

Education as gender equalizer: overcoming youth unemployment in Pakistan

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Abstract

Resistance to a positive change brings no change in a society unless its members do not work for it. In many parts of Pakistan female employment is a sensitive cultural issue. In this country the female population is more than 90 million, and quarter of it is youth, but majority of female youth are not master of their own soul because of the low female literacy rate in the country. This study presents an in-depth outlook of female education, unemployment and its consequences for female gender. A detailed description of the factors and forces which are resisting a positive change in the society has also been presented. This paper presents practicable solutions to make female youth economically active, productive and more independent in male dominant society.

Keywords: Education, Female youth, unemployment

Introduction

Pakistan is a lower middle income country with a population of more than 180 million with a growth rate of 1.56%, half of the population live in extreme poverty and the median age of this population is 21 years (The World Bank, 2010). Pakistan is one of the highest female illiterate countries in the world and Pakistani population have only seven years of school life expectancy, here 40% of the men and 65% of the women cannot read and write (UIS, 2010). This is a country where 48 million working age female population is economically inactive and less than ten million females are employed. A country with Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.572, and Gender-related Development Index (GDI) value is only 0.532 which is the lowest in the list of 152 countries (UNDP, 2009). A country where youth¹ make 29% (38 millions) of the working population, half of them are female. In such a challenging country how difficult it is for youth, particularly female youth, to secure their future.

According to ILO data, approximately half of the world population is comprised of females but only 40% of them, with an age of 15+, are economically active. In 1985 this value was at 38.6%; an increase of only 1.4% has been seen during 25 years. Today, 51.6% of female and 77.6% of the male population, with age 15+, is economically active. Among all countries of the world the Gulf countries, which are oil rich countries also, have the lowest female ratio in the labor force: Qatar 11.6%, UAE 15.5%, Iraq 16%, Saudi Arabia 16.3% and Oman 18.2%. On the other hand there are only nine countries in the world where female makes half or more of the total labor force: in Rwanda, Brudi, Lestho, Mozambique and Sierra Leon more than 52% of the total labor force are female, and in Moldova, Lap PDR, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan this figure stands closer to 50%.

Female youth education and employment

Youth unemployment is a global issue and due to the very recent economic recession the situation of youth employment has further aggravated as youth are more adversely affected by unemployment than adults (Katz, 2010). In the Millennium Development Goals youth have been promised for respectable and productive

¹ According to the UNO definition a person between age 15 and 24 years is a youth.

employment. Will this promised be kept? Will there be a change on side of female youth, who are forced to stay at home and to do unpaid work?

Developing countries have the largest shares of youth population; the opportunity for these youths who are ready to enter into the labour market depends on many factors that include economic growth rate, economic development and cultural trends in the concerned countries.

Education plays an important role in the bringing a sustainable change in the society because of this it is regarded as a catalyst for change. The education is equally important for female gender also. It is a fact that gender discrimination is unfavorable for the society because it prevents women from attaining the right to equality, and it also denies realization of their other fundamental rights (Jones, Snelgrove, & Muckosy, 2006). There is no reason to keep women away from the economic activities because female gender is more efficient and productive if human capital is developed in them through education.

Why education?

The scientific studies have found that the returns to female education are higher than those for males (Psacharopoulos G. , 1994), investment in schooling have greater returns on the labor market for women (Pitt, Rosenzweig, & Hassan, Human Capital Investment and the Gender Division of Labor in a Brawn-Based Economy, 2010), a study of 95 countries shows that estimated gender specific returns to schooling are higher for women (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, Returns to investment in education: a further update, 2004). Likewise research has also proved that compared to men, with the same level of education, women have higher socio-economic outcomes when the investment is viewed on the long term basis (ILO 2009, Schultz, 2002; Strauss & Thomas, 1995; King & Hill, 1998). As female human capital has a high potential, so gender equality is prerequisite for economic growth and social development. Without achieving gender equality a sustainable economic development cannot be achieved (Löfström, Gender equality, economic growth and employment, 2009). Above of all women are good for economic growth, and economic growth is good for women (Jones, Snelgrove, & Muckosy, 2006).

Usually it is argued that education is a gender equalizer but cross country data on female education and employment seemingly does not support this idea. In the world, 42% of the countries have female participation rate at tertiary level (ISCED 5 and 6) superior to male but, surprisingly, only in 18% of the world countries female participation rate in the graduate labor market is equal or higher to male. Millennium Development Goal number 3 and Education for All (EFA) Goal 5 are about gender equality in education, employment and empowerment. Due to higher priority given to education both by states and organizations a significant progress toward gender equity in education is evident (Lewis & Lockheed, Inexcusable absence, 2006) but on the employment and empowerment side still a great deal of work has to be done. Females still have a long way to go as they are under-represented in the graduate job market, particularly at key or administrative positions (Lips, Women, Education and Economic participation, 1999).

The gender imbalance

The gender imbalance in job market, in majority of the countries, seemingly reflects the idea that education is neither a catalyst for change nor a gender equalizer if seen in the perspective of gender ratio in higher education and graduate job market in Pakistan and the most of the countries of the world. Neither higher educational qualifications alone do not aid the smooth progress of women's careers (Soesilowat & Salim, The Paradox of Education, Productivity and Career Development, 2010), nor high educational attainment alone cannot promote gender equality and empowerment unless equal economic opportunities are not ensured (Singh & Mitra, Human Capital Attainment and Gender Empowerment: The Kerala Paradox, 2007), while according to the World Gender Gap Report 2010 there is no country in the world that has achieved total gender equality (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010). This indicates that, in the world, there are multiple factors that are resisting the change and neutralizing the gender equalizer property of education; these factors may be social, cultural, political and even economic.

Female youth and unemployment

At present, global youth population has grown to 1.2 billion which make almost 25% of the world's working-age population. Whereas 87% of the youth live in the developing countries and according to recent data, 80 to 90 million (more than 15%) of them are still unemployed (ILO, 2011). On the economic front youth are facing the hard time as youth unemployment rate is approximately three times higher than the adult unemployment rate and youth make up 43.7% of the world's total unemployed population (ILO Data, 2010). There is no gender specific difference in youth unemployment rate as for female youth it is 12.5% while for male it is 12.2% however this differences are stronger in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. In these regions, more and more young women are engaged in unpaid (family, personal, reproductive) work, which affects their participation in paid economic activities (Coenjaerts & et al, 2009).

Like many other countries in Pakistan also, during the first decade of this century the youth population has increased more rapidly than the employment opportunities. Participation rate of youth in the national labour force is 44%; male youth 70% and female youth merely 18%. The gap between male and female youth participation rate is 51% which is far above the regional average gap in South Asia of 34.6% (ILO, 2010). Like many other countries the Youth unemployment rate in Pakistan is 12% (male youth 11% and female youth 15%). The problem of youth unemployment is severe for adolescents as nearly 60% unemployed Pakistanis are of less than 20 years of age. From these numbers one can have an idea of youth plight in Pakistan.

In Pakistan 78 out of 100 women are not economically active or they are engaged in household work while in the world this value is only 24 out of 100 and for men it is only 20%. So in Pakistan only 22% of the female population is in the job market; 32% of them are formal sector while 68% of them are working in the informal sector. The female unemployment rate is 8.7; 7% in rural areas and 18% in urban areas, whereas only 4% male are unemployed in Pakistan (Ministry of Labor Pakistan, 2008).

Female youth unemployment is higher in urban areas and comparatively lower in rural areas; 14% and 12% respectively. This higher rate of female youth inactiveness and unemployment is an economic loss. Including this economically dormant but potential youth into labour force can bring a sizeable change in the society and by cutting the current female youth unemployment rate in half can bring substantial increase in the GDP of the country.

Root causes of the female youth plight

Female education and unemployment is very complex issue in Pakistan so solely from digits one cannot fully gauge the gravity of the problem: what hardships are being faced by female youth, how much resistance they are facing, why do they stay at home, when do they come in a job market? To understand this it is necessary to know Pakistani society first. Due to gender biasness the society in Pakistan is clearly divided into two separate male and female worlds; the female world is like a small planet that has been forced to revolve around a giant body, the male world.

Pakistan is an amalgam of heterogeneous societies which are further classified into different levels, strata and groups on social, political, cultural, economic, geographical and religious basis. In this perspective no society can be called representative of Pakistan. In urban areas higher female participation rate in education and low employment while in rural areas it is inverse. Similarly in middle families females are supposed to rare children while majority of the working women come from the poor families. In most parts of the Baluchistan and the Khyber Pakhtunkha (KPK) provinces, girls have so limited mobility that many of them are not allowed to go to primary schools, what to say of employment, this is practice in vogue in urban areas also.

Why female are not allowed to leave home in Pakistani society? One answer can be the female gender is considered "honour of a family". In this country traditionally the honour of a family lies in the chastity and sacrify of a female member of that family, and it is responsibility of all members of the family, particularly of males, to protect it. And for male members the easiest way, to protect "the honour", is to limit female mobility. This tradition has been accepted and practised by the majority in all parts of Pakistan without any discrimination; rich or poor, well educated or illiterate, urban or rural, religious or secular. This speaks the lack of confidence that prevails in the minds of men. These all practices are more traditional than religious as majority of the females from other religions than Islam also stay at home. Females who make the half of the working age population have been forced to remain unemployed or they are engaged in unpaid work (household work) due to the tradition of restricted female mobility.

Restriction on female mobility results in low level of education and skills which act as a barrier between job seeking female youth and job market. Later on unemployment results in an early marriage, early pregnancies, more household responsibilities this further limits female mobility and she had very little or no chance to do paid work in future. Female youth unemployment has multilevel affects on this already disadvantaged group as it is making them more vulnerable, promoting feelings of exclusion and segregating them from contributing to the national economy.

Female and different regions in Pakistan

South-west province, the Baluchistan, has the lowest female literacy rate in the world. In this province feudal and tribal factor is dominant. Female are realised from very childhood about the so called tribal and feudal values in the name of tradition. Female being the most vulnerable are marginalised part of the society in every walk of life and very basic rights to them are denied. The life of women in the Sind, a southern province, and in the Punjab, eastern province, the life of female in urban areas is little relaxed while in rural areas the conditions for female are more or less the same. The Khyber Pakhtunkha (KPK) where conservative tribal culture rules the brain and brawn of people. This strong tribal system derives its powers from their own version of Islam to justify action. Being bordered with Afghanistan in the northern part of this province is centre of religious orthodoxy,

and extremism. State has a little control over this area so infrastructure is in bad condition and this area is economically least developed. Here the female gender has forgotten part of the society; Schools are being blown out, female education is forbidden; pupils, providers and parents are being stopped. Similarly females have no right to job and female have no say in the society. Here men are majestic masters of the frail faction; poor females. A society where men have everything but women have nothing, even they are not master of their own souls.

In these areas female youth are fearful of violent attacks that have already resulted in the destruction of more than 200 schools in the Swat Valley only (northern part of Pakistan) until end of 2010. As a result the future education of around 125,000 young women has become uncertain. This exclusion of female youth will have long term negative impact on the local economy and social development.

According to Naqvi & Shahnaz (2002) empirical study on the female youth employment in Pakistan 46% female are not permitted by family, 24% do not have time as they are busy with domestic duties, 13% do not want to do work, 7% do not job opportunities (Naqvi & Shahnaz, How do women decide to work in Pakistan?, 2002). "There are considerable differences in levels, as well as trends, of inactivity between the provinces. Male rates range from 29 per cent in the Sindh province up to 38.2 per cent in the KPK. Female rates range from 75.0 per cent in Punjab up to 91.5 per cent in the Sindh. The biggest change over time was observed for young women in Punjab: since the beginning of the century their inactivity rate decreased by 13.6 percentage points." (Ministry of Labor Pakistan, 2008)

Gender based division

Gender based division of societal role are very clearly defined by the culture and tradition; females are suppose to do household duties and home management while male is responsible to perform all tasks related to the outside of home that includes financial and physical needs.

Women are grossly under-reported in the national statistic due to defective definition of female employment, faulty system of data collection, and absence of detailed micro data on women force on national level. The economic value of women's activities in the reproductive sphere (child bearing and rearing) and unpaid work as a family labourer in the productive sphere is not recognized as economic activity and of any worth in national statistics.

In Pakistan 78% females are not employed because the opportunity cost of leaving home, to seek work in a male oriented job market, is too high for the majority of women. As females have to face opposition from the family and higher level of resistance from the society, harassment at work place and sometimes low profile of working women in the society. The other factors that force them to stay away from the work is low wages; they have little to bear the expenses of transport, child care, laundry, purchasing of cooked food for family and to meet other expenses. Consequently they prefer to stay at home to perform traditional unpaid family care duties.

Rural-urban division and female employment

In Pakistan 38% of the female labour force is youth, between age 15 and 24. In Pakistan female youth in rural areas make up a large segment of the total rural female population and these female youth are more active as compared to urban female youth despite of these female in rural areas are often neglected by both government and international agencies. Because of this disregard even today majority of the higher education institutions, vocational and technical education centres are inaccessible for this economically active part of the society. As a result this dejected and forgotten part of the society has limited opportunities to enhance their productivity.

In rural areas more than 67.6 per cent of the female labour force is working in the agriculture sector, similarly 6% in urban areas are working in formal and informal sector. Due to limited female mobility more than 78% of the economically active women, in urban areas, are employed in the informal sector (working outside of factories, usually at home). Informal sector is second largest sector where females prefer to work because in this sector it is comparatively much easier to find and to continue a job but this informal sector is exploiting female workers by giving low wages and absence of facilities. According to sixth issue of Pakistan Employment Trends, employed females in Pakistan earned almost one third of male and this gap is on the rise for last one decade.

In rural areas majority of female labour force above 35 year of age works in fields, while young girls and youths stay are made to stay at home to perform duties at home like working in animals' farms, preparing and dispatching meals for the working family members in fields, doing embroidery, tailoring and other handicraft work.

Level of education and nature employment of a female is largely determined by socio-cultural and economic factors rather than her own aptitude and choice. These socio-cultural constraints include; gender bias in the labour market, lack of family and legal support, little access facilities such as child care, transport etc. similarly limited opportunities for female youth to educate themselves is one major cause of low participation rate in economics as well as higher education rate; less than 3 percent of the age group 17 to 23 years have access to

higher education. Due to low participation rate in education at all levels the job market also receives workers with low education and low job skills.

Corruption and political instability in the country is resulting in reduced confidence of businessmen and investors, slow economic growth, low state priority public development projects, poor delivery of public services, and bad condition of law. (ADB, 2002)

A slow process of change

The process of change is very slow, according to Ministry of Labour and manpower Pakistan, in spite of female friendly legislation and improvement in access to labour market over the last decade, majority of women are still at disadvantaged position compared to men (MoL&M Pakistan, 2009) . Whereas ILO report on global employment trend for women has found “despite a significant widening of employment opportunities, gender equality in terms of labour market access has not yet been achieved in Pakistan and the same is true for conditions of employment. Women who did find work are often confined to the agricultural sector of the economy and in status groups that carry higher economic risk and a lesser likelihood of meeting the characteristics that define decent work, including social protection, basic rights and a voice at work.” (ILO, 2009)

How to solve the problem

Taking steps to build lost confidence of both genders on each other is also of great importance at all levels; home, community and society. These confidence building measures will bring benefits for both genders; enhances male trust in female and gives self-confidence to female, security outside of home and also on the work place. Ultimately this will improve female mobility and help around 30 million female youth to become socially and economically active member of the society.

Both female and male youth are invaluable assets of a country because tomorrow they are going to shoulder all responsibilities. So helping them to acquire necessary competencies to exploit their full potential and providing them better access to job markets where they could play productive role, is the responsibility of every society and a pre-condition for poverty eradication, sustainable development and peace. Massive youth unemployment in Pakistan is promoting feelings of exclusion and worthlessness and it is making youth more helpless and putting their psychological health at risk that may lead to destructive activities. There is also a possibility that these unemployed youth may be used by extremists.

Government may support female youth business, self reliance programs, micro-financing, financial and technical assistance to community to based organizations to develop skills and competencies which are demanded by job markets. State may also play its role by framing policies and by introducing labour laws which may help female youth to find a way to access a job and to overcome disadvantages against experienced male labourers. It may include market skill development before award of degree, flexible terms and conditions, youth quota, internships programs, relaxed rules for youth, on job training facilities, role of the NGOs,

Successful insertion into labour market depends on the level and type of competencies and experience. So to equip female youth with job specific competencies educational experiences can be designed to acquire skills through experiments and variety of activities. Capital in female youth can be developed through professional trainings, by linking institutions with production units and industries as well as with services sector, and by promoting public-private and private-private partnerships.

Similarly female youth can be prepared for the real world by providing learning environments in which they interact with a wide range of people, across age from young and old to peer.

Empowering youths (both male and female) is very important to solve their problems including unemployment. Youth are important members of this society, preparing young people today for tomorrow by giving them necessary skills and knowledge, problem solving capabilities and building confidence would enable them to shoulder the future responsibilities.

The wind of change is blowing now and the Pakistani society is transforming very rapidly. The men from the new generation are ready to accept the realities and they are agreed to give more rights to women including right of employment. A recent research conducted on Pakistani male youth in universities concluded that attitude of educated male youth towards women empowerment is positive. They are in the favour to provide power over economic resources to women.” (Naz, Sami, & Tanveer, 2010)

As the problem of female youth employment is a sensitive cultural issue and female youth unemployment is a hindrance in way of economic development so it demands great care and prudence to tackle this problem to find a sustainable solution;

- Including whole community in the struggle to neutralize extremism and protect female rights
- Using all means to educate society to end female forced unemployment
- To enhance accessibility of female to quality education and job oriented training

- Making female friendly labour policies and laws.
- As female representation in formal sector is very low so it is necessary to reserve quota for female youth and female adult.
- Mobilizing state machinery and encouraging community organisations and NGOs to play active role in female youth training, micro-financing and direct access to local national and international markets.
- Providing more facilities to working women to reduce opportunity cost of leaving home and to increase opportunity cost of doing a job by ensuring wages for female labour equal to male labour

Equal opportunities for female youth to become more productive and increased accessibility to better jobs are the most suitable ways to overcome female youth problem of unemployment. This equity in access to a decent and productive employment will surely help in eradicating poverty, sustaining prosperity and achieving gender parity.

Conclusions

The problem of youth literacy rate and unemployment is severe in Pakistan. Female unemployment is very complex issue in Pakistan. The research supported the idea that gender parity in education and employment is favorable for the society and without achieving gender equality a sustainable economic development cannot be achieved. According to Ministry of Labour and Manpower Pakistan, in spite of female friendly legislation and improvement in access to labour market over the last decade, majority of women are still at disadvantaged position compared to men. The wind of change is blowing now and the Pakistani society is transforming very rapidly. Now a days educated male from the new generation are ready to accept the realities and they are agreed to give equal rights to the female gender through more access to education and employment.

Suggestions

To overcome youth unemployment problem the government should support female education, youth entrepreneurship, self reliance programs, micro-financing, financial and technical assistance to community to based organizations to develop skills and competencies which are demanded by job markets. Likewise the capital in female youth can be developed through professional education and trainings, by linking institutions with production units and industries as well as with services sector, and by promoting public-private and private-private partnerships. Ultimately it will improve female mobility and help around 30 million female youth to become socially and economically active member of the society and education can play a role of gender equalizer.

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