

Challenging stereotypes

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society social problems
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A Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) working in the area of job placement and counseling for women reports that placing women is harder than placing men in jobs in Lahore. The employers still discriminate against women, and have perceptions that are clearly wrong. The same is also reported by an NGO working in the area of job placement for handicapped people. These NGOs are trying hard to challenge these stereotypes. But perceptions and pre-conceptions change slowly. It is hard for humans to alter beliefs, and the more ingrained the belief the harder it is to alter it.



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Women are discriminated against through a number of ways. Apart from the fact that they get discriminated against in having access to education, in access to vocational training and 'outside-of-house' opportunities, the fact that they do not have access to suitable public transport facilities as well discriminates against women.

Employers think that women are not trained enough, do not usually have the professionalism needed to work in a business environment, do not have the time commitment needed, and cannot have the mobility that men can. They also feel that women are likely to have more turnover as marriage as well as childbearing and rearing are points at which a lot of women leave their jobs or move jobs. Childbearing is also perceived as an additional cost by employers especially since employers are required to offer maternity leave, and allow women to come back to the same job afterwards. Many employers also feel that offering separate washrooms and such facilities (sometimes transport) also adds to the cost.

But more than anything else it is the stereotypes that people have in their heads that hurts the opportunities that women could have in the workplace. If employers believe that women should stay at home clearly they are not going to get a fair shot at any job. If employers believe that women are physically weak, jobs requiring physical strength are not going to be open. If they believe women cannot work with men, or believe that women cannot move around (physically) as freely as men, they are not going to get jobs that require heavy interaction with men or require frequent traveling.

Interestingly there are only a few professions where women have had a significant breakthrough. Nursing, teaching, and medicine are the older ones, and recently secretarial jobs and front desk jobs have also been opened up. But most professions are still not open to most women.

A lot of the factors mentioned above are surely misconceptions, prejudices and misguided attitudes. These need to be addressed. Surely engineering does not require any inputs that women cannot provide. Nor does computer science or for that manner any other job that one can think of. Then why not encourage young women to enter these professions? It is society's attitude that stops women from entering these areas. Similarly if women cannot move around easily, it has to do with the poor state of public transport rather than with inherent qualities of women.

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Pakistan if we are going to compete with other countries around the world. The earlier we understand this the better.

There might be some reasons that might seem to have good economic backing for them. But this can be deceptive. Women might have higher mobility due to marriages but a lot of it has to do with the fact that careers for women are not taken seriously by the society, the husbands and sometimes even the women. This in no way implies that there are no women who do not have the same 'dedication and commitment' as some of the men. And more importantly, there would obviously be a change in behaviour if the society attitude changed. Hence, even if the cost is there, it will be lower with time. It is also a fact that many employers report that women, once they have settled down, are likely to stay with the company and job for longer.

Surely women do need time for childbearing and child rearing. But this cost, if it is to be treated as a cost for employers, is borne by all societies and all employers across the world. If Pakistani employers have to bear it, it should be no big deal, and surely should not be a reason for discriminating against women. In fact employers in the West are required to even offer child-care and other support apart from fairly generous maternity benefits. Though Pakistani laws may formally be quite generous, they are not enforced, and so employers actually get off much more easily than they should. For example, the law concerning maternity requires that formal sector organizations provide 12 weeks of paid leave for maternity, six weeks on either side of delivery. But very few organizations even offer a total of six weeks. Similarly, formal sector organizations are required to provide separate and clearly marked bathrooms for women. Again many organizations do not comply. Even then if the perception remains that women are more expensive to hire, then it must surely be a case of misguided social construction.

The case for handicapped persons is also clearly a case of blatant discrimination. Even more so than in the earlier case. Of course there can be jobs that require skills that a handicapped person might not be in a position to provide. But this is true of non-handicapped mortals as well. It is hard for a frail and weak person to do hard physical

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labour. It is difficult (though not impossible) for a very short person to compete in basketball against the very tall ones. A teacher cannot be a combat aircraft pilot and vice versa in most cases. At least the switch is not possible without sufficient training, if at all possible. Similar will be the case for some people with certain disability.

But in most cases this is not the reason for the discrimination. What does the ability to walk without a limp have to do with being a good teacher, doctor, engineer, computer person and a whole range of other activities? Yet, it is true, and the NGOs working in the area of rehabilitation clearly find that even for jobs that should not be closed to the handicapped, employers are reluctant to hire physically challenged people. This is a sad commentary on our social values.

The government, realizing that cards are stacked against the handicapped legislated that organizations with more than a hundred employees should reserve one percent of their jobs for the handicapped (a 1982 legislation). The local social welfare department decides who is or is not handicapped. Though most companies abuse the law by not complying or by hiring family members in these categories rather than advertising them to all (indicating that they do not think these people can pull their weight), nonetheless the legislation has formally acknowledged the issue and provided some access. It has also allowed some NGOs to rally around the cause. But what is even more interesting is that one NGO reports that most of the multinationals do not comply with the law and instead prefer to pay the requisite fine to the government of Pakistan.

These firms must feel that not only can these people not pull their weight, they will disrupt normal business, or look bad for the company, and to the extent that even paying a fine is preferable to hiring them. This is truly close-minded. Even if we assume that employers have to ensure suitable facilities for their handicapped employees, like ramps for access, suitably fitted washrooms, transport and so on, (though most employers do not do that), and we also assume that co-workers have to make a bit of an effort to make the environment conducive for work for the challenged, so what? Should we not be doing this? Should the corporate world not have responsibilities towards the society and employees that we expect from ordinary individuals? In fact, one would have thought that it is by going in the opposite direction, by caring for their employees, challenged or not, that companies can really get employee loyalty, apart from fulfilling their duty as corporate citizens, and elicit extra effort from them. Clearly most multinationals and larger companies do not think so in Pakistan.

Human thinking and action depends on stereotyping for short-circuiting processing time. We think in categories and need to function in any (social) environment. But these categories (I am not talking of the meta-categories ala Aristotle and Kant) are not immutable. And they need to track our moral and social values. Discrimination against women and against the physically or mentally challenged is clearly not only dependent on archaic stereotypes; it is also from a different economic time. For economic, and more importantly, moral and social reasons, we need to change that. One hopes and expects that the larger firms will take the lead here. But if not, NGOs should continue to push for it and suitable legislation should also continue to induce and encourage the change.

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