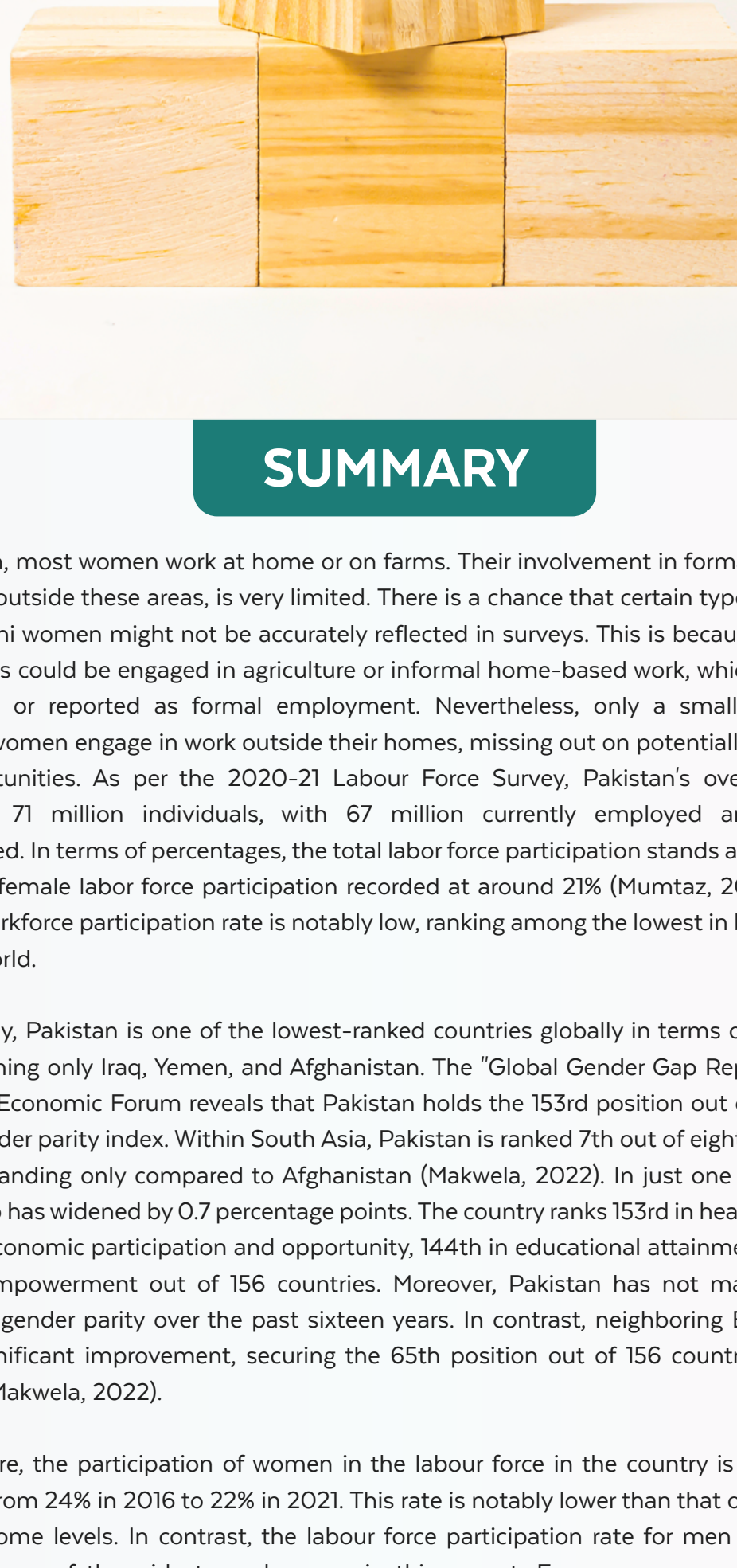


GENDER GAPS IN THE WORKFORCE OF PAKISTAN



Author: Haneen Gul

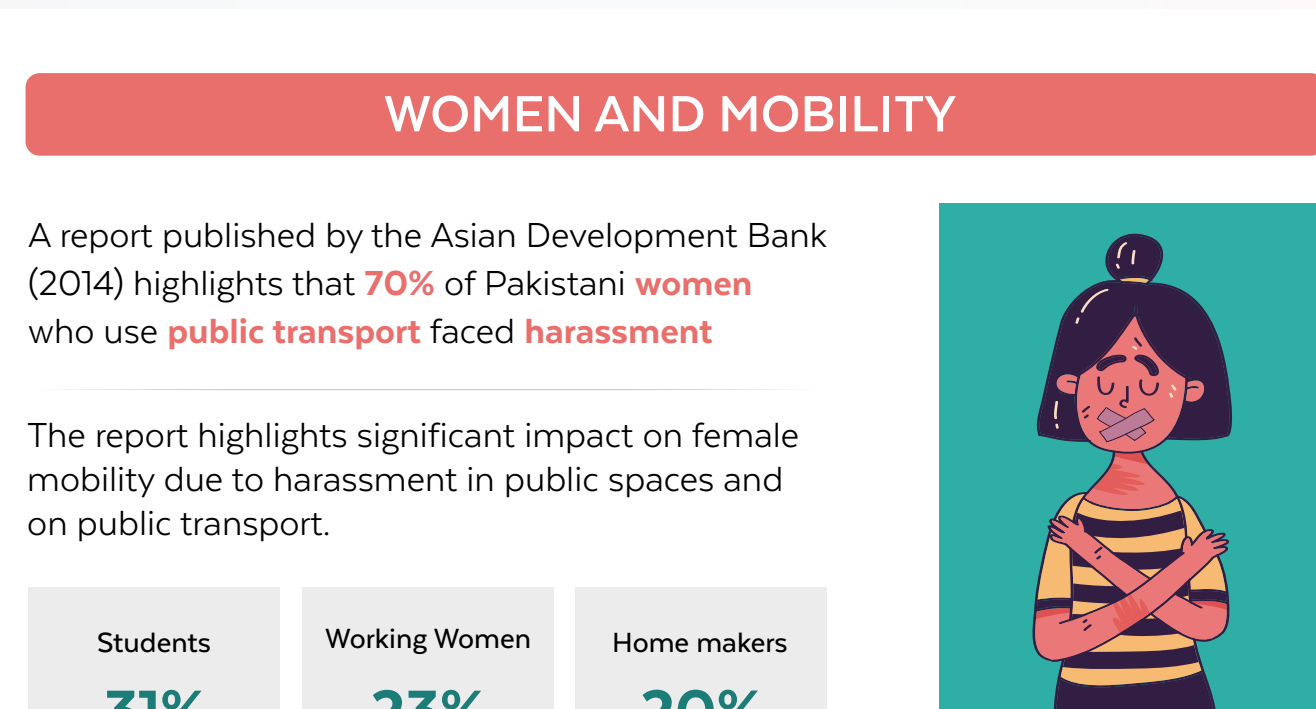
SUMMARY

In Pakistan, most women work at home or on farms. Their involvement in formal employment, especially outside these areas, is very limited. There is a chance that certain types of work done by Pakistani women might not be accurately reflected in surveys. This is because many survey participants could be engaged in agriculture or informal home-based work, which is not always recognized or reported as formal employment. Nevertheless, only a small percentage of Pakistani women engage in work outside their homes, missing out on potentially higher-paying job opportunities. As per the 2020-21 Labour Force Survey, Pakistan's overall labor force comprises 71 million individuals, with 67 million currently employed and 4.5 million unemployed. In terms of percentages, the total labor force participation stands at approximately 45%, with female labor force participation recorded at around 21% (Mumtaz, 2023). Pakistan's women workforce participation rate is notably low, ranking among the lowest in both South Asia and the world.

Additionally, Pakistan is one of the lowest-ranked countries globally in terms of gender parity, outperforming only Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan. The "Global Gender Gap Report 2021" from the World Economic Forum reveals that Pakistan holds the 153rd position out of 156 countries on the gender parity index. Within South Asia, Pakistan is ranked 7th out of eight countries, with a better standing only compared to Afghanistan (Makwela, 2022). In just one year, Pakistan's gender gap has widened by 0.7 percentage points. The country ranks 153rd in health and survival, 152nd in economic participation and opportunity, 144th in educational attainment, and 98th in political empowerment out of 156 countries. Moreover, Pakistan has not made progress in improving gender parity over the past sixteen years. In contrast, neighboring Bangladesh has shown significant improvement, securing the 65th position out of 156 countries in the 2021 rankings (Makwela, 2022).

Furthermore, the participation of women in the labour force in the country is on the decline, dropping from 24% in 2016 to 22% in 2021. This rate is notably lower than that of countries with similar income levels. In contrast, the labour force participation rate for men stands at 83%, indicating one of the widest gender gaps in this aspect. Even among women with higher education levels, participation in the labour force remains low, with only 25% of Pakistani women holding a university degree. This disparity leads to a significant potential loss of productivity. Unlike global trends, where efforts are made to empower women through better-paying employment for their contribution to economic growth, Pakistan's female workforce participation is heading in the opposite direction. The world, on average, is narrowing the gap between male and female labour force participation rates, emphasising the importance of women's economic empowerment for overall growth and prosperity.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP (IN PAKISTAN)



Source: UNDP, 2021

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO GENDER DISPARITY IN THE WORKFORCE

1. Societal Norms:

A significant factor contributing to the low labor force participation among women in Pakistan is the reluctance of women to take up paid employment due to restrictions imposed by cultural and social norms. To monitor women's behavior and safeguard their reputation, many men impose restrictions on women leaving their homes. When women do venture out, they are often accompanied by a chaperone. Consequently, women tend to pursue employment that can be carried out within the confines of their homes. Traditional codes of honor also impact the selection of jobs, creating obstacles to occupations deemed socially acceptable. These attitudes reflect deeply ingrained gender inequality, sometimes endorsed by women themselves.

Nearly 40% of non-working women cite the primary reason for not working as male family members, not permitting them to work outside the home. Another 15% state that they choose not to work outside the home. Among those willing to work, about a third express a preference for working only within their own home. Notably, 30% of women who are employed work within their own homes (ADB, 2016). Even among those women who do venture outside the home for work, their commuting distances are shorter compared to men.

2. Mobility Challenges:

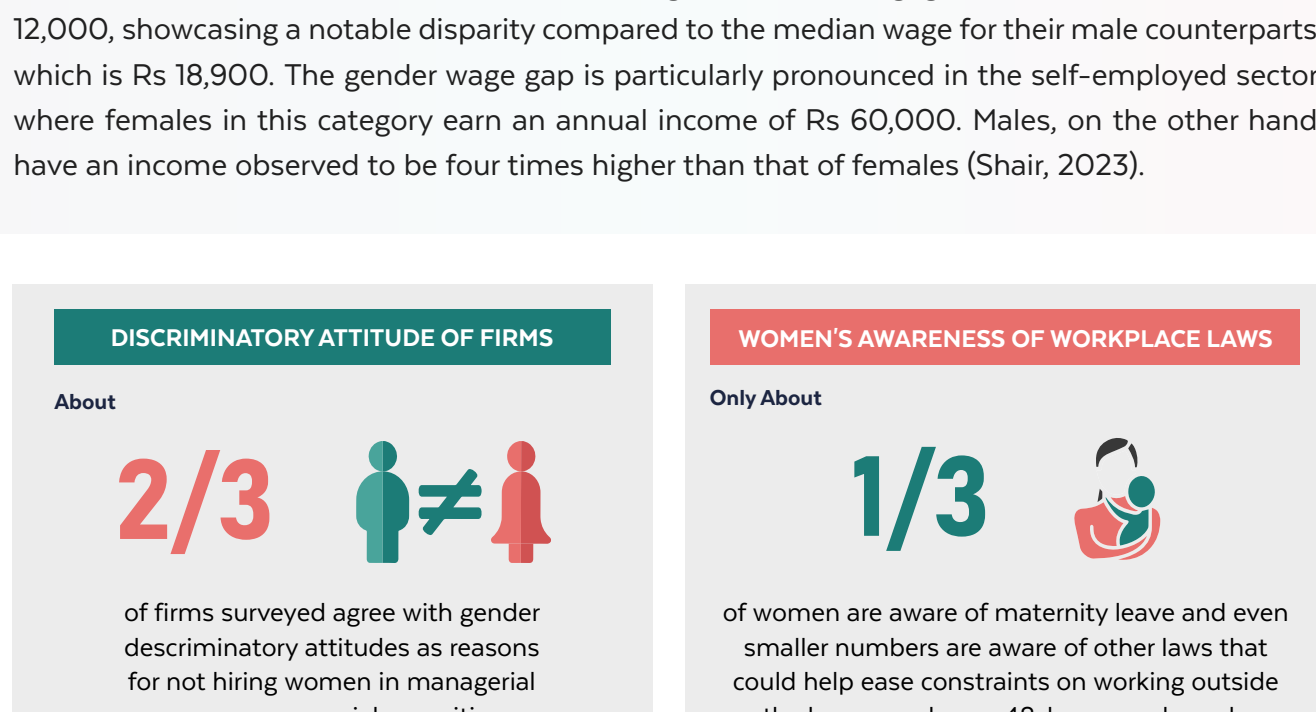
Cultural norms and security concerns restrict women's movement outside their homes, affecting their ability to join the workforce. Even if the workplace is safe, commuting may expose women to visibility that goes against societal norms. 90% of women encounter harassment on public transport, with 82% facing it at bus stops. Many women downplay these incidents and avoid reporting them due to the belief that complaints would not be taken seriously, influenced by societal norms. The main culprits are mostly other passengers, with 62% of women stating they have experienced harassment from fellow commuters (Warraich, 2017). Women also report incidents of harassment from bus staff and passersby.

As per a study conducted by Shehri, an NGO addressing urban planning issues in Karachi, women exhibit a higher dependence on public transport compared to men, 30% more inclined to use buses or wagons. This preference is partly attributed to the fact that other transportation options, like riding motorcycles or bicycles (common among men), are considered socially taboo for women. Consequently, men are 70% more likely than women to use these private modes of transport (Amin, 2022). These factors constrain urban women from venturing outside their homes and, similarly, restrict rural women from moving beyond their village or sub-village for employment. These limitations also hinder younger women from pursuing additional education or vocational training, which could open up better job opportunities for them.

WOMEN AND MOBILITY

A report published by the Asian Development Bank (2014) highlights that 70% of Pakistani women who use public transport faced harassment

The report highlights significant impact on female mobility due to harassment in public spaces and on public transport.



3. Housework and Childcare Responsibilities:

Various household duties act as obstacles to women's employment opportunities outside the home, even in urban settings. The majority of men typically work outside the home, and if they are not part of the labor force, it is often because they are students. In contrast, a significant proportion of women not participating in the labor force attribute their non-engagement to housework. This trend has only slightly shifted over the years, decreasing from 89 percent in 1999 to 83 percent in 2014, with housework remaining the primary reason for women not being employed (The World Bank, 2018). Also, for women, being married may impose limitations, such as heightened responsibilities for childcare, relocation, or care of elderly relatives and household tasks, that can lead to increased restrictions on mobility and independence in decision-making. For instance, 80% of medical graduates are women, but only 20% of them continue to work as doctors after marriage (Mujahid & Ismail, 2019). The reluctance of women doctors to pursue careers without the consent of their families, particularly their in-laws, is highlighted as a major contributing factor to this issue.

On the contrary, many women may deem a career break necessary following marriage; some opt to re-enter the workforce once their children become more independent. However, returning to work after a break can be intimidating for individuals, especially women, and is occasionally burdened by an unfair stigma. This stigma is rooted in preconceived notions about the implications of taking a break from the workforce, compounded by a lack of recognition or value assigned to domestic work. Frequently, the transferable skills acquired through commitments outside the traditional workplace, as well as the determination of these women to excel in their chosen professions, go unrecognized. It is important to acknowledge that domestic work itself is akin to a full-time job, demanding a range of skills that are often undervalued.

Additionally, apart from a handful of multinational corporations that provide sufficient maternity leave and on-site daycare facilities to support their female workforce, many companies overlook the specific needs of women in the workplace. The demanding, long hours often lead many women to give up their jobs, which can negatively impact their self-esteem and, in severe cases, contribute to feelings of depression. A more concerning aspect is the potential waste of the educational investments made in these women, highlighting the need for broader workplace policies and support systems to ensure the retention and well-being of female employees.

Housework and Childcare responsibilities often prevent women from working outside the home



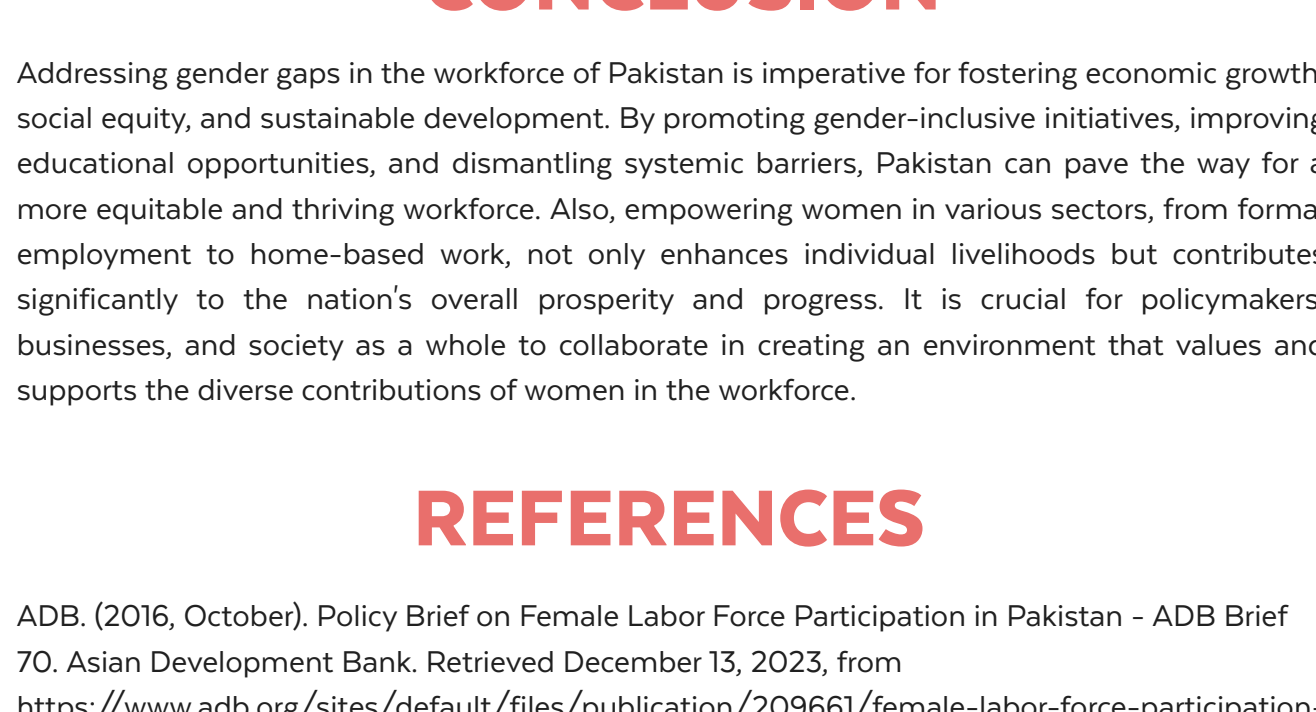
Source: World Bank, 2018

4. Lack of Financial Independence:

Pakistan faces one of the lowest rates of financial inclusion globally, with 79% of its 231 million people operating outside the formal banking system, as indicated by the World Bank's Global Findex Database. This financial exclusion disproportionately affects women, with only 13% of Pakistani women owning bank accounts, compared to 28% of men. Also, Pakistan ranks fourth from the bottom for female financial inclusion globally and is the third-lowest in Asia, trailing only Afghanistan and Yemen. One contributing factor to the limited financial access for women in Pakistan is that approximately 75% of them are not engaged in formal employment (Joles, 2023).

A significant number of women in the country are often labeled as housewives and homemakers, relying entirely on the incomes of their husbands and other male relatives. Even among formally employed Pakistani women, financial exclusion persists, with only 16% holding their personal accounts, in stark contrast to the global average of 68% for women in developing countries who have their own accounts. The limited financial inclusion for women in Pakistan is indicative of a broader societal challenge of gender inequality. Moreover, women's capacity to manage money, make transactions, and control their earnings independently is significantly hindered or compromised due to their reliance on men for engagement with formal banking channels. One of the reasons could be that many women in this context lack literacy and have never attended school or any educational platform, leaving them unfamiliar with the basics of managing regular bank accounts.

WOMEN ACCESS TO FINANCE

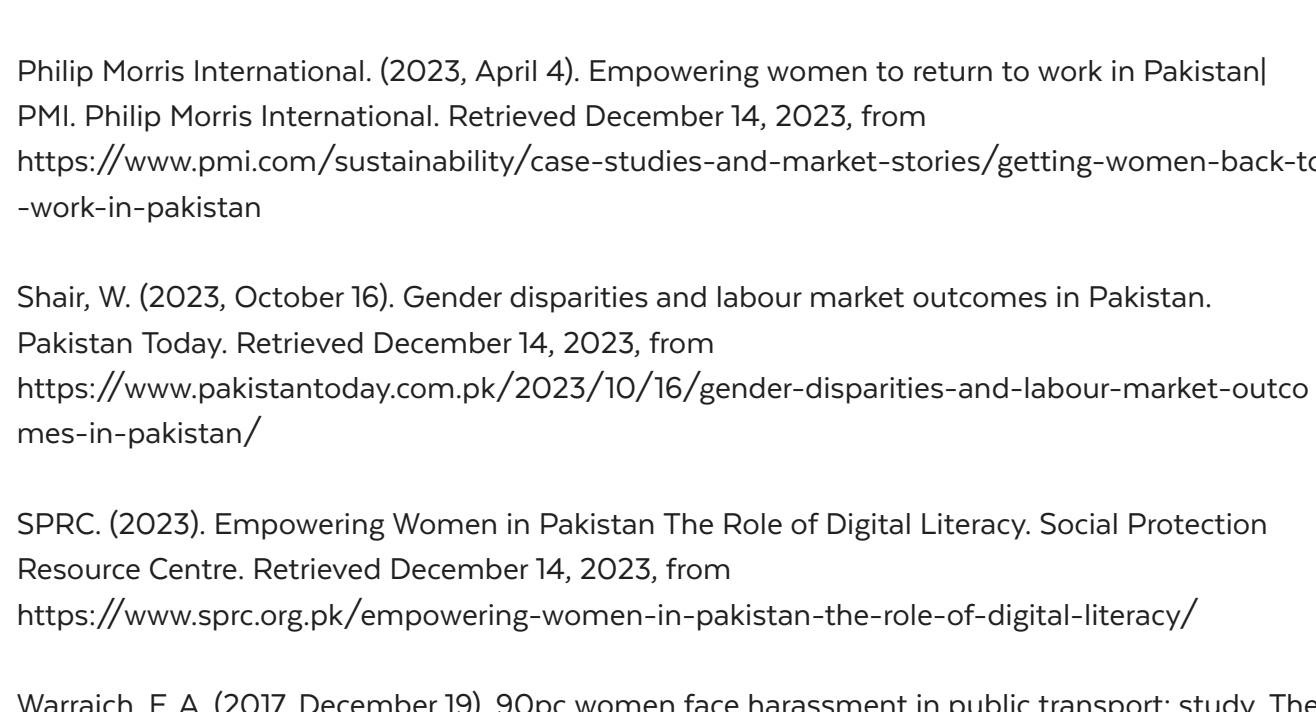


Source: UNDP, 2021

5. Labor Market Bias:

In Pakistan, there are 4.4 million Home-Based Workers (HBWs), with 3.6 million being women. Moreover, only 10 percent of non-agricultural workers in the private formal sector are women (World Bank, 2022). These individuals engage in remunerative work from their homes or selected locations, primarily functioning as piece-rate or product-like workers in the production of items such as textiles, leather goods, or agricultural by-products account livestock. Women in this category are particularly susceptible to exploitation by contractors or middlemen and often come from economically disadvantaged households with limited or no formal education. They face challenges in accessing markets, training, public services, and work-related facilities. Also, home-based workers lack proper rights and social protections, are exposed to increased work and safety risks, and are largely overlooked in economic and labor policies.

Women's reported share of the national income is less than 20%, and their participation in the formal labor force stands at 22% (ILO, 2014). The limited involvement of women in the formal sector can be attributed to factors such as restrictions on their mobility, inadequate access to productive and well-paying employment opportunities, systemic discrimination, and incidents of harassment. These barriers collectively contribute to the lower representation of women in the formal workforce. Furthermore, a significant portion of females, specifically 61.1%, earn a monthly wage of less than Rs 15,000. In contrast, a smaller percentage of males, approximately 32.6%, fall within the same income bracket. The median wage for women engaged in paid employment is Rs 12,000, showcasing a notable disparity compared to the median wage for their male counterparts, which is Rs 18,900. The gender wage gap is particularly pronounced in the self-employed sector, where females in this category earn an annual income of Rs 60,000. Males, on the other hand, have an income observed to be four times higher than that of females (Shair, 2023).



6. Inadequate Skills:

In today's era, digital literacy has become crucial for women, serving as a gateway to education, employment opportunities, and fair access to resources. With various sectors moving towards online platforms, women without access to digital devices and training face a significant disadvantage. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022 highlights that Pakistan's gender gap in mobile ownership is 33%, and the gender gap in mobile internet usage is 38%. Factors contributing to these disparities include a lack of family approval (35%) and low levels of literacy and digital skills (23%). Notably, at the provincial level, only 16% of females in Balochistan use mobile phones, while in KP, this percentage rises to 37% (SPRC, 2023).

Pakistan holds the unfortunate distinction of having the highest digital gender divide globally, as per the GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019' (Aftab & Akbar, 2020). This wide gap in mobile ownership is rooted in various challenges, including barriers to access, affordability, limited education, technological literacy gaps, and the influence of inherent biases and socio-cultural norms. As education increasingly shifts to online platforms, many Pakistani women face exclusion, not only from educational opportunities but also from formal employment prospects. Consequently, they remain confined to informal, lower-paying, or even non-paying labor, perpetuating their disadvantaged socio-economic status and contributing to their obscurity, invisibility, and health risks. Additionally, the lack of access to work-from-home opportunities, a privilege enjoyed by technologically adept, economically privileged, urban-based, white-collar professionals, puts them at higher risk of health issues and job instability.

Furthermore, Pakistan holds the lowest rate of female entrepreneurship globally, with only 1% of female entrepreneurs compared to 21% of male entrepreneurs. A concerning aspect is the lack of documentation and remuneration for rural women engaged in various levels of the rural economy, highlighting an additional challenge in addressing gender disparities in the workforce. Limited technological awareness, inadequate literacy skills, and a perception of limited relevance hinder the empowerment of rural women.

7. Limited Access to Networks:

Similar to job-seekers in any country, individuals in Pakistan use various methods to search for jobs. These methods include networking, submitting applications, responding to advertisements, and visiting work sites. In Pakistan, there are differences in the job-seeking behavior between women and men. Notably, men are more inclined to search for jobs, with 41% actively seeking through various methods, whereas only 29% of women engage in job searches. Additionally, within each job search method, men are more likely than women to seek employment opportunities actively (IGC, 2021). Moreover, among employed females, a significant majority, specifically 64.4%, lack formal education, in contrast to 30.2% of males. In the category of contributing family workers, where individuals work without an explicit employment contract in their partner's or parents' company or practice, females make up 55.9%, while their male counterparts account for only 10.8%. Furthermore, the proportion of females employed in the formal non-agriculture sector is a mere 11.1%, notably lower than the corresponding figure of 19.0% for males (Shair, 2023).

Even among individuals with similar education levels, such as those with advanced education, persistent differences in job-seeking behavior exist. For example, 54% of men actively search for jobs, whereas only 41% of women do so. Similarly, among individuals with more than three years of work experience, 44% of men actively search for jobs, while the corresponding figure for women is lower at 35%. The observed differences in job-seeking behavior between men and women may suggest that women face specific barriers in their job-seeking efforts compared to men. For example, women may have limited time for job searching due to household responsibilities, encounter challenges in securing safe transportation for interviews, and lack access to networks that offer referrals and information about job opportunities. These factors could contribute to disparities in the job-search experiences of women and men.

Factors Limiting women to opt for overseas employment

- Lack of access to legal protection and justice
- Limited Choice of jobs for women in the overseas labour market
- Socio cultural/family constraints impeding women to move for overseas employment.
- Common stories about the risks and negative experience of female migrant workers discourage many women and families opt for overseas work
- Limited incentives for highly skilled women to migrate overseas due to more benefits and social support in Pakistan
- The number of the female Overseas Employment Promoters is very small. Intended female migrant workers do not seek OEPs for support. Majority of OEPs don't encourage women to seek work overseas.

Source: ILO, 2020

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Incorporate digital education into the national curriculum to guarantee that every student, including girls, acquires essential skills and knowledge for proficient use of digital technologies.
- Establish initiatives tailored for rural areas, encompassing the provision of digital infrastructure, collaboration with government agencies, and the formulation of policies and programs specifically designed to address the employment needs of women in rural regions.
- Prioritize and invest in both secondary and tertiary education for women in Pakistan to enhance their access to white-collar jobs.
- Assess the quality and relevance of vocational training programs, considering the significant occupational segregation and low female labor force participation levels at middle levels of education.
- Implement comprehensive security and criminal justice measures to bolster female labor force participation by addressing safety concerns impacting women's mobility.
- Promote increased representation of women in leadership roles and advocate for the retention of women's reservations in the local government system in Pakistan, fostering a safer environment and encouraging greater female workforce engagement.
- Invest in and expand state-provided public transportation services in both urban and rural areas, ensuring reliable and accessible options for women to commute safely to work.
- Implement awareness campaigns to challenge societal norms restricting women from riding bicycles or motorcycles alone, promoting inclusivity and acceptance of diverse transportation choices for women.
- Implement measures to enhance the affordability and accessibility of public transportation for women, including subsidies, fare reduction initiatives, and the introduction of women-only transport services to create a more inclusive and accommodating environment.
- Implement programs to sensitize male family members about the significance of women's economic participation, fostering dialogue to dispel misconceptions and garner support for women seeking work outside the home.
- Promote family-friendly workplace policies, including maternity leave and on-site daycare facilities, to address women's specific needs, fostering work-life balance and supporting the retention and well-being of female employees.
- Launch educational initiatives to enhance financial literacy among women, especially those without formal education.
- Encourage banks to offer personalized account options, breaking societal norms and promoting inclusivity for both employed and housewife-labeled women in Pakistan.
- Address exploitation risks, ensure legal protections, and foster inclusion in economic policies for home-based workers.
- Develop strategies to overcome barriers hindering women's participation in the formal labor force, including discrimination and harassment. Focus on increasing access to quality employment opportunities and tackling systemic issues contributing to underrepresentation.
- Close the significant gender wage gap by promoting policies that ensure fair wages for women, particularly in home-based work.

CONCLUSION

Addressing gender gaps in the workforce of Pakistan is imperative for fostering economic growth, social equity, and sustainable development. By promoting gender-inclusive initiatives, improving educational opportunities, and dismantling systemic barriers, Pakistan can pave the way for a more equitable and thriving workforce. Also, empowering women in various sectors, from formal employment to home-based work, not only enhances individual livelihoods but contributes significantly to the nation's overall prosperity and progress. It is crucial for policymakers, businesses, and society as a whole to collaborate in creating an environment that values and supports the diverse contributions of women in the workforce.

REFERENCES

ADB. (2016, October). Policy Brief on Female Labor Force Participation in Pakistan - ADB Brief 70. Asian Development Bank. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/209661/female-labor-force-participation-pakistan.pdf>

Aftab, I., & Akbar, S. (2020, November 18). Bridging the gender digital divide. The Nation. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.nation.com.pk/18-Nov-2020/bridging-the-gender-digital-divide>

Amin, M. (2022, June 9). For women of Karachi, Swf finally made commuting barely bearable. Then the petrol bomb blew it up. Dawn. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1693620>

IGC. (2021, March 23). Barriers faced by women in labour market participation: Evidence from Pakistan. International Growth Centre. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.theigc.org/blogs/gender-equality/barriers-faced-women-labour-market-participation-evidence-pakistan>

IGC. (2022, October 6). How women can improve resilience and productivity of vulnerable households in Pakistan. International Growth Centre. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.theigc.org/blogs/how-women-can-improve-resilience-and-productivity-vulnerable-households-pakistan>

ILO. (2014). Gender equality for decent employment in Pakistan. International Labour Organization. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from https://www.ilo.org/gender/Projects/WCMS_140742/lang-en/index.htm

Joles, B. (2023, May 10). Pakistan's financial gender gap aggravates chronic poverty. Nikkei Asia. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Pakistan-s-financial-gender-gap-aggravates-chronic-poverty>

Makwela, T. (2022, July 29). The gender gap and economic participation of women in Pakistan. Accountability Lab. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://accountabilitylab.org/gender-gap-and-economic-participation-of-women-in-pakistan/>

Moazzam, I. (2013, June 3). Is marriage the end to my career? The Express Tribune. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/556543/is-marriage-the-end-to-my-career>

Mujahid, M., & Ismail, M. (2019, December 24). '80pc of medical graduates are women, only 20pc join profession'. Dawn. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1524007>

Mumtaz, J. (2023, April 6). Women participation and labour productivity. The Express Tribune. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2410085/women-participation-and-labour-productivity>

Philip Morris International. (2023, April 4). Empowering women to return to work in Pakistan | PMI. Philip Morris International. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.pmi.com/sustainability/case-studies-and-market-stories/getting-women-back-to-work-in-pakistan>

Shair, W. (2023, October 16). Gender disparities and labour market outcomes in Pakistan. Pakistan Today. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.pakistanistoday.com.pk/2023/10/16/gender-disparities-and-labour-market-outcomes-in-pakistan/>

SPRC. (2023). Empowering Women in Pakistan: The Role of Digital Literacy. Social Protection Resource Centre. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.sprc.org.pk/empowering-women-in-pakistan-the-role-of-digital-literacy/>

Warraich, F. A. (2017, December 19). 90pc women face harassment in public transport: study. The Nation. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.nation.com.pk/19-Dec-2017/90-percent-women-face-harassment-in-public-transport-study>

The World Bank. (2018, February). World Bank Document. World Bank Document. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/444061529681884900/pdf/Female-labor-force-participation-in-Pakistan-what-do-we-know.pdf>

World Bank. (2022, July 8). Supporting legal reforms to increase women's workforce participation in Pakistan. World Bank. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2022/07/07/supporting-legal-reforms-to-increase-womens-workforce-participation-pakistan>