

Social, Cultural and Institutional Barriers to Female Labour Force Participation

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The purpose of this study was to explore social, cultural, and institutional barriers to female labour force participation in Lahore, Pakistan. A qualitative analysis using semi-structured interviews was carried out on nine women, who were employed and had been working for at least three years in education, banking, and manufacturing sectors. The data were analyzed by the NVivo software program. Thematic analysis revealed that cultural barriers (male dominance, gender stereotype, joint family system, and the influence of relatives), social barriers (viz., children upbringing, care of older family members, social acceptability, social isolation, and interfamily challenges), and institutional barriers (policies and procedures, opportunity biases, rewards and awards, and behavior of male colleagues) affected female labor force participation. This study suggests that non-government organizations, governments, and society in general, should play an active role to create viable conditions for women to work.

Keywords: gender stereotype, family-related barriers, institutional regulations, women labor force participation

Women make up half of the world's human capital, but their participation in economic activities is far below their male counterparts. Patterns, trends, and evidence show that female labour force participation (FLFP) in economic activities varies across the world (Forsythe, Korzeniewicz, & Durrant, 2000). In Pakistan, women make up 48.7 percent of total population however, their labour force participation averages 18.2 (range: 11.0-24.6) percent between 1980 to 2017, which is below (75%) FLFP of developed countries (Verick, 2018).

Participation of the women in the labour force in professional sectors is necessary to improve the economic prosperity in society, because it can use existing resources efficiently (Fatima & Sultana, 2009; Mujahid, 2014), and their energetic participation guarantees economic as well as social advantages (Azid, Aslam, & Chaudhary, 2001; Maqsood, 2014). In 1970s, America saw an increase in typical household incomes largely due to increased participation of women in the labour market (Ahn & Mira, 2002). So, if employment opportunities for women decline, household incomes decline, national economies weaken and countries lose their valuable human resources (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009).

The developed economies' women's employment in professional sectors is high because family structures have changed, family size has reduced, and a conscious effort is made on delaying or postponing parenthood (Moghadam, 2004). In addition, organizations in such countries have modified workspace to integrate family life for female workers, but countries like; Germany,

Spain, Netherlands, Portugal, and other South Asian countries, support for women is limited (Thévenon, 2011).

In Pakistan, like many other developing nations, women are expected to look after their families in general, and children and elders in particular. According to UN data, women spend three times more time in household activities than men (Lim, 2004). This difference in gender roles is often attributed to the patriarchal family system (Chaudhry & Rahman, 2009).

The 6th Labour Policy of Pakistan supports women empowerment and gender equality, incorporating incentives for women workers like, setting minimum wages to 7000 PKR per month (Hirway & Shah, 2011), but the policy does not include paid maternity leaves, which negatively affects FLFP. Many other social, cultural, and organizational factors can also affect FLFP negatively, therefore this study aims to explore these factors and identify barriers to FLFP that may help agencies and as well as society in rising FLFP.

Literature suggests numerous sociocultural barriers that can restrict women to work for example, patriarchal family system (Chaudhry & Rahman, 2009; Yisehak, 2008), gender stereotypes (Feldberg & Glenn, 1979), and women's perception of themselves as better care providers of children: a reason to stay at home etc. (Haggerty, 1981). Other reasons that include workspace, and institutions include non-friendly institutional policies for families or women (Del Boca & Locatelli, 2006), physical portability (Farre & Vella, 2013), and training of women (Jaumotte, 2004).

Research Questions

1. Do social barriers reduce women's intentions to labor force participation?

2. Do cultural barriers reduce women's intentions to labor force participation?
3. Do institutional barriers reduce women's intentions to labor force participation?

Method

Participants

To carry out this study, we used qualitative methodology and interviewed nine women aged 27-46 ($M = 35.56$, $SD = 5.79$) year through a purposive sampling from various work-related fields in Lahore (see Table 1). Women with at least three years of work experience and two children were included in the study, and this was done to ensure that the length of their work experience and family life was adequate to provide extensive information about what they thought regarding institutional and socio-cultural barriers for women to work.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 9)

Respondent	Age (Years)	Experience (Years)	Dependents	Organization
1	27	3	3	Bank
2	35	7	5	University
3	40	12	2	Manufacturing
4	46	16	7	University
5	39	13	3	Bank
6	35	10	6	Manufacturing
7	37	10	5	Bank
8	30	3	2	University
9	31	3	2	Manufacturing
Mean	35.56	8.56	3.89	

Instrument

On the basis of research questions, a semi structured interview schedule was prepared that addressed major areas like upbringing of children, care of elders at home, social inclusion, choice of profession, experiences of living in nuclear and joint family systems etc. It took 20-25 minutes to complete interview individually from all the participants' women.

Procedure

The face-to-face semi-structured interview technique was used to collect data. The participants were approached at their workplaces to attain their viewpoints about the issue under discussion in the present study. At times, additional probing questions were asked to ensure clarity of information rendered by the participants. All interviews were recorded in a smart phone (mobile phone) using the recoding application, and the interviews were transcribed and translated in English. Transcriptions were sent to the participants to ensure the transparency and accuracy of the data. In qualitative research, it is important to ensure the accuracy, consistency and trustworthiness of the data, so this study adopted a member checking method to ensure the validity of the data. Harvey (2015) suggests that a continuous member checking loop is necessary

to ensure the validity and reliability of the data in the qualitative research method. Moreover, qualitative research involves recording and transcription of participants' experiences and insights.

Data were analyzed through QSR International's NVivo 11 software (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016) for coding and thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

The Table 2 shows the main, sub (basic) themes extracted out of participants' narratives. In this phenomenological table, commonly used-themes related to the cultural, social and institutional barriers are listed.

Table 2

Description of Main and Subthemes (N= 9)

Main Theme	Sub Theme (Basic Theme Excerpt in Italics)	Frequency
Cultural Barriers	① Male dominance <i>"When I was studying, I wanted to work in a textile designing company but my brother didn't allow me and instructed me to choose the education department. I guess I would have been a different person if he allowed me to opt the profession of my choice" (FR2).</i>	22
	② Gender Stereotypes <i>"My culture expects from me to do household chores after coming back home from my workplace. It doesn't matter to them if I'm tired or I don't have the energy to do anything but they desperately want me to cook food for them instantly" (FR6).</i>	
	③ Social Acceptability <i>"In our society, people don't like the working women and they criticize by saying that working women become more liberal" (FR9).</i>	
	④ Joint Family System <i>"I was interested in the corporate sector but family responsibilities restricted me and forced me to opt teaching profession. Now I think a person can perform better if he or she opts the profession of his or her own choice" (FR2).</i>	
	⑤ Interference of Relatives <i>"Yet often we listen even at our workplace that females are for home tasks and child-raising only whereas males are the only bread earners. So females should stay at home which definitely affect the motivation level of female at the workplace" (FR9).</i>	
Social Barriers	① Children's Upbringing and	
	② Care of Older Family Members	

"I have listened many times from in-laws that my job is to look after my children and elders only you should not go out of the house for work" (FR3).

③ Gender Discrimination

"In our society, it is very difficult for the women to work with a male because social values restrict female while the male is free from any restriction which obviously sometimes become very disturbing" (FR2).

④ Social Isolation

"Being working women, I often miss my family functions, and I hardly find time to keep in touch with my friends. This way my social interaction has become limited" (FR3).

⑤ Interfamily Challenges

"Well there was a time when I was very interested in event management but I could not choose it as a profession because it required a longer time to stay away from home and sometimes one has to work with male colleagues at night. My family did not allow me for that" (FR 3).

Institutional
Barriers

① Policies and procedures

"Time relaxation should be there for females and organizations should ask female faculty members for their opinions while making policies" (FR5 & FR6).

"No, my organization did not consider female considerations while formulating policies" (FR6).

② Opportunity Biases

"Yes, my organization shows gender biases while assigning tasks" (FR1).

③ Rewards and Awards

"In work outcomes, they expect everyone, either male or female, should contribute fully while at the time of giving rewards, they pay more to males and less to females" (FR1).

Data analysis in Table 2 reveals, 13 emerging themes (five each for social, cultural domains and three for institutional domain) for barriers towards FLFP

The frequency of emerging themes for barriers is given in Table 3, such that respondents discussed 22 times cultural, 11 times social and 17 times institutional barriers, which suggests that social barriers are

half and institutional barriers are more than two third of cultural barriers that play a role in FLFP.

Table 3
Frequency of Emerging Themes

Respondent	Barrier			Total
	Cultural	Social	Institutional	
1	3	1	2	6
2	4	1	3	8
3	1	1	2	4
4	2	1	1	4
5	2	1	2	5
6	3	2	3	8
7	2	1	1	4
8	3	1	1	5
9	2	2	2	6
Total	22	11	17	50

Cultural Barriers

Literature is less systemized about explaining cultural barriers (Steward, 1972). Generally, social norms and attitudes are deemed as explanations of cultural barriers for women in the labour force (Inglehart, Norris, & Ronald, 2003; Klasen & Pieters, 2012). Moreover, the social fiber of traditional societies like, Pakistan is knitted by cultural values and norms. Therefore, traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes define the role and status of women in society. Though educated women are working in the labor market, their role is typically defined as homemakers whereas, men are titled as bread earners (Sadie, 2005). Therefore, cultural attitudes are more belligerent to women's participation in the labour market.

This study found that women reported to be discouraged to work for cultural reasons more than other barriers. Male dominance and gender stereotype are challenges for women, when they decide to participate in the formal sector. Additionally, social acceptability, joint family system and influence of relatives also appeared to affect FLFP. As Ridgeway (2001) asserted that in traditional societies, it is a common belief that if a woman is more committed to her works, she is therefore not thought as a good mother. Therefore, this biased belief is likely to create barriers for women to involve in the workplace.

Similarly, Nzomo (1995) documented that social-cultural beliefs emphasized on the superiority of men over women; men got more opportunities to get education and training as compared to women that ultimately creates barriers for women to participate in labour force.

Social Barriers

In Pakistan, women are required to seek permission from their families before taking a job or get employed (Rahman & Islam, 2013), this restricts women immensely. Families are open to allow women to seek jobs in professions that are viewed as respectable, hence the reason why majority of women become teachers (Heyne, 2017). Pfau-Effinger (2004) argues that values and social norms of a society regarding gender roles and care arrangements for elders create hurdles in the way of women to participate in the labour market. Results also indicated that the responsibility of children's upbringing, care of elders, social isolation and inter-family challenges also determined women's intentions to work and reduced their participation in the labour market.

Institutional Barriers

Although creating suitable environment for women, employees/workers at the workplaces can enhance their participation

in work but unfortunately, in Pakistan, government and non-government organizations are reluctant to formulate favorable policies and work conditions for women (Shahzad & Malik, 2014; Tanaka & Muzones, 2016). Unfavorable policies like, long working hours, opportunity biases and unfair reward and award system reduce the women's intention to stay in the labour market.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After the Second World War, the participation of women in the labor force increased many folds (Goldin, 1991). However, women's employment rate in developing countries is still critically low (Sadaquat, 2011). This study explored the experiences of working women, and found that they confront cultural, social, and institutional barriers. The frequencies of cultural, social, and institutional barriers indicate that cultural barriers are greater than social, and institutional barriers.

Following recommendations are suggested in the light of the outcomes of the present study:

- The government, and non-government-organizations should play active role in creating viable environment to ease the burdens of these barriers for the working women and those who want and seek to work.
- All institutions should be bounded by the government for the establishment of low cost-good quality, daycare centers at the work place to overcome the social barriers
- Government, and private sectors should establish old care houses for eight to four pm to facilitate the working women
- The government should introduce rules, and regulations for providing equal work opportunities for females.
- Arrangement should be made by the government to involve the women in the policy-making process to bring out the institutional changes in the traditional male- dominated society of Pakistan.
- Note: Coded transcripts of interviews can be requested from the authors.

Limitation and Implications

The outcomes of the present qualitative study cannot be generalized, because:

- i) it included a small sample of nine working women from the banking, manufacturing, and education sectors of Lahore, Pakistan.
- ii) The reliability and validity of the study depends on the interpretation of interviews and the ability of the researcher to the extraction and development of the main and emerging themes from interview data. The ability of the researcher cannot be fully relied upon.
- iii) This study only focused on women who had at least two children and at least three years of work experience in the existing workplace. By including women other than this inclusion criterion may give dissimilar outcomes.

It is hereby suggested to the future researchers to include more women in the study, if feasible by including non-working women and changing the inclusion criterion. However, quantitative investigation about the role of social, cultural and institutional barriers to female labour force participation might be carried out by constructing questionnaire, based on themes evolved in the present study. It can enhance the validity of the results.

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