



INCORPORATING WOMEN INTO PAKISTAN'S LABOUR FORCE

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There is a constant refrain that too few women in Pakistan work. This is reflected in our consistently poor ranking in the Economic Opportunity sub-index of the Global Gender Gap Index as well as our pretty much stagnant female labour force participation rates of 22%. When they do work, their sectoral spread is skewed and considered less than optimal. We have a feminisation of agriculture and of the informal sector; some 70% of women work in agriculture and 78% of non-agriculture informal sector activities are performed by women. Even among those who are in manufacturing, nearly 79% work from home¹. But, why does any of this matter? Why are we so concerned with whether and where the women in our economy work?

By some estimates, we are losing out about 30% of GDP² because too few women work. When we add to this that a substantial portion of women in the PSLM when asked say that they have a desire to work but are unable to, then clearly our labour force participation rates need to, and perhaps can, be pushed higher. This is not just important from a growth perspective but also crucial from an empowering viewpoint. Monetary resources have been found to improve status within the household and enable higher say in household decision-making. This is consistent with the hierarchy of work where paid productive work is valued more. Yet, access to income is not the same as controlling it. Besides, there is now an abundant literature underscoring that not all work is equally empowering and that the nature of work matters. For example, non-agricultural

work, and working out of the home have been found to be associated with better outcomes. Despite the evidence on the positives of working outside the home, one of the main reasons why women prefer to work from home is because it not only allows them to balance productive with reproductive work, but it is also socially more acceptable. We've all heard stories of women facing harassment en route and at work. In this, women typically face the blame for the harassment³. Hence, it is socially more acceptable for them to work from home. And of course, in all this, how much is earned also matters. One of the main reasons why we continue to rank so low in the Economic Opportunity Index is because of gender wage gaps. Nearly two-thirds of women who work in agriculture, do so as unpaid work. Evidence also shows that women earn less than men in the same occupation, and with the same education levels. Women have been found to take pay cuts if it means more flexibility in timings as well as a safer working environment. Hence, it is not just enough to involve women in work, but the type of work that they do, where they work, what is their pay, the conditions that they work in, all needs to be carefully considered.

¹https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/10.1142/9789811213267_0019

²<https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2016/002/article-A003-en.xml>

³<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552074.2022.2130516>

As an economy, one of the main issues that we have been grappling with is raising productivity levels. This holds especially true for women labour. Given the lower educational achievement, issues of mobility, and the stigma associated with certain types of work, there is not enough demand for or supply of women's labour particularly when we start considering sectoral spreads. This becomes particularly clear when we disaggregate sector of work by education – the majority of illiterate women work in agriculture. Another reason why women tend to concentrate in certain sectors and not others goes back to perceptions around work. Women are viewed as 'secondary workers'. As the share of agriculture in overall GDP has declined and higher paying manufacturing and service sector jobs have become available, it is not just men's higher education and skill-levels that make them more suitable for such jobs. The cultural norms around gender roles and productive and reproductive work means that both employers and even households themselves prefer that these jobs go to men. The secondary status of women workers also means that even when they do work, women often take up 'survival jobs' in response to adverse economic conditions and tend to frequently enter and exit the labour market. So how do we change this set of conditions and involve women in higher value-added chains? After all, it is these high value addition chains that give the greatest dividends both from a macro and micro perspective – boosting growth, expanding household earnings and therefore consumption profiles, while also likely constituting the types of work that carry with them higher empowering potentials.

Raising school enrollments and reducing drop-out rates by focusing on building boundary walls, gender of teachers, presence of segregated bathrooms as well as reducing the distance to schools by thinking through school locations and/or providing school buses. Improving vocational training uptake while also branching these out into 'non-traditional' fields where we don't normally see women workers. Developing a more robust network of public transport systems whilst paying attention to the walkability of cities and routes to bus-stops, even lighting at bus-stops and the presence, safety and accessibility of public restrooms for women. All of these are intervention areas with real potential to have long-term impacts on women's ability to engage with the labour market in a meaningful fashion. And in fact there have been countless interventions over the years with many of the focal points mentioned here. Yet, the needle on women's labour force participation has not moved enough. One of the main issues here has been the length and scale of the interventions. Efforts have largely been piecemeal.

Nonetheless, one of the biggest hurdles to women doing full-time, high-paying work that is outside the home and in what are (presently) male-dominated fields remains cultural norms. These norms surround gendered division of labour, who is responsible for carework, even what are 'acceptable' occupations for women vs. men.

Besides, why would women look to work in fields which are stigmatised, for long hours and at lower pay, and then come back home to work equally long hours fulfilling their care responsibilities, all the while feeling guilt and a sense of loss because they are unable to spend time with their families, a role which they intrinsically (and are socially conditioned to) value. Until we can systematically work to change norms around work and particularly look to reduce women's reproductive burdens, women's engagement in the labour market both as a whole as well as in specific sectors will remain limited. In this, it is important for us to look to community and household level support. We must identify allies, especially male ones, and recognise and value the many ways in which women are already contributing to the economy through their reproductive work. Such a shift in valuation would go a long way in changing the gender order surrounding work: making it easier for men in turn to take on reproductive responsibilities, freeing up women's time, improving women's status, and even opening up other fields of work for them.

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