



RESEARCH PAPER

The Analysis of Factors Influencing Female Labor Force Participation in Pakistan (2000-2020)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the mechanisms by which cultural, educational, and political factors affect female labor force participation in Pakistan from a historical perspective between 2000 and 2020. In the process of globalization, the limitations of traditional religious culture on women's professional autonomy, regional differences in education policy empowerment, and the effectiveness of gender equality legislation constitute key variables that constrain women's employment. The study adopts historical analysis and qualitative research methods, and finds that firstly, patriarchal culture continues to influence female labor force choices through occupational gender segregation and family decision-making mechanisms; Secondly, education investment enables urban middle-class women to obtain modern employment opportunities, but the lack of basic education in rural areas leads to a gap in human capital accumulation; Thirdly, although gender equality laws are promoted at the political level, there is a significant regional imbalance between policy implementation and legal protection. Suggest building a three-dimensional intervention system: promoting a family economic accounting model at the cultural level and quantifying the income increasing effect of female labor force participation; Establish a vocational skills certification system using blockchain technology in the education sector, and implement a linkage mechanism between provincial education funding and female employment rate; At the regional development level, a cross-border e-commerce talent cultivation center will be established based on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and a women's employment compensation fund will be set up to balance infrastructure differences. The study also provides an interdisciplinary analytical framework for gender equality policy formulation in South Asian countries.

KEYWORDS

Pakistan, Female Labor Force, Cultural Factors, Educational Impact; Political Policy

Introduction

With the rise of globalization, the world economic landscape has undergone profound transformation, and as an important component of the global economy, the market participation of female labor has also changed accordingly. The historical evolution of female labor force in Pakistan not only reflects the influence of international trends, but also deeply reflects the complex interweaving of geopolitical culture, educational progress, and political decision-making. This study spans the period from 2000 to 2020, systematically analyzing the key factors affecting women's employment in Pakistan - cultural awareness, educational opportunities, and political regulations, with the aim of presenting the historical trajectory and current situation of Pakistani women in the labor market.

During this period, culture and religious beliefs formed the foundation of women's employment choices, and their economic activity sought a balance between family and social identity. Compared to the rapid deconstruction of gender roles in Western societies, the employment path of Pakistani women appears more bumpy due to the limitations of local culture. Education, as a barometer of social development, plays a dual role in the employment history of women in Pakistan. On the one hand, the popularization of education and the increase of higher education institutions have opened up new employment opportunities for women, enhancing their competitiveness in the labor market; On the other hand, the uneven distribution of educational resources and the uneven quality of education constrain the possibility of women achieving comprehensive employment (Kaifa, et. al., 2024; Ahmed, et. al., 2015). The role of political factors in formulating and implementing gender equality policies is particularly significant. The government's legislation and policy orientation provide protection for women's employment rights, although the implementation still needs to be strengthened.

This article reveals the social background of female participation in the labor market in Pakistan through a comprehensive historical analysis of the above elements. Exploring the intrinsic logic of the relationship between cultural traditions and gender employment through critical thinking, investigating the correlation between education and employment, and investigating the practical effectiveness of gender equality laws within a political framework, while also having certain significance for gender studies.

Literature Review

Female labor force participation (FLFP) in Pakistan has remained an important aspect of the country's economic development. Despite constituting nearly half of Pakistan's population, women's economic participation has been persistently low, with the FLFP rate standing at only 22.6% in 2019 (World Bank, n.d.). In the book of *Determinants of Female Labour Force Participation in South Asia - A Case Study of Pakistan* by Bisma Iftekhhar in 2021, it describes that rural areas exhibit higher participation due to agricultural employment, though urban women in Balochistan show elevated rates, reflecting localized economic opportunities.

Cultural constraints emerge as a dominant barrier in multiple studies. Ejaz (2011) and Field et al. (2016) documented how patriarchal norms restrict women's mobility and confine their roles to domestic spheres. The Time Use Survey (2007) revealed Pakistani women spend more hours than men on unpaid care work, severely limiting labor market participation. Muñoz Boudet et al. (2013) emphasized how gender segregation push women into home-based work, which constituted 80% of female informal employment (Akhtar, 2020). Occupational segregation persists, with women concentrated in acceptable sectors like teaching (5% of employed women) and health professionals (6%)(LFS 2017-18). With the calculation of a Duncan Index, education marginally reduces this segregation—each additional year of higher education decreases segregation by 0.0012 units (Awan & Farooq, 2008; Yasin et al., 2010; Muzaffar, et. al., 2020).

Education's impact on FLFP is nonlinear. Women with no formal education exhibit higher participation (30.2%) due to economic necessity, often in agriculture. However, primary and secondary education correlate with lower participation (13.2%), as families prioritize domestic roles or reject low-status jobs (Najeeb et al., 2020). Tertiary education reverses this trend, enabling access to formal sector roles (22% higher participation than uneducated peers) (World Bank, 2018). Provincial data confirm this:

educated women in Punjab and Sindh are more likely to secure regular contracts (Iftekhhar, 2021).

Informal sector dominance. Over 90% of working women are in informal employment, primarily as HBWs or unpaid family labor (ILO, 2018). HBWs contribute significantly to exports (e.g., \$50 million annually from football manufacturing) but face exploitative wages and invisibility in labor surveys from Zhou's book of *Pakistan 's hidden workers- Wages and conditions of home-based workers and the informal economy* (2017). Despite provincial efforts like Sindh's Home-Based Workers Act (2018), implementation remains weak (Dawn, 2019).

From the aspect of household income and marriage, Iftekhhar (2021) talks about poverty drives participation among low-income households, where women comprise 67.2% of agricultural labor. And marriage reduces FLFP by 33%, as childcare and domestic duties intensify (LFS 2017-18). Najeeb et al. (2020) in the book of *Analyzing Female Employment Trends in South Asia* find that wealthier households exhibit higher FLFP among tertiary-educated women, reflecting access to white-collar jobs.

Material and Methods

This study uses a combination of historical analysis and qualitative methods to analyze the complex impact of these three dimensions on female labor force participation in Pakistan.

Results and Discussion

Cultural Factors

The participation of Pakistani women in the labor market is closely linked to the country's profound cultural traditions and religious beliefs, which have had a profound impact on their careers from 2000 to 2020. Analyzing the constraints and promotion of cultural factors on women's employment during this period, this article first analyzes the traditional concepts of gender roles in Pakistani society and explores how to seek a balance between traditional and modern requirements. For example, in a family centered social structure, women's social roles are often limited to roles such as mother, wife, and household worker, which limits their ability and willingness to participate in market work.

Integration of Multi-Culture

With the sweeping wave of globalization, the updating of concepts and the transformation of economic structures have gradually broken through traditional limitations, and women have begun to have more opportunities to receive education and enter the job market. How the rapid development of media and e-commerce during this period has created new employment opportunities for Pakistani women. The entry of multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations has promoted the advancement of social values, including gender equality, and influenced women's employment patterns and career choices.

Pakistani society gradually accepted women's education between 2000 and 2020, but cultural norms still impose structural limitations on women's employment. Research has shown that female labor force participation rate (FLFP) with secondary education presents a U-shaped curve, where the participation rates of uneducated and higher

educated women are higher, while secondary educated women exit the market due to a mismatch between career expectations and opportunities (Chatterjee et al., 2018). For example, data from 2015 showed that the employment rate for uneducated women was 30.2%, while for women with secondary education it was only 13.2% (Najeeb et al., 2020, p.19). This phenomenon reflects the implicit constraints of culture on career choices: women in secondary education tend to seek respectable careers (such as teaching, healthcare), but social restrictions on women's career scope lead to a lack of opportunities (Irfan et al., 2013).

In addition, economic development and household income growth have not fully translated into employment opportunities for women. High income families are more likely to restrict women's participation in blue collar work due to status maintenance (Mammen&Paxson, 2000). For example, women from affluent families in Punjab province are more likely to work in formal contract jobs, while poor women are concentrated in the agricultural and informal sectors (Bisma Iftekhar, 2021, p.26).

The Deep Influence of Religious Culture

Religious culture directly affects women's freedom of movement and career choices through the purdah (veil) and gender segregation norms. According to Shaheed and Mumtaz's (1983) research, women in rural areas tend to engage in household handicrafts due to religious conservatism, in order to comply with the "gender segregation" norms. According to 2020 data, 80% of women's non-agricultural employment in Pakistan is concentrated in the informal sector, with the highest proportion being in the household handicraft industry (Akhtar, 2020).

Influenced by patriarchy, society generally believes that men are the economic pillars of the family, and women may give up their jobs due to opposition from their husbands or fathers; Women rely on male relatives for commuting, especially in rural areas, while the proportion of women from high-income families working outside due to private transportation is higher.

Religious beliefs also reinforce the division of labor in the role of "male breadwinners". A survey shows that married women have a 33% lower probability of labor force participation than unmarried women due to household chores and childcare burdens (Labour Force Survey 2017-18). In addition, religious norms consider women working outside the home as a "family shame", especially in conservative areas where men openly oppose women engaging in paid work (Field et al., 2016).

The double-edged sword effect of religious education in shaping women's employment concepts. On the one hand, the education provided by religious schools has a certain conservative impact on women's employment views; On the other hand, Islamic women's groups have begun to interpret religious doctrines, advocate gender equality based on religious doctrines, and promote women's economic autonomy. During this process, the interaction between religion and culture has had a significant impact on women's economic participation.

The Dual Role of Media Development

The media, as a tool for cultural dissemination, plays a role in shaping public perceptions of women's work roles. More and more television programs, radio broadcasts, and movies depict female characters as role models for professional women,

which not only drives a shift in social attitudes at the ideological level, but also inspires women to pursue broader career paths in real life.

The government and civil society organizations have begun to use the media to promote gender equality. For example, Punjab province has launched exclusive transportation for women and promoted media campaigns to enhance women's sense of commuting safety (policy recommendations section). However, overall, the media still needs to strengthen the promotion of female role models and the presentation of career diversity in the STEM field.

The media has significant potential in shaping gender perspectives, but the role of Pakistani media has not yet been fully unleashed. Research has shown that positive media coverage of women's economic contributions can gradually change social attitudes (Fogli & Veldkamp, 2011). For example, Bangladesh has successfully increased the employment rate of women through microfinance projects and media promotion (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014, p. 10). However, gender stereotypes still exist in Pakistani media, where women are often portrayed as family roles, weakening the social visibility of professional women.

Educational Factors

The improvement of education level is widely regarded as a key driving force for promoting socio-economic development, especially playing a crucial role in the increase of female labor market participation. This study conducted a comprehensive analysis of the education status of women in Pakistan from 2000 to 2020. The overall education level of Pakistani women is showing an upward trend, especially in the higher education stage where the growth is more significant. However, this trend shows differences between different regions and social classes, with women's education levels significantly higher in urban areas than in rural areas, indicating the impact of socioeconomic structure on the allocation of educational resources (Muzaffar, 2016).

U-shaped Curve Relationship

International research has shown that there is often a U-shaped relationship between education level and female labor force participation rate: women with low and high education levels have higher labor force participation rates, while women with secondary education levels tend to have lower participation rates due to family responsibilities and social norms (Psacharopoulos & Tzannatos, 1989). This phenomenon is also significant in Pakistan.

For the low education group, data from 2020 shows that the labor force participation rate of uneducated women is 48%, mainly engaged in agriculture and informal employment (such as household helpers) due to their low skill threshold and flexibility (UN Women Pakistan, 2020).

For the secondary education group, the labor force participation rate of women who have completed secondary education (such as junior high school) has decreased to about 24%, due to social stereotypes of female roles (such as prioritizing marriage) and a lack of suitable employment opportunities for secondary education women (such as low paying positions in the manufacturing industry) (NCSW, 2020).

For the higher education group, the participation rate of women with bachelor's degrees or above has risen to 47%, as they are more likely to enter professional fields such as education and healthcare (such as primary school teachers accounting for 11% of female professional positions), and their families have a higher acceptance of highly educated women's careers (PDHS, 2017-18).

Therefore, in Pakistan, the impact of education on female labor force participation follows a U-shaped curve. The participation rate of uneducated and highly educated women is higher, and women with secondary education may withdraw from the labor market due to a mismatch between career expectations and social acceptance. According to data from 2015, the employment rate for uneducated women was less than 30.2%, while the employment rate for women with secondary education was 13.2% (Najeeb et al., 2020, p.19). This also reveals the positive impact of education on the values, career planning, and even family role positioning of Pakistani women.

Gender Gap in Education

Although the female literacy rate has increased from 30% in 2000 to 63% in 2020 (72% for girls aged 10-14), the gender gap remains significant. Firstly, in the basic education stage, the Gender Equality Index (GPI) for primary schools is 0.85, but it drops to 0.70 in secondary schools, with even greater disparities in rural areas (such as 15% of girls' schools lacking border walls and sanitation facilities) (UN Women Pakistan, 2020). Then, in higher education, women account for less than 20% in STEM fields, limiting their opportunities to enter high paying technical positions (HEC, 2018). This gap leads to a concentration of women in low skilled, low paying informal economic sectors (such as agriculture accounting for 61%), making it difficult for them to break through the career ceiling.

In terms of the data from World Economic Forum (2020), the literacy rate for women in Pakistan was 46%, while for men it was 71% in 2020. In the field of higher education, women account for less than 20% of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), while humanities and social sciences are dominated by women.

Unequal Distribution of Educational Resources

The urban-rural and class differentiation of educational resources further restricts the participation of female labor force. One issue is insufficient infrastructure, with 60% of girls in rural areas dropping out of primary school and only 28% entering secondary school. The main reasons for this include the distance between schools, a lack of female teachers, and safety issues (such as a high infrastructure shortage rate of 30% in rural girls' schools in Punjab province) (PSLM, 2018). Secondly, there are limitations in skills training. Vocational training for women is mainly focused on traditional fields such as sewing and beauty, rather than digital economy or technical jobs, which limits their employment choices (such as only 9% of young women using computers) (LFS, 2017). Thirdly, due to economic burden, the average annual education expenditure of rural families is half of that of urban families, and poor families are more inclined to have their daughters marry early rather than continue their studies (early marriage rate of 28%), exacerbating the gap between education and employment (DHS, 2017-18).

Therefore, although educational factors have played an important role in promoting female labor force participation, unequal distribution of educational

resources has also been discovered during this period. The education facilities in rural areas are generally backward and the teaching staff is weak, which limits women's opportunities to receive high-quality education. At the same time, cultural factors and family responsibilities make it more difficult for women to receive education. The parenting participation rate of married women has decreased by 33%, but women with higher education have lighter parenting burdens and higher participation rates (Azid et al., 2010). The limited educational opportunities further affect the type and quality of women's entry into the labor market, leading to an imbalance in employment opportunities between regions and socio-economic classes.

Political Factors

With the acceleration of globalization, the evolution of Pakistan's female labor market presents a multidimensional political perspective. The role of political and policy adjustments in promoting local women's employment between 2000 and 2020 cannot be ignored. Especially, the promotion and implementation of gender equality laws provide institutional guarantees for strengthening women's economic rights, but their actual effects are constrained by the political environment and governance capacity. Therefore, this part discusses the impact mechanism of political factors on women's economic empowerment from three dimensions: legal and regulatory revisions, social awareness and regional governance, and international cooperation strategies from 2000 to 2020.

Political Power Transition and Revision of Laws and Regulations

During the military government of Musharraf from 2000 to 2008, the regime attempted to improve women's rights through an enlightened and moderate policy. The 2002 constitutional amendment stipulated that 60 seats (17% of the total) be reserved for women in parliament, objectively enhancing women's political discourse power. The Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, promulgated in 2006, for the first time established domestic violence and forced marriage as criminal offenses, but religious conservatives strongly opposed it, resulting in limited implementation of the law.

During the People's Party's governance from 2008 to 2013, the 2010 Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act was passed, requiring all institutions to establish complaint committees. This law increased the formal employment rate of women from 14.3% in 2009 to 18.1% in 2013 (Pakistan Ministry of Labour, 2014). After the Muslim League (Sharif faction) came to power in 2013, Punjab Province enacted the Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2017, which for the first time included domestic workers in the scope of labor law protection. However, only 12% of female domestic workers nationwide completed their rights registration (HRCP, 2018).

In 2018, the government of Imran Khan launched the Ehsaas program, promising to provide cash assistance to 2.8 million impoverished women to promote economic independence. As of 2020, the program had a coverage rate of 67%, but only 9.2% of the assisted women entered the labor market (UNDP, 2021), indicating a disconnect between welfare policies and employment incentives.

Specifically at the policy implementation level, Pakistan has revised legal documents such as the Industrial Relations Act, Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act and Maternity and Paternity Leave Act to formally prohibit gender based employment discrimination, emphasize safety and health standards for

women in the workplace, and eliminate wage disparities. However, despite the establishment of a legal framework, the actual effect is often due to insufficient enforcement. If Pakistan does not stipulate equal pay for equal work and prohibits women from entering certain industries (such as mining), the World Bank's "Women, Business and Law" index (2018) shows that Pakistan's score is only 49.4, lower than India's 74.4 for legal equality. In terms of social security, women in informal employment are unable to enjoy benefits such as maternity leave and childcare allowances, and the 2010 Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act does not cover agricultural and household work.

Changes in Social Awareness and Differences in Regional Governance

The modernization narrative of political elites and the game between local conservative forces profoundly influence gender norms. In urban areas of Sindh and Punjab provinces, government promoted women's economic empowerment projects (such as microcredit) resulted in an 8 percentage point increase in women's self employment rate in 2015 compared to 2005 (NCSW, 2016). However, in the Northwest Frontier Province and Balochistan, due to the influence of tribal traditions and religious forces, the female labor force participation rate has always been below 10% (PBS, 2019).

Education policy has become a key variable. After Article 25A of the 2009 Constitution established the right to education, the enrollment rate of women in secondary schools increased from 28% in 2000 to 47% in 2020 (World Bank). However, gender stereotypes still exist in textbooks, with a 2017 education review showing that 63% of primary school textbooks limit women to family roles (Aurat Foundation, 2018), hindering the formation of career aspirations.

At the level of local governance, there are significant differences in policy implementation among different provinces and states in Pakistan. In 2010, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution delegated decision-making power in various social affairs to each province. In 2013, Sindh Province passed the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, establishing women's shelters; In 2016, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province passed the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Act, which requires gender interaction norms that comply with Islamic ethics in public places. The conservative social atmosphere might be one of reasons for the 3.2% decrease in local female employment rates (PILDAT, 2017). Punjab province leads other provinces in terms of gender equality in the workplace. This is due to the strong policy implementation capability and comprehensive legal construction of local governments. In remote and impoverished provinces such as Balochistan, the proportion of women participating in the labor market is still relatively low, reflecting the impact of political environment and economic development level on gender equal career opportunities.

The Impact of International Cooperation Strategy

The Pakistani government is also attempting to utilize international cooperation to promote women's employment issues. The Women's Economic Empowerment Program collaborates with international financial institutions such as the World Bank to lower the threshold for women's entrepreneurship and enhance their decision-making position in families and society through economic assistance and technical guidance. Through these projects, the employment rate of Pakistani women in small and family businesses has increased to a certain extent, becoming a new force driving regional economic development.

International aid constitutes an important driving force. From 2008 to 2018, Pakistan received \$2.3 billion in gender equality special aid (OECD, 2019), including the EU funded Gender-Responsive Budgeting project, which established quotas for female employment in seven federal departments. The World Bank's 2015 Country Partnership Strategy includes female labor force participation rate as a loan evaluation indicator, promoting Sindh Province to extend maternity leave from 45 days to 90 days in 2016.

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has brought structural impacts. From 2015 to 2020, infrastructure projects directly created 15000 female jobs, but only 0.3% of the total labor force (CPEC Gender Impact Assessment, 2020). The China Pakistan technical cooperation in the field of agriculture has increased the proportion of female agricultural workers from 55% in 2000 to 68% in 2020, but 73% of them are still unpaid family helpers (FAO, 2021).

Conclusion

After two decades of breakthroughs, the status of Pakistani women in the labor market has been unprecedentedly elevated. However, this process has gone through many twists and turns, revealing a dynamic landscape of profound cultural, educational, and political factors intertwined. At the cultural level, gender role stereotypes constructed by religious beliefs and traditional values form implicit barriers to women's employment to a certain extent; The improvement in education has not only opened the door to employment for women, but also subtly changed traditional gender concepts, giving women more economic freedom and choice. In the political field, the promotion and implementation of gender equality legislation have played a significant role in safeguarding women's labor rights, but the imbalance and limitations in policy implementation cannot be ignored. The results indicate that the improvement of education level directly promotes the growth of female employment rate, but its positive effect is often offset by gender bias in cultural cognition and practice. Efforts at the policy level have made progress in promoting gender equality, but their coverage and effectiveness are constrained by regional differences and class divisions.

Under the joint influence of multiple factors, the participation of Pakistani women in the labor market has shown a clear development trend, with significant differences in employment opportunities and challenges faced by women from different regions and social classes. Although the overall increase in female labor participation has injected new vitality into economic development and advocated gender equality, women still face significant employment barriers in some remote areas and conservative cultures.

In a word, the historical perspective analysis in this article provides with a deep understanding of the development trend of female labor force participation in Pakistan, pointing out how the interaction of cultural, educational, and political factors shapes women's employment opportunities and challenges in the context of globalization and social change. Future policy-making needs to fully consider the comprehensive impact of these diverse factors and seek balance in regional and class differentiation, truly achieving balanced and sustainable development of women's participation in the labor market.

Recommendations

The sustainable development on female labor force participation in Pakistan has great room for improvement.

- Cultural concept reform, breaking down implicit barriers. Linking women's employment with family welfare, simulating the income doubling effect of women's employment through household economic accounting, and supporting female entrepreneurs to introduce modern design into traditional handicrafts such as embroidery.
- Promotion of the education system to break through regional class differences. Provide blockchain technology certified vocational skills training for girls in remote areas, dynamically linking provincial education funding with female graduates' employment rates.
- Regional collaboration mechanism to bridge the development gap. Establish an employment compensation fund specifically for the construction of employment infrastructure for women in underdeveloped areas, provide policy incentives for female professionals working in underdeveloped areas, establish the China Pakistan Women's Economic Corridor under the CPEC framework, create cross-border e-commerce training centers, and focus on cultivating female professionals in logistics, cross-border payments, and other fields.

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