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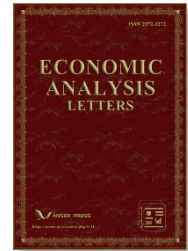
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## The dynamics of traditions and women's employment: Evidence from a developing country

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### ABSTRACT

The workforce participation rate, and hence the level of employment, for women in Pakistan is among the lowest in South Asia – standing at 25 percent in 2023. Conventional explanations attribute this to poor skills and cultural norms of families and society at large. Empirical work has established that low levels of education, and community attitudes regarding gender roles, hinder women's labor force participation. Ethnographic work suggests that household rules – family culture – on who makes decisions about opportunities for married women to work outside of the home for pay – profoundly impact female employment. This is due to the limited availability of data pertaining to explicit assessments of familial traditions that are pertinent to women's participation in the workforce beyond their domestic sphere. Drawing on data from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM): 2005-2006 – which provides information, from married women, on who in the family decides if they can work – we address this shortcoming in the literature. We find that in families where the decision lies clearly, and exclusively, in the hands of males, married women are 18-19 percent less likely to be employed than if the family culture is for married women – alone – to make this decision. Moreover, this is a much larger deterrent to work than poor education and residential location.

### KEYWORDS

Family traditions; women's employment; household's decision making; PSLM

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## 1. Introduction

Pakistan is the world's fifth most-populous country with 220 million people in 2023. It ranks near the bottom – 161st position among 191 nations – on the United Nations Human Development Index, and 37 percent of Pakistanis live at or below the poverty line of \$3.65 per day for lower-middle-income countries established by the World Bank (Meyer 2023). The workforce participation rate for women in Pakistan is 25 percent in 2023. This is among the lowest in South Asia, and globally, and likely contributes to poverty in Pakistan. Isran and Isran (2012) contend that women in Pakistan's labor force participation, and hence employment, is impeded by poor education and training along with an array of social and cultural forces at both the community and family level. According to Croke K, et al. (2023), women face obstacles in accessing and sustaining employment in the formal sector due to limited educational opportunities, mobility constraints, and gender-based stereotypes.

In Pakistan 97% of the people adhere to the Muslim faith, families are typically extended across generations, and the family patriarch has authority over family members. Kabeer (1999) and more recently Jayachandran (2021) have argued that in this context the family patriarch exercises this power by establishing and applying family rules – synonymous with family culture – regarding the decision-making process. These family rules are expected to govern the activities of household members in a wide range of spheres including prospects for women to work outside of the home for pay.

A number of qualitative, ethnographic, studies (Khan et al. 2021; Amir and Durrani 2019; Rizvi et al. 2014; Bhatti and Jeffery 2012; Qaiser 2022; Khatwani 2017) provide a window into how household social norms – often referred to as household culture or family rules – profoundly impact the lives of girls and married women in Pakistan, including the possibility to participate in the labor force. Cigno et al. (2021) posit that economists are increasingly aware that family members' actions may be constrained by household rules. However, according to Amir et al. (2018) the magnitude of the impact structural barriers emanating from the household have on opportunities for Pakistani women to join the labor force – especially those linked to parents and parents-in-law – is lacking due to data limitation. Drawing on data from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM): 2005-2006 – which provides information on household rules or culture over who in the family makes decisions over whether women in the household can work for wages outside of the home – we address this shortcoming in the literature. Married female survey respondents stated their family traditions from various possibilities - who has been handed responsibility over their ability to work.<sup>1</sup>

This study advances our understanding of the determinants of female employment in Pakistan in two ways. First, we offer evidence of the impact of household rules on female work. Second, given these estimates we can assess the importance of this social norm –family culture – relative to factors previously identified as important including – a women's education, age, family type, and residential location.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Family Rules Regarding Female Employment

There were 15,453 households chosen to participate in the PSLM: 2005-2006. Our analysis sample contains 15,524 married women, age 15-49, living in these households. They reported their family's rule – typically put in place by the family patriarch (i.e., senior male in the household) – for who in the household has been handed responsibility over their ability to work.<sup>3</sup> We utilize this data to create a set of binary indicators that reveal a variety

<sup>1</sup> For further details, [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/pslm/publications/pslm2005\\_06/pslm\\_2005-06.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/pslm/publications/pslm2005_06/pslm_2005-06.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent review of the quantitative literature on female labor force participation in Pakistan see Ali and Jamil (2023). Other helpful papers include: Andlib and Khan (2018), and Malik and Jujahid (2019).

<sup>3</sup> Female respondents in the PSLM had the option to report that they are “too old to work” and they “have no interest in work.” We include indicator variables for each of these situations – so those observations remain in the analysis sample to increase the accuracy of our estimates of the other variables – but we do not consider them as types of family culture

of family traditions about women in their households working outside the home for money. Table 1 shows the distribution of family rules – regulations – regarding female employment based on the family's decision-making structure as perceived by married female respondents in our analysis sample.

According to column 2 of Table 1, 50% of the married women in our sample live in a household where the family patriarch alone decides if she can work outside the home. Furthermore, another 24% of married women live in a household where the family patriarch and his spouse (i.e., the family matriarch) together make decisions about married female employment. Only 4% of households have a culture or family rule that a married woman should be consulted in deciding if she can work outside the home for compensation. Finally, in 9% of households, married women report that they – alone – can determine if they work in the labor market.

**Table 1.** Family Rules Towards Married Female Employment, Full Sample and by Labor Force Status.

| Family Rules  | Proportions     |              |                 |
|---|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|
|   | Full Sample (%) | Employed (%) | Not Working (%) |
| Head/Father of the household decides alone                                  | 54              | 26           | 42              |
| Head/Father and other male members decide                                   | 25              | 2            | 4               |
| Head/Father in consultation with his/her spouse                             | 2               | 36           | 36              |
| Other combinations of persons decide  | 2               | 1            | 1               |
| Head/Father and spouse of the head in consultation with the woman concerned | 4               | 2            | 2               |
| Head/Father in consultation with the woman concerned                        | 1               | 3            | 2               |
| Woman herself   | 8               | 26           | 7               |
| Too old to work   | 1               | 1            | 2               |
| Woman concerned has no interest in work                                     | 3               | 3            | 4               |
| Number of Observations  | 15,524          | 14,064       | 1460            |

Table Notes: Data source; Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM); 2005-2006.

In addition, we separated the data into two sub-samples – married women who are employed and those not working – and present the distribution by family rule. Although 50 percent of the households are ones where the family patriarch alone makes the decision if a married woman may work for pay, these households only account for 27% of the employed women. Meanwhile, 26% of working women reside in the 9 percent of families where a woman alone makes this decision. These unconditioned means suggests that restrictive family rules or culture, may substantial constrain female employment.

### 3. Empirical Procedures

In order to gauge the effect of household rules – family culture over decision making related to married female employment – we estimate an employment function. The dependent variable is *Employment*.  $Employment = 1$  if the  $i^{th}$  married woman reports, at the time of the PSLM Survey, that she works for income outside the home, 0 otherwise.

$$Employment_i = \psi(X_i) + \phi(FamilyRules_{ij}^{Working}) + \eta_i \#$$

$FamilyRules_{ij}^{Working}$  entails a series of binary indicators that capture different family norms ( $j$ ) – cthe ulture of the household – regarding who makes the determination if a married woman in the family can work for wages in the labor market outside of the household. The variable  $X_i$  includes an array of factors – control variables – that are also expected to influence the employment of married women given the existing literature on female employment in Pakistan.

We estimate the Employment function for married women in Pakistan, using Probit since the dependent

towards female employment.

variable is binary. The coefficient estimates from our probit regression are presented in Table 2, and can be interpreted as the effect of a variable – holding all of the other variables at their sample mean – on the probability a married woman is employed.

#### Analysis Sample Features:

The values of the control variable reveal the contours of our analysis sample. In our analysis sample, 13% of married women live in a nuclear family while 87% reside in an extended family. The average extended family contains 9 adults aside from the wife and her husband, and eighty-seven percent of married women who live in an extended family report that their mother-in-law lives with them in the household. Only 13% of married women are childless. Married women with children, across both household types (nuclear and extended), have 4 offspring living with them on average. The average age of our sample of married women is 32.

Seventy-one percent of the married women reported that they never attended formal school, while 15% completed some schooling and 14% accumulated more than 8 years of formal education. Their husbands were 38 years old on average, and far fewer of them – 38% – had no education. Twenty-nine percent of the husbands have some education and a third completed more than 8 years of formal schooling.

Punjab is the most common province of residence for the respondents in our sample (37%) and a quarter live in Sindh, while the smallest share of our sample lived in Baluchistan (15%). Most of the women in our sample lived in a rural area – only 38% lived in an urban locale.

## 4. Empirical Results and Discussion

Our estimates of the Employment function for married women in Pakistan are presented in Table 2. The coefficient estimates for the six binary indicators used to identify families that have implemented different household rules or cultures in the decision-making process over female employment prospects, relative to the reference category – a family setting in which the woman reports that she alone has the authority to make this decision – are all negative and significant at the 99% confidence level. Thus, family rules are important determinants – generally impediments, since only 9 percent of women are in families where they have full autonomy to make the decision about working – of the likelihood that a married women works outside of the home for pay.

A striking finding is that in families in which the decision lies clearly – and exclusively – in the hands of males, the impediment to working for married women is greatest. For instance, married women in families where the Head/Father of the household decides alone if a married woman can work, are 19 percent less likely to be employed than women in families where married women make this decision by themselves. Similarly, women residing in families where the Head/father and other male members of the household exclusively decide if a married woman can work, are 18.4 percent less likely to be working for pay than women in the reference group with the autonomy to make this decision.

Our findings also reveal that married women in Pakistan are significantly less likely to be working outside of the home for pay if they: or their husband are very poorly educated (less than 8 years of formal schooling), live in an extended family, have numerous 6 or more children, are relatively young, are from a high SES family, reside in a rural area, and live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Baluchistan. However, an inspection of the coefficient estimates reported in Table 2 reveals that these factors, touted in the literature as the most important determinants of female labor force activity (Isran and Isran 2012; Andlib and Khan 2018; Malik and Mujahid 2019; Riaz and Nadeem 2019; Cheema et al. 2021; and Faridi et al., 2009) are much smaller in magnitude than restrictive family rules.

## 5. Conclusions

Our findings reveal that familial constraints, in the form of household rules or culture, are the primary obstacle impeding women's participation in work outside of the home for pay. Households with a family culture or norm that turns decision-making on women's employment over to men exclusively, or have a rule that requires other members of the family to join married women in making this decision – those limiting her decision-making agency over work – exhibit relatively low levels of female employment. Existing literature has asserted it is poor personal

**Table 2.** Determinants of Female Employment.

|  | Coefficients | Std. Err. |
|--|--------------|-----------|
| Family Rules (Reference category – woman herself)                                |              |           |
| Head/Father-in-law of the household decides alone                                | -0.190***    | 0.012     |
| Head/Father and other male members decide  | -0.184***    | 0.021     |
| Head/Father in law in consultation with his/her spouse                           | -0.127***    | 0.012     |
| Other combination of persons decide  | -0.098***    | 0.035     |
| Head/Father in law & spouse of the head/Father in law in consultation with women | -0.152***    | 0.023     |
| Head/Father in law consultation with the woman concerned                         | -0.141***    | 0.023     |
| Too old to work  | -0.216***    | 0.035     |
| Woman concerned has no interest in work  | -0.220***    | 0.019     |
| Household structure  |              |           |
| Number of children   | 0.084*       | 0.048     |
| Number of children squared   | -0.008*      | 0.005     |
| Adult extended family members  | -0.0004      | 0.005     |
| Extended family  | -0.080*      | 0.045     |
| Mother in law (present)  | 0.015        | 0.039     |
| Female respondent (Reference category – No education)                            |              |           |
| Schooling (up to 8 years)  | -0.024***    | 0.009     |
| Schooling (above 8 years)  | 0.070***     | 0.011     |
| Age in years <sup>¥</sup>  | .007**       | .003      |
| Age in years squared <sup>¥</sup>  | -.00007***   | .00003    |
| Husband (Reference category – No education)                                      |              |           |
| Schooling (up to 8 years)  | -0.021***    | 0.007     |
| Schooling (above 8 years)  | -0.031***    | 0.007     |
| Age in years   | -0.001       | 0.001     |
| Age in years squared   | 0.00001      | 0.00002   |
| Household socioeconomic standing (Reference category – low Quantile-1)           |              |           |
| Middle (Quantile-2-4)  | -0.003       | 0.007     |
| High (Quantile-5)  | -0.028***    | 0.011     |
| Residential location (Reference category – Punjab)                               |              |           |
| Sindh  | 0.002        | 0.009     |
| Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)   | -0.047***    | 0.007     |
| Baluchistan  | -0.064***    | 0.008     |
| Rural (Reference category – Urban)   | 0.021**      | 0.007     |
| Constant   | 0.293***     | 0.056     |

Notes: Reference categories for the binary indicator variables are: not employed, nuclear family, mother-in-law not residing in the family. Regarding the overall significance of Family Rules, we test as; F-Test: Null, all of the Household Rules Indicator Variables = 0,  $F(7, 32488) = 40.05$ ;  $Prob > F = 0.0000$ .

characteristics like limited education, and cultural factors lying outside the family such as Provincial norms and employer perspectives, that were the fundamental factors limiting employment of women. Thus, our work highlights the challenge of overcoming poverty in Pakistan by enhancing the share of families with more than one workforce participant without a major societal transformation since family norms and household culture evolve slowly (Seguino 2007).

An alternative approach to advancing female employment is to establish policies and programmes that are specifically tailored to accommodate existing household rules or cultures. For instance, Jayachandran (2021) suggests that in cases where social norms restrict women's ability to interact with men, initiatives that facilitate remote work or enable women to connect with other women may prove advantageous in promoting female employment and family economic well-being.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors claim that the manuscript is completely original. The authors also declare no conflict of interest.

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