KEY POINTS

• In certain contexts, cultural and social norms surrounding women’s responsibilities at home, their travel outside the home, and their interaction with unrelated men create multiple barriers to their labor force participation.

• Based on a representative survey of firms in Lahore, this brief analyzes the availability of basic workplace features that could help women overcome some of those barriers, such as separate toilets and prayer areas, safe transport to work, and predictable work hours.

• The findings suggest that financial support and other incentives to invest in basic facilities for female employees—particularly for smaller firms with limited resources—would increase the number of female-friendly workplaces.

• The implementation of more fixed working hours for female employees and the provision of safe and secure transport options for working women would encourage more women to work.

• Stricter government policies toward employer provision of compulsory maternity and paternity leave could help many women with childcare responsibilities to return to the labor force after childbirth.

How Female-Friendly Are Workplaces in Urban Pakistan?

Alieha Shahid
Project Manager
Duke University

Elisabetta Gentile
Senior Economist
Asian Development Bank

Lala Rukh Khan
Project Manager
Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan

KateVyborny
Associate Director
DevLab@Duke University

Tehneiat Amjad Butt
Research Associate
Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has one of the lowest rates of female labor force participation in Asia. Only 22% of women participated in the labor force in Pakistan in 2019 compared to an average of 24% in the South Asia region, and 59% in the East Asia and Pacific region (World Bank, 2019). Cultural and social norms surrounding women’s responsibilities at home, their travel outside the home, and their interaction with unrelated men create multiple barriers for women who may be eager to enter the workforce. While the lack of safe opportunities for transport acts as a constraint for mobility to work for many women (Field et al., 2018; Field and Vyborny, 2022), the lack of viable options for childcare limits others from working (Tanaka and Muzones, 2016).

In such a setting, it becomes especially important to ensure that women who do manage to overcome these barriers and enter the workforce find workplace environments that they deem safe and comfortable.

For instance, a 2021 study in urban Pakistan found that information about workplace attributes allows women to navigate their job search in a way that can mitigate the costs associated with social norms (Subramanian, 2021). Another 2021 study found that policies increasing the provision of childcare services increases female labor force participation in low- and middle-income countries (Halim et al., 2021). The provision of basic workplace services and policies—such as separate toilet spaces, separate prayer areas, transport to work, and predictable work hours—could be fundamental to retaining female talent in organizations and encouraging other women to enter the labor market.
In this policy brief, results are used from a representative sample of firms surveyed across Lahore, Pakistan, to understand which of these provisions are offered by employers in urban Pakistan to female employees, and how the availability of these provisions varies with employers’ interest in hiring women. These results shed light on how comfortable workspaces in Lahore currently are for women and the extent to which they can be made more favorable, both for women who are currently employed, and those who wish to join the labor force.

To study these and other questions related to the labor market in urban Pakistan, researchers at the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan created a job search platform in Lahore, Pakistan, called Job Talash in 2017. This platform—which is still active in 2022—generates data for over 10,000 job seekers and 1,200 firms in Lahore. The sample for the Job Talash service is drawn from Lahore, Pakistan, a metropolis of over 10 million people. For the initial enrollment of job seekers into Job Talash, 50,000 households were listed in a clustered random sample of households, and each household member was asked if she or he was interested in signing up for the service. Detailed information was gathered from interested individuals on their education, work experience, and job search preferences.

A representative sample of firms across Lahore was listed for enrollment into the Job Talash platform. Enumerators offered these firms the opportunity to enroll in the Job Talash service and list vacancies with it. The sample of firms signed up for the service represents the diversity of the private sector in the metropolitan area and ranges from large, formal firms to small, informal firms. Apart from vacancy information, the survey asked firms about working hour patterns and policies at their organizations, as well as the basic facilities and services available for female staff. For each new vacancy listed on the platform, matching applicants were identified and informed about the vacancies, after which the curriculum vitae of interested applicants were sent to the firm. Follow-up data was collected from firms on applicant interviews and placement.

From August 2017 to October 2021, the system generated data on 1,151,407 potential job matches sent to applicants. The data used in this brief is from August 2018 to February 2020, which is the period that outreach started for the representative sample. It does not include the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic period, during which there was a decrease in the ads listed on the Job Talash platform, as well as job application rates for both male and female subscribers. As of 2022, Job Talash data is being used to further study the impact of COVID-19 on firms and job seekers, as well as the differential impact on employment and job searches of women and men.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

To discuss female labor force participation in Pakistan, it is important to first understand the social and cultural context of the region. Pakistan has a conservative and patriarchal society that imposes several restrictions on the work opportunities available to women and their ability to take up those opportunities. Figure 1 shows the combination of social norms and limited opportunities that women report as reasons for not working.

Some of the gaps in gender labor force participation can be explained by social norms that constrain women’s choices. Men are traditionally considered the primary income earners at home, and it is generally believed that if jobs are scarce, employers prefer men over women (Tanaka and Muzones, 2016). There is also a gender pay gap whereby women consistently earn less than men, even with the same education levels. According to the labor force surveys of 2013−2014 and 2014−2015, there was a gender pay gap of 26% across the entire economy; meaning that women were paid 74% of what men were paid (Khan, 2017). The sample group findings showed that most employers do not hire women at all, reinforcing the norm that there are specific costs associated with hiring women.

Apart from limited opportunities, women in Pakistan also face several constraints in the household that prevent them from taking up these opportunities. Similar to advanced economies, women

---

1 Public sector firms were included in the listing but did not sign up for Job Talash because they have their own recruitment processes. Hence, the public sector is not represented in the survey.

---

Figure 1: Women’s Reported Reasons for Not Working

- Domestic responsibilities: 36%
- Husband or father does not give permission to work outside home: 37%
- Not enough opportunities: 8%
- Woman does not want to work outside home: 16%

How Female-Friendly Are Workplaces in Urban Pakistan?

Women are primarily responsible for household and childcare duties, which leaves them little time to work outside the home (Bittman et al., 2003). Women who do work outside the home are still primary caretakers for childcare and housework (Sayer, 2005). Women’s work is also heavily stigmatized and jobs that involve interacting with unrelated men or working night shifts are considered “not respectable” in many contexts and are often prohibited (Munoz Boudet et al., 2013). In such a patriarchal setup, women have the additional burden of proving to their families that their workplace and its environment are respectable and safe. The intermingling of the sexes is strongly regulated and—as in other developing economies—there is a fear of women interacting with unknown men in the workplace (Jayachandran, 2019). These norms are also backed up by religions such as Islam—the majority religion in Pakistan—that endorses the concept of purdah or female seclusion (Jayachandran, 2019).

Women’s labor force participation is also affected by their ability to get to work. Social norms that prevent women from moving in public spaces also prevent them from leaving the home without a male relative, and social taboos prevent them from riding bicycles or motorbikes by themselves. Additionally, security concerns about traveling at night, cultural norms that discourage women from being outside the home at night, and the widespread prevalence of harassment discourage women from accessing public transport (Sajjad et al., 2017). This limits the overall opportunities women have access to.

Because of these structural issues and strong cultural norms, women’s labor force participation has been consistently quite low. During 2013−2014, the labor force participation rate for women in Pakistan was only 22.2%, while for men it was 68.1% (Government of Pakistan, 2016). Figure 2 compares women’s labor force participation in Pakistan to a sample of South Asian, East Asian, and Southeast Asian countries and shows that only India has a comparable level.

Female labor force participation is higher in rural areas (28.9%), while in urban areas it is much lower at 10.2% (Government of Pakistan, 2016). This is probably because agriculture is treated as a family occupation in rural areas, so female household members are expected to participate and are, therefore, considered employed.

**FINDINGS**

The representative sample consisted of firms with varied preferences for hiring and recruitment. Overall—in the sample of employers—only 21% of firms had any females currently working in their organization (Figure 3). Among the firms that had any female employees, two-thirds of them were female-dominated, meaning that more than half of their employees were female. Apart from these firms, 9% of firms expressed a willingness to hire women even though they currently didn’t have any female employees. Many (78%) of these firms had less than 6 employees, while none of them had more than 25 employees, which suggests that most firms that expressed a willingness to hire women are smaller in size.

There was also gender segregation by industry and occupation type in the sample. Women employees were more likely to be found in traditionally female-dominated industries like education. More than 60% of employees of firms in the education industry are likely to be women (Figure 4). However, in traditionally male-dominated industries like manufacturing, less than 10% of their employees are women.

---

**Figure 2: Female Labor Force Participation in Developing Asian Economies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pakistan</th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>PRC</th>
<th>Viet Nam</th>
<th>Nepal</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LFPR = labor force participation rate, PRC = People’s Republic of China.

Notes:
1. Series female labor force participation rate (% of female population ages 15+) [modeled International Labour Organization estimate].
2. Countries: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the PRC, the Philippines, and Viet Nam.


---

**Figure 3: Female Employees and Interest in Hiring**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No women employees, no interest in hiring</th>
<th>No women employees but open to hiring women</th>
<th>Some women employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of firms</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on a sample of 813 firms that signed up to Job Talash.

Source: Authors.
This gender segregation also held for the job vacancies listed on Job Talash. The employers were asked to specify their gender preference for the position while listing the vacancy, after which application information was shared with them. Similar trends also emerged here. For jobs like teachers and parlor employees, there was a relative preference for female candidates. However, for traditionally male-dominated occupations like electricians and technicians, over 90% of the employers preferred to hire a male candidate (Figure 5).

Against the backdrop of this gender segregation by industry and by occupation, the following subsections explore the job and workplace characteristics that may deter women from entering the labor force in urban Pakistan.

Working Hours and Flexibility

Late working hours—outside of 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.—are likely to create an unfavorable environment for female workers. For this reason, the decision of many women of whether to work might depend on having work hours that do not go beyond 7 p.m. In the sample, 82% of the firms had late working hours. Of these firms, 52% had working hours beyond 9 p.m., while 48% of them ended their operations between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. The nature of work a firm does and the industry it belongs to likely determines its working hours. In the sample, wholesale and retail trade, other services, and hospitality had the highest share of firms that had late working hours (Figure 6). Firms with late working hours included general stores, workshops, salons, and tailors, which generally remain open beyond 5 p.m. Similarly, the job vacancies listed on Job Talash showed that occupations like lab assistants, doctors and nurses, cooks, and electricians are more likely to have late working hours compared to jobs like teachers or administrative office jobs that are more likely to have regular working hours (Figure 7).

In the sample, firms with female employees were less likely to have late working hours compared to firms with no female employees (Figure 8). However, over 60% of workplaces with female employees still had working hours beyond 7 p.m.

Firm size was also found to affect the kind of hours employees are expected to work. In the sample, larger firms were more likely to operate within regular working hours (Figure 9). This might be because smaller firms are generally less structured and formalized,
so employees in these organizations may have greater flexibility to come in late or step out during work hours, and then compensate for this time beyond standard working hours. Data also showed that larger firms are more open to hiring women, so firms that are open to hiring women likely have regular working hours.

**Services for Female Employees in the Workplace**

In addition to working hours, the provision of certain facilities in the workplace also plays a role in creating an inclusive environment for females. In a conservative society like Pakistan—where the intermingling of the sexes is strongly regulated—having a gender-segregated toilet and prayer area is considered essential for women. Therefore, the sample of firms is split into three categories: (i) firms with no female employees and no interest in hiring women, (ii) firms with no female employees but open to hiring women, and (iii) firms with some female employees (Figure 10). This helps determine whether workplaces in Lahore with female employees are more likely to offer those facilities and services that create a more inclusive environment for women. In particular, firms were asked whether they provide four key items: separate toilets, a separate prayer area, maternity or paternity leave, and a pick-and-drop service. Around 50% of the workplaces that have female employees or are interested in hiring women said they have separate toilets. Conversely, less than 10% of firms that were not interested in hiring women have a separate toilet facility. There were similar patterns for separate prayer areas, although the percentage was slightly higher across all three employer categories; this might be because toilets are much more expensive to build for employers than prayer areas.

Sample firms were also asked if they provide benefits like maternity and paternity leave. Only 25% of the firms in the sample that had female employees offer maternity and paternity leave (Figure 10). This might act as a disincentive for many women to continue in the labor force after they have a child.

In addition to this, employers were asked if they offer pick-and-drop transport services to female employees. A dedicated pick-and-drop service to and from the workplace addresses women’s safety concerns and is likely to reduce the risk of harassment that exists on public transport. Less than 5% of the firms that have female employees offered a pick-and-drop service, meaning that most women must arrange their transport to work.
Overall, 62% of the firms in the sample offered none of these services, while only 0.5% of them offered all four. Additionally, only 5% of them offered at least three of these services. This suggests that very few employers in Lahore are likely to offer these services to their employees.

The study found that as firm size increases, firms are more likely to offer all these services to employees. For example, more than 65% of firms with more than 25 employees offer a separate toilet facility for women, while only 15% of the firms with less than 6 employees offer this facility (Figure 11).

Female-dominated industries are more likely to offer these services compared to male-dominated industries. Industries like education, financial services, and communications are more likely to offer at least one of the services (Figure 12). Industries that are less likely to offer any include wholesale, manufacturing, and food services, which tend to be male-dominated industries.

The employer survey did not include questions on daycare provision because daycare facilities offered by employers are almost nonexistent in the workplace culture of Pakistan, where most employers cannot even provide much simpler and cheaper necessities such as women’s bathrooms. Nonetheless, because childcare responsibilities fall disproportionately on women and often restrict women’s ability to work, the provision of childcare services at the workplace is one of the fundamental benefits an employer can offer their female workers to enable them to work and retain employment.

---

**Figure 10: Services for Women in the Workplace by Interest in Hiring Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No women employees, no interest in hiring</th>
<th>No women employees but open to hiring women</th>
<th>Some women employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separate toilet</td>
<td>Separate prayer area</td>
<td>Pick and drop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity or paternity leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on a sample of 813 firms that signed up to Job Talash, 572 had no female employees and no interest in hiring any, 71 had no female employees but were open to hiring them, and 170 had some female employees.

Source: Authors.

**Figure 11: Services for Women in the Workplace by Employee Size**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&lt;=5</th>
<th>6–10</th>
<th>11–25</th>
<th>&gt;=26</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separate toilet</td>
<td>Separate prayer area</td>
<td>Maternity or paternity leave</td>
<td>Pick and drop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on a sample of 813 firms that signed up to Job Talash, 572 had no female employees and were not interested in hiring any, 71 had no female employees but were open to hiring them, and 170 had some female employees.

Source: Authors.

**Figure 12: Services for Women in the Workplace by Industry**

- Financial, insurance act.
- Education
- Information, communication
- Scientific technical act.
- Real estate act.
- Manufacturing
- Human health, social work act.
- Accommodation, food service act.
- Transportation, storage
- Wholesale, retail trade, repair
- Other service act.

act. = activities.

Notes:
1. Based on a sample of 813 firms that signed up to Job Talash.
2. This graph represents firms offering at least one of the following services: separate toilets, separate prayer areas, maternity and paternity leave, and pick and drop.

Source: Authors.
CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A 2022 study that uses data from Job Talash shows that the gender gap favoring men arises upstream in the job search process, when firms set their demand-side criteria of the types of job seekers they would consider, and job seekers set their supply-side criteria of the types of job ads they would consider (Gentile et al. 2022).

Overall, only 30% of employers in Lahore from the representative sample were interested in employing women (Figure 3). With this very crucial supply-side constraint, it is paramount to consider how the workplace can be made more inclusive and comfortable for women to increase their labor force participation. The provision of a female-friendly environment—characterized by separate toilets, separate prayer areas, pick-and-drop services, and maternity leave—is strongly mediated by the firm's size and the nature of the job, with larger firms much more able to include gender considerations in their organizations and provide female-friendly facilities and work hours. Lack of basic provisions such as a separate toilet and daytime working hours are likely to be important deterrents for women who wish to enter the workforce but perceive that the workplace environment cannot accommodate their needs. Even for the sample firms that were interested in hiring female employees, less than 50% offer a separate toilet facility for women. Similarly, almost half of the firms that do employ female employees are not able to provide a separate prayer area for them. If firms want to employ and retain female employees, there is a need to invest in gender-sensitive basic workplace infrastructure and policies targeted toward making women feel safe and comfortable. Research suggests that only larger firms are investing in creating female-friendly workspaces, whereas in this sample an overwhelming majority of employers who do not have female employees but are interested in hiring females are small firms that may not have the financial cushion or incentive to invest in female-friendly facilities for their employees. Financial support and other incentives to such firms on the margin could potentially encourage them to make that investment.

Another policy direction aimed at encouraging more women to work could also be to implement more fixed working hours for female employees such that they would not have to work beyond 6 p.m. This would allow women and their family members to know that they can reliably return home before nighttime, which could further increase their chances of retaining employment. Similarly, stricter government policies toward employer provision of compulsory maternity and paternity leave could also assist many women with childcare responsibilities to return to the labor force after childbirth.

Public transport is also lacking, and women have a hard time accessing existing transportation options due to security concerns and social taboos regarding the intermingling of sexes. Thus, the provision of safe and secure transport options for working women through employer-led or public-private partnership initiatives could alleviate some of these problems faced by women which prevents them from pursuing job opportunities. Data from the Job Talash platform are being used to conduct a study that quantifies the costs and benefits of transport on women’s mobility and labor force participation by offering door-to-door pick-and-drop services from home to places of employment for Job Talash subscribers. Results from this study will help to understand the extent to which women's mobility is limited in urban Pakistan and assist policymakers in designing transport systems that can alleviate these constraints.

While the provision of gender-sensitive infrastructure, maternity policies, and regular work hours can be effective and easy-to-implement first steps in reforming workplace cultures in Pakistan to become more female-friendly, the second step in the direction of such reform would be the provision of childcare services. This would be a much more costly intervention for employers to introduce compared to the ones discussed in this brief. Despite regulations in Pakistan that mandate employers to provide daycare facilities if there are more than 50 female employees at the workplace, very few employers provide this facility (Mahfooz, 2019). Future research aims to explore the constraint of childcare on women’s employment and reforms that could ease this constraint for female job seekers.

Further work using the Job Talash data to guide gender-based policy making in Pakistan is underway. Researchers at Duke University and the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan are conducting multiple randomized controlled trials using the Job Talash infrastructure to further explore frictions in the labor market and how they affect women differently than men. In one of these experiments, the effect of misreporting work experiences on the job search process for both men and women will be measured, as well as the hiring behavior of firms. In another experiment, the impact of offering active encouragement to the job search efforts of individuals who are on the margin of participation in the labor force is being investigated. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have also been using Job Talash data to compare the pre- and post-pandemic job search behavior of job seekers and the hiring behavior of firms. The results of these studies will be significant for revealing the obstacles confronting female job seekers in urban Pakistan who wish to enter the labor force and for informing policies to alleviate these constraints.

REFERENCES


S. Tanaka and M. Muzones. 2016. Female Labor Force Participation in Asia: Key Trends, Constraints, and Opportunities. ADB Briefs No. 71. Manila: ADB.