Accommodating *Purdah* to the Workplace: Gender Relations in the Office Sector in Pakistan

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Based on a qualitative survey of female office workers conducted in Lahore in 1996-97, this article examines the increasing market integration of women, particularly from the lower middle classes, into secretarial and technical occupations in the office sector in urban Pakistan. The study shows that gender images and gender relations inherent in the social order of Pakistani society—particularly the absence of socially sanctioned modes of communication between the sexes, a strong sexualisation of gender relations outside the kinship system, and the incessant harassment of women in the public sphere—surface inside the offices. Female office workers use many strategies, derived from their own life world, to maneuver in the office sector, to appropriate public (male) space, and to accommodate the *purdah* system to the office environment. By "creating social distance", "developing socially obligatory relationships", "integrating male colleagues into a fictive kinship system", and "creating women's spaces" they are able to establish themselves in a traditional male field of employment, namely, the office sector.

INTRODUCTION

The participation rate of women in the labour force of Pakistan is one of the lowest worldwide. The crude labour force participation rate for women in urban areas is only 5.9 percent,[1] with 55.3 percent of their urban workforce engaged in informal sector activities [Pakistan (1998)]. Women in the urban economy have a heavy concentration at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy—35 percent of urban working women are "professionals, technicians and associate professionals"—, and in the informal sector, they perform home-based and low-paying piece-rate work,

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[1]The crude labour force participation rate is defined as the percentage of persons in the labour force in respect to the total population. The refined labour force participation rate, which is 8.4 percent for women in urban Pakistan, is defined as the percentage of persons in the labour force in respect to the population 10 years of age and above.

including crafts like sewing, crochet, and embroidery. Between these two poles women are only marginally represented, in the office sector. To date only 1.2 percent of the urban working women are engaged in clerical work [Pakistan (1998)].

Yet, the 1990s have witnessed an increasing number of urban women, particularly from the lower-middle-classes, entering occupations that have traditionally been the domain of men. They work as receptionists, secretaries, and telephone operators; as draftswomen, designers, and computer operators. Women from all sections of society, upper and upper-middle-class, can be seen at jobs that were nearly exclusively performed by men only a few years ago. Though still heavily concentrated in a few "female professions" (particularly teaching and practicing medicine), they have chosen new, unconventional careers like banking, marketing, or law. Lower-class women—though presently in very limited numbers— are switching from home-based piece-rate work to trading at Sunday bazaars, or hawking in upper-(middle-)class shopping areas. However, the most prominent changes in the gender structure of the urban labour market are presently being caused by the lower-middle-classes.

Lower-middle-class women, who are commonly not qualified enough to occupy positions of high social status, like teachers or doctors, but are too educated and well-off to remain confined as home-based workers in the informal sector, are usually not gainfully employed. Keeping women out of the labour market (and in *purdah*) has been a religious as well as social status symbol for the lower-middle-classes—the most conservative section of Pakistani society. The lower-middle-classes strictly adhere to what they perceive as "true Islamic values", and they have been most adaptive to the ongoing Islamisation processes and conservative Islamic politics as a whole [Rashid (1996:60ff); Kaushik (1993:183); for detailed discussions see Mirza (1999:33–43)].

The Islamic concept of *purdah* constitutes an important feature of the gender order of the lower-middle-classes. This is manifest in a far-reaching segregation of the life worlds of women and men, the gendered allocation of space in which the public sphere is perceived as a traditionally male space, the absence of concepts for social interaction between the sexes, and in a strong sexualisation of the life worlds of women and men and of gender relations outside the kinship system. Female employment is considered a disgrace, particularly in fields in which the mixing with male colleagues and the (male) public cannot be avoided, and is seen as a fall in social standing of the concerned family.[2]

Yet, it is particularly this section of society that has been hit hard by the deteriorating economic conditions. Inflation, taxes, withdrawal of price subsidies and price controls, together with stagnating wages and high unemployment have made it

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[2]The strong equation of female work with disgrace and a fall in social standing has also been pointed out by Shaheed (1989:26) in her study of lower-middle-class women in Kot Lakhpat, Lahore. On this point see also Alavi (1991:130).

increasingly difficult for the men to maintain the standard of living of their families without supporting contribution to family income by women of the family. More and more lower-middle-class women therefore are entering the few occupations that are open to them; namely, technical and secretarial office jobs. Between 1980 and 1990 the number of women office workers rose twelve times.[3] At the beginning of the 1990s they were only about 3 percent of the office workers; and although no up-to-date statistics are available, women for some years now have become much more visible in offices. These women still constitute a very small minority and are hence regarded as "strange birds" among the (male) office workers as well as among the lower-middle-class women. Yet, their presence in the work world has altered the working environment in offices; a process of de-segregation has begun in which the gendered organisation of public (male) space as well as existing gender relations and gender constructs are being renegotiated and redefined.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The arguments for analysing gender relations in the office sector in urban Pakistan are based on the concept of "embeddedness" of economic action [Granovetter (1992)], an approach developed in the 1940s and 1950s by the anthropologist Polanyi (1978, 1992), which with the emergence of a "New Economic Sociology"[4] in the mid-1980s, is experiencing a significant revival. In contrast to neoclassical analysts, for whom rationally motivated exchange dominates economic life, the New Economic Sociology stresses the social and cultural embeddedness of economic processes and institutions [Smelser and Swedberg (1994); Swedberg (1994)].

Numerous studies of markets that have been conducted in Western societies in the course of the resurgence of economic sociology have pointed out the embeddedness of economic action and processes [e.g., Callon (ed) (1998); Smelser and Swedberg (1994); Hirschman (1993); Swedberg (ed) (1993)]. However, only a few analyses concerning the embeddedness of markets in non-Western societies exist so far.[5] Similarly, not much attention has yet been given to the gender-specific aspects of embeddedness. These have remained absent from, or at best marginal to,

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[3]In 1980, only 1373 women were included in the category "office workers"; in 1990 their number was already 15877 (INBAS 1993:27).

[4]The term "New Economic Sociology" was originally coined by Mark Granovetter in the mid-eighties [Swedberg (1990:106ff)]. For a comparison of the Old and the New Economic Sociology see Granovetter (1992) and Swedberg (1990).

[5]One exception is Dore's study (1994) about the sentiments of friendship and the sense of personal obligations that accrue between economic actors in Japan and their effects on the structure of the economy. The studies of Hamilton and Biggart (1992) and Fukuyama (1995) are also worth mentioning here. While Hamilton and Biggart, in their historical-comparative analysis of the structure of the economies in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, point out the importance of culture and the state for the constitution of the economy, Fukuyama analyses the economic structures of different Western and Asian societies within their ethical, moral and cultural contexts.

the literature; and only in recent feminist works in economics first steps towards adding a gender perspective to the concept of embeddedness of economic action are being taken. It has, for instance, been pointed out by feminist economists that gender relations (and gender inequalities) are reflected in the market and influence the way economic processes take place [Cagatay (1995:1827f); Elson (1993:545); Elson (1995:1864)].

This study tries to look at the embeddedness of the market from a gender perspective ("gendered embeddedness"). It will be analysed how societal gender constructs and gender relations, *inter alia*, the lack of socially sanctioned modes of communication between the sexes, a strong sexualisation of gender relations particularly between unrelated men and women, and the ubiquitous "eveteasing" and harassment of women in public male spaces, mirror in the market; and how they affect the working conditions of female office workers, the gendered organisation of work and space inside the offices, and women's strategies to establish themselves in a traditionally male field of employment, namely, the office sector.

RESEARCH METHODS

The empirical data were collected during one year of field research in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1996 and 1997. The data collection was based on qualitative methods of empirical research. These included participatory observation, and in-depth interviews and informal conversations with working women, their colleagues and families, employers, and relevant experts. Initially, about 40 lower-middle-class women working in middle-level positions in the office sector—draftswomen, computer operators, designers, receptionists, secretaries, telephone operators, etc.—were interviewed. Of these, thirteen women—twelve women working in the private sector and one woman working in the public sector—were chosen as typical cases. Since the study aimed to focus on office workers who really worked in jobs at the middle-level, only women with qualifications between a secondary school (10th class) and college degree (14th class), including some formal or informal skill-oriented training below university level, were selected. The office workers' ages ranged between 20 and 45. Some of the women were married with children, but since it is still common for female office workers to leave their jobs and return to the *chardivari* (i.e., the four walls of one's house) upon getting married, most of the women who were selected for this study were unmarried and in their early to mid twenties.

These thirteen women were regularly visited at their workplaces and homes for interviews and informal conversation over a period of nearly one year. This qualitative design, in which relatively much time was devoted to the individual women, enabled a better understanding of the perspective of the women themselves, what they themselves considered important in their own life world and the problems and conflicts they faced as office workers. It also allowed the development of analytical categories based on these case studies and the contextualisation of the

empirical findings.[6] Apart from the select group of 13 women, several of the other interviews conducted in the beginning of the field research have also found useful reference in the course of this study.[7]

GENDER RELATIONS IN THE OFFICE SECTOR

Across the offices under study gender relations showed an astonishing uniformity. Male colleagues commonly did not acknowledge work-related (de-sexualised) relationships between the sexes at the workplace. In the offices they had, often for the first time, the chance to come into contact with unrelated women; and they took advantage of this situation by trying to get close to their women colleagues and developing personal relations with them. Some common ways tried by men to come closer to women colleagues were approaching them unnecessarily under pretext of work-related issues, trying to involve them in needless small talk about personal matters, often in a low voice or when nobody else was around, inviting them to tea, lunch, etc., offering them a lift on the motorbike, indulging in immodest talk, making crude jokes, speaking loudly within women's earshot in order to attract their attention, or even directly asking them to become their girlfriends. Touching women while passing over things like pencils or a phone receiver, coming very near to women physically while passing by or talking to them, or staring at them furtively was also a common way to "establish contact".[8]

The worst behaviour toward women was exhibited by men who were connected to the office only weakly and temporarily; namely, clients, customers, and visitors. The shortness of the encounters, together with the lack of social control (which makes permanent office staff accountable for their behaviour, in however weak a manner) facilitated behaviour patterns men typically show toward unrelated women in public (male) spaces.[9]

Receptionists and telephone operators complained about the numerous "wrong calls" —as they called them. Clients and visitors who came to the office and saw them working there called them later, knowing that they would attend the phone;

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[6]I am here drawing upon the grounded theory, which was originally developed as a qualitative research methodology by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser. A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through the systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory and then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study, and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. For further details about the grounded theory see Strauss and Corbin (1990); Strauss (1987); Strauss (1994).

[7]Some of the office workers I interviewed did not want their real names to be mentioned in this study. Therefore, a few names have been changed in order to provide these women with the anonymity they desired. Furthermore, the names of all offices were also changed.

[8]For similar findings see Macleod's study (1991) on female office workers in Cairo, Egypt.

[9]For more information about sexual harassment and violence against women in public spaces see Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (1999:215-223); Goodwin (1995); Human Rights Watch (1992); Haeri (1995).

and would try to get them involved in a conversation or worse insist for appointment to meet them outside office:

> I get such phone calls. If some customer comes [to the office], then of course he has our phone number. He sees me working here and after he has left the office he phones me, 'I liked you and I would like you to be my [girl]friend', he will say. 'Let's meet outside'. 'Have lunch with me'. 'Have dinner with me' (*Ghazal*, receptionist, 25.05.1997, p. 5).

Women also faced difficulties with clients they had to deal with inside the offices. *Shazia* and her colleagues, *Shamzi* and *Farhat*, all designers at the publishing house Ali & Ali Communications, design book covers and magazines on the computer, and sometimes clients come to their workplaces to appraise and sanction the designs they have developed:

> Some clients come very close to us. Then we act in a disapproving manner—for example, we look at them, or stare at them, or try to give them the feeling that they should not stand here. Then they realise this themselves and retreat. And there are others who are not influenced by our behaviour, that we are staring at them or trying to indicate that they should not do that [i.e., come so close]; but our [male] executives are also caring. They react immediately and say, 'please sit down in our [visitors'] room. When they have done the work we will show it to you' (*Shazia*, designer, 03.01.1997, p. 7).

When women had to leave their office for work-related tasks, they were confronted with (sexualised) gender relations that characterise public male spaces. *Asieh*, a designer working at a small advertising agency, Rainbow Advertising, told me that her boss once took her to the printing press. Work inside the printing press, a traditionally male field of employment, was usually handled by the male employees or the boss himself; but on that particular day he took her along just to show her the procedures, how scanning and printing was done, and what a printing press looked like:

> There were a lot of men. They were all staring at me in a strange way, 'Where has this woman come from?', 'What kind of relationship does she have with this man?' [And this,] although he only took me to that place to show me how the work is done there. I did not like it. I said, 'I won't go there again; the men stare in a dirty manner' (*Asieh*, designer, 15.01.1997, p. 3).

Sexualised gender relations and men's persistent attempts to gradually stretch the boundaries in their daily interactions with office women were a structural phenomenon all women experienced as an integral part of their daily lives as office workers. The need to define the boundaries of male-female interaction at the

workplace (and beyond) and not to give men the chance to extend these was therefore very frequently mentioned by the women:

"The [office] set-up depends on yourself. After five years of [working] experience I can say that it absolutely depends on you.…They [i.e., the men] do as you like. It is not true that nothing happens, but it depends on you and how you behave with others. You must conduct yourself in such a way that they cannot do anything except work. You should be mature enough not to give them any chance. And if you have only given someone the chance to get close to you once, then you cannot go back to the old relationship.…If there are no obstacles on your part, then problems can emerge. Therefore, one has to remain careful.…Everything depends on the girl. If she wants she can live in a very good [office] set-up.…I think that men are all the same. If they get a chance they will definitely use it. I have seen this many times (*Shagufta*, software developer, 01.12.1996, p. 2ff.).

Female office workers used different strategies to renegotiate (public) space, and to desexualise and redefine gender relations at their workplaces; namely, they created social distance between male and female colleagues; they developed socially obligatory relationships; they integrated male colleagues into a fictive kinship system; and they created women's spaces inside the offices.

STRATEGIES OF WOMEN TO RENEGOTIATE GENDER RELATIONS AT THE WORKPLACE

Strategy One—"Creating Social Distance"

One common strategy women employed to renegotiate gender relations in the offices was to restrict all conversation with male colleagues to purely work-related issues, and be strict, even rude when they tried to talk unnecessarily or get closer to them in any other way. This way women created a social distance between themselves and their male colleagues in their daily interactions with them, as *Shaheen*, a software developer who works in the computer department of a private hospital, Red Crescent Hospital, and is responsible for the computerisation of the medical records; explains:

I do not have public contact in my job, but people who work in the hospital come to me when they have problems with computerisation [of the medical records] or any questions. When they come, then I am friendly because they want to have something explained. But when I meet them on the floor or outside the hospital I am no longer friendly because I am not in a formal work-related situation. I try to ignore the person, say no more than 'hi, hello' while passing by. This way I create a distance. I

also have a lot of talk on the telephone. That is more de-personalised than face-to-face conversation (*Shaheen*, software developer, 25.04.1997).

When employees working in other departments of the hospital enter the computer department, *Shaheen* does not greet or talk to them, nor does she even look in their direction. Even when male colleagues she knows enter her department she ignores them in order to demonstrate that she only establishes work-related relations. She never socialises with male colleagues, not even with those working with her in the computer department, for example, by having lunch or tea with them in the canteen, in order to avoid any unnecessary contact with the male staff. Once when I left Red Crescent Hospital together with *Shaheen* after finishing an interview with her there, we met a man outside the building who worked in a different department but knew *Shaheen* as he had contacted her a few times in connection with computer work. We were walking in a narrow lane and the man, coming toward us, had to pass by very closely. Despite this she did not look in his direction; and greeted him only after he had greeted her. She kept looking in the other direction and thus avoided eye contact in order to maintain the social distance. *Shaheen*, explaining her behaviour toward her male colleagues told me:

> sometimes your job requires you to be very polite. But the disadvantage of being too polite is that the men might misunderstand this. So you should remain balanced. If you are polite you should sometimes also be rude....If you remain polite continuously, men will try to make close, personal contact with you (25.04.1997, p. 2).

Keeping male-female interactions at the workplace purely work-related was often a delicate balancing act: on the one hand, the woman must integrate into an office environment and a (male) team while at the same time remaining somewhat distant; on the other hand, she could become marginalised if she was too rude or strict with her male colleagues. *Shaheen*, for example, faced such a dilemma whenever there was a social gathering in her department. She could not always excuse herself from attending; yet she felt uncomfortable at these get-togethers, particularly during her first year at Red Crescent Hospital because at that time she was the only woman in her department. They brought her into situations which were not entirely work-related any longer, and which inevitably required a certain degree of frankness and informal talk with male colleagues. In offices, on special occasions like weddings or engagements, (male) colleagues often brought sweets and snacks and also invited the female colleagues to participate in a little get-together inside the office. These are friendly gestures, but they put women in a dilemma. If they accept the offer, men would be encouraged to make further advances, if they refuse the men would feel offended.

Strategy Two—"Developing Socially Obligatory Relationships"

Another strategy of women was to embed formal working relationships into social and socially-obligatory relationships. *Shazia*, for example, works in a large publishing house, Ali&Ali Communications. Only four or five women work in this office; and though *Shazia* spends her lunch break with two female colleagues, during the work hours she sits and works with a male colleague who is about her age. While the other two women work on the second floor—they are both responsible for the designing of book covers—*Shazia's* and her colleague's (*Asif's*) workplace is on the ground floor. They design the layout of magazines the agency publishes for local and multinational companies. *Shazia* has been able to turn her formal work-related relationship with *Asif* into a socially obligatory one by establishing informal social relations with his family, particularly his sisters:

> We [i.e., *Asif* and me] are the same age; we are friends. He and his sisters have become my friends, and they keep on phoning me. They even phone me when he is not here. They also phone me at home. Sometimes they come to the office to meet me.…I also phone them. Yesterday I phoned them to wish them happy *Eid*. He has two sisters and they have become my friends since his mother passed away.…[On that day] the whole office staff went there, and I met his sisters. And since then they have become my friends. Since then I also take more care of him…, of course he is my good friend and for this reason he also cares for me (*Shazia*, designer, 20.04.1997, p. 2).

Embedding formal work relations with male colleagues with socially obligatory ones creates social control and prevents men from behaving disrespectfully. It helps the development of more intimate relations between male and female colleagues, which remain family-like and thus de-sexualised. In *Shazia's* case, her colleague even became protective toward her—a behaviour that is typically shown toward female relatives. He talked to (male) clients who came to discuss the layouts of the magazines with them and thus prevented them from having contact with her and thus saved her from exposure to male strangers that nevertheless was part of her duty.

It was also very common that female office workers introduced their family, particularly their fathers and brothers, to their colleagues and superiors. Male relatives dropped in from time to time for a chat, for example, when they were close by or when they came to pick up their daughter/sister, and met the (male) colleagues and superiors regularly on an informal basis. Thus by personalising relationships between their (male) colleagues and their family they prevented male colleagues from excesses women commonly experienced in public male spaces. This strategy is of course doubly beneficial as which keeping male excesses in check it also helped the women's families to overcome their hesitation in permitting women to work in

an office environment with male strangers, and helped promote a liberal attitude toward working women. [see also Mirza (1999:140-146)].

Strategy Three—"Integrating Male Colleagues into a Fictive Kinship System"

Furthermore, women used kinship terms to address male colleagues in order to integrate the latter into a (fictive) kinship circle. It has already been pointed out elsewhere [Mirza (1999:60ff)] that in Pakistani society women's use of kinship terms for working male colleagues creates a vicarious sense of responsibility and respect in them for these women that they otherwise reserve for actual female relatives of theirs. It also helps overcome the norms of gender segregation; integrating *namahram* men—men whose kinship does not represent an impediment for marriage and with whom social interaction is therefore forbidden according to Islamic Law [Khatib-Chahidi (1993:114)]—into a fictive kinship system that permits social interaction and sharing the same physical space with them.[10] Fictive kinship terms, though, were only used in few of the offices under study. In most of the offices male colleagues and superiors were addressed by their first names, followed by the polite suffix, *sahib*. Women were addressed as 'miss', sometimes followed by the first name. Bosses were often addressed as 'sir' or 'madam'. Subordinates were called by their names; and after working together for a while, employees of equal status—men and women—also started to drop the terms '*sahib*' or 'miss' and just used their first names for addressing each other. Sometimes kinship terms were only used by one of the persons, as, for example, at the architectural office Unique Architects, where the three draftswomen, *Andeela*, *Farhana* and *Shazia*, addressed their boss as 'sir', while he addressed them '*beta*', or '*bete*' (i.e., daughter) when talking to them.

One reason why kinship terms are not commonly used among colleagues is the realisation by women that merely addressing unrelated men with kinship terms did not turn them into real relations with concomitant social implications. Fictive kinship is common in other social settings also such as among neighbours or families with close friendship ties [Mirza (1999:60ff)], but using kinship terms in an office

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[10]This point has also been illustrated by Khatib-Chahidi (1993) in her study about recognised procedures for making *namahram* persons *mahram*—i.e., men and women between whom social interaction is permitted because their relationship prohibits marriage—in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is achieved by fictive and temporary marriages which are legal according to Shia law and remain unconsummated. Marrying, for example, a new servant to one of the little children in the house—even if the "marriage partner" is not mature, and may not even know that he or she is married—makes this person legally *mahram* for all family members and therefore permits persons of the opposite sex to share the same physical space.

environment as a public male space in order to manipulate men's conduct did not constitute a strong mechanism of social control:[11]

> Why should they see us as their sisters? If they treat us as their sisters then they won't be able to enjoy themselves [with us]. They do not like this and if I forget this and say, '*bhai*' [i.e., brother]; I mean, I call someone, [for example,] '*Hassan bhai*'; then he says, 'no, don't call me '*bhai*'', call me '*Hassan*''. I mean, they do not let us call them '*bhai*'. In the beginning when I was not experienced I used to say, 'you are all my brothers, everybody'. But then I felt that nobody is anybody's brother here. Apart from the blood relationship there are no brothers. By calling strangers brothers they do not become family members. You have to keep them in their boundaries (*Kishwer*, receptionist, 25.03.1997, p. 7ff).

Strategy Four—"Creating Women's Spaces"

In the public sphere we find many spaces for women that segregate them from men but, at the same time, do not prevent them from taking part in public life. Lachenmann (1993) describes these spaces as "parallel structures" (18), "women's spaces" and a "women's world" (7). Minces (1992:55f) uses the terms "parallel culture" of women, and Vagt speaks about a "dual public" (1992:50). Schools and colleges for girls with female staff and surgeries and hospitals with female doctors to treat female patients ensure gender segregation formally. But other informal spaces for women also exist in everyday life, such as separate enclosures at ceremonies like weddings, engagements and religious functions, or at funerals. At other public places like restaurants, ice-cream parlours and snackbars a corner of the space is often separated by a curtain or partition to reserve that for women's use. In public transport some of the front seats next to the driver that can be reached through a separate front door, are reserved for women. The public libraries offer segregated areas for women where they can sit and study. New spaces for women that enable them access to fields that are normally restricted to men have been developed during recent years, like the first public park for women in the town of Sobhodero [Der Spiegel (40/1993)].

In the offices under study, too, women workers tried to maintain segregated spaces for themselves to create a physical distance with male colleagues. It also minimised interfaces for interaction with clients, customers, and visitors, viz., men, who were not part of the office staff.

[11]In her study on female factory workers in the garment industry in Bangladesh Dannecker comes to similar conclusions. In order to de-sexualise the workplace the factory workers tried to construct fictive kinship relations with their male colleagues and superiors by addressing them as *bhai* (brother) or *chacha* (uncle). However, attempts at de-sexualising the male-female interactions were not accepted by the male supervisors and co-workers, and their behaviour toward female workers did not reflect the respect implicitly underlying (fictive) kinship [Dannecker (1998:142ff)].

In the offices under study women workers usually sat in corners, behind poles or partitions, or in backrooms where they were shielded from the gazes of their male colleagues as well as those of incoming customers. When men and women were not segregated physically, their workplaces were arranged in a way that they did not have to face each other but could work with their backs to each other or have seats side by side. Furthermore, there was usually sufficient space between them to allow men and women to be able to work without having physical closeness.

Spatial provisions for women were most pronounced in offices with employers belonging to the "conservative type".[12] Such spatial provisions were evident, for example, in the allocation of a separate room for female employees, as could be found at the small advertising agency, Creative Designers, in which one woman, *Sadia*, a designer, works. *Asif Sahib*, the owner of Creative Designers, told me,

> "Women sometimes get confused when a man sits too close to them; then they cannot work well, their speed slows down. Even if you let a girl stand next to me my work speed will slow down" (04.04.1997, p. 1ff).

Thus, *Asif Sahib* created enough space in his office so that men and women would be able to work at ease. He allocated one separate room to *Sadia*, and clients and visitors did not have access that, nor did most of the staff:

> *Sadia* is in our computer section. No man goes there and no man is supposed to go there either. There are only few staff members—one sweeper, me, my elder brother, and two men who work on the computer—who enter this room. No one is supposed to go into this room….We have made this [arrangement] very consciously, and usually the room remains closed. Men sit in the office; friends come [to visit

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[12]During the research, three different kinds of employers/superiors could be identified; namely, a "Westernised type", a "conservative type", and a "mixed type". "Westernised type" employers had a (Westernised) upper- or upper-middle-class family background and had often studied or lived in a Western country for some years. Having a mixed working environment was not considered a problem or constraint in any way. These employers even had women among the highly-qualified employees who worked partially outside of their offices—architects who had to go to construction sites, designers who regularly visited clients to discuss the designs they developed, etc.—and it was not perceived as inappropriate to employ women for tasks which required such kind of public exposure. In the "conservative type" employer's life world gender segregation and *purdah* were much more ingrained. Although he did not oppose female employment in the office sector, he nevertheless tried to provide segregated working areas for his female staff so that the integration of women into the office remained in accordance with the gender order of society and his own (conservative) life world. The "mixed type" of employers did not provide segregated working areas for women, and they also deployed women in fields that required public contact and exposure. However, they were actually very conservative as far as their own family was concerned. Although they themselves recruited women and promoted a desegregated office environment, they were not in favour of their own female family members being employed; and being conservative at home did not stop such employers from making amorous advances toward women in public spaces or even their own female staff.

them] and sit down. And from the beginning we established such a set-up.
I do not like that a girl sits in the computer room, and all the guys start
coming to the office only to glance at her (*Asif Sahib*, 05.04.1997, p. 15).

Women tried to create gander-specific spaces even in offices where no special
provisions were made for female employees under a "Westernised type" of
employer. For instance when *Tasneem* started to work as a draftswoman at Premier
Architects, a medium-sized workplace, she had to share the room with other
draftsmen. It was separated from the hallway by a glass wall through which she was
visible to everyone all the time. And her workplace being in the middle of the room,
she was constantly in view of all draftsmen working around her. But all this changed
in couple of weeks. She was seated in the corner of another small room in the office.
Here, no incoming visitor could notice her, and male colleagues only came in when
they had to discuss work-related issues with her. When I asked her why her
workplace had changed, she told me,

> I asked my boss to give me a proper workplace, not a workplace in the
> middle of the room. Now I sit in the corner of this room; this is much
> better because I am protected (01.04.1997).

A second example of women's efforts to create exclusive spaces is manifest in
the computer department of Red Crescent Hospital. When I visited *Shaheen*, a
software developer, for the first time in the fall of 1996 I found the workplaces of all
employees fixed along the three walls of the department, and the staff was in full
view of incoming persons. At that time *Shaheen*, who was the only female employee,
preferred to work in a small backroom attached to the main one that no one except
the computer staff entered. Later, partitions were placed in front of the workplaces so
that the staff was no longer visible to people entering the department. Four
employees now sat along the walls, left and right of the entrance, and two employees
sat along the wall opposite to the entrance. Meanwhile, two more female employees
had been recruited as *Shaheen's* assistants, and since two employees always sat at
one big work desk with two computers, both women now sat together on the right
side of the entrance along side two men. The women therefore placed another
partition between themselves and their male colleagues. They felt that they could
thus work undisturbed, without being observed by their male colleagues. Along the
opposite wall, though, where four men worked, no partition was placed between the
desks. Once when I went to Red Crescent Hospital to conduct an interview with
Shaheen, I heard a loud argument going on in the computer department. One male
employee, had removed the partition separating the male and female staff and had
placed it behind his own workplace to provide privacy to the head of the department
whose small office was behind his seat. The affected lady was arguing with the boss
that she needed the partition more than he did. Although the boss was of a
"Westernised type" she won and, triumphantly, once again placed the partition

between her seat and the men's. *Shaheen*, being the third woman, and their senior, had her seat next to a male colleague but when one of the two female assistants quit her job, the other one left her workplace and started to sit next to *Shaheen*. This way, again, the women reorganised the space to avoid exposure to men.

The only exception to such a gendered organisation of space was in the case of receptionists/secretaries. They were expected to be visible to all, particularly clients and visitors entering the office; and their workplaces were positioned accordingly. It is interesting to note that even (some) "conservative type" employers had female secretarial workers in their offices without perceiving this as conflicting with their own conservative outlook. In an interview with the owner of the agency, Creative Designers, *Asif Sahib*, for instance, stressed the importance of allocating a separate room to his female designer, *Sadia*. Yet, he did not consider the provision of spatial arrangements for *Sadia* inconsistent with the fact that he later employed a second female employee, a receptionist, for whom of course no spatial arrangements were made. On the contrary, she sat directly behind the entrance, visible to every incoming person; and she was also the first contact person for all people visiting or phoning the office.

When I raised this issue with the "conservative type" employers who had secretarial workers in their offices or planned to recruit women for secretarial positions, I found they had either not consciously thought about this inconsistency, or to them the trend of employing women in office jobs was too prevalent to allow for traditional concerns to come in the way.[13] When the latter was the case, they acknowledged that advantages of having women in secretarial positions outweighed whatever concerns they had for maintaining the gender norms.[14]

The presence of women's spaces inside offices manifested not only in a gendered organisation of space but also in a gender-specific allocation of work that was universal in the offices under study. Women did not generally perform tasks that required contact with the public, or even mobility outside office. This way, interfaces for communication between the sexes, particularly with men who were not immediate colleagues or part of the office staff, were reduced to a minimum. Most of

[13]The experiences of employers with recruiting female office workers for middle-level positions were overwhelmingly positive. In the interviews the employers stressed that women worked harder and more concentrated than men; they were more sincere with their work and more trustworthy; and they were very punctual. Women did not disappear for hours during work time or the lunch break (as men did); they did not get personal visitors who kept them away from their work; and they did not take many casual leaves. The latter qualities of female office workers that were mentioned by employers are certainly linked to women's restricted mobility. While male employees can take their motorbikes and leave the office for half an hour or an hour at any time during the day, women cannot do the same. Furthermore, it is common that men get visitors in their offices—friends or relatives who drop in for a chat—while women cannot visit each other so easily. They remain in the office the whole day and do not leave their seats.

[14]This point brings back to mind an observation already made elsewhere [Mirza (1999:51ff.)] namely, that spatial arrangements for women in public (male) spaces in order to keep up gender segregation are only acknowledged and upheld by men as long as they do not cause financial or other personal disadvantages.

the women in my sample did not have any contact with the public, and for the few who had such contact, it was restricted to a limited number of the company's clients or (male) staff members from other departments.

Many employers did not allocate work to women that required public contact and exposure. But even in offices with "Westernised" or "mixed" types of employers women avoided jobs that involved customer service or required them to leave their offices to do outside work. Instead, they preferred jobs in which the mixing of the sexes was minimal. *Zaheer Salam*, director of the well-known publishing house Ali & Ali Communications and a "Westernised type" employer, told me that he also recruited women for jobs which required public dealing. For him, the qualifications of a person, not the gender, were crucial in the assignment of tasks. Although a female designer—an upper-class woman with a five-year university education in Fine Arts at the exclusive National College of Arts—had formerly worked for the company, and had also been responsible for customer service, including visiting clients in their own offices, Mr *Salam* concluded that many women did not want to work in fields which required such public exposure:

> When women apply here they often say, 'we do not want to do outside work but work inside [the office]'. Then I ask them, 'why did you study so much? You studied Marketing and Sales, so why don't you go to the market?' But they say, 'no, we don't want to go outside, we want to sit in the office and work there'… (*Zaheer Salam*, 05.06.1997, p. 10).

When *Shazia* joined Ali & Ali Communications as a designer she too made it clear from the very start that she did not want to do any work outside of the office. Thus, from the beginning her superiors knew that she could not be assigned duties that exposed her to male strangers. The designs *Shazia* and her male colleague *Asif* develop have to be presented at the clients' offices, but this task is taken over by *Asif*. *Shazia*, as well as her female colleagues, *Shamzi* and *Farhat*, remain in the office the whole day. Work is allocated to them by their supervisor, who also takes back the completed work and then tells them of suggested alterations. *Shazia* went to a client only once, and then too after she had phoned her parents and obtained their permission:

> I don't like to go out of the office in this way. I don't like to go to different places. From the beginning I felt that they can give me as much work as they'd like except for going to different places….Once I had to go, and I said that 'I won't go, I can stay here and work'; and I said that I don't have the permission from my family. It is true that I do not have the permission from my family, but I did not want to go either….I did not like it….If there were two or three more girls with me, then it would be different….And when I go somewhere I do not know whether there will be girls or not. If I was the only girl I would get confused there. Therefore

I do not like to go to different companies to visit clients (*Shazia*, designer, 20.04.1997, p. 4).

Even when male and female employees had the same skills and were recruited for the same positions, tasks requiring external duty were assigned to men. Women invariably remained inside, doing the same work their male colleagues did. In the two companies I visited that serviced computers, female employees servicing computers sat in a room even customers bringing equipment for repair could not enter. They handed the computers at the reception explaining the problem to the male staff who forwarded the computers to the women technicians. Male employees alone were sent out to check defective equipment at offices and residences.

Even when women were formally responsible for dealing with the public they, at least unofficially, handed over all work which involved contact with customers and clients to their male colleagues and only took over such tasks temporarily when no male colleague was available.

The illustrated gender-specific allocation of work did not apply to receptionists and secretaries, whose very work entailed helping visitors and answering phone calls.

DISCUSSION

This study has analysed how female employment in urban Pakistan is embedded in its societal context. It has shown that gender images and gender constructs inherent in the social order of Pakistani society, particularly the strong sexualisation of gender relations outside the kinship system and the ubiquitous harassment of women in public (male) spaces surface inside the office sector; they influence the work conditions of female office workers, the gendered organisation of work and space inside the offices, and the scope of activities women can perform in their occupations. They use many strategies, derived from their own life world, to maneuver in the office sector, to appropriate public (male) space, and to renegotiate gender relations and gender constructs at the workplace. Female office workers try to create "women's spaces" in the offices and this way introduce the *purdah* system to the office environment. Thus, forms of *purdah*, especially in the shape of segregation, are introduced in the offices. But women are also initiating the redefinition of gender relations (for example, by developing "socially obligatory relationships" with male colleagues), and new gender constructs are developing at the workplace. Formerly unknown (de-sexualised) modes of communication between male and female colleagues are emerging, and gender relations that were formerly perceived as sexual ones *per se* are now opening up to renegotiations.

The analysis has further shown that the *purdah*-system—which is a central feature of the gender order of Pakistani society—is flexible and has many breaches, and *purdah*-rules can be redefined and adjusted to new situations. Therefore, the boundaries between male and female spaces, and gender relations as such, are constantly being (re)negotiated. During the economic transformation processes, new socio-economic opportunities are being created for women through which they are enlarging their room for maneuver, and trying to define ways to embed these new spaces in society at large [for Bangladesh see Dannecker (1998)].

In the current processes of societal transformation educational institutions and women's organisations can play a crucial role in facilitating women's entry into new, traditionally male fields of employment, by guiding women on how to accommodate themselves in occupations that have hitherto been exclusive male domains. The Technical Training Centre for Women, Lahore, a vocational training centre for lower-middle-class women that aims to provide school leavers with market oriented training for later employment in the office sector, can be named as one example. Instructing women in correct and proper office etiquette like how to talk to and work with male co-workers and how to handle harassment and indecent behaviour of men constitutes an integral part of the training. Women are taken on excursions to offices to see what an office environment looks like, how the work is done there and how men and women work together. Two internships that are a compulsory part of the training are also to prepare women for later employment. According to the teachers of the TTCW, students' responses after the internships are overwhelmingly positive because women lose their fear of facing male strangers and working in a male-dominated office environment.

Women's organisations and educational institutions that, apart from imparting market oriented training to women, also actively encourage women's entry into so called "male occupations" are still very few. Training results at the TTCW, however, show that women can be taught to cope with a male-dominated office environment and deal with existing (sexualised) gender relations and harassment in male spaces and that such education can positively influence women's decision to become gainfully employed in the office sector.

Just how far lower-middle-class women's entry into the work world will bring forward societal changes in gender relations and the gendered organisation of public space will depend on future economic trends, i.e., on the number of women who will be able to join the labour market, particularly the office sector, and to actively contribute to the current transformation processes of Pakistani society. However, the rapid integration of lower-middle-class women into the urban labour market that can currently be seen is very likely to shake (and probably even transform) the existing gender order of society, especially by facilitating the development of new modes of communication between men and women in the office sector as well as in public spaces in general.

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