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PATRIARCHY AND RELIGIOUS CONSERVATISM: BARRIERS TO OPTIMIZING GENDER DIVIDEND IN PUNJAB

Zubda Zia Ur Rehman^{1*}

¹Department of Economics Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore, Pakistan

Article Info

*Corresponding Author

Email Id: zubda.rashid@hotmail.com

Abstract

Patriarchy and religious conservatism significantly contribute to low female Labor force participation (FLP) in Punjab, thus hindering the province from reaping optimal gender dividend. This exploratory study has used mixed method approach to analysis the qualitative factors such as patriarchy and religious conservatism that have contributed to limiting female Labor force participation in Punjab. Primary data was collected from four Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and existing content was analyzed. Detailed discussions with the focused groups highlighted different sub themes such as societal pressure, family honor, safety, transportation, lack of women's agency, lack of institutional support, misinterpretation of religion as some of the reasons for men in Punjab to take the decisions for their women folk. The results of the study show that in Pakistan particularly in Punjab, traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched in the society. They are internalized and are a set norm. These traditional gender roles are primarily dictated by the patriarchal structures. Religious conservatism is also used as a patriarchal tool to limit the mobility and agency of women thus limiting them to the bounds of their homes.

Keywords

Gender Dividend, Female Labor Force Participation, Patriarchy, Religious Conservatism.



1. Introduction

Gender Dividend means the increase in the economic growth made possible due to the continued investment in health, education and other areas that enhance the capabilities of women that enable them to function optimally (Belohlav, 2020). In Punjab, gender dynamics are predominantly shaped by patriarchy and religious conservatism, thus significantly contributing to the low female Labor force participation rate in the province. The deeply entrenched social systems affect women's mobility and agency. They hamper their access to employment opportunities, education and health facilities thus confining them to the perceived traditional roles of cooking, cleaning and tending to the family. The intersection of religious conservatism and patriarchy in Punjab hampers women's socio-economic empowerment. Patriarchy is defined as a system that allows, enables and privileges unrestricted male authority and unlimited control over scarce resources. The social fabric of Punjab is laden with patriarchy. In most of the rural as well as urban parts of Punjab, the primary responsibilities of women are dictated by traditional gender roles. They are expected to stay home and look after their families, clean, cook and tend to the elderly. Men are the sole bread winners, whose primary and only job is to provide for the family, whereas women seeking employment are looked down upon. It is ironic that women work hard at home and in agricultural fields for their family's subsistence but most of their labor is unacknowledged and is unpaid. In Punjab, conservative families deem it inappropriate for

their women to seek paid employment. They consider it against the 'honor' of their families. This lack of women's autonomy to take basic decisions about their lives such as who to marry, number of children, seek paid employment, leaves them emotionally, psychologically and financially dependent on the men of the household thus strengthening the vicious cycle of patriarchy. The idea of 'good' and 'bad' woman is deeply ingrained in Punjabi culture, where later is the one who is subservient, compliant and follows the directives of the male members whereas the former is the one who is defiant, vocal and has the courage to break the stereotypes and live life on her own terms. Early marriages in Punjab are a norm which is yet another patriarchal tool to restrict women from pursuing a career. When married young, women lack the confidence to assert themselves and hence give in to the pressure of bearing children. Because of early marriage they have more childbearing years which keeps them occupied in their houses thus allowing them hardly any liberty to follow their aspirations. Religion plays a central role in shaping the cultural and societal norms in Punjab, particularly in rural areas, where religious conservatism often dictates gender roles. While Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of women's rights, the interpretation of these rights is frequently conservative, prioritizing women's roles within the family and discouraging their engagement in the labor force. In Punjab, parochial and archaic interpretations of Islam have been a major cause of misconstrued notions and perceptions about female labor force participation.

Unfortunately, due to lack of proficiency in Arabic language, there is a serious dearth of in-depth understanding of the true meaning of Quranic teachings. Hence it has been easy for the clerics and local religious leaders to equate the participation of women in the labor market with moral decay or the erosion of family values (Dildar, 2015). The economic costs of the deeply ingrained patriarchy and religious conservatism have been massive. According to the 2023 Census, in Punjab there are 62,226,589 women out of the total population of 127,688,922. This means that women make up approximately 48.7% of the total population whereas the female labor force participation rate is 36.3%. The exclusion of women from the formal economy limits the potential for economic growth in Punjab. Despite women's significant contributions in agriculture, where they make up a large portion of the labor force, their work is often undervalued and unaccounted for. This lack of recognition, coupled with restrictive norms, prevents women from entering higher-paying sectors and reduces their financial independence.

2. Literature Review

Patriarchy, religious norms, and conservatism significantly contribute to low female labor force participation (FLP). Patriarchal structures often dictate traditional gender roles, where men are seen as breadwinners and women as homemakers, limiting women's opportunities and social acceptance in the labor market. This phenomenon is particularly evident in "belt of classic patriarchy," as labelled by Kandiyoti (1988) which includes Muslim Middle Eastern countries (Turkey

and Iran), North Africa, and East Asian and South Asian countries (Moghadam, 1998). In these regions, entrenched patriarchal norms and conservative values perpetuate traditional gender roles, thereby creating substantial barriers to women's labor market participation (Dildar, 2015). The relationship between patriarchy and female labor outcomes has been studied by Dildar (2015) for the case of country. The author has constructed an index of patriarchy through detailed questions like division of labor in the household by gender, mobility of females in the public domain, decision making in the family, and control over sexuality. The study concludes that patriarchy and social norms indeed effect the women labor force participation. Religious norms and conservatism further reinforce the gender roles by prescribing specific duties to women, often emphasizing domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations. Goksel (2013) studied the role of religiosity, conservatism and social norms on the labor market outcomes of females. The results suggest that for urban females the phenomena that religiosity and conservatism decrease female labor force participations holds true. Olivetti (2014) in her book argues that, as the economies of emerging nations expand, women are often pushed out of the workforce since males are seen as the main providers of income. They are mainly seen as caretakers and housewives and their money is only seen as a supplementary benefit. Indeed, a significant element that keeps active women out of the female labor market and confines them to the walls of their homes where they conduct unpaid labor is societal obstacles and perceptions about

the role of women. Bradshaw *et al.* (2013) indicates that women in the developing world are discriminated against because the traditional norms and parochial mindsets do not allow them to be seen as economically beneficial. They are only valued for their roles as daughters, wives and mothers, whose primary responsibility is caregiving. The study also emphasizes the role of cultural norms have in fostering workplace participation among women. Societies with a stronger religious conservatism tend to be more prone to limit women's rights to movement, the acquisition of property, and the pursuit of work. Furthermore, they stress that since women have little control over their bodies and fertility, they have more kids and have less opportunities to participate actively in other activities. The World Bank report's (2018) findings indicate that, while women's human capital is expected to increase by more than 50%, the global human capital wealth could potentially skyrocket and bring a one-fifth increase if women achieved the same income level as their male counterparts. Additionally, it suggests that efforts to end gender inequality should not solely be based on economic theory; rather, the major driving force should be to address and overcome the social barriers that impede girls' and women's long-term development as people and their overall progress. There is need to address prevailing social norms in the given culture in order to convert measures that would reduce gender disparity. It was only then that significant gains in human capital could be made by addressing gender inequality. Sweetman (2005), emphasizes the importance of institutional factors

in mitigating the discrimination against women. His study emphasizes the significance of local safety networks, including access to basic health facilities, legal services, and campaigns to raise awareness, and regular counselling sessions that could raise women's morale and give them the courage to leave the comfort of their homes and take on the dual challenge of battling patriarchal forces at home and at work. If adopted at the legislative level, these safety networks might be crucial in motivating the "missing" women to assume more active roles in society. Douglas A. Hicks (2006) explored the subject of gender discrimination and how it relates to the idea of capability as articulated by Amartya Sen. His Capability Approach and its application to the problem of gender discrimination are thoroughly examined in the paper. His strategy, of course, highlights the need of concentrating on people's ability rather than just their social or economic background. This strategy emphasizes how gender prejudice may restrict women's talents and keep them from achieving their full potential. Dildar (2015) studied the relationship between patriarchy and female labor force participation. He constructed an index of patriarchy through detailed questions like division of labor in the household by gender, mobility of females in the public domain, decision making in the family, and control over sexuality. The study concludes that patriarchy and social norms indeed effect the women labor force participation thus not allowing a society to attain the maximum gender dividend. Goksel (2013) studied the role of religiosity, conservatism and social norms on the labor market outcomes of

females. The results support the argument that religious norms and conservatism are a huge barrier to the mobility of women thus hampering them to take active part in the labor force.

3. Methodology

Four focused group discussions were conducted. Each group comprised of four participants, both from rural and urban Punjab. Each group was invited for around 160 minute's discussion. The moderated discussion was conducted using semi structured and open-ended questions. Focused Group 1 comprised of 4 men from rural Punjab. Three of them, aged between 28 and 45 were married and had children (sons and daughters). The fourth participant aged 20 was unmarried and had sisters. Focused Group 2 comprised of 4 men from Urban Punjab. Three of the participants, aged between 30-48 were married with children and the fourth participant, aged 22, was unmarried but had sisters. Focused Group 3 comprised of three married women with children, aged between 25 and 35 and one unmarried girl aged 20. All these women hailed from rural Punjab and none of them worked. Focused Group 4 comprised of four women from Urban Punjab. Three women aged between 25 – 40 were married with children and the fourth participant was a 22-year-old college graduate, unmarried and unemployed. Based upon in-depth discussions with all four focused groups, main themes of patriarchy and religious conservatism and sub-themes of family traditions, honor, security, and lack of transportation facilities, stigmas and taboos, lack of employment opportunities were highlighted.

4. Findings

4.1 Focused Group Discussion # 1

The first focused group comprised of four men. Three of them, aged between 28 and 45 were married and had children (sons and daughters). The fourth participant aged 20 was unmarried and had sisters. None of the men allowed their women (wives, daughters and sisters) to work and the common argument that was given by the rural men was that it was against their family tradition to allow their women to step out of the house and earn money. One of the rural married men, categorically said that women are supposed to stay within their homes and take care of household chores. They are supposed to observe 'pardah' and be modest. It is men's job to work and provide for the family. He also added that households where women seek paid work, attract wrath of God and 'baibarkati'. The second rural married man said that he had never seen any women in his family work. It was common for women folk to work on fields, but it was their family farms and was not for money. Since he had never seen any woman work for money, it was not acceptable for him to allow his wife to seek paid labor. He also mentioned that a chaste woman is supposed to follow her husband's commands and since he does not want her wife to take part in labor force she cannot. The third participant mentioned that in rural areas, they live in a closely knit community, and everyone knows everything about each other. So, if any woman steps out of the house for paid work, the community will hold the man accountable and would question him for not providing enough for the family. The fear of being questioned and labelled by the community enables men to exert

stronger control on their women and thus not allow them to seek paid work. In villages, men's reputation is tarnished if the women in their housework. He added that it was against his pride to live off a woman's earnings, he mentioned that he was raised to be the breadwinner of the family, and allowing the women in the house to share that status would be a blow to his ego. He also mentioned that according to his understanding of Islam, Allah has made him the master of his family. He can decide whatever is best for them and he thinks that women of the house should invest their time and energy on taking care of the family and making sure their husbands are well fed and obeyed. The fourth unmarried participant mentioned that it was against his dignity to allow his sister to work. He said that it is best to marry off the daughters and sisters at a young age so that they adapt quickly according to the husbands' wishes. If they are allowed to pursue education and then work, it becomes difficult to marry them off which is an added trouble. He said that girls are not mature enough to differentiate good from evil hence they can easily be lured into something immoral that could bring dishonor to the entire family, hence it is safer and wiser to keep women focused on domestic chores.

4.2 Focused Group Discussion # 2

The second focused group comprised of four urban men. Three men were married, aged between 30 and 48, with children. The fourth participant was a university student aged 22, unmarried. They were asked the same questions as were their rural counterparts. One participant mentioned that like rural Punjab, traditional mindset prevails in urban

Punjab too. Although men want to support their wives in their choice to work but they do not do so because they fear that going against the traditions would leave them ostracized. The second married urban man mentioned that the cost of living in cities is high, so having his wife stay at home, cook, clean and teach his children is more cost effective than letting her seek paid work and not earn enough to pay for all the above-mentioned tasks. The third married urban men expressed that he did not trust the society and was not comfortable sending his graduate wife to seek paid employment. He candidly mentioned that he finds it hard to be the sole breadwinner, but because of rampant cases of assault on women, he just couldn't muster up the courage to send his wife for work. All three urban married men said that the primary job of women is to take care of the household and raise children well, if they are employed then they would not be able to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the children which could compromise their upbringing. Interestingly during the discussion, none of the married men, claimed any responsibility towards reproductive chores. They all argued that they only have productive responsibilities i.e. to step out and bring finances to run the house, other than that none of the men felt comfortable owning that they had some responsibility sharing the reproductive burden at home i.e. taking care of children. The unmarried university going participant mentioned that women are their 'izzat' (honor) and by allowing their mothers or sisters to work, they would risk the honor of their family. He said that women are innocent, and it is easy for anyone to

coax them into something immoral, which would bring dishonor to their family, hence it is wise to keep the women under check and not to expose them to the world outside the bounds of their homes.

4.3 Focused Group Discussion # 3

This group comprised of three married women with children, aged between 25 and 35 and one unmarried girl aged 20. All these women hailed from rural Punjab and none of them worked. When asked as to why they never opted to join paid labor force, they all had one common answer, that they did not have enough education to seek employment. Two of the women attended school till grade 5 and the third married woman dropped out of school in grade 4. The unmarried girl had done her matriculation and could read and write Urdu and English but lacked any kind of digital literacy or any other vocational skill. All three married women cited their domestic duties as their primary tasks. They all seemed satisfied with the existing status quo where the men earn, and women look after the children and manage house chores. One married woman did express the desire for her daughter to get education and become a doctor, but did not desire anything different for herself. All married women said that they did not have any education or skill to join the informal labor market. All they had ever seen and learnt was to take care of the cattle, help their men folk in the fields and manage domestic chores. Since they hadn't been exposed to anything different, they did not really understand the opportunity cost of staying home and not working. The unmarried young girl expressed her desire to do some office work. She

said she was fascinated by the confident office going girls she saw on TV but knew she couldn't be anything like her because of lack of support from her family. She mentioned that while growing up she had only seen her mother worry about a suitable match for her. It was clear to her that she would be married off as soon as her parents found someone worth it. Hence, she was never allowed to dream of higher education let alone any career. She seemed to have conceded.

4.4 Focused Group Discussion # 4

This focused group comprised of four women from Urban Punjab. Three women aged between 25–40 were married with children and the fourth participant was a 22-year-old college graduate, unmarried and unemployed. First married urban woman with children cited her children and domestic obligations as her primary responsibilities that took up most of her time and energy. Since she lived in a joint family, she had added responsibility of taking care of her elderly in-laws. Although the joint family set up could have been a source of support, but her family was reluctant to allow her to work in formal labor force. This participant lacked self-assurance and confidence and kept doubting her ability to manage her family along with paid work due to which she never even tried to convince her family to allow or support her to seek paid labor. This participant also mentioned that cultural expectations and pressures from the wider community also act as a huge barrier for women to have and use their agency, The culture gives men the right to control and men in our culture are raised to be masters hence they allow little or no space to the women to partake in any

decision making of the household. Not only is this demotivating but is a self-perpetuating cycle that keeps pulling down our self-esteem. The second participant had MBBS degree, but she chose not to work because her husband who was also a doctor had long work hours and if both parents were to stay out, then the kids would be neglected. This participant lived in a nuclear set up and did not have any support from her in laws or other family members. She mentioned that there is a serious dearth of reliable childcare facilities, there are no authentic day care centers. She mentioned that she did try working after her marriage and even during pregnancy but when she was posted in a public hospital without any day care and relaxation for new mothers her husband asked her to quit her job. She said she had no qualms because her husband's career was certainly more important to her for her family's wellbeing. She also mentioned that despite her being a professional degree holder, it is ingrained in her that a good woman is the one who obeys her husband and successful woman is the one who prioritizes her family and raises her children to be good human beings. With these expectations, following a career along with the family life would have been a double burden. The third participant had a master's degree and she was a teacher before she got married. She worked at a school near her house but left the job after marriage. She mentioned that there was no school near her new house and her husband was not very comfortable allowing her to use public transport. She herself mentioned that she felt unsafe commuting far off hence did not push it hard to pursue a career and then once she had children,

working out of the house was never even an option. She also mentioned that the society enjoys the freedom to judge women who work. They are labelled and their characters are questioned. She said she does not have the courage to follow a career with so much surveillance and that too for paltry income. It is easier and safer for her to stay home. The fourth participant who was a college graduate mentioned that her family wants her to settle down. She hailed from a conservative family where woman's income is considered to bring bad luck to the family. Her father is a wage earner, and brothers work in a factory. They supported her education but did not allow her to pursue any career. She mentioned that even if her family did allow her to work there were not many options for her because she lacked digital skills and with her basic skill set, she could only opt to be a teacher at some school.

5. Discussion

Results show that patriarchy is deeply ingrained in Punjab. Men have been raised to internalize their superiority. They are made to internalize that they are the breadwinners for their families and to maintain their hegemonic status in the household, they should keep their women folk in check by limiting their agency. This mindset is attributed to many factors. Lack of good quality education for both boys and girls is one of the most important factors responsible for the prevalence of these patriarchal trends in the society (Hussain 2012). Women in Punjab, opt to stay away from paid labor because of societal pressures and familial obligations. They have also internalized their role as primary caregivers and find it hard to stand up

to the society and change the age-old norms. Lack of support from the families, lack of day care facilities in cities, lack of employment opportunities with competitive remuneration are only some of the factors that compel women to opt for domesticated lives rather than a career (Shaheen & Haq 2016). Conservatism is rampant in Punjab. Women are supposed to be the upholders of honor and dignity and if they choose to pursue a career, they are labelled as careless, characterless, selfish and too open-minded beings who are not capable to make their marriage work. They are judged and looked down upon not just by the men but also other women. This norm of women supporting patriarchy is one of the significant factors for low female labor force participation in Punjab, Pakistan (Niazi & Rauf 2020). Patriarchy is further aggravated because of the misunderstood nuances of religious interpretations. Men in Punjab seem to leverage religion to their advantage. By using 'pardah' as an excuse they tend to stop their women from taking an active part in paid labor force. They use religious conjunctions to keep women from becoming financially independent which in turn makes their hold and position stronger (Shaheen & Haq 2016). Amartya Sen emphasized the need to enhance the capabilities of women for them to function optimally. Enhancing their capabilities means freeing them from low esteem. However, the norms prevalent in Punjab further aggravate the situation of women. With men taking all the crucial decisions for their women, they lack the agency to take control of their lives hence rely completely on the men of the household who use religion, societal

pressures, ego, pardah, taboos and societal expectations to curb their freedom (Bari,2000)

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