

On the Margins - Women Workers and the Future of Work

Narratives in Pakistan

Aisha Anees Malik



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Foreword

Despite economic growth and declining poverty levels across Asia, inequality continues to grow, with large groups of society remaining marginalized in economic and social terms.

Women in Asia continue to experience massive structural disadvantages, from early childhood education through their retirement from work—if they wanted and were allowed to work—and into their older age. It is mainly women who are exploited as cheap labour in Asia's export industries and low-skill sectors, especially agriculture, textiles and the footwear and electronic industries. They are paid subsistence wages and experience increasing precariousness of their working as well as living conditions.

On the heels of all the economic progress now comes rapid technological transformation that is altering the present and future nature of work in ways that offer a multitude of opportunities but also add new levels of risks for social groups across the Global South.

Women are particularly vulnerable and disproportionately affected by these changes, both in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and in the ever-expanding care work across the formal and informal sectors.

Unfortunately, the predicted productivity gains through automation and digitalization in many sectors possibly will not give women much hope for fundamental improvements of their prospects. Due to their poor access to education, skills development and professional know-how, Asia's women are at risk of slipping deeper into unemployment or resorting to migration far from their home for jobs they can manage.

The goal for them and for us in development cooperation work is to find socially just and gender-equal responses to

these challenges. Solidarity and coalitions across a range of progressive movements in Asia are essential.

Through our regional networks, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) brings together diverse voices from social movements, civil society organizations, trade unions, political parties and academia to work together in developing progressive ideas and narratives for advancing social justice. Among the most innovative platforms is the newly established FES Asia project Women's Perspectives on the Future of Work. With insights from distinguished researchers in nine Asian countries, FES and its partners aim to further promote gender equality in the world of work, with emphasis on enhancing women's participation in public and political life and promoting decent work for all along with gender-just and human-centric economic models.

Desk reviews from nine countries, including this one from Pakistan, are presented as a first step to understanding the concerns for women in the future of work and to discuss possible interventions. We are highly thankful to Aisha Anees Malik for authoring this paper and for her analysis of the situation of Pakistani women and their perspectives on the future of work. We also extend our gratitude to Saba Gul Khattak from Pakistan and Dewi Candraningrum from Indonesia who commented competently and constructively on an earlier version of this paper.

We hope that this publication contributes to a fruitful discussion and provides valuable insights for future initiatives.

Mirco Günther and Lea Gölnitz

*FES Office for Regional
Cooperation in Asia*

Jochen Hippler and Sidra Saeed

FES Pakistan Office

Introduction

The nature of work is changing dramatically the world over due to technological advancements. This calls for looking at how women will be affected by the automation and digitalization of work. A review of literature from Pakistan indicates the country has yet to wake up to this reality. Other than an occasional report¹ commissioned by international organizations and discussions in newspapers that target mostly urban women, there seems to be a disconnect between the current location of women in work,

technological advancements and policy considerations relating to the future. This has serious implications for women who generally are on the margins of debates around productive employment, income generation and decent work anyway. This paper broadly looks at the narratives and debates, focusing on the future of work and women in Pakistan. It also raises questions on the feminist debates in Pakistan that have yet to include discussions about the impact of technology on women's work.

Pakistan's economy and female labour force participation

Pakistan's population has surged to more than 207 million persons, according to the sixth Population and Housing Census (2017). Of them, 51.2 per cent are male, 48.8 per cent are female and .05 per cent (10,418 persons)² are transgender. The majority of the population lives in rural areas, at around 63.6 per cent, whereas the urban population is roughly 36.4 per cent.³ Around 64 per cent of the population is younger than 30, and 29 per cent are aged 15–29 years. This youth bulge means that the labour market will expand at a fast rate, and the economy will have to create 2.1 million jobs annually to accommodate the labour supply.⁴

According to World Bank reports, Pakistan's economic growth was 5.8 per cent in 2018, driven largely by lowered interest rates and big infrastructure projects. This has slowed, however, to an estimated 3.4 per cent in 2019, due to tighter fiscal and corrective policies being adopted to reign in the consumption-led growth of previous years. This slowing of the economy has been accompanied by rising inflation and devaluation of the rupee.⁵ The major sectors of the economy are agriculture, manufacturing and services.

Women are employed in all the major sectors, although a gender gap is quite evident. According to the 2017–2018 Labour Force Survey findings,⁶ the refined activity rate of female labour force participation was 20.1 per cent, down from 22 per cent in 2014–2015. Female labour force participation was higher in rural areas (at 25.6 per cent) than in urban areas (at 11.1 per cent). Among the distribution of women by major sector divisions, the majority, at 67.2 per cent, worked in agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing, followed by manufacturing, at 16 per cent, and community, social and personal services, at 14.6 per cent. Based on those figures, there was a decrease in the women's share in agriculture since the 2014–2015 survey (from 72.2 per cent) but a gain in manufacturing (from 14.1 per cent).

In the overall occupational grouping of women among the 2017–2018 Labour Force Survey findings, they configured largely as unpaid contributing family workers, at 51.9 per cent of the female labour force, followed

by 28.5 per cent as paid employees and 19.5 per cent as own-account workers. Within paid employment, the largest share was in the service sector, which entails elementary jobs requiring a low level of skill at low remuneration. Some 50.3 per cent of women were involved in such paid employment, followed by 26.4 per cent in agriculture and 23.3 per cent in manufacturing. Much of the manufacturing activities were located in the informal sector, where women do the bulk of the work. For example, within the informal economy, 61.5 per cent of women, while only 17.7 per cent of men were involved in manufacturing. This was followed by the community, social and personal service sector, where 31 per cent of women worked, compared with 14 per cent of men. A gender gap is also evident in the unemployment ratios for 2017–2018, at 5.1 per cent for men and 8.3 per cent for women.⁷

Women and work debates in Pakistan centre around the development model in which women's inclusion in the labour force is seen as crucial not only to the country's development but also for their individual well-being. Within this framework, the low female labour force participation is treated as a set of challenges faced by Pakistani women that can be improved through policy measures. These policy measures range from investment in education and the health of women to passing laws against sexual harassment in the workplace to promoting entrepreneurship through microcredit finance provision. The emphasis is on economic empowerment of women by increasing economic opportunities available to them and improving the magnitude of their participation in those opportunities.⁸

There is not much discussion around the quality of work that is made available to them, however. Even the feminist debates have focused on the fight for constitutional rights, legislative rights (right to own property, etc.), women's political representation, changes in the laws on marriage, divorce and custody of children, the fight against military dictatorship and rising Islamization. The 1990s that ushered in the rise of neoliberal globalization and its harmful effects on women and work also ushered in the "NGO-ization" of

the feminist movement in Pakistan.⁹ The internalization of the development model resulted in donor-driven responses to the challenges that women experienced in the economy. Although there have been dispersed efforts in terms of research, like Saba Gul Khattak's

excellent work on subcontracting women workers,¹⁰ there has been no forceful and concerted feminist response to the challenges of globalization of economies as well as the impact of digitalization and automation on women's work.

Women and the future of work

The discussions and commentary found in online forums, blogs, newspapers and research reports, etc. on women and the future of work, present conflicting debates on how digitalization and automation may impact women. For example, a posting on an International Monetary Fund blog, entitled, “Women, Technology and the Future of Work,”¹¹ noted: “How we work is changing at an unprecedented rate. Digitalization, artificial intelligence and machine learning are eliminating many jobs involving low- and middle-skill routine tasks through automation, and this trend towards greater automation will be very challenging for women.” The blog’s author went on to say: “On average, women face an 11 per cent risk of losing their jobs due to automation, compared to 9 per cent of their male counterparts. So while many men will be or even are losing their jobs to automation, they estimate that 26 million women’s jobs in 30 countries are at high risk of being displaced by technology within the next 20 years. And that women’s jobs have a 70 per cent or higher probability of automation. This translates globally to 180 million women’s jobs.”

Another article posted to The Conversation website emphasized a different case. The author argued that women are better positioned than men to resist the automation of work and possibly even benefit from it. Women are over-represented in industries that require high levels of social skills and empathy (such as nursing, teaching and care work), where it would be difficult to replace a human worker with automation.¹² While the McKinsey Global Institute has been predicting that 375 million people around the world may have to change jobs so that they do not lose employment due to automation, other researchers predict that the impact may not be equal and that different stages of automation may impact racial groups and genders differently.¹³ Broadly, women are more concentrated in such sectors as education and health, which require more personal and social skills that are less easily automated (for now). How do Pakistani women fare in all this? The following section looks at the contemporary debates on the future of work and women’s work in Pakistan.

Agriculture and manufacturing

The major sectors in which Pakistani women are already concentrated lack discussions around automation.

For example, the largest employer of female labour is agriculture, which consists of three main subsectors: cereal and fibre crops, horticulture and orchards, and livestock and dairy. Technical change and value added have been slow in almost all the sectors. Within these sectors, livestock has the most potential to benefit women.

A comprehensive study on women in agriculture in Pakistan by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations,¹⁴ presented a provincial breakdown of tasks women perform that covered land preparation, seed preparation, planting, spraying of chemicals, weeding, fodder cutting, threshing, sealing, storage and processing. In addition, women are responsible for kitchen gardens, fetching water and firewood and care work. What they seldom do is crop protection, output marketing and water management, which is done by men. Also, they produce on land that is owned by men or they work with landless tenant farmer households and landless labourers as part of households dominated by men.

Because most of this work suffers from informality, the future of work discussions centre on improving women’s access to credit and extension services, teaching them skills in value addition and improving their contribution in decision-making within farm households, etc. There are no studies as yet on how and even whether the agriculture sector is moving towards automation and what will be the impact on women. There are, however, policy recommendations that call for the use of improved technologies in agriculture or for enabling the digitalization of economic sectors.¹⁵

In manufacturing, women are seen in textile and garment, footwear and food manufacturing. The textile industry contributes significantly to Pakistan’s economy. In 2017, it contributed almost 8.5 per cent of the gross domestic product value, accounted for one-fourth of the industrial value-added exports and employed 40 per cent of the industrial labour force. And 30 per cent of textile workers were female.¹⁶ The garment industry is the most labour intensive, the least energy and capital intensive and generates the greatest value addition of all the products in the textile value chain.

The garment industry is one of the most female-intensive workplaces in Pakistan. Garment manufacturing firms employ a greater share of female workers, compared

with the textile, footwear and leather industries. More specifically, compared with the primary textile sector (ginning, spinning, and weaving), garment enterprises have a more favourable male-to-female workers ratio across different-sized firms (small, medium and large). However, the share of female employees is greatest in the medium-sized garment enterprises. For instance, in the formal sector, there are four males for every female in medium-sized firms, compared with 27 males for each female in large-scale firms.¹⁷ The gender pay gap is also large in the garment industry. And women are more likely to be concentrated in no-growth jobs than men, and they are more likely to experience non-compliance issues.

Technology adoption is lacking in the garment industry due to the high cost of acquisition and learning as well as risks associated with unknown payback times. Typically, larger enterprises are early adopters of technology.¹⁸ Smaller enterprises follow suit when information spill-overs facilitate learning about the technology. As noted, women are largely concentrated in small and medium-sized enterprises, where the adoption of technology has yet to arrive. The debates thus centre around the exploitation of workers in the textile industry due to the contractual nature of the jobs and the hazardous safety regulations under the umbrella of labour rights' violations,¹⁹ and ignore the impact of automation on workers.

Service sector

The most visible discussions about the future of work relate to the service sector. The following sections look at two important areas that are experiencing growing technological impact: digitalized home-based or remote work and the information technology (IT) sector.

Digitalized home-based work: There is a small but growing population of educated middle-class women who want to work but find it difficult due to familial obligations. Technology is indeed transforming such women's participation in some areas of the labour force. Pakistan's share in the global digital gig economy is about 8 per cent, following India, Bangladesh and the United States. According to some experts, the flexible, piecemeal gig work has provided many Pakistani women a foothold in the new digital economy, in some cases shifting

women into the primary breadwinner role. For example, DoctHERs, a telemedicine platform, connects unemployed or underemployed female doctors to patients in remote areas. Despite Pakistan having one of the lowest doctor-to-patient ratios in the world, pressure to prioritize family over career means that around half of all female medical school graduates never enter the workforce.²⁰

Facebook groups, like Souls Sisters, have sprung up in most big and small towns. Abbottabad, for instance, is a small town in the foothills of the Himalayas. It has a high literacy rate but not much economic opportunities, especially for women, other than teaching in schools. In addition to helping women cope with child care-related problems in increasingly nuclear family units, where they have no help from more experienced older women, these forums are offering advice on income earning. Souls Sisters Abbottabad, for instance, also encourages e-commerce and provides advertisements of entrepreneurial activities. Young mothers often ask for advice on where to look for online work they can do in the vicinity of their home. The oft-repeated answers are Upwork, Fiverr and Toptal.

The ever-growing industry of beauty salons absorbs mainly former domestic workers in urban centres, where they are paid between 100 US dollars and 150 US dollars a month. Women agree to these long hours and low-paying jobs because they get to work in women-only enterprises, where they feel safe. They also make house calls for services like waxing, manicures and pedicures. Through web-based solutions like GharPar (At Our Home), women work as freelance beauty service providers, earning up to 500 US dollars, which allows them better income, more flexibility and the dignity of working for themselves. Even domestic work has moved to digital work in major urban cities, where online forums, like mauqa.online, provide domestic help by the hour. They claim to provide "verified and trained on-demand and temporary maids, cleaners, cooks and babysitters."²¹

All these opportunities, however, are dependent on information and communication technology (ICT) platforms. Pakistan's internet penetration rate is only 22 per cent, and mobile phone use by women is also limited. A 5,000-household survey-based research conducted in Asia and the Global South between April 2017 and February 2018 revealed a stark gender gap in ICT access and use. In Pakistan, among the 15- to 65-year cohort, 57 per cent of

the respondents reported owning a mobile phone, and 55 per cent owned a SIM card, but only 2 per cent owned a laptop or computer. The gender gap stood at a whopping 37 per cent for these households. Internet use reflected the same trend. Among the respondents, 37 per cent indicated internet awareness, 17 per cent reported using the internet, and the gender gap was 43 per cent.²²

The digitalization of the gig economy, therefore, cannot provide opportunities to everyone. Most women cannot take advantage of technology-based work platforms that favour the urban, English-speaking elite. Also, women are more likely to be hired for lower-end jobs, like content writing, than men, who tend to get higher-end jobs, such as IT-related work. It seems, then, that although some women may benefit more from the flexibility allowed by digitalization and the gig economy, they may suffer on quality of jobs.

The façade of informality created by this new form of casual work that comes without the welfare benefits women may need even more than others in the workplace as well as de-skilling, in some cases like the online doctors, is not beneficial for women in the long run. Women also have limited financial inclusion to support home-based entrepreneurial activities. According to FinDex 2017, only 21 per cent of Pakistan's adults have a bank account. The gender gap between account ownership is almost 30 percentage points.²³

Information technology: The IT sector dominates discussions on the future of work. That is because it holds a special promise for women. However, the relevant questions for Pakistan centre around the size of the IT sector, the expectations of growth, the extent of the workforce it employs and the number of women who currently participate in it.

Pakistan ranks fourth globally in IT service provision to overseas clients, with more than 200,000 professionals working in this field.²⁴ According to the Pakistan Software Export Board, there are 2,000 software houses and call centres in Pakistan, with 14 IT parks located in major urban centres. The IT workforce includes project managers, business analysts, software developers, quality assurance engineers, technical writers, graphic designers, web developers and search engine-optimization experts. IT exports increased by 35 per cent during the 2014 fiscal year and by 45 per cent

in 2015 in the areas of telecommunications, outsourcing IT-enabled services and software development. Women represented only a small portion of this growing sector, however, with ratios as low as one woman to six men.²⁵

In 2012, the Pakistan Software Houses Association (P@SHA) surveyed 49 companies, mostly software development organizations, to analyse the role of women in technology. It found that women amounted to 14 per cent of the technology workers, of which 37 per cent were working at mid-career level and nearly 30 per cent worked as software engineers. Additionally, education, the internet, hardware and oil and gas were found to be the most women-friendly IT-related industries, while, interestingly, business process outsourcing and computer software were not. Women faced unfavourable odds when moving up to senior management roles: 41 per cent had 4–15 years of work experience, but only 13 per cent were promoted to senior positions. IT companies with five or more human resource benefits had 18 per cent more women in senior management. The main concern of women working in the IT sector, in the 2012 findings, was that they do not have enough time for social and family responsibilities. And 71 per cent of the companies surveyed reported offering paternity leave, but only 22 per cent of them offered day-care service to their employees. Overall, however, women had positive opinions about the IT sector, suggesting that women need to be encouraged by those already working in the industry.²⁶

Tanwir and Khemka identified several barriers to women's entry into the IT sector in Pakistan. They include a biased education that discourages women from studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects; negative perceptions of marriage that clash with a work life; lack of successful role models; few networking opportunities; and institutional biases, with the government reluctant to push women-friendly initiatives.²⁷

Care work

According to the International Labour Organization, care work encompasses direct and indirect care activities. Personal and relational care activities fall into the direct category, whereas teaching, cooking, cleaning, etc. are more indirect. There is also the distinction of paid and

unpaid. Most of the caring activities women perform in households and communities are unpaid, whereas nurses, teachers, doctors and personal carers are paid care workers. Domestic workers, who provide both direct and indirect care in households, are also part of the care workforce. Globally, the majority of care work is done by women, who are sometimes replaced by more marginalized migrant women workers.²⁸

Pakistan currently requires a low level of care employment because most of the care work is done by women for free. However, increased urbanization, changing family structure from joint to nuclear, increased incidence of disease and disability in society as well as factors like inflation and poverty are pushing women into paid employment, which means that the low level of need may change. Public service provision of care work has the potential to free up some women from the unpaid labour and recruit more women into paid care work. The lady health visitors, lady health workers and community health workers inducted at various points in time by the government for health-related programmes are a case in point. But due to increased privatization and under pressure of structural adjustment programmes, such work is increasingly becoming contractual and, hence, precarious. Nurses, lady health visitors and workers, community health workers and primary school teachers have borne the brunt of such policies and are often protesting for more job security.

The future of work debates in terms of care work centre more around decent work rather than on automation because care work is seen as needing more interpersonal and interactive skills and is thus less susceptible to automation. Also, machines have not yet evolved to a stage where they can surpass or even match the human capability of social interactions that involve effective labour as well as expertise and team management.

Related challenges

Work was traditionally organized around the idea that people move where there are jobs. This paradigm has shifted with digitalization and automation. Now work comes to people. This shift may help some women in Pakistan. But this kind of work needs education and skills training. Pakistan suffers from low literacy levels and skills

development in general, particularly among women. The number of out-of-school children is as high as nearly 5.1 million at the primary level and 6.5 million, nearly 5 million and 6.3 million at the middle, high and higher-secondary levels, respectively. More girls than boys are out of school. In the primary to higher-secondary levels, 49 per cent of the population of girls are out of school, compared with 40 per cent of the population of boys. There are improvements at the tertiary level, with more girls than boys attending university. But this education mostly serves as another worm on the hook in the marriage market instead of translating into employment.

An increasingly technology-dependent future of work requires not only education and skill training but also re-skilling that goes beyond investment in traditional ways of school learning. The state of technical training in Pakistan is abysmal. The government has formed a National Vocational and Technical Training Commission²⁹ (NAVTT) at the federal level and a Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) in all provinces. NAVTT advises the government on policy matters and runs some training programmes, but with limited outreach. Its programmes currently involve 400,000 trainees, of which only a few are women. There is no targeted gender-based programme. The provincial TEVTAs also offer diploma courses in technical fields but only to a limited number of trainees. For example, in 2018, TEVTA Punjab had an enrolment of only around 100,000 students.³⁰

Some researchers see incorporating lifelong learning systems as an answer to coping with the changing nature of work. To create high-performance, lifelong learning systems, the government needs to make significant changes to both the governance and financing of education and training. Establishing a system of lifelong learning requires changes in the scope, content and delivery of education and training. Because of its structural adjustment programmes, the government is already reducing education financing and wants to shift the burden to private providers. Will the corporate sector then invest in learning systems that are beneficial to industry in the future?

To conclude, the future of work in Pakistan needs to be investigated further, with emphasis on lifelong learning and how it can become part of future policy and planning that translates into viable projects.

Future research priorities

As the paper highlights, women are predominantly employed in agriculture, followed by manufacturing and then the service sector in Pakistan. However, the debates involving the impact of digitalization and automation, if any, focus only on the service sector. Even within this sector, urban women are favoured, although they are fewer in number than rural women workers. Research must be encouraged on how women already are incorporated into the agricultural processes and what will happen if these agricultural processes are automated.

Within manufacturing, the garment industry is being encouraged to adopt technology. Because this debate

is in its initial stages, pushing for a women-centred approach is recommended. Most importantly, a dialogue must be set in motion between policy-makers, employers and women (workers, feminist researchers, activists and labour activists), whereby they look into how increased digitalization and automation may impact women. We already know that liberalization, globalization and privatization have worsened the gender gap and increased inequalities globally. An early stake in the future of work debates can push for a women-friendly agenda that will not only help reverse the damages of the informalized global economy but also create a better future for women workers.

Endnotes

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About the author

Aisha Anees Malik is assistant professor at the Centre of Excellence in Gender Studies at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad. She obtained her PhD in 2010 from the University of Cambridge, specializing in gender and social policy.

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P.O. Box 1289
Islamabad, Pakistan

Responsible:


Jochen Hippler | Resident Representative

Sidra Saeed | Programme Coordinator

T +92-51-2803391-4 | F +92 51 2803395

www.fes-pakistan.org

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To order publication:

info@fes-pakistan.org

Production contributors:

Karen Emmons | Copy-edit

Myriam Rueda | Layout design

Kawin Tadtiam | Cover design

Mila Shopova | Production coordinator

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