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### EXPLORING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PAKISTAN'S INFORMAL LABOR SECTOR

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#### ABSTRACT

Women in Pakistan play a significant yet often overlooked role in the informal labor sector, contributing to the economy through activities such as domestic work, agriculture, handicrafts, and small-scale trade. Despite their substantial contributions, women in this sector face numerous challenges, including low wages, lack of social protection, and limited access to legal rights and healthcare. This study explores the dynamics of women's participation in Pakistan's informal labor sector, examining the socio-economic factors that drive their involvement and the barriers they encounter. It also highlights the intersection of gender, poverty, and cultural norms that perpetuate their marginalization. The research draws on qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which women work and the impact of their labor on household economies. The findings reveal that while women's work in the informal sector is crucial for family survival, it often goes unrecognized and undervalued. The study calls for policy interventions to improve working conditions, provide social security, and empower women through education and skill development. By addressing these issues, Pakistan can unlock the potential of its female workforce, contributing to broader economic growth and gender equality.

**Keywords:** Women, informal labor sector, Pakistan, gender inequality, socio-economic challenges, social protection, empowerment, household economy, policy interventions.

#### Introduction

Pakistan stands out as one of the few countries globally where the labor force participation rate for women has unfortunately exhibited a troubling and concerning decline, even as the poverty headcount has noticeably risen during the same timeframe. Women constitute nearly half of Pakistan's overall population, accounting for approximately 49%; however, their representation and share within the labor force remain alarmingly low, at merely around 26%, and this percentage continues to diminish steadily over time. It is indeed shocking to note that less than 16% of working women are employed within the formal sector of the economy, while a significant portion, specifically 36.97%, are categorized as unpaid family helpers, primarily

engaged in the agricultural sector. Nevertheless, the largest proportion of employed women in Pakistan can be found working within the informal sector, which is crucial in influencing the economic landscape. This informal sector is predominantly characterized by small-scale production activities and the operation of small, often family-run units, which makes it frequently overlooked and underestimated in discussions relating to economic contribution and development.

The primary focus of this paper will be to conduct an in-depth exploration into women's participation and roles within the informal sector, as it is widely recognized that individuals involved in this domain often remain entirely invisible in official statistics, legislative measures, and regulatory frameworks. Additionally, the glaring absence of legal protections and state support means that these women frequently fall outside the range of established labor market standards and regulations, leaving them in precarious circumstances. In the distinctive context of Pakistan, as well as on a broader global scale, there exists a considerable deficit of scholarly studies and research that emphasize the crucial and significant role of women operating within the informal sector; instead, the majority of research endeavors in labor economics tend to focus predominantly on the experiences, challenges, and issues faced in developed economies, thus neglecting the unique conditions and contributions of women in informal employment (Andlib & H Khan, 2018)(Ali Choudhary et al., 2015).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The family and workplace, often seen as separate, are deeply interconnected, influencing the realities and futures of individuals. Discussions on women's rights at home relate to their roles at work. The workplace, formal or informal, is where gender relations are continually negotiated. In patriarchal societies, the private and public spheres are gendered, complicating women's compatibility between home and work. This limits their opportunities and access to resources. The gendered division of labor privileges male breadwinners and female homemakers, creating a patriarchal bargain detrimental to women. Attempts by women to enter traditionally feminine roles are often met with ostracism from male peers and family, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Fear of sexual harassment and social stigma continues to exclude women from formal work, pushing them towards informal employment. In households, controlling women's sexuality and fertility sustains patriarchal systems. This control is often manifested through practices like forced marriages and can extend to limiting women's access to formal work, which can provide them with independence. Maintaining virginity and fidelity poses additional challenges to women's job prospects, especially in informal sectors. Gender-segregated domestic spaces and purdah create barriers to women's workforce participation. The perpetuation of gender-biased norms in family, education, and work systems further restricts agency

and increases the vulnerability of marginalized women. Thus, understanding the interplay between family and workplace in shaping gender norms is crucial for recognizing the cyclical nature of inequality in opportunities and resources.

### **Definition of Informal Labor Sector**

The informal labor sector comprises workers with little to no job security, such as day laborers and petty sales earners, often comprising women who provide cheap labor. Despite low wages, this sector thrives due to easy resource availability for entrepreneurs, allowing them to start businesses with minimal capital. Characteristics include household enterprises and home-based workers. In Pakistan, the informal sector contributes 30% of the Gross Value Added (GVA) to the economy, with a 35% share of the manufacturing sector's total GVA. Workers are vulnerable to job loss, wage cuts, and lack of written agreements, making it easy for entrepreneurs to dismiss them or reduce pay. This lack of legal protection often leads workers to accept unsafe conditions to survive. The income distribution within the informal sector is broad, with wages significantly lower than those in the formal sector. Moreover, women's challenges in this sector have been largely ignored, as they only make up 6.07% of the labor force compared to men's 25.1%. (Ali Choudhary et al., 2015)

### **Gender and Labor in Pakistan**

Appropriate policies may be designed by comprehending the dynamics of women's involvement in the informal sector in the development of nations. Currently, Pakistan is facing a decrease in the labor force. At the beginning of the 21st century, Pakistan's labor force participation went down and predicted a decrease from 82% to 81% among males and 14% to 10% among females from 2009 to 2015. However, during the same years, neighboring nations Bangladesh and Nepal experienced an increase in the labor force participation rate. According to a survey conducted in 2013, out of a total of 60 million individuals who have a job, only 15% are women, in contrast to 52% of the total population.

Women's relationship with the economy has captured the minds of many scholars. The notion of "family labor supply" is taken into account also the "civilized organization" is not acknowledged (Andlib & H Khan, 2018). Women's role within the household is the foundation of a framework for understanding female labor. Women's dependency is cultivated as they are trained to maintain the housework and take care of their family members, in order to continue the actual maintenance and enhancement of the family. Women's minor participation in the workforce is the construct of such performances.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Women in Informal Labor**

The informal sector has become a large part of the economy in many developing countries such as Pakistan. In countries where the major assignment of the economy is in agriculture, the size of the informal sector in urban regions is not as great as in

non-agriculture economies. However, it is common that people do informal work, such as small scale vendors, to create an additional source of income. Women always become important economic agents in society in each sector. The role and contribution of women in economic activities have been significantly recognized and expanded as being not only in the formal sector but also in the informal sector.

The informal sector in many cities such as Karachi developed quickly without any attention to the distribution of national income and employment. It is common in urban environments that a process of urbanization appears alongside mechanic development due to the inward movement of rural people in search of jobs, services, and shelters. Informal workers are deliberately employed by authorities, industrialists or other people, in order to minimize industrial or operational costs, as businesses do not need to adhere to any government control (Augusto da Costa Xavier Mau-Quei, 2022).

The total number of informal workers in all countries is unknown, due to a lack of reliable data and the fact that the status of Informal sector workers is temporary. In Pakistan, around 93% of workers are informal. Globally, in response to the steady growth of the informal economy, new thinking has led to new minimal employment acts; amendments to laws regulating labor for ease; simplified schemes for starting small businesses and lowered health safety and environmental standard; and innovative social security schemes.

### **Historical Context**

This study examines the role of women in Pakistan's informal labor sector and discusses their situation. In developing countries, the informal sector has expanded over time, especially in urban areas. The labor market is characterized by the informal sector. Most people in the informal sector are self-employed workers. In the case of wage employment, the employer does not provide any written contract, benefits, job security or regulation. The nature of informal work is perceived as inferior, regardless of gender. The situation is more difficult for women. Women often work in the private sector, but the extent of informality can vary significantly by employment sector, occupation, and qualification. Women make up the greatest proportion of unpaid family workers. Pakistan is considered one of the traditional countries where most women are still engaged in informal work, especially in the countryside. Extensive research has been carried out on the labor participation of females in rural areas compared to urban areas. In general, women living in urban areas are more likely to enter the labor force than women living in rural areas. The participation rate of rural women is low: only 14.4% of rural women work, and 28.8% of urban women work. Women working in the urban informal labor sector face additional obstacles. Women in Pakistan are patriarchy. Fathers, husbands, and adult sons control many aspects of

their life, such as mobility and work. Violence is also an emerging concern. Globally, 20-50% of women workers experience violence in the workplace (Andlib & H Khan, 2018).

### **Evolution of Informal Labor in Pakistan**

During the last few decades, a large body of literature has emerged that examines the role of women in development, with new debates emerging on their paid and productive work. A strong attention is given to women's paid employment. Four times as many men as women are in wage employment, including casual labor, reflecting the sex segregation of the labor market that channels women into a limited number of unskilled, low-paid jobs. This is particularly the case in rural areas, where women's lack of transport, illiteracy, social stigma attached to women working and other constraints result in a further restriction of the jobs that women can take (Andlib & H Khan, 2018). However, even in urban areas, women's participation in the labor force is minimal compared to that of men. Women's employment, in most settings, tends to be limited to traditional, unpaid activities of low status, a large part of which is squarely within the household context. Despite the long hours spent on these activities and the overall productivity it brings about, they are not regarded as contributing to the economic well-being of the household or the macro-economy. Although important for the survival of themselves, their families, and their communities, such activities have been neglected by conventional strategies aimed at promoting economic growth.

Pakistan, with its population of 141.7 million, has gross national product per capita of \$430. This ranks Pakistan 145th of 174 countries. With a Gini index of 41.2 and 35% of the population falling below the poverty line, huge income disparities exist, resulting in major socio-economic problems such as limited availability and access to basic needs including education, health, and sanitation (Ali Choudhary et al., 2015). The availability of basic needs sustains the development prospects of individuals. The absence of basic needs results in the degradation of human quality inhibiting the process of development. Social and economic disparities resulted in the formation of hierarchical structures of the society, where enjoyment of the basic needs by the poor hinged upon the behest of the aristocracy. Female labor force participation rate in Pakistan is one of the lowest in the world. Part of this low participation can be ascribed to the high fertility rate in Pakistan, where home-making takes a substantial portion of women's time. In general, it is found that females do not participate in labor market after attaining higher education since employment opportunities meeting to their skills were not observed in the field. These issues lead to undertake a study on the topic to know the key reasons that how it is a major cause for low female labor force participation in Pakistan.

### **Legislation and Policies Affecting Women in Labor**

In Pakistan, 87% of women are working at home (with or without ALO) and jobs like embroidery, knitting etc. There is a separate column of jobs for men and women in Pakistan. Very few women are getting a chance to work as cultivator, agriculture and fisheries, etc. In productive sector jobs, 7.04% of male are in cultivation and women are 1.54% only. Women's role in agriculture is increased and providing labour force for agricultural activities is vital for agricultural development because rates of inflation in relation to food items are increasing day by day. This is the reason women are indulging the income generating activities outside and agriculture and are adopting different ways of employment like daily wages, contractual way, labour, and permanent jobs in low financed organization etc (Andlib & H Khan, 2018). Women are depending their financial position on formal and informal sector jobs like Agricultural and relevant jobs are considered as informal jobs but still some rules and regulation and practices systems running in a defined way to manage financial issues. With the reference of comparison to the formal labor jobs informal labor jobs are considered as low paid less benefits for a security etc

Pakistan is a developing country. In spite of the fact that numerous rules and regulation and acts regarding the job security and well paid jobs are run to women, but fact is opposite or vice versa in prevailing the previous rules and regulation. Social retaliations are occurred in against the mindset of parent or husbands in some cases. This is the reason women are discharging the exploitation behavior on the name of rules and regulation into the unseen defficient environment. Multiple Article from Employment act of Pakistan are trialing to protect the women workforce outside. Article 11, 18 and Article 37 and 45 are specifically mentioned to provide the job security to the woman in informal jobs (Ejaz Ali Khan & Najeeb Jamal, 2008). In another article 35 is additionally mentioned, in this article government do the power to make the rules and regulation for securities of women force who are working near to the door. Most of the organization did not open the job advertisement for the female job vacancies because of the multiple challenges and issues some of these are further elaborated in the forthcoming paragraph.

### **Current Landscape of Women in Informal Labor**

Despite the fact that the role of women in informal labour markets is significant in Pakistan, there is no comprehensive analysis to quantify the importance of the role played by informally employed women. Only select aspects of informal female employment are analysed and most of this analysis is based on insufficient or inadequate data. The Pakistan Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data set, for instance, is inadequate for comparing female employment across formal and informal sectors of the economy because the definition of the informal sector keeps changing and the data was collected only for two sectors. The role of female workforce in agriculture, a

major sector of the Pakistan economy that is dominated by informal production relations, remains unexplored. Only the association among the type of farming operations, the gender of the farmer, and the choice of female workforce is discussed. Qualitative gender-disaggregated data such as reviews of literature and case studies may help bolster this analysis. However, such a review has not yet been conducted. It is well known that female in the informal sector are a vulnerable group and constitute an indisproportionate share of the poverty-stricken population (Ali Choudhary et al., 2015). They are severely disadvantaged in terms of health, hours of work, security of job and income, as well as social security benefits (Loi Nguyen et al., 2014). Evidence from the carpet weaving industry and the domestic service sector of Lahore and from the garment industry of Karachi illustrates the exploitable conditions of female employment in the informal sector. How far the female labour force participation rate in the informal sector differs from that in the formal sector of the economy is an important question.

### **Types of Work Women Engage**

Different kinds of work exist in the informal sector and the formal sector, but women are more likely to work in the informal sector. In many countries, regardless of efforts to minimize the informal sector, these kinds of work have nonetheless grown significantly in the last few years. Women are more inclined to pursue work that is informal and is marked with a lack of social protection (Loi Nguyen et al., 2014). Estimates suggest that 95% of women employees are in the informal sector in India. While some discussions have taken place in relation to the informal sector and women, there has been relatively little direct research examining the conditions in which women workers participate in the variety of tasks, the intensity of work, and rates of compensation they might get. The present research focuses on women who work for a fee, salary, or revenue, are self-employed or contract workers in the informal sector, but it should also be noted that in this sector numerous men and children perform related tasks. But in reality women work in certain businesses, such as cobbling shoes, sweeping or cleaning shops, in the streets and homes, street vendors, rickshaw pulling, loading and unloading, agriculture, periodical activities, and other kinds of jobs. There are also many that do not completely meet the criterion outlined above and are situated on the borders of being considered informal (Jose, 2007). On the other hand, the analysis will also address the issue of whether women receive salaries for the same task as men, other general features, domestic conditions, and the position of wives with regards to the frequency and type of beatings received. As a point of departure for the debate of these more complex problems, an aspect of the types of tasks in which women are employed is addressed.

### **Working Conditions and Challenges**

Women in Pakistan are crucial markers of individual and family differences, particularly within the care economy, which encompasses both formal and informal reproductive work primarily performed by them. The informal farming workforce is often excluded from economic activity, affecting how women's labor is recognized. Women engage in unpaid care tasks such as child care, maternal care, and elderly care, which are vital yet often overlooked. This work reflects women's societal roles, linked to beliefs in destiny. Understanding the gender dynamics around this work highlights barriers to women's economic potential. Many uneducated women, with limited resources, enter low-paying, female-dominated sectors as wage laborers. Unpaid labor sustains society without welfare provisions and is included in the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 under target 5.4, underscoring the economic implications of gender divisions. Consequently, distinct bio-social factors like societal norms and stereotypes impact women's engagement in the labor market. Despite inflation and socio-economic challenges, many women enter the informal market, often facing underpayment and overwork, leading to higher indebtedness. This issue is compounded by limited public child care and inadequate training resources. Pakistan's population policy revisions aim to improve women's situations; however, they often reflect indirect job quotas rather than true empowerment. Women's unpaid domestic activities, including cleaning and child care, further perpetuate their perceived dependency and vulnerability, even as their empowerment remains a goal. Success stories in alleviating these issues are minimal, often reinforcing gender divides. Limited opportunities exist; many girls may fare better by leaving school for work, gaining financial independence and recognition. Ultimately, a cultural acceptance of lower value assigned to care work emerges from patriarchal structures, revealing a Catch 22 where essential unpaid labor sustains socio-economic power. (Khan et al., 2018)

### **Economic Impact**

In Pakistan, informal labor constitutes a significant share of women's employment, limiting their job security and work benefits. Women's economic empowerment is perceived to positively influence economic growth and development, job creation, poverty alleviation, and income distribution, ultimately contributing to gender equality and social harmony ((Hadia) Majid & (Karin Astrid) Siegmann, 2017). However, concerns about the quality of women's work are understudied, particularly in the context of Pakistan. This gap becomes more pronounced when considering the longitudinal changes in women's employment in informal activities. Women's formal and informal employment statuses are distinctly different, and there is heterogeneity in women's work within the informal sector. Women working as unpaid family workers have been on a rise during a period when women overall experienced a decline in



employment proportion. Consequently, they might face exclusion from their productive and protective rights and benefits.

Modernisation theory asserts a positive relation between economic growth and women's rights and welfare by virtue of the changes in industrial structure and modernisation processes. Gender Wage Discrimination, the experience of unpaid family workers in the shape of lower financial gain or without any monetary benefits is rarely discussed in existing literature. Additionally, the shortcomings of industrialisation strategy in leading to the required structural change in terms of service sector employment and female-oriented industry are highlighted in past reports. Social norms, customs, and illiteracy reinforced by several cultural and religious beliefs place women in a more vulnerable position by restricting their involvement in market activities. Household responsibilities are shared unequally among family members, with women having the least say in decision-making regarding their own lives and health. The women's mobility rate is low as they need the permission of a male member in order to leave their living quarters.

### **Contribution to Household Income**

The statistics are reflected describes household characteristics of selected women. Notably, the study focuses on women aged 20-70 participating in the labor force. Economic and demographic data reveal that the women are mainly married or divorced. In Pakistan, 21% of women in the study are never married; this is 19% in urban samples and 17% in rural areas. Among those selected, 31% are married or divorced versus 52% for comparison women. Additionally, 34% of the selected women live in urban regions, while the remaining are in rural areas, where women typically have lower education levels and access to resources. Half of the analyzed women are from Punjab, with 23% from Sind, and 16% and 11% from KPK and Balochistan, respectively. Balochistan, a province with the smallest population size, has ridiculously low female LFP rate as compared to the other 3 provinces and overall Pakistan (Andlib & H Khan, 2018). The results are quite intuitive as in population women may also move across urban and rural areas. A sizeable share of 85% women have been residing in the same province since birth and only 11% are migrated from other provinces. Women in urban areas have no formal education is lower by a factor of 2 as compared to nearby rural areas. In the urban sample, no formal education is defined as having no degree outside the religious degrees whereas in the rural; no formal education is defined as not being able to write and read independently. In the selected sample for the main analysis, a sizeable share of the exposure sample live or very nearby large cities as compared to the scanty number of urban counterparts. The socio-economics of the women thus must vary according to the area of residence. Hence, corresponding policy must be designed to address the differential constraints faced by the labor force

possibilities ((Wazin) Baihaqi, 2018). Further simple is designed to address the observed heterogeneity in the workforce characteristics across the urban and rural areas.

### **Poverty Alleviation Efforts**

At the macro level, several poverty alleviation efforts have been made by the Government of Pakistan, focused on social protection programs to the poor. The Social Safety Net (SSN) Program of the Government of Pakistan and the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) directly targeted to enhance women's economic empowerment. The BISP was launched in 2008 in Pakistan, financing a quarterly cash handout of 3,000 Rupees to the identified poor women. Moreover, the government has endeavored to prevent women from being excluded from the workforce, in which the Government of Punjab established the labor laws. Punjab's labor laws include the provision that no women worker shall be engaged in a factory for more than full-time without her consent. In Pakistan's informal labor sector, the majority of women workers are engaged in the home-based sector as outworkers but they are paid at low piece rate wages. The study conducted on the Status of Home-Based Women Workers identified several issues. Forced labor is commonly performed in the informal sector, with findings stating that 50% of women home-based workers were either forced by contractors or bound by the family. Research on their conditions revealed that there is no fixed wage rate for making a punch rug cradle. Moreover, women are not given advances to purchase necessary materials, that contractors pay a low piece rate, and tiers of contractors in collaboration with the owners exploit the women. This set of details the deplorable condition of women workers who are engaged in the home-based informal labor sector in Pakistan. Vice versa, the Alternative Employment of Home-Based Women Carpet Workers was piloted in Azad Kashmir.

The research has critically evaluated the effects of cash protection expenditure on the reduction of women's economic insecurity using data from the National Labor Force Survey 2017-18. The RD design methodology was used as an identification strategy to parallel the assumption of running variables. Analysis indicates that cash receipts from the BISP reduce women's vulnerability employment by 23.61 percentage points relative to the non-eligible group (Sarfraz et al., 2022). However, as a corollary, there is a significant impact of cash transfers on a consistent sample of women belonging to an observation.

### **Social and Cultural Factors**

Pakistan was established in 1947 as a separate state for Muslims, but the significance of Islam in its national identity developed gradually. In 1977, General Zia Ul Haq's military rule embraced conservative and politically motivated interpretations of Islam that continue to resonate today. The 1974 declaration of Ahmadis as non-Muslim

marked a political maneuver that many believed contradicted Jinnah's vision of a pluralist Pakistan, where all religions could coexist freely. Despite being predominantly Muslim, with Islam as the state religion, elements of other religions like Sikhism and Hinduism are present. The South Asian Muslim community in Britain exhibits cultural and religious diversity, with British Asian women's identities shaped by their affiliations. This study reveals that Islam is a crucial component of Pakistani-British women's identities concerning family and community. Since 9/11, Islam's role in cultural discussions in Britain has heightened, emphasizing its relevance. Pakistan is recognized as a conservative nation with a patriarchal structure, reflected in local traditions that highlight family, caste, and moral relationships between genders, supported by customary laws rooted in Islam and male lineage.

Lastly kinrelations are also effected through legal discourse, specifically in terms of the commodification of female bodies and the exchanging of women as bearers of patrilineage. Pakistani women in Britain are also shown to participate in these structures of kin relation, particularly to resist family alliances that involve the exchange of women. However, a significant impact of diaspora is not simply that such relation are maintained through space and time but that they are transformed, particularly through the significances families come to invest in the commodities and visual appearances. Through these vehicles of exchange it is argued families invest and signify mobile capital that helps to build familial power and genealogical relations. In this way kin relations are maintained through modern circuits of money and goods and within specifically gendered norms of appearance (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). These ethnographic cases help to illustrate the manner in which notions of family honor and gender ideologies are shaped through active resistance of women and how they are complicated by broader social change. The term resistance implies the concealment, subversion or evasion of particular discourses or actions deemed inappropriate.

### **Gender Norms and Expectations**

Pakistan is recognised as a conservative country, with a patriarchal system that strongly influences its gender dynamics (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). In patriarchal systems, women's movement is controlled by men, rendering them dependent. Men sustain control over women primarily by institutionalizing the segregation of the two spheres (private domain and public domain) and restricting gendered behaviour in these different spheres of life. The institutionalization of a separation between the two gendered spheres is also found in the widely practised system of purdah. In the context of South Asia, and particularly Pakistan, purdah is practised through the restriction of women's movement and public behaviour. The LMPs and purdah are common cultural practices that control and restrict women's ability to move around, especially alone,

thus also limiting their ability to access and participate in different labour sectors, including informal service jobs. The roots of Pakistani culture also contribute to the perpetuation of restrictive gender norms. This culture towards women is influenced by historical, social, religious, political, and regional factors.

It is found that generally middle class, educated women in urban areas, most of them from Punjab and Sindh provinces, have more autonomy to have a career, and choose their life partner in their own way. However, a hidden reality exists apart from educated, middle/elite women. Pakistani women in Pakistan, in several ways, have needed to negotiate and redefine their gender roles and social relations to accommodate the patriarchal cultural norms and values as well as the cultural demands of Islamic practices. Over the years, women's participation in the job sector of Pakistan has also increased, and Pakistani women are now in various types of jobs such as medical, teaching, sewing, embroidery, beauty parlour, domestic work, working in a boutique and ready-made garments.

### **Family Dynamics and Decision-Making**

Pakistan is a conservative country with strong dependency on a patriarchal system that significantly constructs and naturalizes gendered dynamics in everyday life. The patriarchal system controls women's lives via gendered roles and very restrictive norms, and female virtue is a connection to family honor. Women are ascribed the responsibility of safeguarding family, so any transgression affects the entire family. Puni herself deepens her family's debt of honor, as she is now unmarked, unclaimed, and unfit for marriage. In this state, Puni is forbidden to become a mother, as cursed children bring about the downfall of all generations of the hereditary family curse (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). She is seen as a dangerous anomaly by her village community, pushed to the outskirts. In this family system, women are marginalized, limiting their access to labor, education, and public spaces. This directly impacts purdah practices that keep women confined to the domestic sphere, hindering their mobility and interactions with unrelated men, thus impoverishing their chances to engage in formal labor sectors. Meanwhile, men and women from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds experience vastly different realities. Urban middle and upper-class women typically face fewer mobility restrictions and enjoy more autonomy over career choices. Economic incentives for middle-class lifestyles facilitate their access to education and compliance with high-class femininity standards, leading them to pursue professional careers in academic or white-collar sectors, where purdah restrictions are less practical. In contrast, lower-class women face suspicion, accused of "immoral behaviors" when seen alone outside. Recent economic hardships have driven some to work in fields or local industries, but these jobs are often low-wage and male-dominated, exposing them to harassment and social discrimination. Due to

safety concerns and gender roles, many opt for home-based work, which offers slightly better wages while allowing them to maintain their reputations. However, this isolation exacerbates loneliness and damages relationships with in-laws. Changes have begun, with informal women workers entering the cotton, garment, and textile industries, earning significantly less than their male counterparts. Still, these shifts tend to benefit only exceptional women, while many remain in exploitative and low-wage jobs. Traditional gender ideologies dictate that women prioritize family and household responsibilities, leading to attrition from higher education and the workforce, particularly after marriage and childbearing. Conservative cultural norms restrict individual autonomy, with the family heavily influencing women's choices about education, marriage, and careers, significantly affecting their mobility and freedom. In joint family systems, individual desires often yield to the family's collective needs, particularly limiting women's mobility while encouraging male children to pursue education elsewhere. This dynamic underscores society's perception of family decisions as communal and reinforces harmful gender norms. In the end, women's access to mobility and opportunities varies based on socio-economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, often tying their prospects to male relatives' resources and circumstances. Despite this marginalization, women play critical nurturing roles within the family, influencing decisions more broadly and attempting to challenge inequitable conditions through their social relationships.

### **Health and Wellbeing**

Health is an important component of human life. The concepts of health and wellbeing are multi-dimensional. Considered from an ecological perspective, health and wellbeing are related to having safe water to drink and enough nutritious food to eat, adequate sanitation, and safe shelter, as well as justice, peace and rights. The health of communities is affected by, for example, violence, natural disasters, and war (Riaz & Khan, 2012).

Status of health is often measured using factors such as the incidence of diseases or death rates, or the measure of health care resources such as doctors, hospitals or health centers, absence from work due to sickness, etc. Mental health is significant. How people feel about themselves and their relationships with others can be used to measure emotional aspects of mental health. For people's development, optimal child health is necessary. The state of child health has to do with the health of the societies within which they live, as well as their individual health.

History tells us that development in the modern era is associated with specific social features such as poverty alleviation, good health, education and clean drinking water. Many aspects of health develop more adversely in poor communities, but health is not the only aspect of life that is significant in this respect. Social, political, and economical

patterns and the opportunities or expectations of people living in or belonging to such communities are also significant. Even in contemporary times, health is still a problem for the majority of the people living in developing countries.

### **Occupational Hazards**

Work is often considered the most important area viewed systematically throughout human history. Economic analysis of the role of women in society focuses on the variation and similarity of these roles in different modes of production ( (Noman et al., 2021) ). While their roles varied according to the share of agriculture, commerce, industry, and services in the economy and changes in these shares, the solidarity between women crossed the limits of production sectors. It is because family and kinship functions and differences, which are the main reason for the existence of the society, have been influenced by the economy in every mode of production. Even in this process, the share of agricultural production in world production showed a decrease considering industrial production as an important force. With the expansion of industry, the value of agricultural products produced fell, both in terms of combining the vast potential of industry and in terms of the deployment of the investment opportunity there. The share of agricultural production in the Gross National Product decreased globally, as well as in the capitalist countries with the industrial developed. The details here provide the opportunity to view the effects of these macro-level movements more closely. One of the most important indicators demonstrating the role of agriculture in the employment structure is the labor force share of agriculture. At the low level of developed countries, this rate reached 10%, while it decreased to 15.2% globally.

### **Access to Healthcare Services**

Pakistan's health care system is facing a variety of problems. US\$19 is spent on the total health care system per capita, and this is not even sufficient enough to provide essential drugs. In 1999, for primary health care, Pakistan invested only 0.847 percent of its GDP, which was much lower than the investment in defense. The system consists of numerous health facilities which are predominantly urban-based. The health care delivery system lacks specialized personnel. Even though there is an over supply of doctors and specialists in the private sector, there is an acute shortage of general duty doctors in the public sector, especially in rural areas. In both the private and public sectors, there is a scarcity of nurses and midwives. The so-called traditional health sector, consisting of mainly untrained providers, provides care to a majority of people. The health care system consists of a vertical organizational arrangement, which tends to emphasize selective primary health care in terms of maternal and child health care. It neglects the curative care of common health problems. A survey conducted at the secondary level government hospitals shows that 44% did not have essential drugs,

42% did not have emergency drugs, and 70% did not have necessary equipment. A nationwide survey showed that about 25 percent of the doctors practicing in rural and slum areas did not have minimum medical qualifications.

There are also technical problems in the delivery of health services to rural and semi-urban areas. The public transportation system is extremely poor, resulting in inaccessibility to health centers in rural and remote areas. Consequently, it takes as many as eight hours for a critically ill patient to reach a health center. On the other hand, if a politically or socially influential person faces a similar condition, the provincial government would provide an air ambulance, which indicates the inequitable distribution of health care services. In a country with scarce resources, the ideal solution is to have all health resources distributed evenly all over the country, however, this is not feasible due to political reasons. There is also no proper referral system in place. For simple health problems or minor diseases, people go directly to specialists in the private sector. On the other hand, both the secondary and tertiary care hospitals are burdened with common health problems, while they are not equipped to handle such a load due to the scarcity of qualified personnel and resources. Public health services receive low priority, and the government has made little effort to cut public health care costs.

### **Education and Skill Development**

Pakistan's population in 2017 was 207.8 million, and the share of the total population is 48.7% Female. The female literacy rate is much lower in comparison to that of men, there is a direct impact of skill development on livelihood program for women in the informal sector. Women's involvement in economic activities is concerned with the welfare of the family. There is a need to create extra sensitivity to the role of women in the national life through innovation mass education work. Education and skill development are the essential parameter for women in Pakistan.

### **Barriers to Education and Training**

The informal labour sector is one of the most neglected areas in the labour policies aiming to promote employment and alleviate poverty in developing countries. Overall, it represents a significant portion of overall employment and income across different countries. Many unique and similar features of informal labour have been revealed by informal labour sector studies in different countries, contributing to understanding the meaning of informal labour and making possible an accurate evaluation of policy alternatives. The informal labour sector, despite multiple conflicts towards the jobs it has created, is here to stay and adding to the tools aiming to put balance and poverty-reducing long-term development framework could offer valuable insights for analysing developing economies and their emerging labour markets. The role of women in the informal labour sector has undergone much review, particularly with the

recent 'feminisation of poverty' debate, yet a gender-based focus on Pakistan is lacking. This research investigates the nature, causes, formation and consequences of female employment in the labour sector in Pakistan (Syed Faisal Hyder, 2018). Central to this is understanding why women choose to work in the informal sector, and why they are forced to do so.

Women from all social strata participate in Pakistan's informal labour force to some extent, with those in the lower-income groups entering it most frequently. The most common form of informal work for women is home-based, though wage-labour is becoming more popular. The push factors, such as lack of education, training and experience, along with an increase in the surplus labour force, have made the formal sector just a dream for many women. For house wives, the informal sector offers a flexible alternative to formal work, allowing them to earn and fulfil their maternal and domestic duties. Small-scale female entrepreneurs view the informal sector as less complex, less costly, and a more accessible method of entering the labour market. The pull factors are more for women who work out of home, and include better wages than the formal sector, fear of sexual harassment, and the improvement of family status and livelihood through this 'external' source of income.

### **Initiatives for Skill Enhancement**

It is quite notable that the informal economy is growing rapidly all over the world. Although there is no agreed-upon definition of the term "informal economy," it is generally accepted that it refers to economic activities that are not subject to national taxation or regulation. At the same time, the term "informal sector" refers to that portion of the non-agricultural informal economy that is engaged in wage labour. In many third world countries, women constitute the major part of this sector. In response to the necessity involved in sustainable economic development, a couple of initiatives have now been taken to enhance the income of this vulnerable group of people in Bangladesh (Chen, 1984). Credit is provided for their participation in various income-generating projects.

In addition, training opportunities are created to prepare them for new jobs. It is particularly noticed that a large number of women in underprivileged communities are already engaged in various informal businesses in rural areas, and they migrate to urban slums with the hope of increasing their income. It is already reported that about 44 percent of the urban population is living in abysmal poverty. In metropolitan cities the number of illegal slums is increasing every day which is directly linked to the rise of women in the informal labor sector (Ainul et al., 2013). In such areas most of the women are involved with low-skill jobs like domestic work, and garment sector work, etc. Hence, some innovative measures are needed to prepare them for more skill-oriented jobs.



**Empowerment and Agency**

Increasing female landownership or female labor force participation are policies designed to empower women in developing countries. However, societies are diverse and not all Pakistani women benefit from these increased economic opportunities in their decision making. This paper shows that negative impacts of labor force participation on empowerment can result for some groups of Pakistani women, explained by different gender expectations along Pakistan's gendered institutions (Parlow, 2018). The findings shed light on the process of how empowerment works at the household level. Empowered women typically invest more in the health of their children and in the education of their children. Empowering women at the household level can lead to more gender equality and economic development over time. A key policy implication is therefore to promote broader gender equality beyond just increasing economic opportunities for women. However, empirical findings from Pakistan suggest that this is a difficult and very lengthy process that requires continued effort from policymakers.

**Women's Collective Action**

The objective of this paper is to study the role of women's collective action at the union council level in Pakistan. The social life of women in Pakistan is governed by strict rules and norms. Despite restrictions and confinement, numerous stories and media reports are coming out daily to shed light upon women's issues at the grassroots level. There are some individual cases of success and social mobility among women, yet the bulk of women suffer from oppression, suppression, exploitation, and discrimination (Mujahid et al., 2015).

There is need to focus on this angle by recognizing the forced collective action of women working willingly and unwillingly in the informal markets due to burgeoning economic pressures. A qualitative study was designed that involved 45 in-depth interviews with women from three major cities of Pakistan. The findings suggest that women in informal markets do form their subaltern organizations for collective action that tend to provide them economic, social, and moral support. Polygamy, illiteracy, domestic violence, and strong tie kinship were found to be the major factors restricting the growth of such unions.

**Advocacy and Support Programs**

Many discussions surrounding women's empowerment tend to focus on the phenomenon's spatial dimensions, where empowerment measures the individual's ability to control resources and make their preferred choices. However, the overarching concept of empowerment doesn't end by being confined to the sizes of women. In its most general formulation, it's regarded as Human Agency, Capacity and Inner Strength, in the case of opening to women, both in national informal economy, which

defines a series of features and roles characterizing and articulating her with respective layers in society (Mujahid et al., 2015). Beyond Market and State and sometimes associated with civil society, the multitude and diversity of women's roles, the various cross-cutting and composite activities they undertake to keep their livelihoods, like markets within markets, the disjointed and disaggregated manufacturing/outworking units of wider textile and garment production chains situated both in rural and urban spaces, or the niche, margins and interstices in the social, physical and moral-political landscapes that they usually cover or occupy.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Women in Pakistan contribute to the informal labor sector through farm labor, home-based work, and different sorts of entrepreneurship, contributing to approximately over 64% of the population. Women in Pakistan are the main characters in the agricultural production sector. The role of Pakistani women in farm work is higher than their counterparts in most of the developing countries, where they are the support and equipment providers of family labor. In spite of unstipulated and under-compensated efforts, women work like animal-driven work and earn as much as men. All the agricultural loan schemes initiated by the government are reserved only for the land-owning farmers, which serve as a superior quality of poverty treatment within the male dominant rural structure. Women do receive little or nothing from their male counterparts because they do not have any right over the land and other assets. Women account for a significant share of unpaid and underpaid farm labor in the informal labor sector. Women devote more time to the productive and reproductive work recognized in the sustainable development goals as the 'care economy' (Khan et al., 2018). On the one hand, the percentage of women enrolled in the secondary and post-graduate levels has been enhanced but, on the other hand, women's labor participation rate is consistently decreasing.

### **Barriers to Advancement**

The work market is separated into two sections: the formal education and the informal or hidden work market. The first segment belongs to those jobs which are controlled and secure both by valid documents and means, e.g., proper record, facilities, job guarantees, etc., while, on the contrary, the second segment is void of basics and safeguards to the employees. This hidden work market is executed by the individuals limited to non-domestic environments and relevant activities under the arrangements of concealed mutual agreements. Women's contribution to the domestic environment weaves the backbone of the concealed work market due to which they fall easier prey for labor exploitation and harassment under peculiar grim methods. The etiquettes of domesticity overpower the women's assessment of these working rules. Isolation from the domestic world is the core of this voiceless work market but the respect for the

domestic norms nurtures taciturn and compliance to the concealed working rules and regulations. Since the domestic world stretches from the kitchen to the bedroom, so, they are prone to work with exposure to either of the segments: either with tangible or with intangible exposure (Khan et al., 2018).

Reproductionism is an ideology that presumes that women must focus attention and effort to domestic chores and raise children with full commitment. Furthermore, reproductionism assumes that success of fulfilling designated responsibilities as wives and mothers is not always compatible with the demands of the paid workforce. Government is ultimately concerned with the management of its territory including that of assisting establishment by a citizen. Thus, citizen equals members of the population whose natural role fits into society. Accommodating the women either to job market or in education in unwise view dispels negativity towards the women in public domain. Females placed restrictions and are discouraged in different forms to participate in the education as well the job market. Cultural, religious, and social alterations are strident via many forms. socially constructed roles and responsibilities largely influenced by patriarchal and hierarchical social structures, create systemic disadvantage and discrimination for women in labor market participation (Sattar et al., 2013).

### **Potential for Growth and Innovation**

There have been analytical advancements on the casual and directional claim of interlinked between gender wage discrimination and economic growth in quantitative phase. In Pakistan word economy, men are found to dominate the informal labor sector necessitating that the bulk of women's contribution to economic growth is unrecognized and unpaid. There is vast scope for women to participate in innovation and entrepreneurship within the informal sector with a potential to improve growth rate of this sector and hence economic growth.

Given the intensely exploitative nature of informal employment in Pakistan, particularly regarding wages and lack of job security, those women who are employed in this sector generally do not have decision making power or scope for innovation or creativity. It is often argued by pro-growth theorists that gender wage discrimination retards economic growth because the full potential of human capital is not realized (Ali, 2015). However, if economic growth is defined not just by the quantifiable indicators of expanded GDP, increase in FDI and improvement in HDI, but more qualitatively on issues of necessity and sufficiency, the direction of causation can be reversed such that growth is seen as contributing to gender discrimination and that better female participation in the labor force is only observed when an economy is at the more advanced stage of development.

### **Conclusion**

One of the most extensively researched issues in economics is labor market participation of women. It is a matter of great policy concern due to many reasons social, political and economic and also explored by various researchers that are related with females' participation in the labor force. In this paper, these factors are explored in the context of the women employed in the informal sector of the city of Sargodha in the Punjab province of Pakistan and conclusions are drawn about the ways in which these factors influence the nature of women's participation in the informal labor sector and its trends. In conclusion, it might be reiterated that the working women in the city of Sargodha are generally young and are more likely to be married than their non-working counterparts. Those who fall into the older age groups, however, are also less likely to be single because they are expected to have already been married off by the time they reach the age of twenty-nine years. In the younger age categories, women who are single are more likely than their married counterparts to be participating economically as paid workers. However, this relationship seems to disappear in the older age cohorts, also expressed through analyzing more serious less likely to be found in labor force activities and easily set up their own domestic vaporized things like food items and fancy work ornamental materials. A study on the female headed households showed that the greater the number of dependents, the lower the likelihood of female household heads participation in labor force activities.

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