

Women Leaders in

Trade Unions of Pakistan

Stories of Struggle and Leadership



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Contents

Foreword	3
Acknowledgements	5
Aima Mehmood	7
Fatima Majeed	17
Halima Zulqarnain Laghari	23
Kaneez Fatima	28
Mahnaz Rahman	33
Musarat Jabeen	38
Nusrat Bashir	43
Parveen Latif Ansari	48
Rehana Yasmin	53
Saba Ali Baig	58
Zehra Khan	64

Foreword

Pakistani women have long stood at the forefront of labour movements, organising, leading, and challenging entrenched inequalities with extraordinary courage. Yet, too often, their struggles and achievements have been obscured by societal constraints and outdated gender norms. *Women Leaders in Trade Unions of Pakistan – Stories of Struggle and Leadership* seeks to redress this imbalance by bringing their voices and experiences to the fore.

Through eleven compelling accounts, this publication traces the journeys of women who defied expectations and transformed the trade union landscape. From the Lady Health Workers of Sindh who mobilised for recognition, to the home-based workers who fought tirelessly for legal status, these stories capture the resilience, conviction, and leadership of women determined to claim their rightful place in the world of work. Each narrative stands as a testament to the power of collective action and the enduring pursuit of dignity and equality.

The comic strip format, brought vividly to life by talented students of Beaconhouse National University, extends these stories beyond the circles of academics and labour rights advocates. By combining art and activism, the publication invites a broader audience to connect with the struggles and triumphs of women trade unionists, making complex histories accessible, engaging, and deeply human.

The interviews were conducted between November and December 2024, and the detailed interview-based report was finalised in June 2025. It can be accessed online through the QR code provided at the end of this publication.

At Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), we remain steadfast in our commitment to democracy, social justice, and equal rights. This collection reflects our ongoing efforts to celebrate and amplify women's leadership within Pakistan's labour movement through creative and inclusive storytelling. We hope that these narratives will not only honour the courage of past and present leaders but also inspire future generations of young women to organise, speak up, and lead with confidence and conviction.

Felix Kolbitz,
Country Director

Sidra Saeed,
Programme Advisor

Acknowledgements

This publication, *Women Leaders in Trade Unions of Pakistan – Stories of Struggle and Leadership*, is the result of a collaborative effort to document and celebrate the voices of women who have shaped Pakistan's labour movement with courage, resilience and conviction.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Pakistan extends its heartfelt appreciation to Dr Saba Gul Khattak for conducting, transcribing and translating the interviews that form the core of this book. Her dedication to amplifying authentic voices from the field has been invaluable in preserving these significant narratives.

FES Pakistan also gratefully acknowledges the Visual Communication Design Department at Beaconhouse National University (BNU) for its collaboration in developing the illustrations for this publication. The creativity and commitment of the department's faculty and students, under the guidance of Professor Rashid Rana, Dean of the Mariam Dawood School of Visual Arts and Design (MDSVAD), have added a striking and evocative visual dimension to these stories.

The team from the Mariam Dawood School of Visual Arts and Design, BNU, including Duaa Khan Kundi (Lecturer), Umai-ma Mohsin (Assistant Professor) and Qanitah Malik (Outreach and Communications Manager), played an instrumental role in guiding and coordinating the illustration process. Their support, mentorship and collaboration greatly enhanced the artistic coherence and quality of this publication.

Special thanks are extended to the talented students of the Mariam Dawood School of Visual Arts and Design from Department of Visual Communication Design, who brought these stories to life through their powerful and imaginative artwork. Their thoughtful interpretations and creative dedication have beautifully captured the spirit and resilience of the women featured in this publication.

Aima Mehmood

Born in Lahore and raised in a family of activists, Aima Mehmood grew up listening to chants of solidarity for her father, Chaudhry Gulzar Ahmed, a prominent trade union leader in the 1970s. For her, union activism was not just inherited—it became her life’s purpose.

Aima studied Political Science and began working early to support her family after her father lost his job for union activities during Zia’s era. Witnessing workers’, and especially her father’s struggles, shaped her belief in the dignity of work and the power of collective action.

Over the years, she has emerged as one of Punjab’s leading women trade unionists. As General Secretary of the All Pakistan Trade Union Federation (APTUF, Punjab), she has also confronted entrenched patriarchal attitudes within unions. Women’s issues—unequal pay, lack of childcare, unsafe transport, and harassment—were often dismissed, but Aima consistently pushed for their recognition.

She co-founded the Sanati Mazdoor Ittehad, a platform for young workers and women, challenging the dominance of older male leaders and introducing technology into union work. She has also served on the Punjab Social Security Authority, successfully advocating for reforms such as recognising women as primary beneficiaries on social security cards—so their husbands and children could also be covered.

Aima is outspoken about the limitations of Pakistan’s labour movement; she points out internal divisions, lack of young leadership, and the neglect of women’s voices. Yet she is equally determined to change it.

“Women must not just be present in unions—they must speak, lead, and be heard. Numbers mean little if silence prevails.”

For Aima, victories come in small but significant steps: recognition of home-based and domestic workers, inclusion of women in anti-labour code alliances, and ensuring bureaucrats listen to women at the negotiating table. She envisions a trade union movement where women lead alongside men, not from the margins but at the centre.


Illustrator: Bilal Ahmed

Carving Space

AIMA MEHMOOD

Journey Through Trade Union Struggles in Pakistan



A cartoon illustration of a man in a blue shirt addressing a crowd. A banner above reads "Chaudhry Gulzar, Qadam uthao!". The man is seen from the back, gesturing towards the crowd. The crowd consists of various people, including a woman in a red dress and a young girl in a purple dress. Many people in the crowd have their fists raised in a gesture of solidarity or protest. The background is a simple light blue sky.


Chaudhry Gulzar,
Qadam uthao!

I grew up surrounded by trade union activism. My father was my role model.

When my father lost his job, we all had to take responsibility. It was a hard time.



"The one who
grows the food
→ should eat it
first"



Socialist ideals shaped my belief in
dignity of work and workers' rights.



Women's voices were ignored, their struggles sidelined.



SANATI MAZDOOR
ITTEHAD
WORKERS UNITED!

We formed a new alliance for women,
youth, and workers.

Our struggle brought real changes, laws for women workers, recognition for the informal sector.



EQUAL RIGHTS
EQUAL LEADERSHIP



Women must not just be present, they must lead.



**"OUR FIGHT IS NOT JUST AGAINST
CAPITALISM- IT IS FOR DIGNITY,
EQUALITY, AND A FUTURE WHERE
WOMEN LEAD WITHOUT FEAR."**

-AIMA

Fatima Majeed

Born in the historic fishing village of Ibrahim Haideri, Karachi, Fatima Majeed grew up among a community deeply tied to the sea through fishing, net-making, and boat building. Inspired by her father—himself once imprisoned in India for crossing Sir Creek waters and later an active voice in fisherfolk organisations—Fatima was drawn early into community activism and gained knowledge about mangroves and fishing from her father when he mentored Mohammad Ali Shah. She witnessed firsthand the struggles of fisherfolk, overfishing, sea pollution, and the growing threats to the Indus Delta.

Fatima's activism began through the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF), where she rose from the women's unit to become Senior Vice Chairperson. She worked closely with Tahira Ali Shah and senior activists, organising meetings, campaigns, and study circles on environmental issues like mangrove preservation. In 2013, she helped lead a 14-day Long March for Mangroves, raising slogans, giving speeches, and mobilising women across Sindh. These experiences shaped her as a confident climate activist, despite initial stage fright and resistance from within her own community.

Her leadership has focused on both women's empowerment and environmental justice. She built women's participation in fisherfolk movements, formed theatre and youth groups, and mentored younger women to take leadership roles. She has also pioneered Mahigeer Tours—community-led initiatives that showcase local food, fisherfolk culture, and raise awareness about mangrove destruction, pollution, and the ecological importance of the Indus Delta.

Beyond PFF, Fatima has been politically active as a member of the Aurat March (Karachi chapter), the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), and local government politics in Malir district. She has represented fisherfolk and climate concerns at national and international forums, including UNDP training in Bangkok and WWF consultancies. Her work has been covered by German media and universities such as Habib University and QAU.

Fatima overcame personal challenges, including a four-year delay in education due to conservative family restrictions and community scepticism toward women leaders. Yet, she turned obstacles into learning experiences, earning recognition as a fearless voice for fisherfolk and environmental rights.

Vision for the Future: Fatima dreams of building a national fisherfolk movement across Pakistan, where women are equal leaders and environmental protection is central to community survival. She emphasises the urgent need to save mangroves, rivers, and seas—“our guardians and protectors”—and insists that true equality and dignity for fisherfolk can only be achieved through collective struggle and strong, women-led activism.

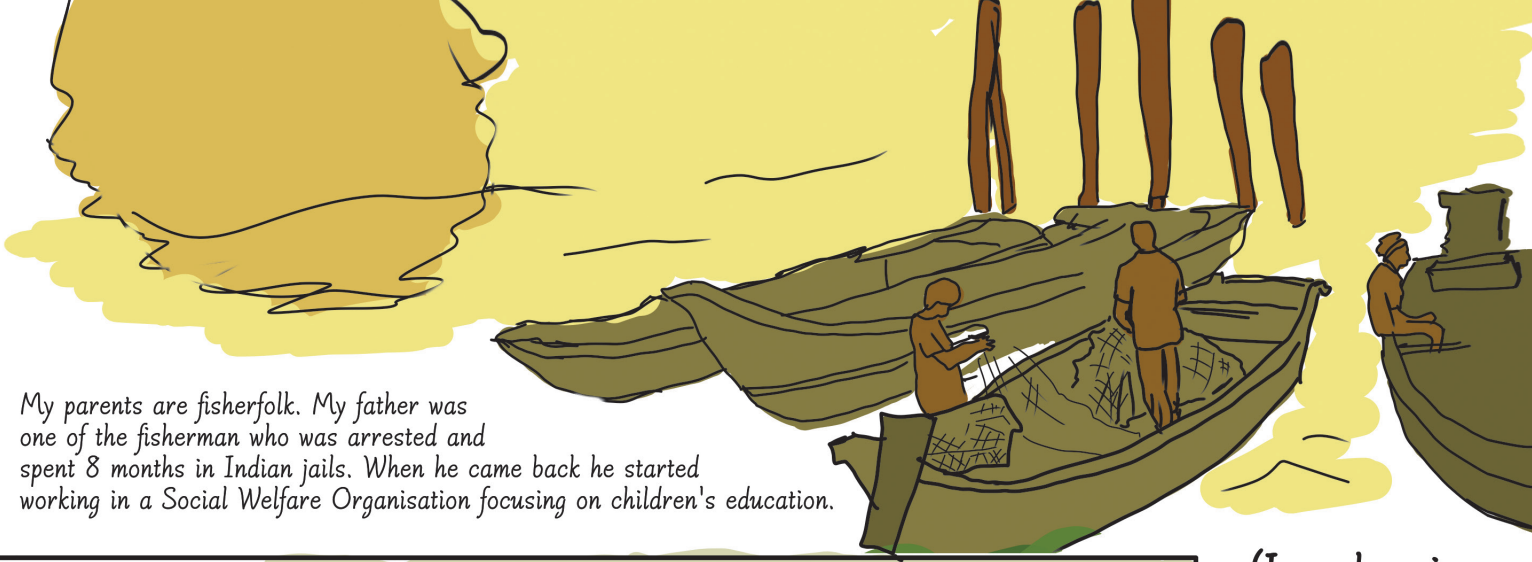
Illustrator: Shaza Umar

FATIMA MAJEEED

GUARDING THE DELTA :

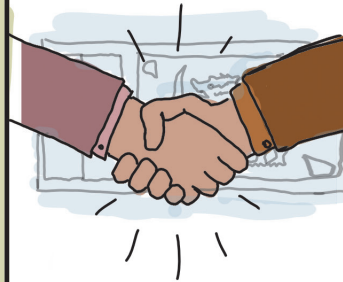
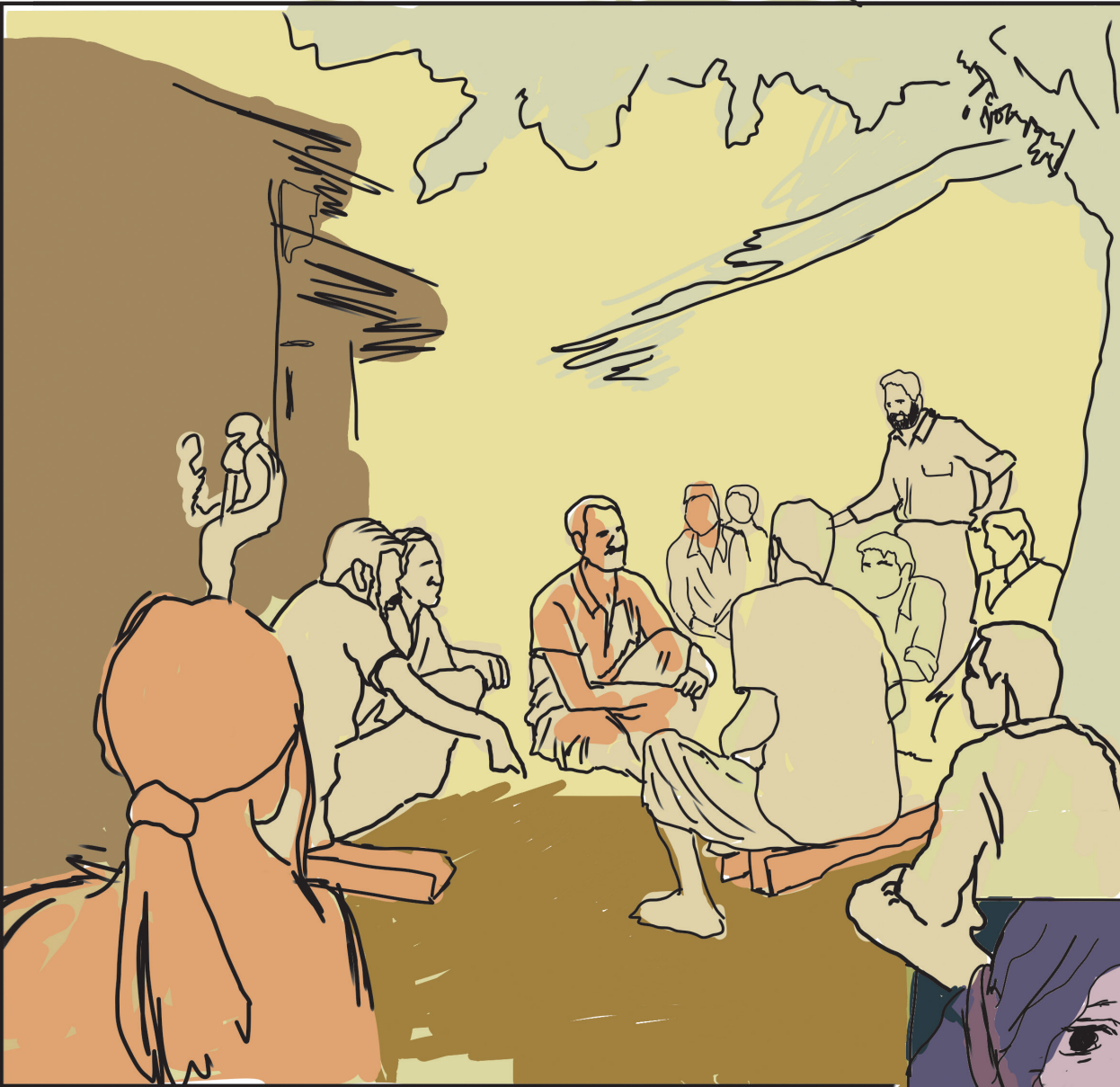
A Fisherfolk and Climate Activist's March for Mangroves and Equality





My parents are fisherfolk. My father was one of the fisherman who was arrested and spent 8 months in Indian jails. When he came back he started working in a Social Welfare Organisation focusing on children's education.

(I was born in Ibrahim Haideri Fishing village Malir, Karachi)

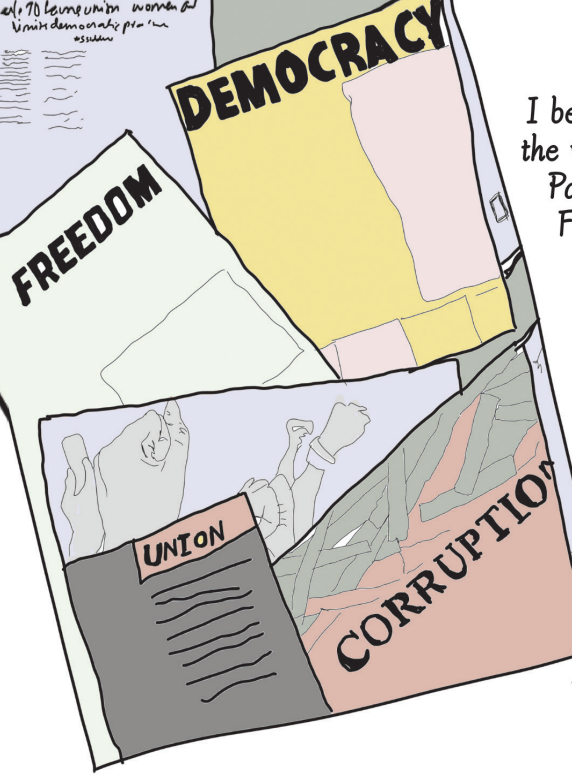


My father was nominated for the Asian Culture Development Forum in Srilanka to recognise the importance of fisheries.

My father met with many fisherfolk organisations who were Srilankans and Indians. He took me to meetings and I saw my father actively participating in all this and I became very interested and inspired.

(Young Fatima)





I became a member of the women's unit of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum in Ibrahim Haideri .



I used to get very nervous when making a speech, but my mentor encouraged me to overcome my fear

Sometimes people did my character assassination but I didn't allow these negatives get to me.

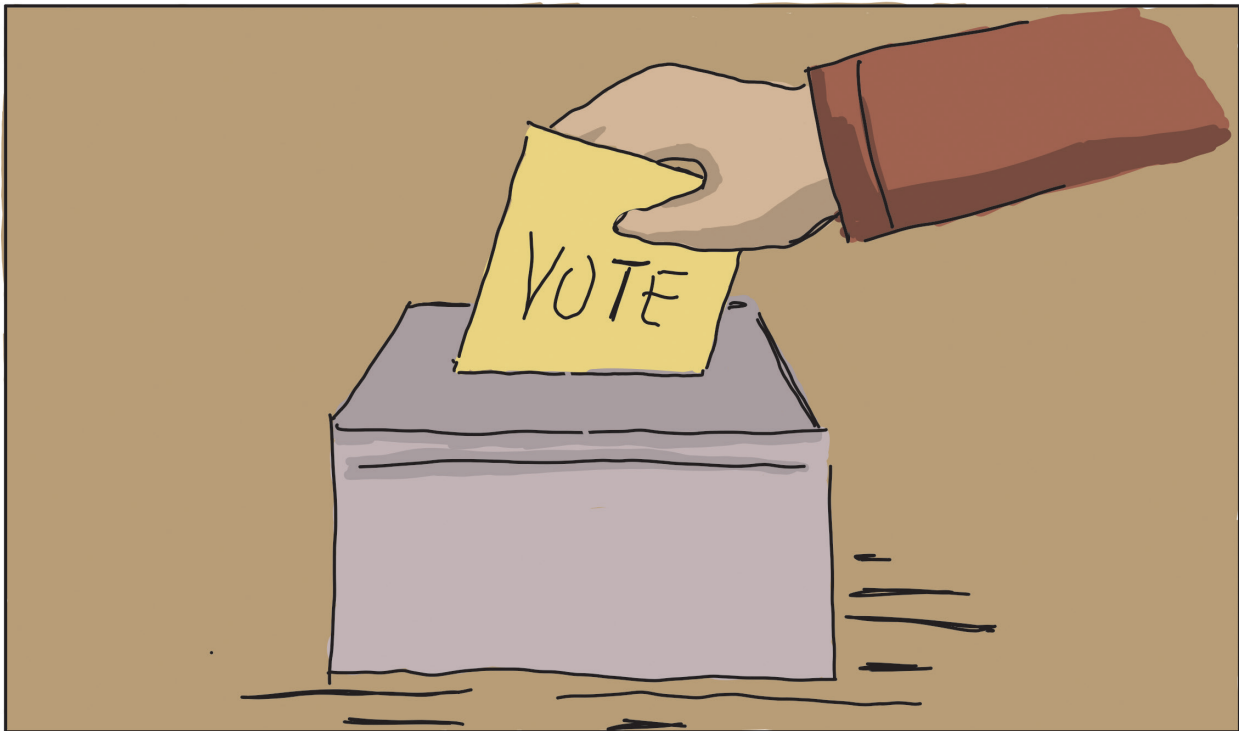


I felt there was opposition towards me due to internal leadership struggles within PFF, but I continued to advocate for mangroves and our rivers.



We organised a 14-day long march from Jamshoro in 2013 to raise awareness about the mangrove ecosystem. I used to raise my voice and give speeches



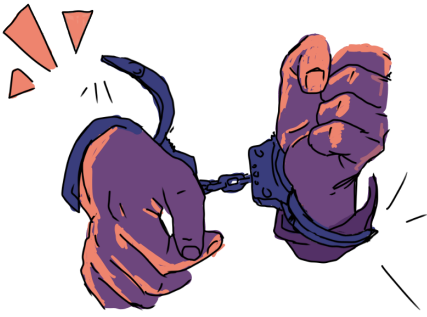


I had also contested for a seat against some of the powerful candidates in the local government but I lost. PPP then gave me a reserved seat for women. I am district Malir's president now.



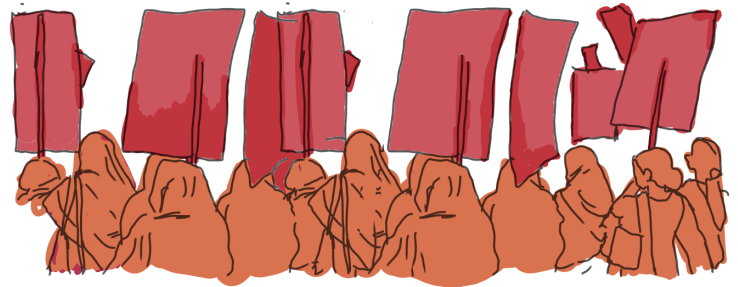
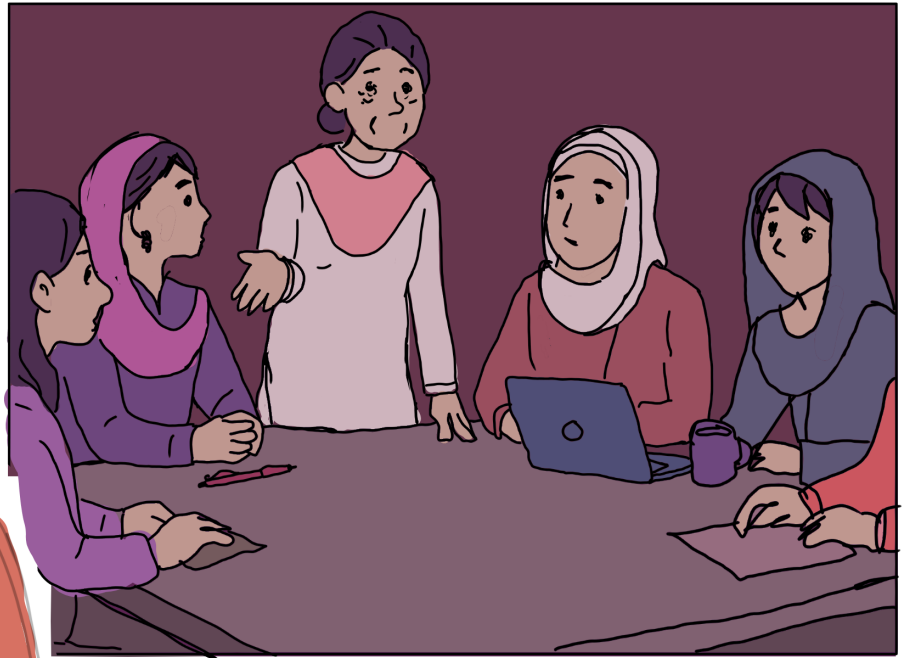
I now organise 2 to 3 Mahigeer tours every week. We promote local foods and raise awareness about the destruction of our mangroves and Indus Delta.

(Organised study groups)



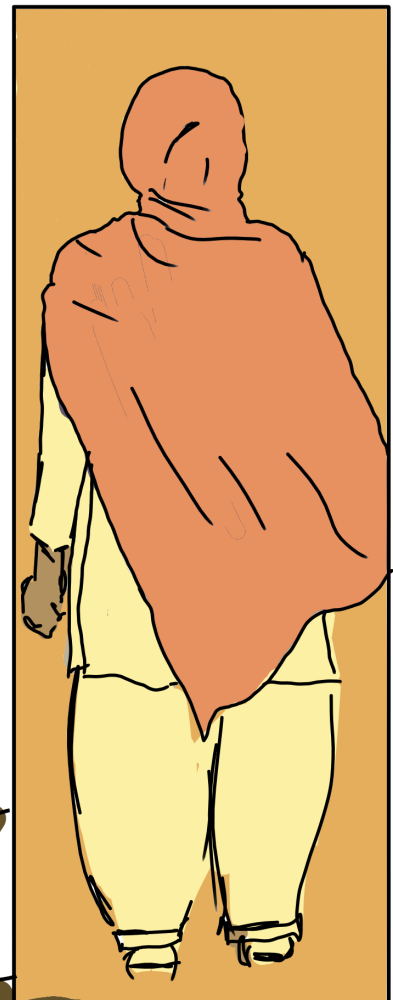
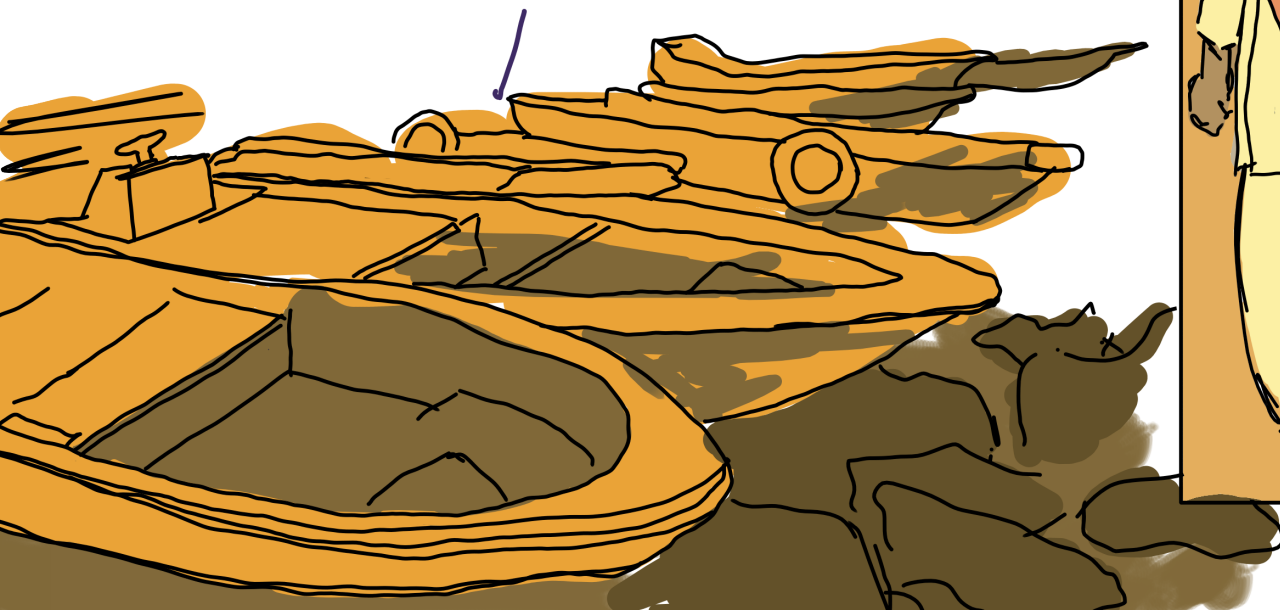
(Freed arrested fisherfolk)

I have taken all the pushbacks as learning, not as hindrances, which is why I am now the Senior Vice President of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum.



Today I am recognised. UNDP sent me to Bangkok. German media has covered our work. I have been invited to speak at many places

Our struggle is still going on. We need a national voice for fisherfolk in every district of Pakistan. And as a woman, I believe you have to be strong. This is my achievement that my work is recognised.



Halima Zulqarnain Laghari

Born in Chambar Shehr, District Tando Allahyar, Sindh, Halima Zulqarnain grew up in a society where girls' education was rare, especially in her Baloch tribe. Her mother, who regretted leaving school after grade six, was determined to change that for her daughter. With her encouragement, Halima studied up to a Masters in Sociology, despite resistance from her extended family.

Halima married young, but her first husband was financially exploitative and abusive. She divorced him with her mother's support—a bold step in her community—and later remarried against her tribe's wishes. Her family's rejection and the grief of losing her mother to a heart attack after police harassment at the behest of her male siblings during her marriage ceremony, did not break her spirit.

Her entry into the world of work began with the Lady Health Workers (LHWs) Programme launched in 1995. Excelling in her training, she became a supervisor by 1998, but she and her colleagues faced deep injustices—low salaries, no regularisation of their work, and delayed remuneration. Outraged, Halima helped organise protests that eventually led to better pay and the regularisation of LHWs. The struggle was fierce: women were beaten, jailed, and even divorced for participating. Halima herself was suspended and injured during demonstrations, but she never gave up.

Over the years, she organised thousands of LHWs, founded the All Sindh Lady Health Workers Association, and later transformed it into a trade union with the support of allied organisations. Today, she leads a federation of more than 17,000 members in Sindh and has been elected as the President of the Lady Health Workers' Federation of Pakistan.

Her leadership is rooted in empathy and determination—listening to women's everyday struggles with salaries, school fees, and harassment, often spending her own income to support workers, and importantly, to raise awareness among them to demand their rights. Despite political interference, police violence, and divisions sown by authorities, she has kept the movement alive.

“People once said regularising LHWs was as impossible as a trans-person having a child. Today, we are permanent employees with rights. Nothing is impossible if women lead with courage.”

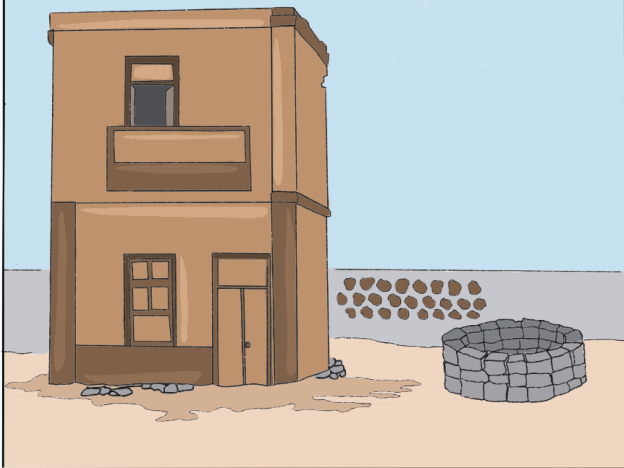
Halima now advocates nationally and internationally for issues like security during polio campaigns, fair wages, and social protection. For her, leadership means integrity: “First do your duty with honesty, then demand your rights.” Her journey shows that women, even in the harshest conditions, can move mountains.

Illustrator: Abdullah Shahid

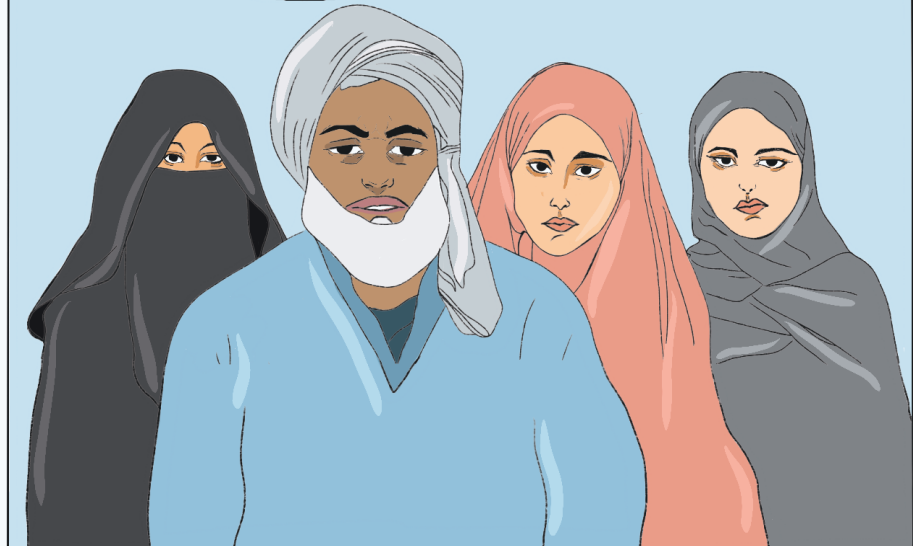


HALIMA ZULQARNAIN LAGHARI
**ACHIEVING THE
IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE
LADY HEALTH WORKERS (LHWs)**

In my Leghari Baloch tribe, girls' education was rare... but my mother fought for ours.



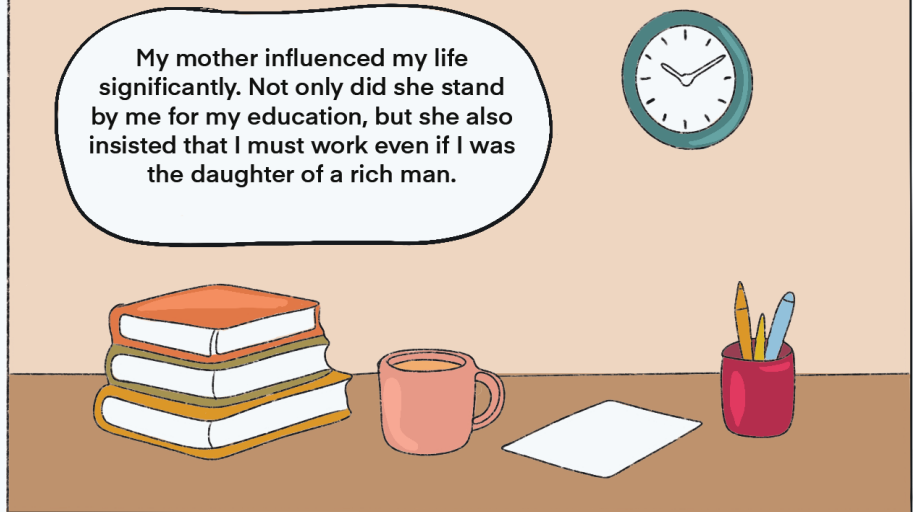
I was not a laadli (pampered girl child) as I was born in the middle (with older and younger siblings). My father had married thrice.



As the middle child of a rich man, I often thought... 'If I wasn't needed, why was I born?'



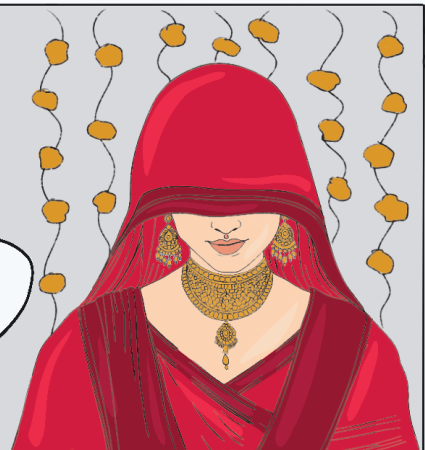
My mother influenced my life significantly. Not only did she stand by me for my education, but she also insisted that I must work even if I was the daughter of a rich man.



I joined The Government's 'Lady Health Workers' (LHWs) program in 1995, my mother said... 'You can be a little doctor.'



I was married to my cousin in 1998... he even took money gifted to me on my wedding day and my salary.



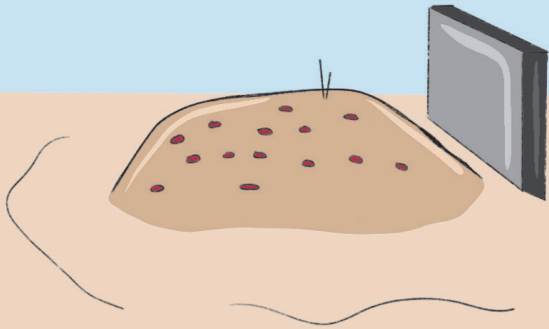
There would often be fighting, and eventually, my mother told me to divorce him before he grabbed my share of the land. I initiated divorce in 2011.



In 2015, I married outside my clan, due to which my brother sent police.



My mother got so upset, she had a heart attack and passed away.



We did not even have Sundays off; maternity leave was only 20 days—10 days before and 10 days after delivery. We earned Rs 3,000 a month; salaries delayed for months, even on Eid.



We want justice

We protested against the dishonest practices. Politics had begun to seep into our internal dynamics as well. I had to revive a half-dead organisation.



On Feb 12 2012, some 55 women were jailed in Sukkur; similarly, LHWs were put in prison in Karachi and Balochistan. As a result 5 girls were divorced.

We protested with zeal until 2012... The Sindh governor took notice when the police became violent and used water cannons in Karachi



Finally, government regularised us. Following the 18th Amendment (2010), health was finally devolved to the provinces on Jul 1, 2011, bringing Lady Health Workers (LHWs) under the jurisdiction of individual provincial governments. We made the All Sindh Lady Health Workers' Association.

My husband wheels me to meetings .
We fight for pay, safety, and dignity.



We were helped/guided by the Workers Education and Research Organization (WERO) and Public Service International (PSI) to make a trade union.



They said regularising 130,000 LHWs was impossible. Now, we have 5 provincial unions and a national federation and I'm the President.



In 2017 as President of 17,000 workers, I spent my own salary... faced suspension, injuries, and political pressure.



Today, we receive Rs 53,000 per month, including allowances. This is an achievement.



I once asked, 'Why was I born if I wasn't needed?' Now I know... this journey is my purpose.

Kaneez Fatima

Kaneez Fatima's name is etched in the history of Pakistan's labour movement. She was the first woman trade union leader in Pakistan. Beginning her journey in the early 1960s, she became one of the first women to challenge both management and government through union activism. Her parents and brothers' struggle during the independence movement inspired her as a child. When her father was imprisoned, her mother spoke out. Thus, Kaneez knew from a young age that she had a mission. She was involved in progressive politics, inspired by Maulana Bhashani and became involved in organising women in Karachi while raising her voice for dockworkers' rights. She was the President of the powerful Karachi Shipyard Workers Union.

At a time when few women even entered union spaces, Kaneez defied social norms and took bold risks. Kaneez Fatima's first public involvement was during the 1963 workers' strike in Karachi, which began at the Security Printing Press and lasted for several months. As the old leadership lost credibility, new leaders emerged. Kaneez Fatima showed solidarity by organising women and children to sit by the road at Regal Chowk and raise funds through the traditional Jholi Fund method, thereby garnering public support. On the third day of the women's protest, the workers' demands were accepted. In 1966, she led a large rally of women workers for the rights of labourers working in various industries. As a result, she was expelled from Karachi to Thatta, where she organised labour from prison.

She organised study circles by visiting labour colonies in Karachi, where she gathered workers and their families to explain what a trade union is, how it is formed, its importance and advantages. She encouraged male workers to allow their womenfolk to actively participate in unions. Throughout her active life, Kaneez Fatima led campaigns for better working conditions, fair wages, and recognition of women's labour. She spoke for those who were invisible, e.g., the brickkiln workers, hari women and bonded labour, kathiawari women who are involved in roadbuilding, sanitary workers and peasants, and advocated for their right to form unions. Arrested repeatedly under Ayub Khan's and Yahya Khan's era, she continued to organise workers even while imprisoned.

Kaneez was a fierce critic of tokenism in unions. She believed that people's thinking needed to be revolutionised. She opposed the idea of "women's wings," arguing instead for men and women to work together on an equal footing, on a single platform for the collective and indivisible interests of all workers. She broke barriers not only in trade unions but also in society. Under her leadership, women began to occupy space in union activities that were previously unimaginable. Many of the women active in unions today stand on the foundations laid by her courage.

Her life is a testament to the idea that women are not followers in the labour movement—they are leaders who can stand against employers, and patriarchy alike.


"Success is not only in better wages or more representation—it is in workers knowing their rights and daring to claim them."

Illustrator: Raheel Hussain

"KANEEZ" "FATIMA"



The First Woman Trade Union
Leader of Pakistan



I grew up hearing words like samaj (society) and istehsal (exploitation) because my father was politically active in the independence movement; he was with the Congress party, due to which he was sometimes imprisoned for long stretches. While my mother worked for the Khilafat Movement.

Since my childhood, it was in my mind that our country needs to be free of the British who came as traders. I was clear that we needed freedom from traders.

I would go to meet my father in jail and innocently tell him I will also come and stay here.

And that's how I came into the field of labour rights

My family migrated to Karachi from Gujranwala when I was in first year (11th grade). I was asked to participate in gate meetings even though I was with the National Awami Party.

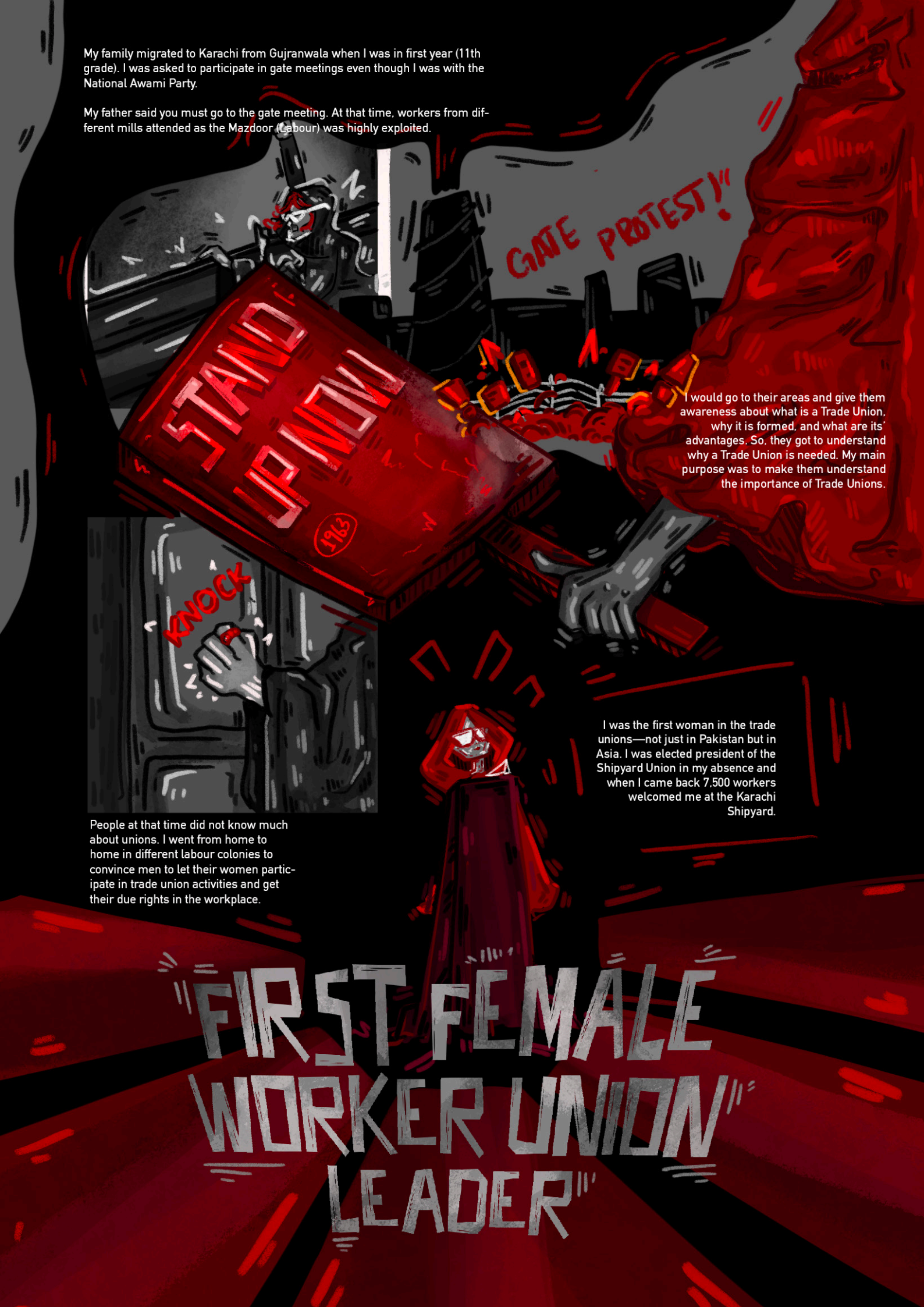
My father said you must go to the gate meeting. At that time, workers from different mills attended as the Mazdoor (Labour) was highly exploited.

I would go to their areas and give them awareness about what is a Trade Union, why it is formed, and what are its advantages. So, they got to understand why a Trade Union is needed. My main purpose was to make them understand the importance of Trade Unions.

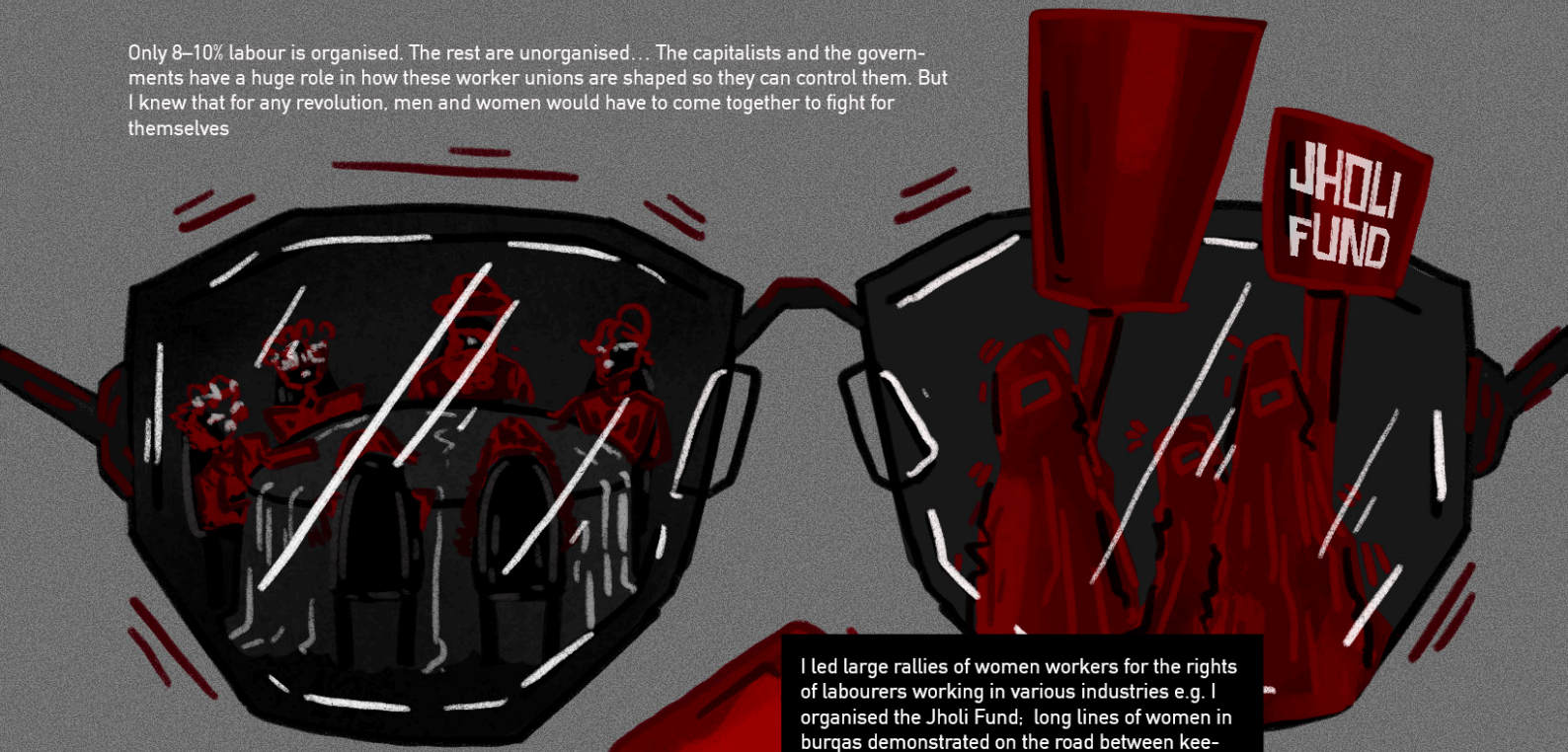
I was the first woman in the trade unions—not just in Pakistan but in Asia. I was elected president of the Shipyards Union in my absence and when I came back 7,500 workers welcomed me at the Karachi Shipyards.

People at that time did not know much about unions. I went from home to home in different labour colonies to convince men to let their women participate in trade union activities and get their due rights in the workplace.

"FIRST FEMALE WORKER UNION LEADER"



Only 8–10% labour is organised. The rest are unorganised... The capitalists and the governments have a huge role in how these worker unions are shaped so they can control them. But I knew that for any revolution, men and women would have to come together to fight for themselves



I led large rallies of women workers for the rights of labourers working in various industries e.g. I organised the Jholi Fund: long lines of women in burqas demonstrated on the road between keemari and bandar road, all led by me.



Once the all-powerful Deputy Commissioner of Karachi called me in his office and said that he had all the powers and could destroy me. I threw a paperweight on his face and said, "I have all the powers". This did result in me getting expelled to Thatta but I started organising workers again.



Women too need to stop treating themselves as a separate entity and work with men on an equal footing. I have always been critical of the formation of separate women's wings, men and women need to come together on one platform to work for the common good of all workers.

Mahnaz Rahman

Mahnaz Rahman, born in Karachi, is a prominent journalist, trade unionist, and activist whose journey reflects Pakistan's turbulent political and social landscape. The only daughter among four brothers, she grew up in a family shaped by the Partition migration. Her parents' story—meeting in Karachi after moving separately from Delhi and Amritsar, and marrying in 1948 on the day of Gandhi's assassination—was marked by resilience and adaptation.

Mahnaz's childhood unfolded across Lahore, Lyallpur (Faisalabad), and Shikarpur, where she experienced both privilege and inequality in the industrial colonies of Koh-i-Noor Mills. Observing the lives of thousands of mill workers alongside the comfortable lives of officers, she became aware of class divisions early in life.

Her political journey began at Karachi University, where she pursued a Master's in Economics to better understand socialism. Inspired by Sahir Ludhianvi's revolutionary poetry and global leftist leaders like Che, Castro, Lenin, and Mao, Mahnaz quickly emerged as a student leader. She defied campus conservatism—organising strikes against sexist remarks by professors who maintained that women joined university to find husbands, leading protests for Bhutto's release, and challenging Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba's dominance. Breaking barriers, she became the first woman to contest and win the Economics Society election, with progressive students rallying around her. She also joined demonstrations led by the National Students Federation (NSF), experiencing firsthand both the risks of political dissent and the solidarity of progressive student networks. These early experiences cemented her commitment to activism and leftist movements.

The 1970s marked her entry into journalism and trade unionism. She worked with Masawat, a PPP-affiliated newspaper, and later with Amn Akhbar. She became the first woman president of a newspaper union and joint secretary of the Karachi Union of Journalists (KUJ). Her activism coincided with Zia era, which repressed journalists through censorship, arrests, and division within the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ). Mahnaz and her husband, also a trade unionist, faced severe financial and political hardships—he went underground, and she struggled with low-paid, insecure jobs at left-leaning papers that were denied government advertisements.

Despite these challenges, Mahnaz's courage and leadership stood out. She led union activities, managed the women's page at Amn, and resisted state intimidation. In 1985, she moved with her family to Beijing, where for eight years she wrote the widely read column Letter from Beijing, offering Pakistanis rare insights into China. For this, she became the first Pakistani woman to receive China's prestigious Friendship Award.

Mahnaz acknowledges that her husband's reputation shielded her from gender-based harassment, though financial struggles were constant under Zia's era. Looking back, she takes pride in raising her children amid adversity and in her and her husband's role as symbols of resistance within the press community. Reflecting on the future of trade unions, she laments their decline under neoliberalism, casual labour contracts, and internal divisions. While she believes unions can only thrive if the state reclaims responsibility for social welfare, she remains sceptical about unity among leftist forces in Pakistan.

Mahnaz Rahman's life embodies the resilience of women activists who fought not only for workers' rights and press freedom but also for a progressive political vision in Pakistan's darkest authoritarian years.

Illustrator: Muhammad Hayyan



MAHNAZ RAHMAN

JOURNEY OF ACTIVISM

from STUDENTS' UNION to JOURNALISTS' UNION

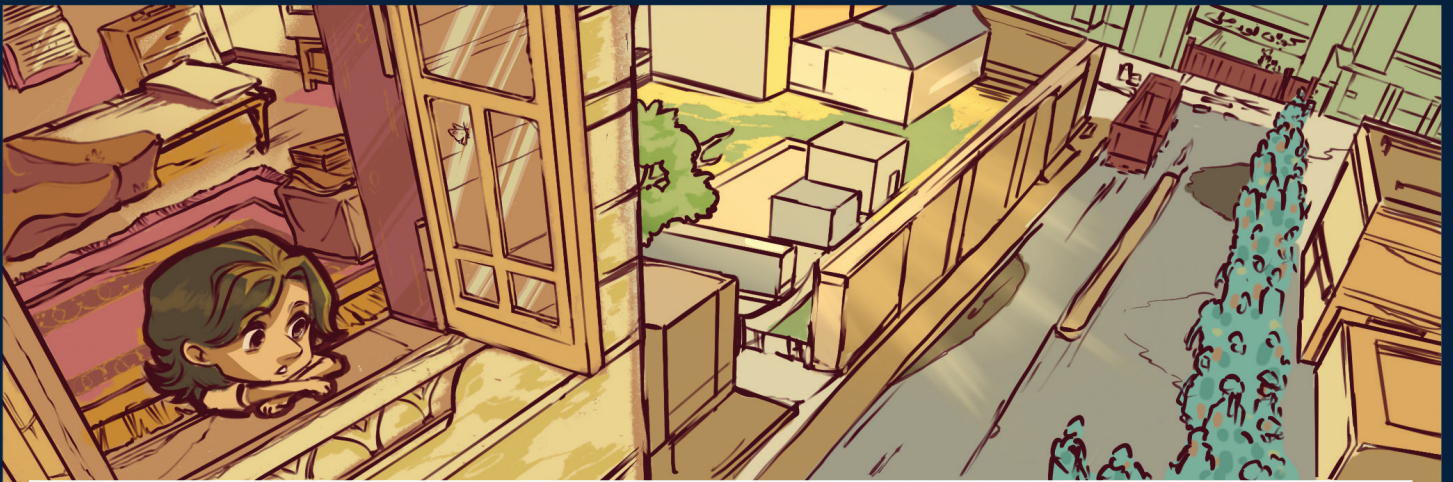


BORN IN

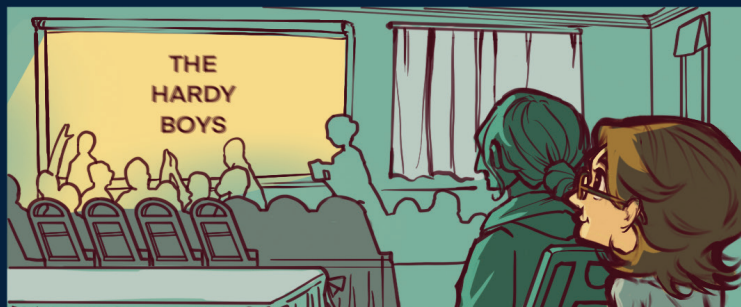
1949

IN





I had spent my childhood near the Koh-i-Noor Mills in Faisalabad. With the best school nearby, my four brothers and my parents, I had a lovely childhood. I used to stare out the window watching the long lines of workers go to the nearby textile mill, unaware of how they were exploited.



My father's work gave our family a lot of perks. They'd give facilities like school, a house and a club where we watched weekend movies, which I enjoyed along with trying to read Urdu literature.



Compared to my lifestyle, I wondered about the lives of the workers and the troubles they went through waiting in line, while I, went to school.

My activism started when I enrolled in Karachi University for a Masters in economics. I was into socialist poetry.



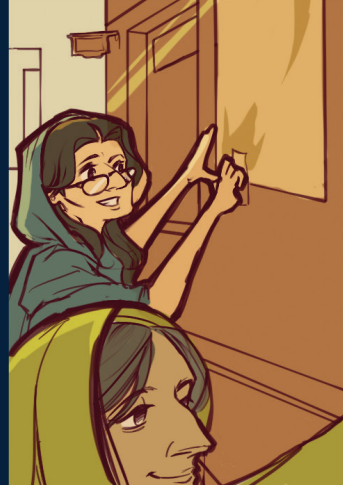
The Jamat-i-Islami back then, was confident about its influence over the university and discipline checks.

My friends and I as women, had a lot of restrictions and stigma attached to us by our teachers and administration.



The girls and I started a strike over the conservative environment. I didn't realise, but I had gained a sort of leadership status.

Bhutto was arrested at that time. My friends and I secretly put up posters for his release.



My best friend pushed me to use my leadership effectively by running in the elections for the economics society as the first girl to do so.



I was grateful I had won as it got me a step closer to being taken seriously by the Jamiat. However, plans to protest for post graduate jobs was underway by the National Students' Federation (NSF).

My friend was part of the NSF and the students decided to protest the day of the convocation.



He threw a flower pot to rile up noise and confusion, but then started getting beaten up by members of the Jamat-i-Islami.



A student picked up a stone to attempt smashing my friend's head, I saw it and screamed, which made him stop right there. This is an example of the violence for demanding students' rights.



I joined my parents in Shikarpur after university to get a job, to no avail.

Our family stood with the nationalists as we were involved with leftist politics.



Later we moved to Karachi where I got a hired at Masawat Newspaper.

Trade Unions were the only platform for left politics to show communist solidarity.

The communist party workers went underground.



I met my husband at Masawat as he was working there; he was active in trade unions and was part of the left politics.

I started working as a freelance journalist but later I joined Amn Akhbar, owned by left leaning journalists.

I was elected as president of the Amn Newspaper Employees Union. I was the first woman President of a newspaper union.



Soon after Zia ul Haq took over as army chief in July 1977, my husband became jobless when Masawat was shut down.

Other newspapers were also shut down by Zia ul Haq govt.

The Zia govt. split Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) through bribery.

Journalists who opposed the Zia govt. were being arrested. Or lost their jobs.



My time at Amn newspaper was difficult because we were underpaid, no work rights, and exploited.

The office was tense, the government blocked us from events. I covered the women's page largely on my own.



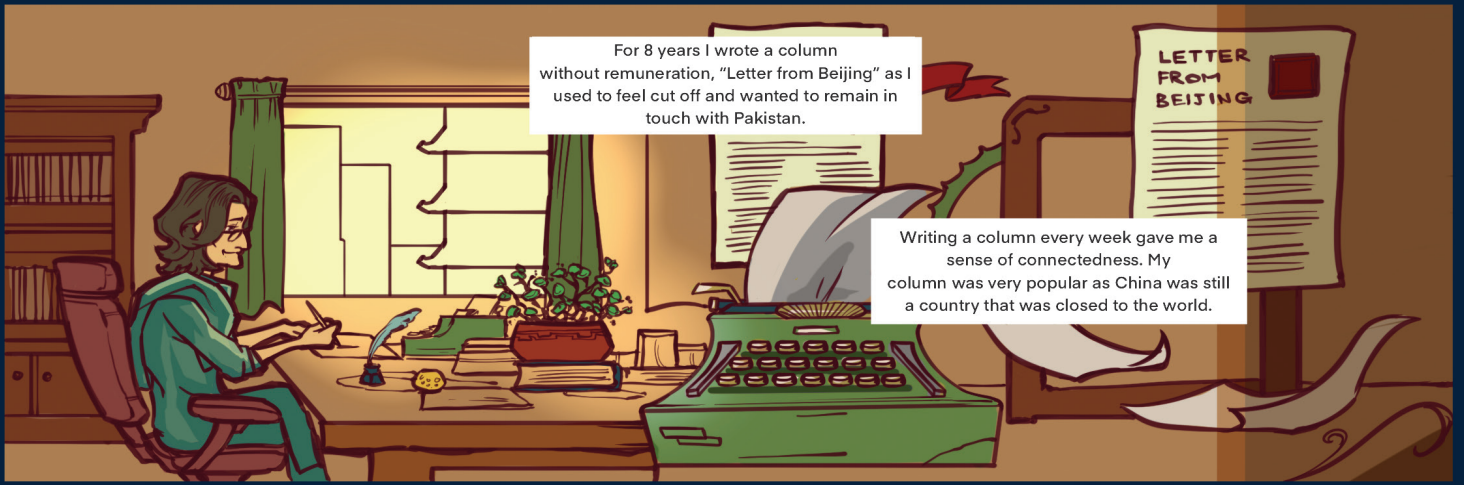
When the landlord came to know, he asked me to vacate the house. I shifted to my parents' house with my baby girl. There were many hardships.

My husband went underground to continue the movement of journalists against the Zia govt. as other journalists had been jailed.

The police came looking for him at our home.



In 1985 my husband got a job in China so we moved to Beijing.



For 8 years I wrote a column without remuneration, "Letter from Beijing" as I used to feel cut off and wanted to remain in touch with Pakistan.

Writing a column every week gave me a sense of connectedness. My column was very popular as China was still a country that was closed to the world.

I was the first and only Pakistani woman to receive the Friendship Award from the Chinese government as Pakistanis got to know about China due to my writing.

It placed me in a far more recognised position, I felt rewarded for the efforts I made and what I did to reach this point. I did not want to lose touch with my country.

Writing had helped me strengthen faith in others around me as well as faith in myself. And of course, the years passed by as I strove towards championing my beliefs.



One would imagine that my life had been tough. However, I did not face difficult problems when I was working as my husband was a popular and respected leader.

He was adored by everyone, and his presence was an umbrella for me, from the harassment others had to face. After his passing, I realised I had lived in a comfort bubble. Other women did not have protection from the horrid ways of the world.

In the Press Club people perceived us as an inspiring couple. I am proud that despite the adverse circumstances, I raised my children well and I feel proud of them. They are my best achievements.



I believe previous efforts to bring together the various trade unions divisions still are valuable and I will wait to see what comes next for the betterment of working women.

Musarat Jabeen

Born and raised in Karachi, Musarat Jabeen came from an elite-turned-middle-class family and aspired to become a doctor, but instead pursued a BA. Remaining unmarried, she devoted her life to labour rights, caring for her mother, sister, and disabled niece at home, while carving out an independent identity in the trade union movement. She received tremendous support from her father in connection with labour rights.

Her entry into the labour struggle began when she joined International Foundation Garments (IFG), a factory owned by a Bohri woman who supported unions. Despite social stigma around women working in lingerie production, Musarat found both encouragement and a platform to lead. She quickly emerged as a fearless and outspoken leader, trusted by colleagues to resolve disputes and represent workers. With training from PILER and mentorship from leaders like Saleem Raza and Karamat Ali, she rose to become General Secretary of her union at IFG, winning elections consistently for nearly two decades. She was also affiliated with different trade unions in Karachi and was a leader of the women's wing in the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF)

Musarat's journey, however, was marked by betrayals and violence. Factory administrations backed fake "pocket unions" to weaken genuine organising, while opportunistic colleagues bartered away workers' rights. She survived an assassination attempt in the factory canteen, faced character attacks, and endured relentless opposition, yet remained steadfast: "I have not done any bargaining (sauda baazi). I kept working. I made losses, but I am satisfied."

Her greatest achievements include securing wage increases, bonuses, facilities, skill-building programs, and respect for all workers, from janitors to factory floor staff. Workers' families remembered her as someone who stood by them in celebrations and crises alike. She built trust and inspired confidence, making herself a role model for younger women.

Today, Musarat reflects with disillusionment on the state of trade unions. She sees many trade union federations weakened by corruption, some NGOs complicit in fake unions, and labour rights eroded by contract work and inflation. Where once unions were strong enough to hold employers and the Labour Department accountable, she now sees silence and fear.

Her message to the younger generation: "Fight for yourselves. It's not easy, but only genuine unions—not pocket unions—can bring dignity and rights back to workers."

Illustrator: Eiman Habib

MUSARRAT JABEEN



Individual Struggles
Against The Tide



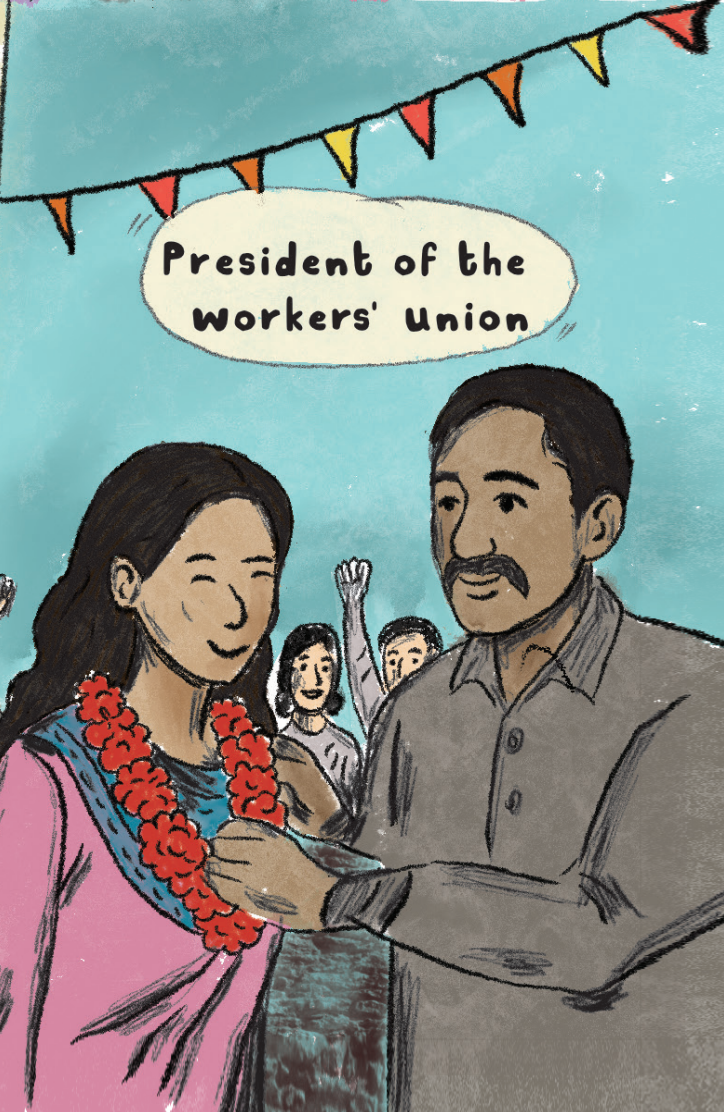
My father told me
"be late if you must,
but always call and
always stand for
what's right!"

if we stay silent,
nothing will ever
change for us

she is different
not scared of the
management.



From a young age
she raised her voice
against injustice.



President of the
workers' union



I will not sell workers's rights for money! Never!

break her team apart we need control



We will fight for better wages, bonuses, and respect for every worker here



we stand with you MUSARAT



They can scare me but I'll not stop



The next
generation must be
braver, louder,
stronger than us

Workers' children
know my name- that's
the real victory

Nusrat Bashir

Born in Sialkot, Nusrat Bashir Zafar was raised in Lahore and grew up in a household steeped in trade union activism. Her father, Bashir Zafar, a renowned trade unionist and former President of the Pakistan Trade Union Federation, was her first mentor. From a young age, she accompanied him to protests and rallies, chanting slogans for workers' rights.

By her teens, Nusrat was already mobilising workers. In 1989, she participated in a 3,000-strong demonstration on Lahore's Mall Road, which contributed to the landmark Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992. Soon after, she helped form unions in different cities, laying the foundation for the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Federation.

Trained as a lawyer alongside an MA in Political Science, Nusrat combines legal expertise with grassroots activism. She represents brick kiln workers—among Pakistan's most exploited, often trapped in debt bondage where entire families, including children, must work to repay loans. She insists that women, who toil alongside men, must be recognised as workers and receive wages in their own names, not through male family members.

Her activism extends beyond the kilns: she is at the forefront of the Labour Alliance, resisting attempts to weaken protections through the consolidation of labour laws into pro-contractor codes. Mobilising federations and workers, she has turned her home into an organising hub and continues to fight legal battles for workers' wages, protection, and dignity.

Women's participation in unions, Nusrat notes, is still limited by fear of employers, authorities, and their own families. Yet she inspires women to step forward: "If we don't speak for our rights, we risk losing even the few protections we have."

She is proud of her dual role—fighting cases in court and leading protests on the streets. For her, both arenas are essential for justice.

"My father passed me the torch of the labour struggle. I will keep carrying it forward—for the workers, and especially for the women, whose voices are silenced the most."

Optimistic about the future, Nusrat continues to fight bonded labour, child labour, harassment, and wage inequality. Her leadership bridges generations, bringing legal strength and political will to the brick kiln workers' movement.

Illustrator: Areeba Shaukat Qureshi

NUSRAT BASHIR

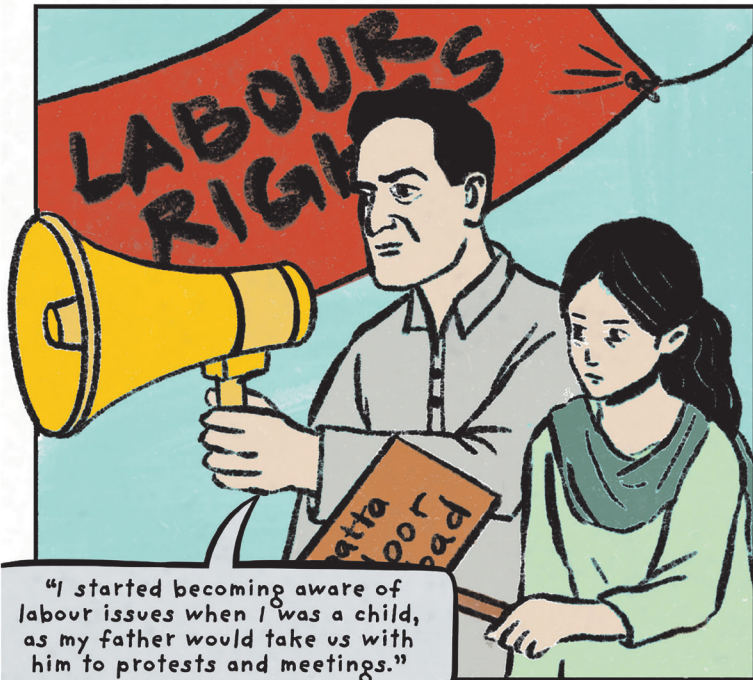
LEGAL & POLITICAL STRUGGLES
FOR BRICK KILN WORKERS

LABOUR
RIGHTS
MATTER

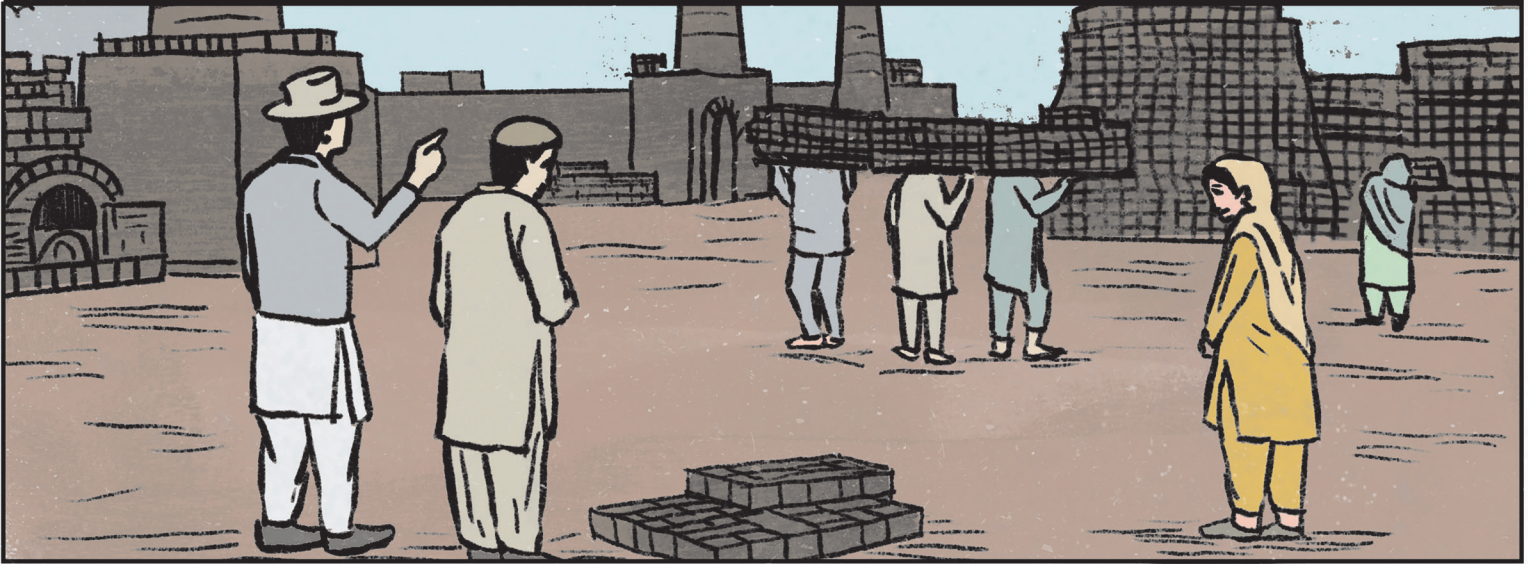




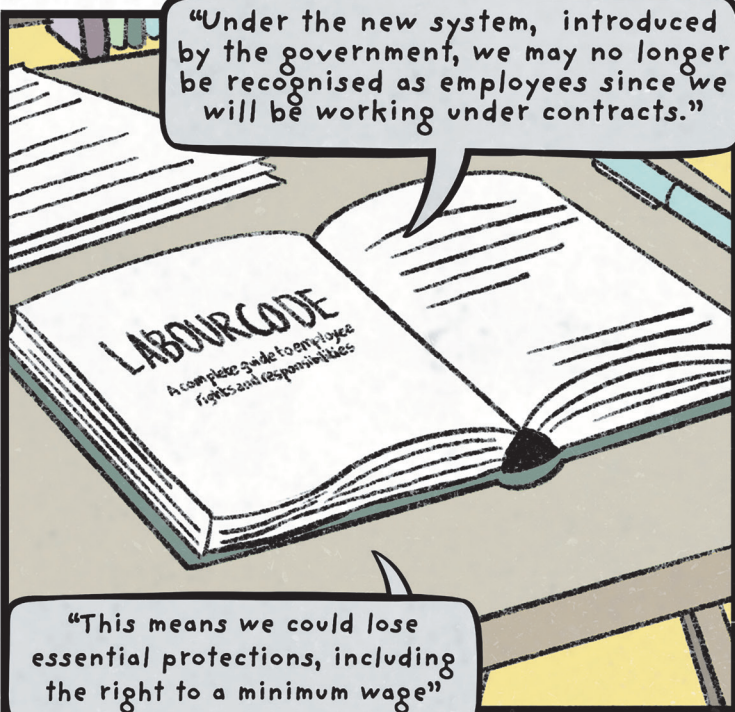
Nusrat grew up in the shadow of rallies and union speeches.



In the brick kiln system, women do not get paid. Whoever does the work should be the one who receives remuneration.



"Under the new system, introduced by the government, we may no longer be recognised as employees since we will be working under contracts."



"This means we could lose essential protections, including the right to a minimum wage"

"We should expand our struggles to youth and women"



In Nusrat's living room, 15-20 people gathered for a Labour Alliance meeting.

"I need to convince women to step forward, for their own sake and for their children, and to stand up for our collective rights."



"My law practice includes a lot of labour cases as well as domestic violence cases."



The media has made a lot of people aware of what constitutes harassment, what the punishments are, and where a woman can go with a complaint.



Child labour remains widespread, and the pressure for change grows.



"I will continue to strengthen trade unions and support labour causes through my legal practice."

Labour Rights
Training Program



From Mall Road Protests to Parliamentary debates, Nusrat's voice refuses to fade!

Parveen Latif Ansari

Born in Faisalabad, Parveen Latif Ansari grew up in a working-class family where education for girls was discouraged. Her father, a power loom worker, initially opposed her studies beyond primary school. But thanks to supportive grandparents and teachers, she persevered, completing a Masters in Islamic Studies and becoming a teacher.

Parveen's life took a decisive turn after marrying Latif Ansari, himself a trade union leader. On her wedding day, she was welcomed into the labour movement, speaking at a workers' rally the very next morning. Since then, she has dedicated her life to fighting for workers' rights alongside her husband and, often, in his place.

Her resolve was tested when Latif was shot and seriously injured during a negotiation with authorities. While he recovered, Parveen stepped into his role, attending meetings, filing petitions, and learning to navigate the labour department. These experiences turned her from a teacher into a confident union activist.

She became deeply engaged with brick kiln workers and the Pakistan Labour Quomi Movement, mobilising women and families who faced extreme exploitation. Later, she co-founded the Women Workers Alliance (2021), a collective that brings together women from diverse sectors—sanitation, garments, teaching, and brick kilns—to address workplace harassment, lack of transport, long hours, and unfair dismissals.

Parveen has focused on women workers' rights; she has courageously taken up cases of violence and injustice, ensuring women workers are reinstated or compensated. She highlights how women can access spaces men cannot: "As a woman, I can go inside homes, listen to women's problems, and win their trust in ways male leaders cannot."

Her activism extends to securing compensation for widows, fighting for anti-harassment committees in factories, and exposing exploitative practices where women workers are hidden or silenced.

"Women don't need higher education to be leaders. Courage and conviction are enough. The women I meet every day are proof of that."

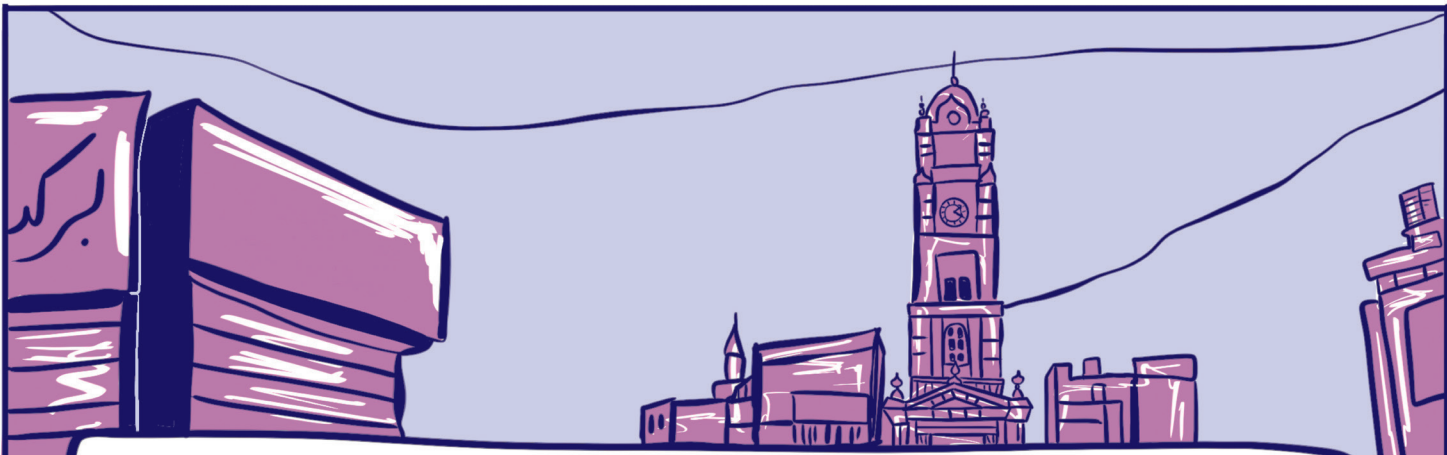
Parveen envisions a movement where women workers stand shoulder to shoulder with men, not as tokens but as leaders shaping the future of Pakistan's trade unions.

Illustrator: Azqa Azim

Parveen Latif Ansari

From Teacher to a Trade Union Activist





I WAS BORN IN FAISALABAD AND GREW UP IN A CONSERVATIVE NEIGHBOURHOOD. MY FATHER, A POWER LOOM WORKER, BELIEVED GIRLS SHOULDN'T STUDY BEYOND 5TH GRADE.



I WAS A BRIGHT STUDENT... MY TEACHERS CONVINCED MY FATHER TO LET ME STUDY FURTHER



MY MATERNAL GRANDFATHER BOUGHT ME BOOKS AND ENCOURAGED ME UNTIL I COMPLETED MY MASTERS IN ISLAMIAT.



I BEGAN TEACHING, INCLUDING, IN SCHOOLS FOR WORKERS' CHILDREN.



IN 2012, I MARRIED TRADE UNION LEADER LATIF ANSARI. AT MY WEDDING, MY MENTOR URGED ME TO REMAIN ACTIVE EVEN AFTER MY MARRIAGE.

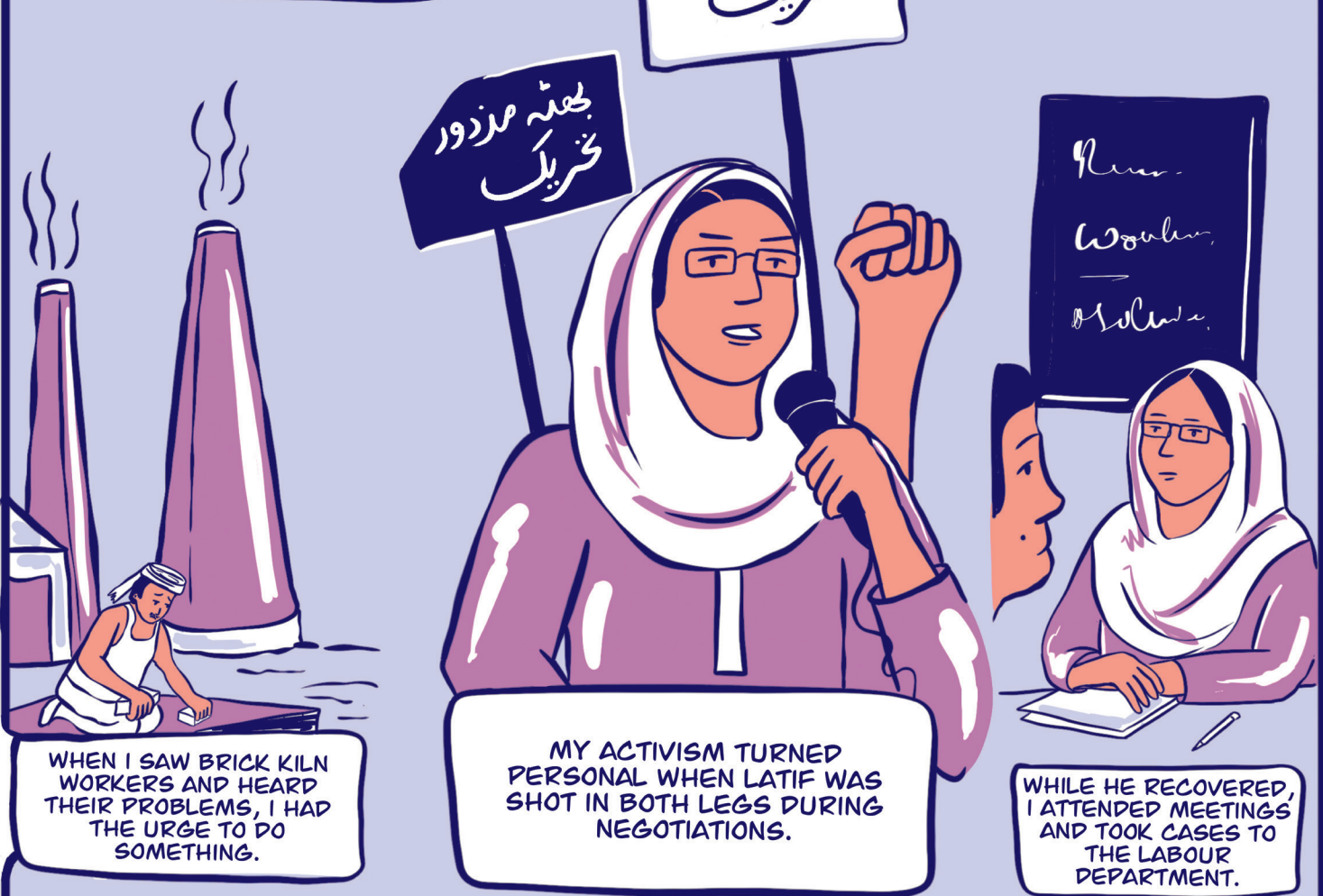


THE DAY I GOT MARRIED, I JOINED THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT!



THROUGH PATTAN DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION, I LEARNED ABOUT WORKERS' RIGHTS.

I EVEN ATTENDED RALLIES WITH MY CHILDREN.



WHEN I SAW BRICK KILN WORKERS AND HEARD THEIR PROBLEMS, I HAD THE URGE TO DO SOMETHING.

MY ACTIVISM TURNED PERSONAL WHEN LATIF WAS SHOT IN BOTH LEGS DURING NEGOTIATIONS.

WHILE HE RECOVERED, I ATTENDED MEETINGS AND TOOK CASES TO THE LABOUR DEPARTMENT.



ALL THIS GAVE ME A LOT OF CONFIDENCE.

I LEARNED TO TAKE CASES/APPLICATIONS TO THE LABOUR DEPARTMENT ON MY OWN AND DISCUSS THESE WITH OFFICIALS THERE.

IN 2021, I CO-FOUNDED THE WOMEN WORKERS ALLIANCE, UNITING WOMEN FROM MULTIPLE SECTORS TO ADDRESS WORKPLACE ISSUES, HARASSMENT, AND UNFAIR DISMISSALS.



THE ABSENCE OF ANTI-HARASSMENT COMMITTEES GIVES MANY MEN A FEELING OF IMPUNITY.



I REINSTATED A HARASSMENT VICTIM, SECURED RS. 1.1 MILLION DUES FOR A DISMISSED WORKER OF 27 YEARS, EXPOSED FACTORIES HIDING DEPLORABLE WORKING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN WORKERS FROM LABOUR INSPECTORS.



I ALSO HELPED A WIDOW SECURE RS. 7 MILLION IN INSURANCE AFTER HER HUSBAND'S DEATH.



"WOMEN DO NOT NEED TO BE HIGHLY EDUCATED TO BECOME TRADE UNION LEADERS."



FROM TEACHER TO FEARLESS VOICE FOR WORKERS, MY JOURNEY PROVES DETERMINATION CAN CHANGE LIVES.



Rehana Yasmin

Born in Karachi, Rehana Yasmin's life was shaped by hardship from the very beginning. She lost her mother at the age of four, and she had to start working soon after finishing matriculation, as her father was struggling with illness. Determined to educate herself despite the odds, she completed a BA while supporting her family. She got married but was widowed early and raised her daughter singlehandedly.

Her early jobs included nursing at Liaquat National Hospital, sewing frocks as a home-based worker, and teaching—all while raising her daughter. Facing social suspicion for leaving home daily, she resolved to raise her daughter to be strong, independent, and fearless.

Rehana's turning point came when she joined training programs at the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER). Learning about labour rights transformed her perspective. She began organising home-based women workers in her community, fighting exploitative piece-rates and contractors' ill-treatment in terms of verbal bullying and remuneration. Her first victory came when she convinced women to collectively demand higher wages from contractors.

In 1996, she co-founded the Hosiery Garment Textile Workers General Union, deliberately designed as a “general union” spanning multiple factories to protect workers from victimisation. Under her leadership, the union grew from 500 members in 2000 to over 20,000 by 2010, extending across Karachi, Hyderabad, and Nawabshah.

Rehana has been at the forefront of landmark struggles—supporting families of the Ali Enterprises fire victims to secure compensation, advocating for minimum wage implementation, and fighting harassment and workplace violence. She is known for encouraging women to speak up (“bolo”-- raise your voice), and for convincing families to allow women's participation in unions.

Her greatest pride is her daughter, Sana Rubab, who pursued higher education, participated in international youth programs, and now inspires others as a strong, educated woman.

“I never accepted silence. If women don't speak, no one will hear them. A collective voice is our strength.”

For Rehana, empowerment is both personal and collective. She dreams of teaching and training future generations of women workers so they can continue the fight for dignity and rights.

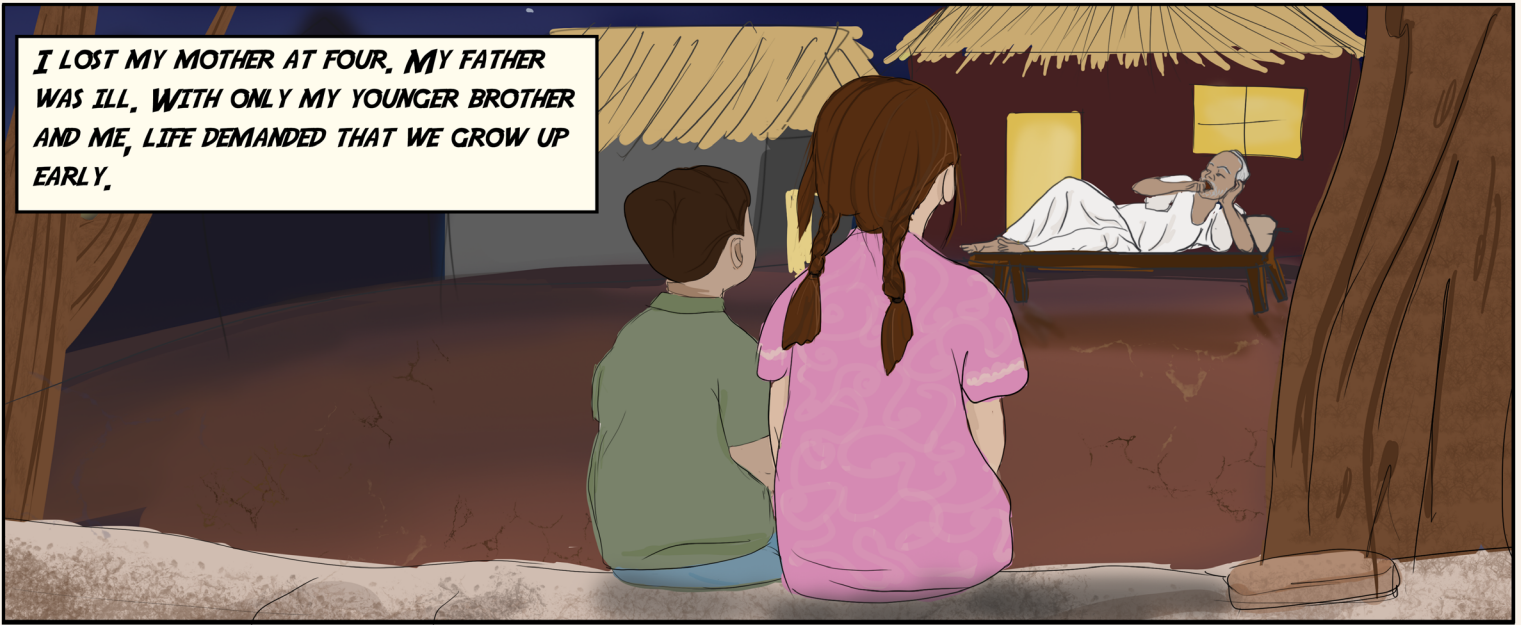
Illustrator: Aiman Saleem

REHANA YASMIN

*"FROM ORGANISING TO
EMPOWERMENT"*



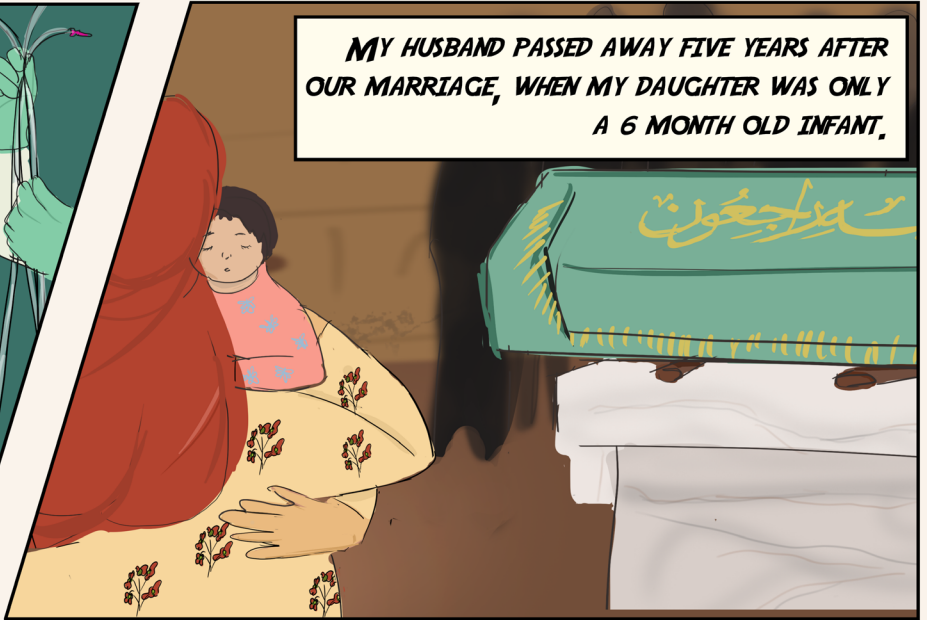
I LOST MY MOTHER AT FOUR, MY FATHER WAS ILL, WITH ONLY MY YOUNGER BROTHER AND ME, LIFE DEMANDED THAT WE GROW UP EARLY,



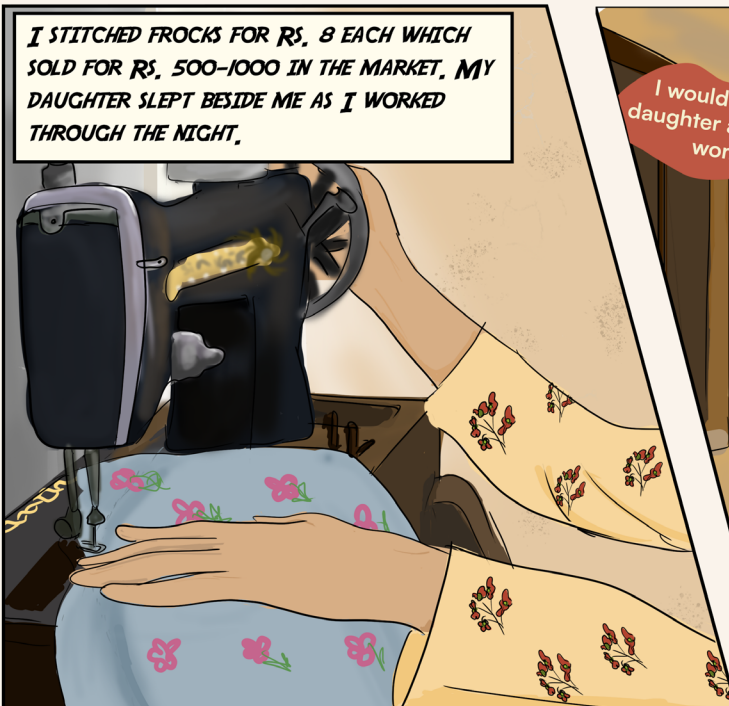
I BEGAN WORKING WHEN I WAS 19 YEARS OLD. I JOINED NURSING TRAINING AT LIAQAT NATIONAL HOSPITAL, KARACHI AND WORKED THERE FOR 6 YEARS,



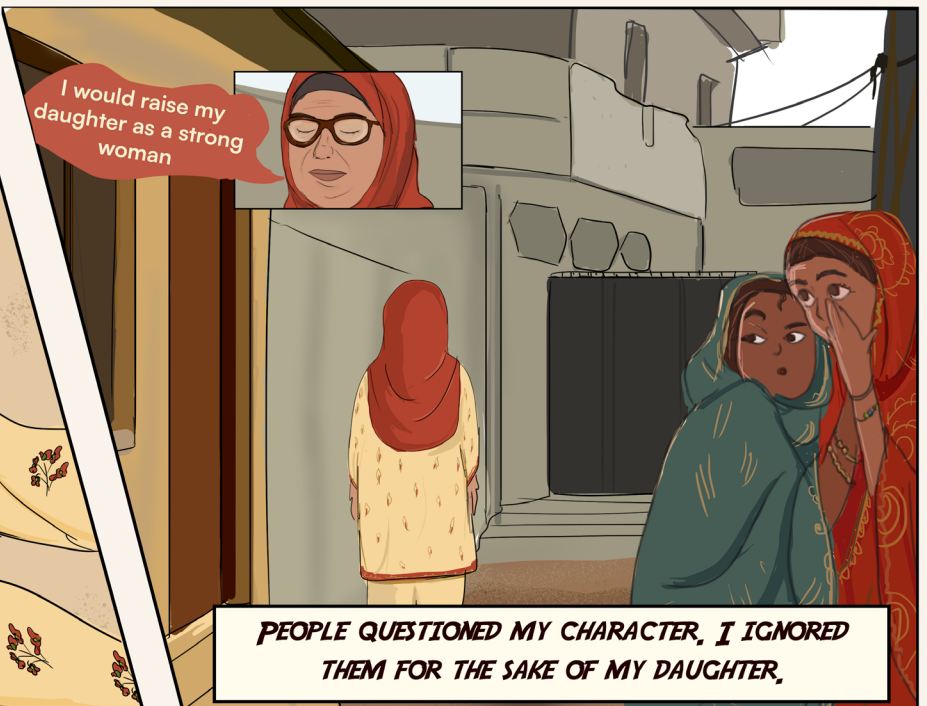
MY HUSBAND PASSED AWAY FIVE YEARS AFTER OUR MARRIAGE, WHEN MY DAUGHTER WAS ONLY A 6 MONTH OLD INFANT,



I STITCHED FROCKS FOR RS. 8 EACH WHICH SOLD FOR RS. 500-1000 IN THE MARKET, MY DAUGHTER SLEPT BESIDE ME AS I WORKED THROUGH THE NIGHT,

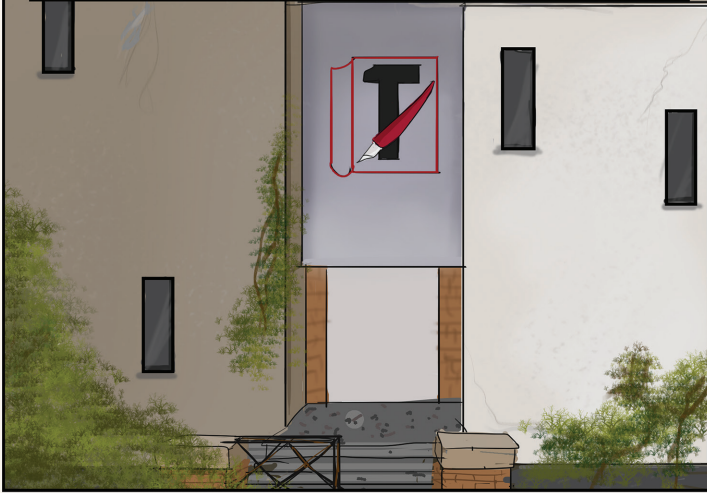


I would raise my daughter as a strong woman



PEOPLE QUESTIONED MY CHARACTER, I IGNORED THEM FOR THE SAKE OF MY DAUGHTER,

I TOOK A 15-DAY TRAINING AT PILER FOR WOMEN WORKERS. I LEARNED A LOT UNDER MY GURU, KARAMAT ALI SAHAB AND DECIDED TO WORK ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS.



DISHONEST CONTRACTORS WOULD CUT MONEY FROM PIECE RATE, I COULD COUNT. I KNEW WHAT WE WERE OWED.



HOME BASED WOMEN WORKERS IN MY AREA WERE UNDERPAID. I TOLD THE WOMEN THEY SHOULD REFUSE WORK IF DEMANDS ARE NOT MET. I ALSO STARTED WORKING FOR WOMEN RIGHTS THROUGH LABOUR UNIONS.



Say no! demand 25 rupees, not 15!



IN 1996, I BEGAN WORKING WITH THE HOSIERY GARMENT TEXTILE WORKERS GENERAL UNION IN SINDH AND WAS ELECTED ITS GENERAL SECRETARY.



AFTER THE ALI ENTERPRISES FIRE, WE SECURED RS. 18 LACS FOR VICTIMS' FAMILIES. AT NAEEM ENTERPRISES, WOMEN WORKERS WERE PAID RS. 36,500 - NEARLY REACHING THE MINIMUM WAGE WHICH WAS A WIN.

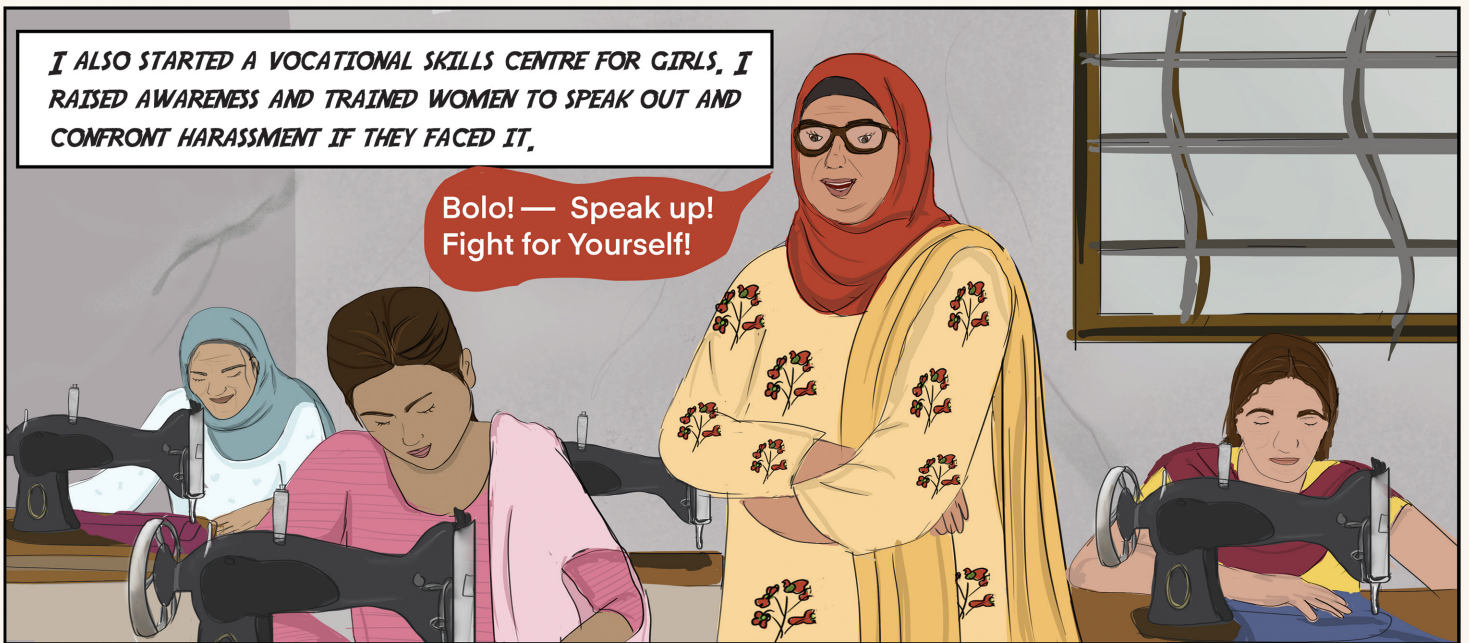
YOUTH PARLIAMENT BANGKOK



*MY DAUGHTER, SANA RUBAB IS
MY PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENT.*

*I ALSO STARTED A VOCATIONAL SKILLS CENTRE FOR GIRLS, I
RAISED AWARENESS AND TRAINED WOMEN TO SPEAK OUT AND
CONFRONT HARASSMENT IF THEY FACED IT.*

**Bolo! — Speak up!
Fight for Yourself!**



REST ISN'T FOR ME, HELPING OTHERS IS WHAT GIVES ME PEACE



Saba Ali Baig

Born into a farming family in rural Punjab, Saba's childhood was marred by domestic violence, authoritarian control at home, and the forced end of her education after grade 4. She memorised the Holy Quran during years in a madrassa but secretly developed a love for stories and novels, reading them in fields to escape household turmoil. Influenced by her uncle, a student at Punjab University who often spoke of labour rights and unions, Saba's awareness of workers' struggles began early.

At just 14, she was taken by her paternal aunt to Karachi under false pretences and forced into factory work. Exploited by the contractor system, she endured harsh conditions, withheld wages, and was forced by her aunt to participate in strikes to demand increased wages. This opened her eyes to both solidarity and exploitation and laid the foundation for her activism.

Married at 18 against her will, Saba endured years of domestic violence, control, and financial dependence. After her divorce, she was left to raise three children alone. Her greatest grief came when her young daughter died from burns due to lack of medical care in her village—a tragedy that pushed her to move to Lahore in search of work and dignity.

In garment factories, she faced harassment, overwork, and stigma as a divorced woman. Refusing to compromise her integrity, she endured heavier workloads rather than yield to blackmail. "I removed all kinds of fear from my heart," she recalls, choosing resilience over silence.

Determined to challenge exploitation, Saba sought knowledge about unions. She discovered the Labour Education Foundation (LEF), where mentors like Jalwat Shahzadi and Khalid Mehmood guided her. Starting by whispering to women workers about unionising—often met with fear—she eventually won the respect of young male workers who saw her as an equal. Despite being branded "bad character" in factories, she persisted, holding rooftop meetings and organising in secret.

Facing intimidation, increased workloads, and eventual resignations, she shifted her struggle to a registered, province-wide platform. Today, as General Secretary of the Punjab Textile and Power Loom & Garment Workers Union, she is leading efforts to expand membership, especially among women, and to counter the dominance of "pocket unions" that weaken collective bargaining.

Now in her early thirties, remarried to a supportive partner she met through her activism, Saba balances family life with leadership. With support from LEF, she works as a field organiser, documenting workers' cases and pushing for legal redress. She has also resumed her studies to counter perceptions of illiteracy.

Her vision is to build stronger, worker-led unions by mobilising more women and replacing "pocket unions" with genuine collective organisations. She also aims to establish active harassment committees in factories and raise workers' awareness of their rights, including fair overtime pay and grievance mechanisms.

Illustrator: Parvez Khan

SABA ALI

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

FROM CHILD LABOURER TO UNION LEADER
A WOMAN'S FIGHT FOR DIGNITY, RIGHTS, AND RECOGNITION.





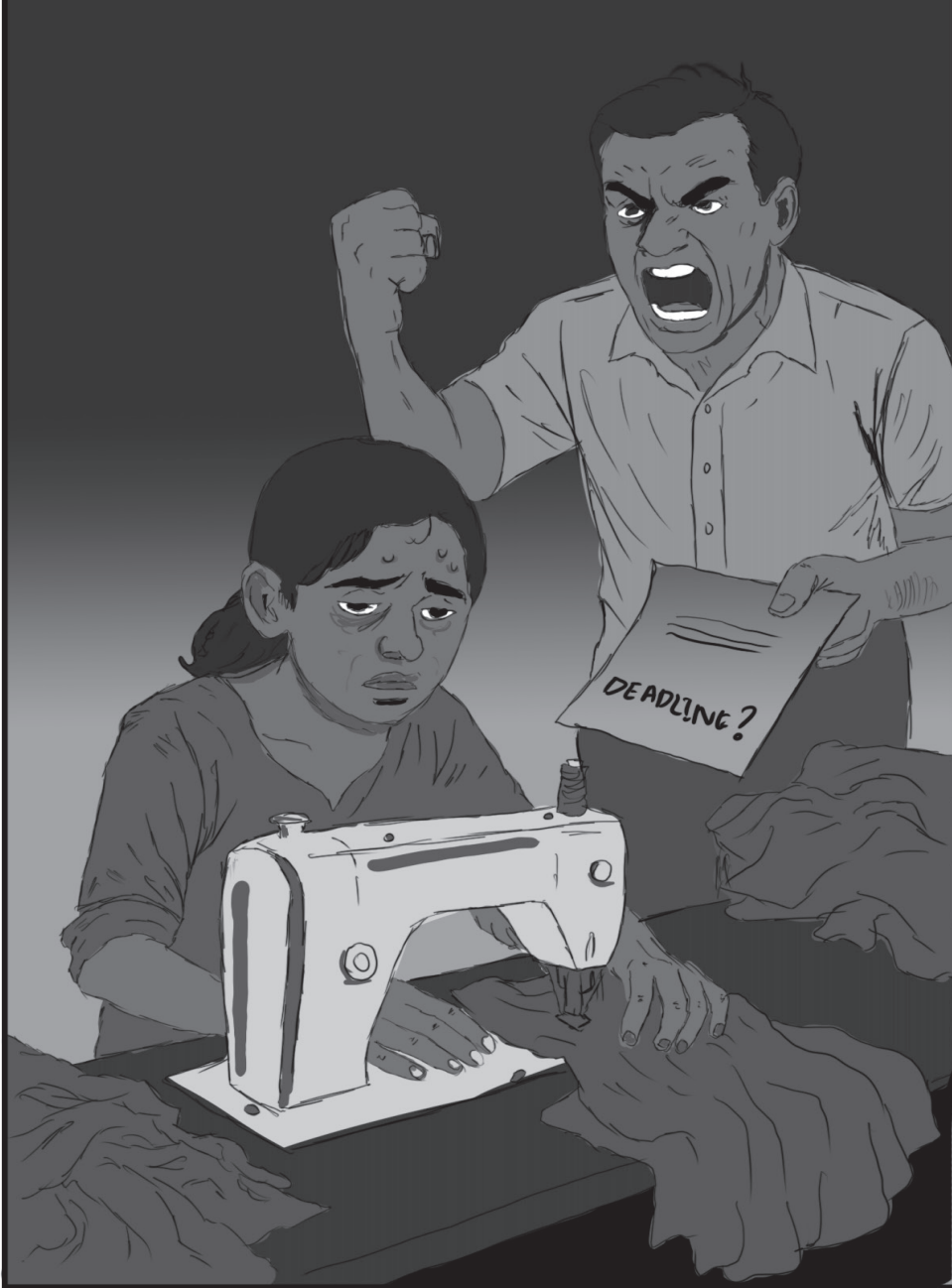
My father's violence at home ended my schooling in grade 4.

My uncle enlightened me about concept of labour rights and labour unions



At age 14, my aunt (father's sister) forced me into factory work in Karachi (while lying to my father) at Saima Enterprises.





Acting upon my aunt's directions, I became part of protests against no pay conditions, later I left that work and joined Prime Factory Ltd., that too I left later due to low pay. Then I joined J&M Clothing, company that had better working conditions.



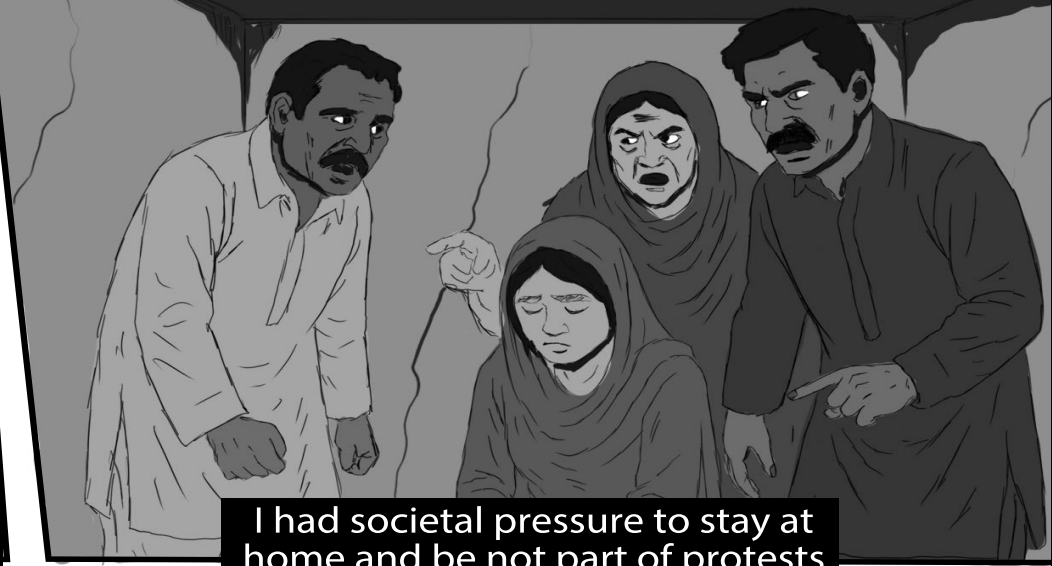
The factory became my world with long working hours, low or no pay, and constant harassment.



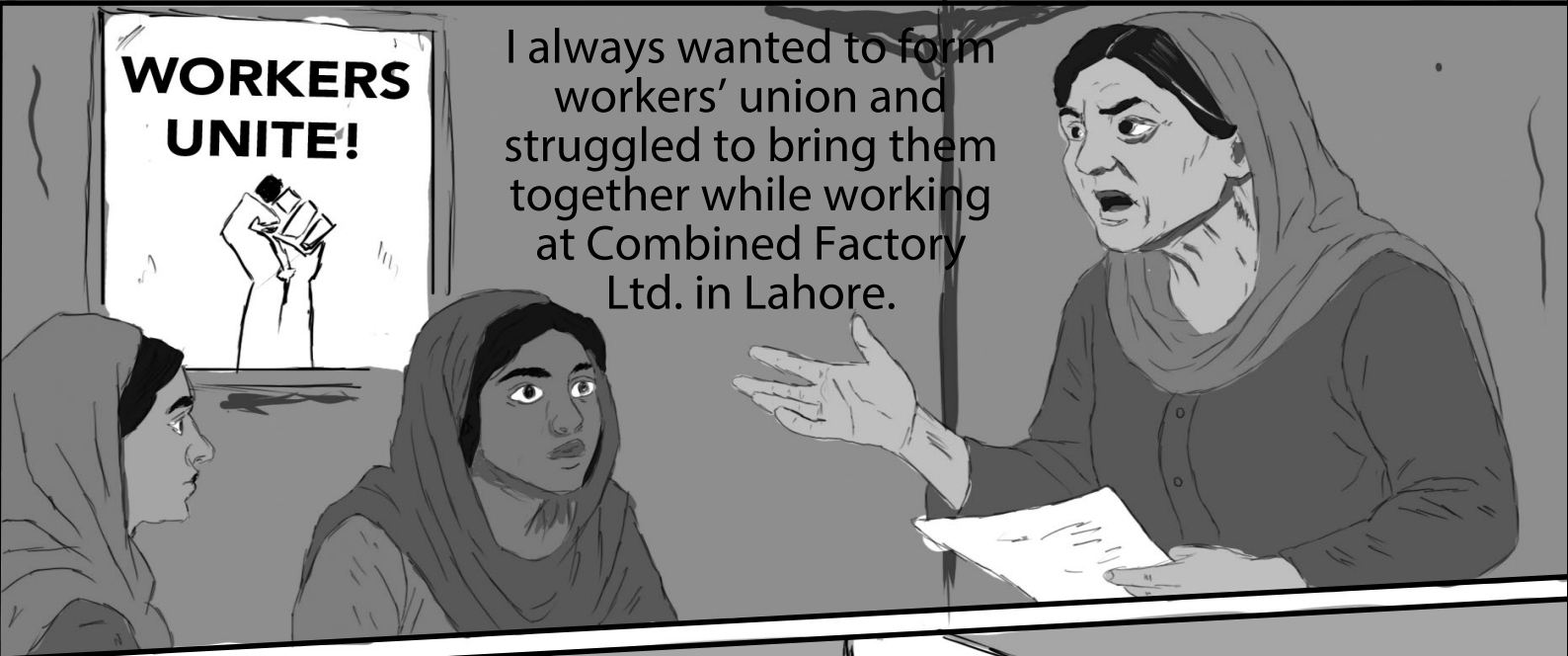
I was married off at age 18 to a 37-year old man.
We had 2 daughters and 1 son.



My youngest daughter died after 7 years of my divorce



I had societal pressure to stay at home and be not part of protests



I always wanted to form workers' union and struggled to bring them together while working at Combined Factory Ltd. in Lahore.



I became General Secretary of Textile and Power Loom Garment Workers Union in Lahore.



As a woman union leader, I want more women to be mobilised and fight for their rights!

Zehra Khan

Born in Karachi, Zehra Khan grew up in a supportive family that encouraged her to pursue higher education, even when society discouraged it. With degrees in Clothing & Textiles and Gender Studies, she chose not to marry, defying societal expectations, and instead devoted her life to organising women workers.

Her academic research on home-based workers opened her eyes to the invisible yet vital role women play in Pakistan's economy. Skilled in crafts but denied fair wages and recognition as workers with labour rights, these women inspired Zehra to step into trade union work. Supported by mentors like Comrade Nasir Mansoor, she resisted advice to form only "associations" and instead insisted that home-based women had the right to form trade unions under Pakistan's constitution.

In 2009, Zehra helped register the first union for home-based workers in Karachi and Hyderabad, mobilising thousands of women through study circles, solidarity campaigns, and public marches. Her leadership has been instrumental in passing the Sindh Home-Based Workers Law (2018)—a landmark in South Asia—recognising home-based workers as labourers with rights to wages, social security, and representation.

Her movement is built on grassroots strength. Study circles create awareness of labour laws and foster solidarity among women across sectarian, linguistic, and class divides. Zehra highlights the power of ordinary women who, once mobilised, are unafraid to march, chant, and demand rights—even in burqas.

"If you claim space, people will give it. Fear is our biggest barrier—once broken, women can transform unions."

Zehra's achievements also include securing wage increases for bangle-makers in Hyderabad, pushing for social security reforms to allow self-registration of workers, and challenging bureaucratic inertia that delays implementation of laws. She currently serves on the Sindh Employees Social Security Institution (SESSI) Board, where she advocates for worker-friendly policies.

Her vision is clear: women's work must be recognised, protected, and dignified—not treated as charity or informal labour. For Zehra, organising home-based women is not only about economic justice, but about reshaping the future of Pakistan's labour movement.

Illustrator: Hadia Mukhtar

Taking the Struggle to Worker's Homes

Zehra

Khan

HOME
BASED
WORKERS

HBWWF

Home-Based Women
Workers' Federation

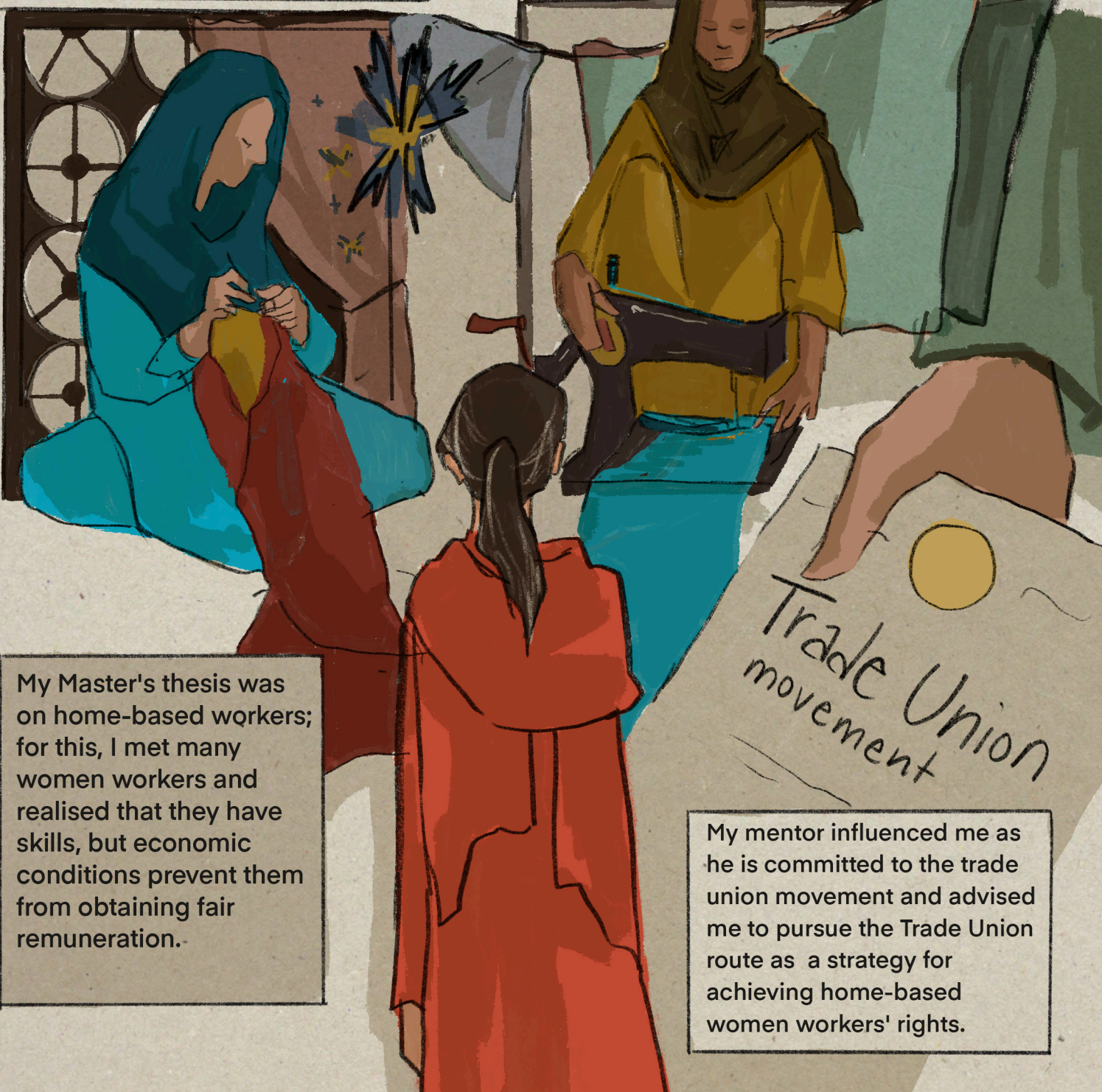




Gender Studies

Both my parents were very supportive, and the atmosphere at our home was not strict and conservative. For example, I participated in a March, and my picture was printed in a newspaper. My father framed the cutting as he felt proud of me.

With my BSc degree, no department was willing to give me admission. My father said to me, "you think you have studied enough?"; this question spurred me to enroll in Gender Studies at Karachi University.



My Master's thesis was on home-based workers; for this, I met many women workers and realised that they have skills, but economic conditions prevent them from obtaining fair remuneration.

My mentor influenced me as he is committed to the trade union movement and advised me to pursue the Trade Union route as a strategy for achieving home-based women workers' rights.

In TU's, you have to carve your own space

HBW'S — LABOUR dept

NOT JUST A GENDER ISSUE



Some NGOs considered HBWs a gender issue and took it to the Women's Department instead of the Labour dept. and thus compartmentalised it. We took it up and changed it into a class issue and advocated for HBW laws to be inclusive of men, women and transgender persons.

I handle tough times by talking and discussing issues with comrades and listening to their suggestions. Solidarity is very important. Our study circles help connect women. There are no Shia, Sunni, Hindu, or language-based identities amongst us; we all are workers.

2009
Union Registered

2014
Resolution for HBW's Passed

2015
Resolution for HBW's Passed

2018
HBW's law promulgated in Sindh

In 2009, we had a conference in Hyderabad and invited 400 women workers to participate, but many more came and narrated their stories. The Labour Department Director heard them and promised to help, due to which our first union was formed in Hyderabad.

We registered our union in 2009 by getting 1000 women in Karachi and Hyderabad to come together. We had 3-4 objectives at the beginning. First, we wanted HBW's economic contributions to be recognised.

In 2013, 2014 and 2015, resolutions were passed for the HBW law. Due to our advocacy, finally, a policy was made, and a law was announced in 2018. We made the first TU for HBWs in Sindh.



In 2015, we asked for a revision of remuneration; the Sindh government agreed to raise the remuneration and also recognise bangle-makers as workers. The increase in remuneration was applicable to all workers.



The success with bangle makers encouraged us to move to another important section, i.e., Textiles and Garments.



Advocacy for minimum wages of textiles and garment workers is ongoing

SESSI BOARD MEMBER

Sindh Employees Social Security Institution

A portrait of a woman with glasses, wearing a red shawl, set against a light blue background. The text 'SESSI BOARD MEMBER' is at the top and 'Sindh Employees Social Security Institution' is at the bottom.

HBWWF

Website for Workers' registration is still Work in progress

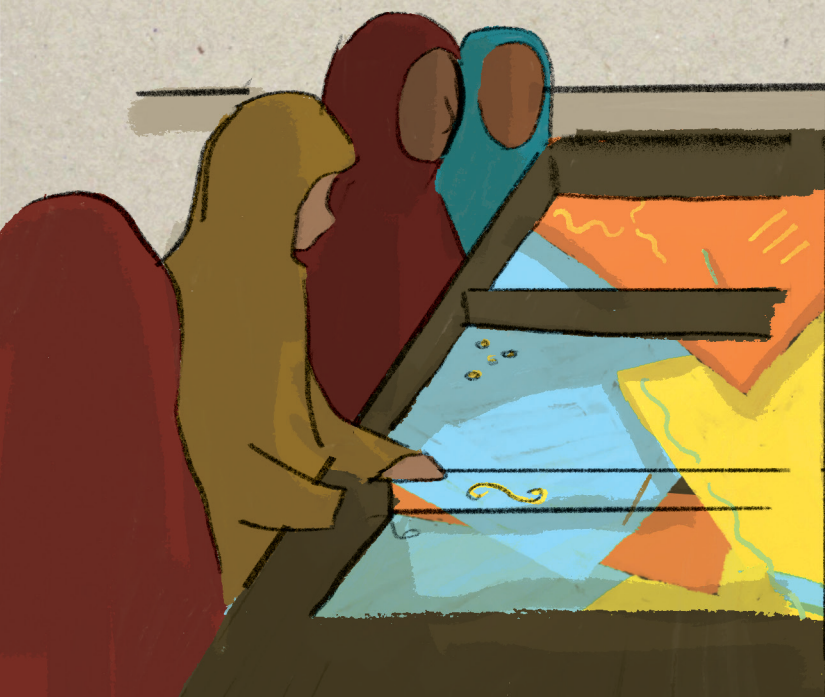
Another goal was to register workers with Social Security.

We made a software and entered data for 2500 workers, which has been verified. Now, the social security cards need to be issued.

A graphic of a computer window with a blue header and a red 'X' icon. The text 'HBWWF' is in large yellow letters. Below it, a box contains the text 'Website for Workers' registration is still Work in progress'. Below the box, there are two paragraphs of text.

We are now working with factory workers on harassment issues in the pharmaceutical sector. We are preparing a Charter of Demands to include maternity leave, training and women's representation in TUs.

We are also now talking with men in TUs to sensitise them



Importance of Women's Representation in Trade Unions

About the author

Saba Gul Khattak has a PhD in Political Science and a Masters in International Relations. An independent researcher, she has previously worked in senior positions at the Planning Commission of Pakistan, the World Bank, and as Executive Director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Islamabad. She writes on the intersections of governance, structural and direct violence, with a feminist lens, and with an emphasis on synergies across economic and social policies. Her work focuses on labour issues, women, peace and security as well as refugees. She has published widely in journals and books. She serves on different advisory committees for the government, NGO boards, as well as regional networks.

About the illustrators

Abdullah Shahid

Abdullah Shahid is a Pakistani illustrator and visual storyteller whose work blends design, emotion, and lived experience. Graduating in 2025 with a degree in Visual Communication Design, Abdullah has developed a practice rooted in observation, identity, and the small human moments that often go unnoticed.

Aiman Saleem

Aiman Saleem, is a visual communication designer. She has a keen interest in creating illustrations and brand identities that stand out.

Areeba Shaukat Qureshi

Areeba Shauka Qureshi is an interdisciplinary Practitioner whose work navigates the politics of care, access, and everyday resistance. Through critical visual practices, she challenges assumed systems and reimagines more just ways of living.

Azqa Azim

Azqa Azim is a visual communication designer and an illustrator. She has worked on graphic novels, web comics and narrative based illustration projects. She is interested in exploring personal themes such as grief, nostalgia, loss, and longing. Additionally, she practices storytelling through visuals that represent emotional depth with visual expression.

Bilal Ahmed

Bilal Ahmed works at the intersection of design, fiction, and the subconscious. For him every piece is a portal into a world where time bends and identities unravel.

Eiman Tiwana

Eiman Tiwana is an illustrator and ceramic artist whose work revolves around storytelling. She creates pieces that explore everyday moments, culture, and personal narratives. Combining her background in visual communication design with her love for handicraft, her work seamlessly blends illustration and ceramics. Through her art, Eiman brings stories to life in a warm, engaging, and visually expressive way.

Hadia Mukhtar

Hadia Mukhtar is an illustrator and graphic designer. Currently, she is pursuing a master's in Visual Communication Design.

Muhammad Hayyan

Muhammad Hayyan is an illustrator/ animator. He works closely with fantasy video games and interested in exploring ideas about society, human behavior, or social interactions from a philosophical perspective through his art.

Parvez Khan

Parvez Khan is a Visual Communication Designer and Illustrator based in Karachi. He specializes in creating culturally rooted illustrations, editorial visuals, and narrative-driven design work. His creative practice focuses on storytelling that highlights social themes, identity, and community experiences. Parvez has collaborated with various organizations on publications, branding, and educational projects. He is passionate about using design as a tool for awareness and meaningful impact.

Raheel Hussain Tiwana

Raheel Hussain Tiwana is a multi-disciplinary designer, illustrator and art director hailing from Rawalpindi, Pakistan. His artistic practice is greatly influenced by nostalgia and growth, and delves into the complexities of social and cultural life experiences. His work focuses on ideas of gender identity, socio-political activism and personal storytelling by making use of vibrant imagery and mixing mediums of digital art, printmaking and graphic design.

Shaza Umar

Shaza Umar is an animator and comic illustrator who works with folklore, social archives, and fiction, creating characters on the margins. Her comics form part of her ongoing exploration of visual journalism.



Scan to view all the detailed interviews

Women Leaders in Trade Unions of Pakistan

Stories of Struggle and Leadership

Trade unions are the democratic faces of society that defend workers' rights, and leadership matters the most. Women in trade unions face classic patriarchal challenges globally; therefore, when they dare to lead, it is a strong statement in itself. Women's leadership in trade unions not only creates avenues for younger women to join but also challenges the patriarchal mindsets.

This publication tells 11 selected stories of resilience of the women leaders in trade unions of Pakistan, whose journeys of struggle for workers' rights will undoubtedly leave readers inspired.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

➤ pakistan.fes.de/publications