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Despite the benefits that come with the ability to earn, work is a double-edged sword for some women

Economic pressures are changing women's roles but social attitudes to gendered responsibilities are not.

February 8, 2019
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More women are getting higher education in Pakistan than in previous decades, but working women continue to face difficult challenges, particularly in fulfilling dual responsibilities at work and home — and accessing childcare.

Based on data from the International Labour Organization for women aged 15-64, recent World Bank [statistics](#) plot a growth in overall female participation in the Pakistani labour force from just over 12 per cent in 1995 to over an estimated 26pc in 2018.

Despite this gradual shift, female labour force participation in Pakistan is still low in comparison with other developing countries in Asia, such as Nepal, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

Even among highly educated women, there are relatively few that work outside the home: according to [a brief](#) published in 2016 by the Asian Development Bank, only around 25pc of Pakistani women with university level education do paid work outside the home.

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A recent article in *Dawn*, '[The Myth of Doctor Brides,](#)' made the point that for Pakistani women, education is not necessarily seen as a route to a professional career, but is often considered a safety net in case women are compelled to earn a living.

An important reason for this is that traditional gender roles remain largely unchanged in Pakistan. Many still see the *chaar diwari* as women's natural domain and men as the primary breadwinners for the family.

Education for women is increasingly encouraged, but there does not seem to be a corresponding recognition of women's unchanging roles within the family as nurturers and carers, and the additional burden that puts on women when they take up jobs.

Women — whether working outside the home or not — remain primarily responsible for bringing up children and fulfilling the tasks of cooking, feeding, caring and cleaning that make life liveable for other family members.

Working the mandatory shift

In 2016-2017, I interviewed 18 teachers at schools in two low-income areas of Karachi while conducting a study on women teachers' lived experiences of pursuing education and work.

My study participants came from different communities and linguistic backgrounds, but they all had one thing in common: they had stepped out of traditional homes to pursue education and paid work.

Most of them were the first individuals in their families to get higher education: at the time of the interviews, the majority of the participants had a Master's degree, or were enrolled in a Master's level programme. Almost all of them started working at very young ages to escape poverty.

One of the study participants was Sumaira, a rather intense young woman with a feverish gaze. I realised later that Sumaira's intensity was actually desperation — the desperation of someone pushed to the limit by their circumstances.

Sumaira's husband was unemployed and she juggled three jobs in order to support their three children. Every weekday, she left home at 7:30am to reach the school where she worked till the afternoon.

Her second shift was a part-time job at an organisation in her locality, where she worked till 6:30pm.

Her third shift involved note-taking and research for another organisation, which she could take home and complete between 6:30pm and 8:30pm. During this time, she cooked dinner as well.

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After 8:30pm, she began her fourth shift and turned her attention towards housekeeping and her children's requirements. After checking her school-going daughter's homework and putting the children to bed, Sumaira stayed awake, burning the midnight oil to do the laundry and finish her household chores.

She told me, laughing slightly, "When I look towards my bed, I feel as though it is beckoning me." She said in a sing-song voice, "Come to me! Come to me!" then added in a mocking tone, "But I tell the bed, please wait! Please wait!"

In the late 1980s, Arlie Hochschild's research looked at two-job families in the United States and noted that in the "speed-up of work and family life," it was women who paid the biggest cost.

In the preface to her book, *The Second Shift*, she wrote, “These women talked about sleep the way a hungry person talks about food.”

In my research with school teachers, I also interviewed women who worked not two, but three — sometimes four — shifts, and hungered for sleep as they finished household chores late into the night.

Jabeen was one such married woman. Like many of the teachers I interviewed, she worked because her husband did not earn enough to pay for their children’s education and other needs.

Still, when she started teaching, her husband said, “I give you permission, but I don’t want to hear from you that you’re tired because of your job and you can’t do the housework.”

Jabeen did not want to risk annoying her husband and she rushed home as soon as school ended, to tidy the house and cook before he came home. In the evenings, she gave tuitions to augment her meagre income.

A precarious juggle

A new study published in the journal *Sociology* indicates that women in the United Kingdom who have two young children and are working full-time have up to 40pc more stress than other employees.

The study points to a situation that seems to be almost universally true: women who work outside the home face more challenges than men, but when women get married and have children, balancing their responsibilities between home and work becomes an increasingly arduous and complicated juggling routine.

Not surprisingly, sometimes the pieces fall — and sometimes, it is women themselves who burn out.

Although most societies acknowledge the economic and social benefits of having more women join the labour force, they fail to provide enough flexibility in their systems to make it easier for women with children to seek employment or keep working after childbirth.

Special report: Sexual harassment in workplaces in Pakistan

It is simple to assume that childcare is an issue of the ‘Western world’ and in our closely connected and interdependent Pakistani lives, working women can leave their children with compliant mothers, sisters or mothers-in-law who will step in to fill the void.

Unfortunately, this scenario is no longer true for many women living in cities.

Urbanisation in Pakistan is leading to the fracturing of extended families and often, women no longer have the luxury of a stay-at-home mother or mother-in-law to provide reliable childcare.

Many of the women in my study belonged to families that moved from rural settings to urban locations. The change from a joint household to a nuclear family meant that women were able to access schooling and paid work without the social pressure of a disapproving extended family.

Ironically, it also meant that women could no longer rely on other female relatives to divide their burdens.

For married women, the biggest challenge to working outside the house was finding appropriate care for their children. Sumaira told me that because she was out of the house for most of the day, her children had become very independent, so much so that her four-year-old son could bathe himself and iron his own clothes.

For a period, she left her nine-month-old baby boy with a neighbour during the day, but became uncomfortable with the arrangement and started leaving him at a female relative's house.

She told me that her baby came home every day at about 8:30pm when she was done with her last job and reflected:

“Sitting here just now... I'm talking to you but my mind is elsewhere. Because my focus right now is totally... I mean... I mean my thoughts, from morning till night, are with my baby. I mean I wonder if he ate, if he slept... like the feeling of a mother within me... I mean so many worries are going round in my mind... what if he is crying? What if he has had a fall?”

Even if women had family living nearby, they were sometimes unwilling to help out with childcare.

At the time of the interviews, my study participant Savera's youngest daughter was just a few months old. Savera's husband worked for daily wages, but would not seek work on a regular basis. Consequently, the household was largely run on Savera's limited earnings.

Previously, she had left her daughter with her mother while she worked but following her mother's death, her brothers (who lived in the same house) and their wives told her not to leave the baby there.

Savera was ultimately forced to leave her baby at the house of a school maasi, to whom she paid a monthly recompense. This caused her great distress as she was constantly anxious about the child's wellbeing while at work. With two older children to feed and educate, the idea of leaving her job was inconceivable.

Staid attitudes in a transforming world

Women's growing participation in labour markets in Pakistan is tied strongly to economic factors that compel them to enter a 'man's world' and earn a living.

In urban centres such as Karachi, it has become difficult for many families, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to survive on one salary.

Although economic pressures are changing women's roles in Pakistan, social attitudes to gendered responsibilities are not keeping pace. Among the teachers I interviewed, married women's biggest reasons for working were to run the household and provide for their children.

In most cases, these women were not just augmenting their husbands' earnings with 'extra' money. They had become primary breadwinners for their families.

Despite this, participants' husbands, most of whom were less educated than their wives, and some of whom had no fixed employment, did not step in and fill the childcare void, or provide significant help with household tasks.

The division of labour within households remained deeply segregated and working women continued to do the lion's share of caring and domestic work.

Equality vs equity

The Sindh Maternity Benefits Act, 2018, which applies to private, government and semi-government organisations mandates 16 weeks of paid maternity leave to new mothers — four weeks prior to delivery and 12 weeks following childbirth.

It also mandates the creation of daycare facilities equipped with CCTVs and allows new mothers four breaks during work to visit and feed nursing children. The Act is a step in the right direction but it needs to be followed up strongly with checks on both public and private organisations to ensure that the law is actually implemented.

Working women also need to be educated about current labour laws: in a lot of cases, women employees do not demand their rights because they are simply not aware of them.

Discussion and legislation on childcare and maternity laws should not stop here. Future revisions of the Act can incorporate elements like child support for working mothers with young children beyond the preschool level, and tax breaks and incentives for organisations that employ women and provide maternity benefits and childcare facilities.

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Governments also have to devise ways to bring women working in the informal or domestic sector within the loop, perhaps by creating systems of childcare support within communities and neighbourhoods.

In April 2018, Dawn reported that two children aged five and two years died when their hut caught fire, while their mothers (both sisters) were at work, cleaning houses. Tragically, the fire started while the five-year-old child was cooking breakfast for himself.

“Equal opportunities for women” is a popular slogan in Pakistan, but opportunities can only become more equal for working women when perceptions about gendered responsibilities change and men feel comfortable contributing more to childrearing and housekeeping duties.

Secondly, we have to view women's work through the framework of equity rather than equality and enforce laws that make it easier for women to work.

Until then, despite the benefits that come with the ability to earn, for women from low socioeconomic backgrounds, working outside the house will remain a double-edged sword.

Names of individuals have been changed to protect confidentiality. Header by Zoha Bundally