

Cultural Perceptions and the Productive Roles of Rural Pakistani Women

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In most societies, women have been defined largely in terms of their maternal and caretaking roles and hence been stereotyped as “domestics”. Epstein (1986); Ortner (1974); Reiter (1975); Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974); Rogers (1979) and Nelson (1974) argue that the roles that females take have been viewed as relatively of lesser significance in larger cultural pictures. Male as opposed to female activities have always been recognised as being more important and cultural systems have given authority to the roles of men and have portrayed them as being of greater value. Anthropology, in the past, has also followed in the same evaluations and greater attention has been given to the documentation of male activities which constitute the “public” life of the culture and are therefore more visible to the researchers. As a result the “private/domestic” spheres where women are involved have been downgraded. All this has led to impoverished ethnographic accounts, and to a number of misconceptions regarding female values, contributions and activities. Rogers (1979) states:

It is thought “natural” that a woman’s place is in the house and that she has a very specific set of tasks which are thought to be universal because they are based on the biological imperatives of sex. The most important role for women, defining their entire life, is the bearing and bringing up of children. A man, on the other hand, is seen as the “natural” head of the family, its representative in the outside world. (1979 p: 11.)

In a similar vein, in Pakistan, a myth of female dependency clouds the perception of the active productive roles of women and male heads of the household are viewed in the larger cultural pictures as predominantly participating in the maintenance and economic survival of the family. It can be argued that the contributions and productive activities of rural Pakistani women who work in the subsistence sector of the economy are more invisible than their counterparts in

urban areas who to some degree are acknowledged as part of the work force because they work for wages along side men. In addition, the features of purdah¹ and segregation of sexes prevailing with a relatively greater intensity in the rural areas of Pakistan have to a large extent, deterred both male and female researchers from conducting studies relating to women. Whereas owing to the lack of access of male researchers to female domains, they have concentrated little on issues that relate to women, studies undertaken by female researchers are few and far between. The resulting dearth of published anthropological/ethnographic studies regarding rural Pakistani women in general and what they supply in terms of goods and services in particular has further reinforced the traditional concept of women's roles being limited to the bearing and bringing up of children and that of men being the only productive members of the household. This in effect obscures the responsibilities women undertake for supporting the family and the enormous amounts of time they spend in activities that are essential for sustenance in terms of providing food and other items of necessity for the household. However, only a handful of studies have outlined female productive contributions as of vital importance. See Abbasi (1982); Malik (1977); Saeed (1966). A study by Anwar and Bilquees (1976) in a Pakistani village reveals that apart from playing an intensive role in farm management, rural women are also active in producing goods and services not only for their own consumption but also on a smaller scale for sale and exchange in the local market. Talking about rural women in a Pakistani village they state:

The rural woman in Jhok Sayal is an active but unrecognised participant of every economic and social activity inside and outside her home. She performs all the duties of a wife, a mother and a daughter-in-law and simultaneously shares the burden of field work with the husband (1976: 65).

¹Although the word purdah meaning "curtain", in its literal sense is understood as the veiling of women's faces and bodies underneath a cloak (burqa), in this study, drawing from Hannah Papanek's definition (1982), the word purdah is taken to mean a system of secluding women, restricting them from moving freely into public spaces and enforcing high standards of female modesty upon them. The crucial element of purdah according to Papanek is its limitations on interaction between women and men outside certain well defined categories. Caroll M.C. Pastner; (1978) in her study of the status of women and property on a Balochistan oasis in Pakistan, talks about purdah in terms of physical seclusion which requires that women in a Muslim community be severely constrained from economic and other activities taking place outside the home. According to Pastner, one of the definitive features of Muslim purdah is that social intercourse between men and women is delimited by the criterion of kinship. In this respect, social access and interaction between men and women is possible only if they are related through blood or marriage.

They further report, that a village woman works for 14 hours on a normal working day i.e. a day outside the hectic harvesting and sowing season. In most of the cases, a major portion of her time is spent in farm management, animal care, collecting and preparing fodder in addition to other activities that are indispensable to the family's survival. Other published accounts of women though not related directly to women's productive activities, do note the important contributions women make in terms of providing subsistence to the family, see for example Dixon (1978); Eglar (1960); Epstein (1986); Naveed-i-Rahat (1981); Shah (1986); Wilber (1964)). Naqvi (1989) reports that in Pakistan, the concept of males as those who are born with two hands as opposed to the concept of females as "liabilities" and as those born with a mouth has resulted in a lack of empirical evidence about the magnitude of their contributions to the household and rural economy. Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987), in their book *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward One Step Back?* draw attention to the fact that the official documents and statistics which underreport the economic activities of Pakistani women have further re-enforced the myth that women are unproductive. In addition, policy planners, decision-makers and intellectuals have persisted in reproducing an image of a woman "with time on her hands" and whose mind is filled with – "sundry matters of scant importance," they state:

Condemning a woman as being economically unproductive and limiting her role to that of reproduction has a host of repercussions, all of which are detrimental to women and their status in society (p: 27).

This paper based on field research² in "Rajpur" (a pseudonym), a punjabi village in Pakistan, aims to outline firstly: the nature of productive activities women perform both inside the house and outside on the farm and secondly: the cultural perceptions regarding women and their work, to specify how these perceptions relate to fostering the image of women as dependent/private wives and mothers.

Productive work in this study, is taken in its broadest sense, as work that is directly or indirectly geared towards producing utilities of some kind. These utilities can be those that are either income generating when sold to others for cash or those that eliminate the need for expenditure. In household production for instance, churning milk is both income generating and expenditure saving. Butter and shortening that is processed at home not only meets the consumption

²This paper is an outgrowth of research conducted in 1990 for my Ph.D. dissertation, *Myths and Realities: Religious/Cultural Perceptions and the Productive Activities of Rural Pakistani Women*. Data was collected through participant observation and through indepth interviews with both men and women in Rajpur.

needs of the household but is also sold to the villagers or in the market for cash. Similarly spinning cotton or jute, is also termed productive – the yarn is used not only for weaving bedspreads and sleeping cots but may also be sold to others. At the farm, work related to the harvesting and processing of crops is also viewed as productive. The processed crops in addition to being consumed by the household itself are also income generating when sold for cash and again expenditure saving if exchanged for other utilities.

Rajpur, located approximately 40 kilometers from Islamabad, is like other villages in the Punjab, undergoing a process of change. Factors such as the rapid pace of industrialisation, modernisation, communication and transportation have escalated the rural-urban migration. Where on the one hand, these changes have pushed the men out of their villages in search of additional cash earning opportunities in the cities, on the other they have necessitated that women take on the roles which in the past were performed predominantly by men.³ Rajpur women have gradually assumed charge of many agricultural and livestock tending operations on their farms in addition to poultry tending, handicrafts etc. Whereas men are working in the cities to earn extra cash, women too, though differently are working in pursuit of the same goal. However, as will be explained later in the paper, women's increased involvement in these activities has not resulted in giving them any additional power, recognition or control within the households.

In Rajpur as in other villages, land cultivation is a year round activity. Wheat, maize, pulses and mustard are the major crops grown in the village. In addition, barley, peanuts and melons are also grown. The production and processing of crops require substantial amounts of both time and labour and specialised activities in which women participate considerably along side men. However, there are some activities performed exclusively by men, some exclusively by women and other jointly. Table 1 shows the distribution of male/female and joint activities in different stages of crop production and processing.

The intensive participation of women in the production and processing of crops is productive in that it also saves money that would otherwise be spent in hiring labour. The processed crops not only meet the household consumption needs but are also income generating when sold in the market for cash.

Besides agriculture, women also make a significant contribution towards the care of livestock which is vital for agricultural purposes and for sustenance. Table 2

³Rauf (1984) in his study of rural-urban migration and rural emigration in several Punjabi villages in Pakistan reports that the processes of migration and emigration of men has become instrumental in involving women in those areas of economic activity (such as farm and livestock activities) that were heretofore considered "exclusive domains of the male".

Table 1

*Distribution of Male-Female and Joint Activities in
Crop Production and Processing*

Wheat	Maize	Pulses	Mustard/ Taramira/ Sesame/ Seed	Peanuts	Fodder Crops Millet/ Barley
Ploughing	EM Ploughing	EM Ploughing	EM Ploughing	EM Ploughing	EM Ploughing
Spreading Manure	MF Spreading Manure	MF Spreading Manure	MF Spreading Manure	MF Spreading Manure	MF Spreading Manure
Sowing	PM Sowing	PM Sowing	PM Sowing	PM Sowing	PM Sowing
Harvesting	MF Harvesting	MF Harvesting	MF Harvesting	PF Harvesting	MF Harvesting
Weeding	PF Stacking	MF Beating	PF Beating/ Seperating Seeds	EF Seperating Shells	MF
Threshing	MF Peeling	MF Winnowing at Home	EF Winnowing	EF Threshing	MF
Winnowing	EM Threshing	MF Packing/Tra- nsporting	MF Packing/Tra- nsporting	MF Removing Stubs	MF
Packing/Tra- nsporting	MF Drying	PF Sifting	EF Trans. to Mills	EM Packing/Tra- nsporting	MF

Continued -

Table 1 (Continued)

Wheat		Maize		Pulses		Mustard/ Taramira/ Sesame/ Seed		Peanuts		Fodder Crops Millet/ Barley
Collecting Chaff & Hay	MF	Winnowing at Home	EF	Storing	EF	Storing	EF	Roasting	EF	
Winnowing at Home	EF	Packing/Tra- nsproting	MF	Trans. to City/Selling	EM	Trans.to City/Selling	EM	Storing	EF	
Storing	EF	Storing	EF					Trans. to City/Selling	EM	
Trans. to City/Selling	EM	Trans. to City/Selling	EM							

Legend: EM: Exclusively Male.
 PM: Predominantly Male.
 MF: Male Female.
 PF: Predominantly Female.
 EF: Exclusively Female.

Table 2

*Distribution of Male, Female and Joint Activities
in Livestock Tending*

1. Grazing	EM
2. Bathing	EM
3. Milking	PM
4. Harvesting Fodder	PF
5. Chopping Fodder	MF
6. Preparation of Cattle Feed	MF
7. Feeding in Manger	MF
8. Cleaning of Cattle Shed	EF
9. Disposal of Dung	EF
10. Heating Milk	EF
11. Churning Milk	EF
12. Processing Butter into Ghee	EF
13. Selling Milk or Ghee within the Village	PF

Legend: EM: Exclusively Male.
 PM: Predominantly Male.
 MF: Male Female.
 PF: Predominantly Female.
 EF: Exclusively Female.

shows the distribution of male, female and joint activities in livestock tending.

As indicated in the chart, the activities of grazing and bathing livestock are performed exclusively by men since these activities take place outside the compound of the house. Other activities related to livestock tending fall primarily into the hands of women. Cows, sheep and goats are an important source of milk and meat. Milk, butter and ghee (shortening), apart from being consumed at home are also sold within and outside the village to generate additional cash. In addition to agriculture and livestock tending, small items of utility and domestic use are made in almost every household in Rajpur. Girls are initiated into the act of embroidery, sewing and stitching, and handicrafts such as weaving cots, *azarbands*,⁴ *parandas*⁵ at an early age. These form important items in a girl's dowry – made at home, they eliminate additional expenditure of buying these items from the market.

Although women in Rajpur, when interviewed, did express an awareness of working long and hard and of the paltry amounts they earned from selling small

⁴A narrow cotton belt, used for tying trousers to the waist.

⁵A tape with three strands used for tying hair into braids.

items such as eggs, handicrafts, within the village, a majority seemed almost unaware of the 'indirect' income and savings which their work generated. Working for wages is culturally perceived as a male prerogative and remains the domain of men par excellence. Not only that, other domains involving financial transactions outside the domestic realm are also monopolised by men. Although, as mentioned earlier, women work alongwith men in most of the processes involved in the production of crops, as the crop is processed and made ready for sale, men take over at this stage as they alone have access to the world of business and exchange. Ironically both the credit and the returns for the finished commodities go to the person who makes the sale. Whereas on the one hand men perform activities that are culturally more valued and help them establish contacts outside their kin-group, on the other, women are assigned tasks which although important for the smooth functioning of the household, do not apparently enhance their relative worth, keeping them confined to their houses and limiting their contacts with the outside world. Working in the city for wages and making financial transactions in the public domain, gives men an upper hand over women and makes their work culturally more important. Men's earning power and their control over the sale of commodities makes them appear as the only productive members of the household and leads to the erroneous assumption that all females of the household are economically dependent on them.

As with the changes that have occurred in the division of labour over a period of time and as women have become increasingly involved in work on their farms, there has been a redefinition of duties which has now come to include not only child-care responsibilities and domestic work such as cooking and cleaning but also the production of utilities and involvement in other productive domains of work such as agriculture and livestock tending operations which were largely the domains of men. Women's productive activities go unrecognised as society perceives their activities as "wifely" duties rather than as work. Despite the change in activities and the resulting change in the spatial mobility of women, (women's mobility rarely extends beyond their fields and the village wells), they are culturally constrained to confine production and productive activities within the private domain and not transgress the boundaries culturally allocated to them. Sale of utilities and contacts outside the domestic realm necessitate the presence of a male, since he is the only one who has access to the public world. Women do not have any more opportunities to earn cash other than the small amounts they⁶ earn from selling items such as eggs, milk or handicrafts within the village.

⁶These items are sold on demand or whenever a need arises. There are no regular customers or clientele for these items.

Women's lack of access to the public world in turn takes the control away from them and thrusts it into the hands of men. Women's economic subjugation contained in the lack of control over economic resources and restriction over working for wages, persuades them of the importance of men's work and of the trivialness of their own. Control over production together with the cash income men earn in the cities gives them control of the household and ultimately control over women.

The division of labour, according to which men take charge of exchange in the public world and women's activities are confined within the private domain, exists primarily because of the way women are perceived culturally. Each female within her household is not viewed on the basis of her kinship relation alone but is viewed as simultaneously passing through a specific stage in which her biological propensities have a specific role to fulfil, for instance women are perceived as chaste daughters/sisters, fertile wives and nurturing mothers. Punishments and social rewards available to women are inextricably linked to their natural, biological propensities, for instance, marriage prospects of a girl are jeopardised if she does not come up to the culturally prescribed standards of modesty. Similarly, marriage is threatened if a wife is unable to fulfil her "natural" procreative roles as a mother. Heaven lies under the feet of women as mothers, those who have successfully fulfilled their natural child bearing functions. Women in their private/domestic and sexual images are viewed as those who "look good within the house". The house apart from having a private connotation epitomises other meanings as well – A house is a place where one satisfies one's primary and material needs for shelter, food, rest and sex. On the other hand, the public space which is removed from the house is where men satisfy their secondary/material and cultural needs such as social contacts, business and economic transactions and entertainment. The house is a symbol of femininity where only females should be seen. The outside world represents the male world and therefore masculinity dictates that a man spend most of his time outside the house as doing otherwise subjects him to social ridicule and gives him a feminine image – the image of passivity. The house and the women therefore are very much alike as both satisfy the basic needs. The house is where one eats food – the women cook the food. The house is where the man comes to satisfy his sexual needs with his partner – the wife becomes the channel. Similarly, the house is where one comes after detaching oneself from the outside world of knowledge, public contact and exchange – women are viewed as already detached from this domain. In addition, women on the basis of their biological, natural functions, cultural attributes such as lack of aql (reasoning ability) and culturally ordained roles of child bearing and moth-

erhood are seen as unable to transcend from "natural" and as incapable of dealing with the outside world – world which according to men requires intellect and reasoning. Women, defined on the basis of their biological attributes are culturally and socially conditioned into finding gratification in their natural roles as wives and mothers and into considering the incompatibility of these roles with the public domain – they are denied access to the public world "for their own good". Men on the other hand in their traditional cultural images as *mijazi khuda* (worldly/imaginary gods), *maliks* (masters), guardians, protectors and providers, and as those possessing greater *aql* are oriented to take charge of the public domains.

Despite the interpretations which cast women in their ideal roles of dependent wives and mothers, the fact remains that men in reality are not the only "protectors and providers" within the household. What is important to note is that such interpretations foster a kind of blindness to those roles performed by women that do not fit into the cultural ideals or are seen as jeopardising the traditional role recognition. Where masculinity is defined as a capacity to earn an income and the authority of males is embodied in the ability to provide for their families, it would be logical to assume that women would be valorised in their traditional roles as mothers and producers of children and as Mernissi⁷ argues, any economic endeavour on the part of women will be seen as castrating and as disrupting the natural order of society.

Where the physical, social and economic invisibility of women is still highly valued and where women's identities as dependent mothers and wives are less threatening than their identities as independent productive beings, it is most likely that their productive contributions will be sifted through cultural blinders and only men will be viewed as the protectors and providers.

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⁷See Fatima Mernissi (1986) for details.

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Comments on
“Cultural Perceptions and the Productive Roles of
Rural Pakistani Women”

This paper, takes the form of a polemic, against a stated view of the cultural perceptions of female roles in a punjabi village. It does not however present the counter argument. There is moreover, no theoretical or empirical reference to the conditions which caused the genesis of these perceptions; nor the network of socioeconomic relations at the village level which structurally foster or perpetuate these relations.

Although we are still somewhat distant from developing a General Theory of Gender Relations (because of the gaps in our knowledge of women's lives in different social settings) a vast amount of literature on women's issues has nevertheless been generated, particularly since the International Women's Year in 1975.

If we are to make recommendations for changing the status and role of women in their social setting, we must justify the need for doing so with reference to the potential for such change within the context of existing local and global conditions. Unfortunately, Dr Ibraz's paper lacks the correlation between the nature and content of the society studied, and the functionality, or otherwise of culturally conceived notions at the given level of development. We are provided with data on the traditional division of labour by gender, followed by general reported notions of female social status, concluded by a helpless assessment that blindness to the significant roles women play, is likely to continue since her traditionally defined identity is "still highly valued". We are thus left wondering as to whose interpretations we are dealing with, and what the purpose of the exercise really is? Because of ignoring the existing literature on women, and perhaps being unaware of it, the discussion becomes too general and superficial.

To make a few comments on some of the terminology used and statements made in the text:

We are told by the author that "the productive activities of rural Pakistani women are more invisible than their counterparts in the urban areas". Now, if both men and women in the rural areas are engaged in primarily non-monetary productive activity, and the only official document, namely, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey which contains data on earners by gender, records a higher percent of female earners in the rural as compared to the urban areas (I am not supporting the accuracy of these figures, and besides they take only mon-

etary employment into consideration) however, one wonders on what grounds the author feels the contribution of women to the household economy is more invisible in the rural as compared to the urban areas?

Again, productive activity is defined "as work that is directly or indirectly geared towards producing utilities of some kind". Whereas I tend to agree with this definition, its elaboration as "activity which generates income when sold to others for cash or that which eliminates the need for expenditure", tends to limit the meaning of the term to its use in monetary economy. I fail to see how the elimination of expenditure can be called productive? Moreover, most of the South Asian societies, such as the one studied by the author, have had closed subsistence economies. The social produce is still primarily geared towards meeting the subsistence needs of the society, and is exchanged for acquisition of goods which the society needs but does not itself produce. The concepts of income-generation, sale, hire etc. can apply only to those transactions in these societies, which have been introduced since the recent penetration of these societies by the monetary market system.

The finding (corroborated by Rauf's study of 1984) that the factor of rural-urban migration results in women undertaking activities that were the "exclusive" domain of men is not supported by the findings of most ethnographic material on the subject, including our own study in Gilgit. It is furthermore not substantiated by the author's own findings when she states that "women do not transgress the boundaries culturally allocated to them". In most ethnographic material on the subject, in the absence of men, women may become more extensively involved in activities which they formerly *shared* with men. They rarely engage in activities from which they have been entirely excluded in the traditional division of labour by gender, since the logic responsible for this division rarely undergoes corresponding change as a result of changed material conditions.

We are also told that women "remained unaware of the indirect income and savings which their work generated". This also I find surprising, when on the following page the author says women sold some of their crafts in the village. In primarily closed subsistence economies, even if we consider a case where the bulk of the distribution and circulation of social produce is controlled by men, women are as likely to be aware, as are men, of the value of the produce, since they are often the channels whereby the produce is utilised and circulated among members of the kin and communal group. Take for instance, the case of the daily domestic consumption; the periodic seasonal expenses (such as agricultural inputs, or the meals served to communal helpers during the labour-intensive activities of the agricultural cycle); or occasional expenses incurred during the ceremonies

accompanying the rites of passage.

While talking about the stages of women's life, related to her "biological propensities", it may have been useful to mention the division of labour between women of different age groups, as distinct from the division of labour by gender. It may also have been relevant to discuss the specificity of the status and role of women in their society with reference to sociobiology. General statements about women on account of biology, have largely been challenged by a number of sociobiologists. Biology, we know is not destiny, or else all societies of the world would be uniform. In conclusion, I would just like to point out, that the text contains a number of references, for instance Epstein (1986); Nelson (1979); Naqvi (1986); Mumtaz and Shaeed (1987); Mernissi (1987) etc. which have not been included in the bibliography.

I am sure the author will be able to present a more structured and theoretically sound paper in future, when she has more time on her hands.

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