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Women's mobility and labour force participation

Early evidence from Karachi



- In brief:**
- Full employment is an important precept of economic growth. While South Asia has witnessed robust economic growth in recent decades, growth in employment has remained below par regionally.
 - Low employment growth can largely be explained by persistently low female employment and participation rates (Nayar et al., 2012).
 - Female youth Labour Force Participation (LFP) rates in South Asia dropped from 32.5 percent to 22.6 percent between 1991 and 2014 (International Labour Organization, 2015). Within the region, Pakistan has the lowest female LFP rates and urban areas especially perform poorly.
 - Existing literature explains low LFP rates in urban areas of developing countries by human capital constraints, lack of urban transport, labour market discrimination and the care economy.
 - While acknowledging the importance of factors mentioned above, this study uses a different vantage point in explaining low LFP rates by exploring how women's mobility and agency is interlinked, determined or changed by distinct patriarchal norms within their communities, geographic and spatial anxieties due to migrant status and history of ethno-political conflict within the city.

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Motivation for this study

Full employment is an important precept of economic growth. While South Asia has witnessed robust economic growth in recent decades, growth in employment has remained below par regionally.

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Existing literature explains low LFP rates in urban areas of developing countries by human capital constraints, lack of urban transport, labour market discrimination, and the care economy. While acknowledging the importance of factors mentioned above, this study uses a different vantage point in explaining low LFP rates by exploring how women's mobility and agency are interlinked, how women's mobility is determined or changed by distinct patriarchal norms within their communities, geographic and spatial anxieties due to migrant status, and history of ethno-political conflict within Karachi.

About the study

This study was conducted in Karachi, Pakistan's main economic hub and sole mega-city. According to the recent census, the city's population is estimated to be 14.9 million (Population and Housing Census, 2017). Karachi contributes 12-15 percent of Pakistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank, 2018), which signifies the city's economic importance. The city has experienced several mass migrations since the partition in 1947, and is also the most ethnically heterogeneous cities in the country. In terms of women's mobility, this could imply that patriarchal norms, underpinned by perceptions of class and ethnicity, translate into similar but also diverse implications for new and former migrant women hailing from different communities across the country.

The study undertakes a qualitative exploration in three distinct working-class localities in Karachi, namely Lyari, Baldia, and Korangi. The three urban sites represent cross-sections of ethnic diversity and density along with history of migration and political conflict. Lyari is one of the oldest settlements in Karachi and houses a concentration of Baloch and Katchi communities, Baldia is a pre-dominantly Pashtun community, and Korangi is an ethnically heterogeneous neighbourhood with concentrations of Sindhi and Urdu-speaking populations. The sample for the study attempts to capture age, ethnicities, and varying migration statuses within these communities.

Ten in-depth Key Informant Interviews (KII's) were conducted with women, stratified across age, ethnicity, employment, and marital status, in each of the three sites. These KII's captured information on migrant status, life, educational and employment history, and experiences of agency and mobility in the city and elsewhere. These were complimented with one male KII at each site in order to understand political and ethnic history. In addition, two Focus Group Discussions (FGD's) (one female and one male) were conducted for triangulation of perceptions, expectations, and experiences.

The study attempts to address the following four overarching research questions.

- 1) What are the constraints and reasons for low female LFP in Karachi?
- 2) How does migration to Karachi impact the agency and mobility of women from different regions in

Pakistan? What migration-related factors affect women's LFP in an urban context?

- 3) How do patriarchal structures within ethnic groups and communities (homogenous and heterogeneous) transform post-migration and impact female members' mobility and agency? How is this different from environments where the migrants originally come from?
 - What is the degree to which change takes place, if at all, and what is the pace of the change (static or dynamic patriarchy)?
- 4) Are norms associated with mobility and threats of violence subject to change, depending on whether members of a community are first- or second-generation migrants? How does age affect employment?

Findings

Lyari

Most young Baloch and Katchi women preferred to complete their education and work. Two-thirds of younger women have at least completed intermediate exams and nearly all aspired to hold undergraduate degrees if they did not already. Respondents did not report restrictions on mobility from patriarchal figures in the household or street harassment by strangers to the same degree as other sites. Surprisingly, some of the Balochi women reported ease of mobility and relative lack of restrictions around issues of respectability and safety. This is indicative of norms improving overtime, in conjunction with the length of the migration period. In terms of hindrance to employment, most women reported discrimination due to ethnicity rather than gender. They also reported rampant racism against residents of Lyari.

Baldia

Women earning income was considered disgraceful and dishonourable because men were expected to earn a living for the household. Even income issues did not mobilise women or let men allow their women to work. The only instances women resorted to working were in the face of extreme poverty as a result of the absence of a male patriarchal figure and breadwinner in the household, but this came at the expense of disrepute in the community. Even older women barely held jobs. Similarly, in terms of education, households frequently stopped their daughter's education after primary school or once they reached puberty.

Korangi

Similar to Lyari, the long assimilated Urdu-speaking and Sindhi women did low-paying private school teaching jobs. If they had income issues, they would take up better paying and more demanding factory jobs. Older women took up work as cleaners in other households but this was not considered respectful. In contrast, newer Sindhi migrant women were not allowed to work at all, especially if they were young. This was due to the strangeness of the new and unfamiliar city.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

- Patriarchal arrangements relative to migrant status and cultural notions of respectability determine the extent of women's LFP.
- Relegation of women's LFP only to certain acceptable occupations or by keeping women at home entirely indicates that gender norms play a role in determining women's LFP.
- In an urban context, women's mobility is affected by distinct patriarchal norms within communities, geographic and spatial anxieties due to migrant status and histories of conflict.
- This study suggests a differentiated employment strategy concerning women's LFP, underpinned by social-policy that is context specific to communities.

References

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