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Duality of Female Employment in Pakistan

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The paper seeks to assess changes over time in the level and pattern of women's employment in Pakistan and to analyse these changes in the context of supply and demand factors influencing women's participation in the labour market.

THE CHANGING SHARE OF WOMEN IN DIFFERENT OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

Before proceeding to the main findings of the study it is necessary to briefly mention the problems of data collection on women's employment in Pakistan. The shortcomings of official data sources such as the Labour Force Survey and the Population Census have been pointed out in detail elsewhere [Afzal and Nasir (1987); Government of Pakistan (1986)] here it will suffice to state that women's economic participation is greatly underestimated in official statistics mainly due to unsuitable methods of data collection, inappropriate definitions of activities and stress on recording only one activity, and the cultural inhibition to admitting to women working.

Given these problems the present study relies primarily on data from intensive micro-level surveys and the Agricultural Census in the case of informal sector employment of women since the limitations of official data are particularly acute in these occupations, while estimates of changes over time in women's share of formal sector jobs (professionals, clerical, administrative and organized industry) are mainly based on Labour Force Survey data.

The findings of the paper highlight the trend towards the duality of female employment as reflected in the increased participation in the labour market of women at the top and bottom end of the socio-economic scale. Data from the Labour Force Survey indicate that females comprise a significant and rising portion of the occupational category of professionals and related workers. Between 1984-85 to 1987-88 the female share in the occupational group of professionals

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and related workers has risen from 15.5 to 18.3 percent of the total. Although there have been some inroads into non-traditional areas like engineering, banking, and law the numbers in these fields remain very limited, the major increase under this occupational group has been confined to the professions of teaching and medicine. Hence, in 1988 nearly one-third of all teachers and one-fifth of all doctors were women. The demand for women in these categories is itself the result of the segregation in society and the subsequent need for female teachers for girls' schools and lady doctors for female patients.

Among other white-collar jobs, such as managerial workers and clerical workers the proportion of women is still extremely low. Although the share of women among the clerical workers is very small at 2.9 percent it has nearly doubled in the four-year period between 1984-85 to 1987-88.

The evidence further indicates that with the exception of these small proportions of highly qualified females. The great majority of women are in a severely disadvantaged position in the labour market and their participation in the modern high productivity sector of the economy has not increased during the course of development. Thus despite industrialization, the urban female participation rates derived from official Labour Force Survey data have shown a negligible increase over nearly two decades rising from 3 percent to 5 percent between 1971-72 to 1987-88. The evidence of virtually unchanging rates of work participation is contrary to findings from micro studies of urban areas which point to an increasing influx of women workers particularly in the informal sector. Data based on a survey of working women indicate that the majority, irrespective of socio-economic class, belonged to families where women have never worked before. A large number are shown to be working in home-based piece rate employment [Shaheed and Mumtaz (1981); Duncan (1989)]. However, a sizeable portion of activity in the informal sector because of the nature of work such as income-earning activities undertaken at home or work for the family enterprise is unlikely to be captured by official statistics.

Evidence on women's employment in the manufacturing sector provided in a recent nationwide survey of 2000 factories Hafeez (1983) indicates that women's representation among regular industrial employees is very low. The results of the study revealed that women comprised only 5 percent of the employees in factories located in the more developed provinces of Sindh and Punjab and, of these, female employees which comprised only 20 percent were in regular employment as compared to 50 percent of the male workers who were regular employees. The tendency to relegate women to temporary, casual or contract

work has also been observed in selected factories in the Punjab [Khan (1986)].

Finally, with respect to agricultural workers, evidence from Agricultural Census data and Labour Force Surveys indicate a rising proportion or women in this occupational category. The Agricultural Census data is widely acknowledged as the most reliable source of national level information on women's participation in the agricultural sector, however its coverage is limited to agricultural households, including both farm and livestock holders. The 1972 Agricultural Census, provides information only on female participation in agricultural work on the family farm. Thus it excludes non-agricultural work on the family farm as well as work done for other households. A comparison of Agricultural Census data for 1972 and 1980 for the category of agricultural work on own farm, indicates that labour force participation rates of females aged 10 years or more increased from 39 percent in 1972 to 54 percent in 1980. Further, the comparison also shows an increase in the share of females among family workers in agricultural households which rose from 35 percent in 1972 to 42 percent in 1980. For the more recent period between 1984-85 to 1987-88, data from the Labour Force Survey point to a continuation of this trend. Female representation in the category of agricultural workers increased from 14.5 percent in 1984-85 to 16.6 percent in 1987-88.

Thus, although women's contribution to the economy is now widely acknowledged, much of the increase is taking place outside the formal sector. With the exception of a few qualified women who are making inroads at the highest level, the majority of women workers are increasingly concentrated in agriculture and in the informal sector.

DEMANDS AND SUPPLY CONSTRAINTS ON FEMALE EMPLOYMENT

Demand Considerations

Demand-side constraints to female employment are, to some extent, a part of the general problem of low levels of labour absorption in the economy affecting both male and female labour force members. This is a reflection of the macro-level problem of increasing capital intensity in the economy. The period between 1978-79 to 1986-87 was marked by a significant shift towards greater capital intensity in Pakistan both in agriculture and, most noticeably, in industry [World Bank (1989)].

Agriculture

Mechanization in agriculture in the earlier period of the 70s was mainly in the form of tubewells and tractors. Whereas the impact of tubewell technology on labour use has been shown to be unambiguously positive, empirical evidence on the employment effect of tractors does not provide any conclusive answer [Irfan (1988)]. In agriculture, mechanization in the form of harvesters and threshers is unambiguously labour displacing and in most cases it displaces females who traditionally undertake these activities [Agarwal (1985)]. However, in Pakistan these machines have not yet been inducted on a large enough scale to have a significant displacing effect on female labour use.

The findings of the previous section indicate that women's share of agricultural work in the form of family labour has increased over the period between 1971 and 1982. Certain developments in the rural sector may have contributed to the increasing 'feminization' of agriculture a tendency which has also been noted in other countries of South Asia [Banerjee (1989)]. A possible explanation for this trend may be the reduction of male labour supply available for agriculture due to outmigration of males to urban areas and to the Gulf region as well as the result of males diversifying into other non-farm occupations. Employment generation in the rural non-farm sector has increased rapidly in the 80s particularly in construction and transport [Irfan (1988)]. Growth in these sectors has been fueled by the inflow of remittances from migrants to the Gulf region, the large majority of whom belonged to the rural sector. Outmigration to the Gulf region and the growing importance of the rural off-farm workforce has squeezed labour supply available to the agricultural sector. While men looked for other, more lucrative, opportunities in the non-farm sector or abroad, women were increasingly left with the responsibility of managing farm production. Hence, the share of women in family farm labour has risen in the past decade.

Manufacturing

Despite significant growth in value-added, estimated at an annual average of 8 percent since 1971-72, large-scale industry has been characterized by sharply falling rates of labour absorption with respect to investment in fixed capital. To some extent the negative impact on demand for female labour was countered by the rapid expansion of employment in small-scale manufacturing estimated to have increased at an average annual growth rate of 6 percent between 1978-79 and 1984-85 [World Bank (1989)]. Moreover, output of industries that traditionally

employ women such as garments and food processing has shown a sharply rising trend in the 80s.

However, the evidence indicates that expansion of women's employment in manufacturing has taken place outside the regular factory workforce and mainly in the form of temporary and contract workers. This trend is not only a reflection of the low absorptive capacity of the large-scale industrial sector but also indicates a deliberate policy by employers to exploit women as a cheaper and a more pliable form of labour. Temporary workers are not entitled to labour benefits including maternity leave and maternity benefits. Subcontracting, in addition, not only allows the firms to circumvent labour legislation but also offers overhead cost advantages and enables them to capture a cheap source of labour supply. Women are an important part of the system of subcontracting whereby they operate either from small workshops or from their homes. Evidence from Pakistan as well as for some other Asian countries indicates that the level of exploitation of these home based workers is high [Shaheed and Mumtaz (1981); Bilquees and Hameed (1989)].

SUPPLY CONSTRAINTS

Culturally Determined Division of Labour

The low 'visibility' of women in the modern sector in Pakistan is usually attributed to supply-side factors such as cultural restrictions, household responsibilities and low levels of education and skills. However, these cultural prescriptions of women's roles appropriateness are changing as more women are being pushed into the labour market because of dire necessity. Evidence from various micro studies indicates that the vast majority of working women enter the labour market in response to financial need [Hafeez (1984)]. More women are seeking work and the majority belong to families where women have not worked before.

The growing incidence of female-headed households in South Asia provides further evidence of changing socio-cultural norms [Visaria (1980)]. Economic pressures are overriding the basic tenet of the patriarchal system that males should provide for their female relatives. Although the extent of female-headed households in Pakistan is not known, information based on a survey of working women in Karachi indicates that households headed by women belong to the poorest strata of society [Kazi and Raza (1989)]. The lower economic status of female-headed households reflects to a large extent the lower earning capacity of women *vis a vis* that of men.

The Lack of Education and Skills

The persistence of gender disparities in education are a major obstacle to improving the position of women in the labour market. Although the gap between enrollment rates of males and females has declined, substantial inequalities still remain. Further, the gender gap in schooling rises at each level and is very high at the secondary stage. Thus, the share of females in total enrollments falls from one-third at the primary level to one-fourth at the secondary level [Government of Pakistan (1989)]. Enrollment figures do not convey the true picture of the gender gap in access to education within categories since drop out rates vary and are significantly higher for girls. The female dropout rate at the primary level is as high as 50 to 60 percent [Government of Pakistan (1985)].

Male female differences are not only visible in the duration of study but also in the field of study. In courses like engineering, commerce and law the predominance of males is specially marked. The male-female ratio of enrollments has been estimated to be as high as 27 in engineering as compared to 2.76 at the BA/BSc level [Khan (1985)].

Household Responsibilities

The conflict between women's productive and reproductive roles is put forward as a major reason for women staying at home to look after their families. However, in the large majority of cases there is no choice involved and employment is crucial to the economic survival of the household. Available evidence from the Karachi survey indicates, on the contrary, that the poorer strata of working women take up paid work after an increase in family size. Supplementing family income in these cases is a more overriding need than staying at home to look after young children. Among poorer women in lower status occupations seeking employment in itself is often precipitated by a large family size. Such women are forced to enter the labour market because of their additional household expenditure, due in most occasions to a large family size. In such cases high fertility induces employment.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the paper highlight the trend towards duality of female employment as reflected in the increased participation in the labour market of women at the top and bottom end of the socio-economic scale. Access to education and work options vary for women belonging to different socio-economic

strata. While women from the more privileged classes in Pakistan have been able to acquire university education and take up professional jobs, women from the poorest strata are pushed into the labour market due to dire economic necessity. Employment for these women is not a matter of equity or of self-fulfilment but is an essential need for them to earn a living. They undertake a diverse range of economic activities to meet their subsistence needs and are increasingly relegated to casual, low paid, unskilled jobs in the informal sector. The disadvantaged position of these women in the labour market is usually attributed to supply-side factors such as cultural restrictions, household responsibilities and low levels of education and skills. However, it needs to be emphasized that the problem also reflects a situation of restricted demand for women in the modern sector which is only partly due to the overall low levels of labour absorption in the organized sector and attitudinal barriers whereby women are not considered as suitable for certain jobs. Keeping women out of regular employment and in casual jobs in the informal sector with no security of employment or other benefits is also the outcome of a deliberate policy of exploiting a cheap source of labour.

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Comments on "Duality of Female Employment in Pakistan"

This stimulating paper highlights the problems of female employment in Pakistan–both the data problems and the substantive issues. It is to be hoped that the deficiencies in the collection of data on female employment that the paper analyses so well will be addressed particularly through the Pakistan Integrated Household Survey, but also through the Population Census and other surveys (e.g. the Labour Force Survey).

The authors attempts to explain the level and pattern of female employment in Pakistan in terms of supply and demand factors. The paper makes an important contribution to the literature, but in my view there is excessive emphasis on demand, rather than supply factors. To understand fully the determinants of female employment, it should be recognised that supply and demand factors are inextricably linked, through the medium of what might be termed "cultural appropriateness"; and that, because of this factor, it is necessary to disaggregate women into three groups, who face different cultural norms governing their degree of segregation/domestic responsibilities. It is also helpful, from a policy perspective, to look not just at employment, but also at the productivity, and therefore income of women in particular jobs.

There are then, if one is permitted broad generalisations, three principal (supply-side) factors determining female employment, but which affect women differently according to which income/class group they belong to. These factors are: level of education/experience; degree of segregation/domestic responsibility; and income/satisfaction level. In other words, whether they are qualified for a job, whether their families permit them to work, and the benefits they as individuals derive from the job. The only clear demand-side factor would be employers biases. For instance, the relatively high proportion of women working from the upper-income/class group would be due to their higher levels of education/experience (compared with other groups of women, but not compared with men in their class); their low degree of segregation (since they are more "liberated"); and the professional satisfaction they derive from the job. The constraints on their greater employment would be appropriate education and training; employers gender discrimination; and the relatively higher satisfaction they might derive from their domestic rather than professional roles.

In the middle and lower-middle-income/class group, however, the required segregation of women is a more powerful force, which outweighs the relatively greater levels of education (compared with the lower income group), and whatever income benefits they might derive from the job. It is this supply-side factor which explains why female employment is so low here.

In the lower-income/class group (most of whom are self-employed in agriculture or micro-enterprises), the need for income is a much greater force than segregation norms, which explains the high labour force participation amongst women in this group. However, their lack of education, skills and other inputs, as well as their household responsibilities (rather than a "deliberate policy of exploitation") condemns them to the informal sector, with flexible hours and very low productivity and hence income. Since these women are already employed in large numbers (whether outside or inside the home doing "piece-rate"), the main concern here is their low productivity.

If policy-makers are concerned with providing women, and hence their families, with opportunities to increase their welfare and productivity, then the policy prescriptions must be different for each group. In particular:

(a) *for the upper-income/class group:* more education and training opportunities should be provided, especially in the scientific and technical fields; and employers should be encouraged not to discriminate against women in their hiring and firing practices;

(b) *for the middle- and lower-middle income/class group:* more employment opportunities in culturally-sanctioned roles and working conditions are needed: it is for this group in particular that supply and demand are so inter-twined. The challenge is to provide access to education and employment delivered in a culturally acceptable form, without confining them to a "female ghetto" of low quality education and employment. For example, given the cultural "norms" for this group, it is essential to increase the number of female service providers, not only to provide more employment opportunities, but also for more girls to be educated, women to get better health care, family planning services, credit, etc.; however, it is difficult for many women to work in these jobs unless the environment is fairly "respectable". If women are to acquire human capital, and access to productive inputs and services, this "vicious circle" must be broken; and

(c) *for the lower-income/class group:* raising their productivity is more im-

portant than raising their employment; however, their productivity is also dependent on their access to productive inputs and services (e.g. extension, credit, new inputs and technology), which in turn increases with more employment of women as service providers. It is also important that such productivity-enhancing inputs and services be geared to women's roles and needs: for example, inputs and training for them in agriculture and micro-enterprises; group guarantees instead of assets as collateral for credit, combined with "outreach" services, etc.

It is thus clear that a key strategy for increasing the education, employment and productivity of women in the middle and lower groups (where the majority of the population are concentrated) is to provide appropriate training, incentives and working conditions for female service-providers, especially in rural areas, in order to break the "vicious circle".

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