

Jasmine Mirza. *Between Chaddor and the Market: Female Office Workers in Lahore*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002. 266 pages. Hardbound. Rs 395.00.

Pakistani society at present is in a state of transition from the traditional to the modern. Recent decades have witnessed marked changes in social values and norms, particularly those pertaining to the gendered structure of society. More and more women of the urban lower-middle class are seeking employment outside their homes—in offices, factories, and shops, etc. Not only that; they have started working in what are generally considered to be exclusively ‘male occupations’. With this change, a process of de-segregation of the life-worlds has been initiated affecting the entire social life and gender order of the society. This is the central theme of an interesting and insightful book by Jasmine Mirza, who is a sociologist by training.

As the title *Between Chaddor and the Market: Female Office Workers in Lahore* indicates, the work specifically focuses on the urban female labour force working in metropolitan Lahore. Given the age-long patriarchal social structures and the religiously-oriented outlook of the masses in general, issues pertaining to the emancipation of women and economic assertion acquire considerable significance in the context of Pakistani society. The findings of the study reveal that most of the women entering the office sector come from the lower-middle classes, and it is quite ironical to note that these classes constitute one of the most conservative sections of society. In some cases, economic exigency is the prime factor compelling women to seek employment, and thus raise their family incomes. In fact, the cost of living has considerably increased in recent years, and the lower-middle classes are hard hit by the frequent price hikes in almost all utilities and commodities of daily consumption. It partly explains why more and more women are now inclined to get market-oriented education, which promises well-paying jobs to them. In some cases, women are venturing into the public arena for their own self-fulfilment and independence as well.

Nonetheless, the process of change has its own cost. Working women are confronted with a host of problems ranging from the hostile attitude of the males towards them to the reactions from their extended family and neighbours. For many women, confronting the male world immediately after being employed was a major impediment. The author infers that transportation constitutes another main problem for working women since “eve-teasing” and harassment are common experiences. Realising that the problem of harassment of women by men can be understood better against the backdrop of the prevalent custom of *purdah* in Pakistani society, the author treats the subject at length. She defines *purdah* as an institution based on the notions of female sexuality and sexual behaviour and its control, rather than as seclusion, or gendered allocation of space, or a simple division between the private realm of a female and the public sphere of a male.

In Pakistani society, as in some other Islamic countries, efforts are made to contain and regulate female sexuality, and the imposition of strict segregation

between the sexes is considered the key to order and morality in society. In the decade of the 1980s, an Islamisation process was systematically initiated by the Zia regime and the official policies aiming at restricting women to '*chaddar aur chardivari*' [generally womens' seclusion] had won a sizeable number of sympathisers in the country. Similarly, the findings of a recent survey reveal that 41 percent of the men in the major cities of Pakistan approve of restrictions imposed on women in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule (p. 230). Nevertheless, Jasmine Mirza points out that such efforts prove counter-productive, since they reinforce the sexualisation of human relations by enhancing the sexual nature of the interaction between men and women.

As for female harassment, a survey report published in an English daily reveals that all the women questioned in the survey had experienced harassment (p. 46). The explanations generally offered by the people for the harassment of women by men is that the latter feel tempted by "women's innate seductiveness", since, in their view, the women should not have transgressed the confines of '*chardivari*' (the four walls of the house) in the first instance. The author, however, opines that such views are in fact reflective of the gender-relations and the perception of men and women about each other in Pakistani society. In the traditional view, it is exclusively female sexuality that needs to be strictly controlled through confining womenfolk to their private spaces or homes. However, if they do come out in public spaces in case of "necessity", traditional codes of conduct for the women, which include, among others, observing the veil or wearing *chaddor* (a large sheet of cloth wrapped around), and lowered gaze and voices, etc., are to be strictly enforced. Furthermore, as in many other traditional Islamic societies, a family's honour (*izzat*) is socially constructed on the basis of the sexual behaviour of its female members. Any moral lapse on the part of the women is supposed to bring a bad name to the entire family.

Nevertheless, pointing out the practice of veiling among women, Jasmine contends that it does not necessarily mean "subordination" as it is often interpreted in Western discourse. Veiling constitutes one of the strategies which a woman employs in order to broaden her space for action, such as for having access to the public space where she would have no access otherwise.

Since gender segregation itself necessitates women's working in various fields, for instance in female schools, colleges or hospitals, female employment is not disapproved in principle in Pakistani society. For this reason, some professions command considerable respectability but others are regarded as "improper" for women. Nevertheless, women in Lahore, as in the rest of the urban centres in the country, are engaged in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy, and in both public and private sector jobs.

With the entry of women in the labour market, not only is the gendered structure of society being altered gradually, but also societal taboos are disintegrating as well. For instance, living on one's daughter's income is a strong taboo in

Pakistani society. Similarly, in the societal perception, particularly of the conservative sections of the society, female office workers are morally corrupt. Those working in secretarial positions are perceived as “show-pieces”—in some cases even by their own employers and colleagues. However, these working women are the agents of change in Pakistani society. In general, the gender relations are being redefined, and the boundaries between male and female spaces are being renegotiated. The image of the female office workers is being reconstructed. Through employment, women are creating new social identities, which are not sexual or familial. These new identities are noticeably contributing to confidence-building among women. Moreover, the entry of women in the labour market is affecting positive changes in the social environment of their workplaces as well.

An important feature of the study is that it specifically highlights the incongruity between the life-world of the working women and their “world of work”. The yawning gap between the life-world of these women and the behaviour patterns and norms which prevail in the society at large, including their own offices, constitutes a crucial problem. Following Norman Long, the author employs the “interface approach” in order to investigate how different and often conflicting life-worlds, based on different values and norms, intersect; and consequently, how social actors, belonging to different life-worlds, try to bridge, accommodate to, or struggle against each other’s different social and cognitive worlds.

In addition, the work presents four case studies of women engaged in various jobs in Lahore which are classified according to the reasons for entering the public arena. While discussing the office cultures, which are classified as “Westernised”, “conservative” and “mixed” types, four case studies of four organisations, where women are employed, are also presented.

As for the methodology, the research, which is based on fieldwork in Lahore, draws extensively on the techniques of semi-structured interviewing. Using the insights of Grounded Theory, the study does not attempt to fit the collected data in the straitjacket of a theory; rather it allows the empirical facts to speak for themselves. Tables and figures including pie diagrams are used to illustrate empirical data and to facilitate comparative analysis. In addition to an impressive bibliography, a glossary of terms used in the study and a subject and names index make its use convenient.

The book under review is a valuable addition to the scanty feminist literature dealing with Pakistani women. The data of the study and the meticulous analysis and interpretation speak volumes for the hard work put in by the author to appreciate and explain the phenomenon of social change in the country from the perspective of women.

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