Former Member Sindh, National Human Rights Commission**

Anis Haroon, senior human rights activist, Former Caretaker Provincial Minister for Women Development and Human Rights and Former Member Sindh, National Human Rights Commission was also among the panellists at the event. When talking about the issue of suicides in Sindh she said, “Every other person is facing physiological issues nowadays and to see the lack of proper health facilities makes one hopeless about the state of affairs in Sindh. Even though we are told that Tharparkar is flourishing, unfortunately, the increasing ratio of suicides shows us a different picture altogether.”



Ms Anis Haroon talks about the increasing number of suicides in the province

She added that poverty is rampant and a major cause of suicides among people, especially in rural Sindh. “At least 31% people are unemployed. People do not have a place to live and work. For instance, what happened with the Empress Market victims is appalling to say the least.”

Ms Haroon added that depression is a curable disease and so are other mental illnesses. However, the lack of a comprehensive health policy is the reason why we cannot tackle the issue. She demanded that the media, too, must address the issue as a priority to bring it into the attention of those sitting in the corridors of power. “No programme on TV has covered suicides in their analysis. So many channels have reported suicides in their news bulletins, but nobody is analysing the reasons behind the issue. Unemployment, social issues, and class difference are all reasons behind the increasing rates of suicides. People feel isolated, hopeless and depressed at the state of affairs in our country. The powerful rulers are oblivious to what is happening in the country. This is what needs to be discussed,” she opined.

When addressing the members of the civil society Ms Haroon said, “If we consider ourselves to be civil society and human rights activists, then we need to do something about the discrepancies in the society. SHRC has done a tremendous job by highlighting these issues. We need to support their initiative and work towards a healthy, thriving society.”



## Justice (Retd) Shahnawaz Tariq, Provincial Ombudsman, The Protection Against Harassment of Women at The Workplace

The Provincial Ombudsman for The Protection Against Harassment of Women at The Workplace, Justice (Retd) Shahnawaz Tariq, shared that issues of workplace harassment cannot be disassociated with suicides. These issues are now being discussed in our society and it is high time that we deal with it in the light of the law.

He said, “Harassment is a serious issue. Women who are subjected to harassment undergo immense mental trauma and attempt suicides in the absence of redress. This is why it is important to address the issue.”



Provincial Ombudsperson for The Protection Against Harassment of Women at The Workplace, Justice (Retd) Shahnawaz Tariq speaks at the event

He added that the Commission frequently deals with several cases of workplace harassment and it is often noted that the culprit is always a powerful man, but the survivor always comes from a lower stature of the society. “This discrimination of treating the accuser and the victims needs to be taken into consideration. Women are not treated with equality in Pakistan and harassment is prevalent. Every other day, there is a new case reported in the media that involves sexual harassment or rape of a woman.



Ms Kulsoom Chandio, Member Provincial Assembly Sindh, and Member SHRC presenting a traditional *Ajrak* to Justice (Retd) Shahnawaz Tariq, Provincial Ombudsman, The Protection Against Harassment of Women at The Workplace

Since men do not consider harassment as an issue and crime, they tend to take it for granted. The bigger issue is of awareness. Women are respectful, and this needs to be stressed,” he said.

He added that he has requested the Government of Sindh to hire a female senior prosecutor to better address the cases of women who approach the Ombudsman Office for redressal. Justice Tariq said, “Women usually give in and give up when dealing with such issue because they cannot face their perpetrator.”

He lauded the efforts of the SHRC and said that the dialogue SHRC has initiated to address suicides in the province is, in itself, is a major step.

## **Closing remarks**

The event ended after a vote of thanks and closing remarks by the Commission’s Secretary Ms Abida Lodhi.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were also shared towards the end of the consultation:

- Suicides should not be tried in criminal proceedings.
- Call centres and helplines for psychosocial support and prevention of suicide should be established, especially for women who have been sexually harassed.
- An amendment in the law should be made to ensure the reporting of suicide cases. This is because several cases received by police and medico-legal personnel of suicides are portrayed as accidents.
- People suffering from various issues including mental health should be given access to facilities, regardless of their social class.
- Mental health rehabilitation centres should be established to cater to mental illnesses, especially suicides. Those established for drug abuse should be separated from those treating mental health patients.
- Long-term planning to cater to this issue must be brought on the table instead of focusing on short-term solutions.
- The state must prioritise psychosocial counselling and ensure its provision to even school-going children. Hiring a competent individual to do the job will help address issues that are rampant in our society.
- In cases of harassment against women, the culprit should be named and shamed.
- In cases of harassment, the culprit should be terminated from current employment. He should not be given the same position anywhere. Merely a compensation for the crime, as is usually pursued, is not enough.

**Sindh Human Rights Commission**  
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