**Women and work**

BY D U R E S A M E E N A K H U N D 2021-12-22

PAKISTANis facing one of its worst economic crises, with inflation hovering around 10-10.5 per cent for FY2022, resulting in massive hikes in food, energy and consumer prices. The upward moving trend of commodity prices coupled with a relatively flat wage trend, has given rise to a definite need for a secondary income for households to sustain themselves or even survive in this economy.  
  
The transition from a single-income to dual-income family is not as simple as it seems. In Pakistan, discriminatory patriarchal social norms coupled with the lack of support is a major factor behind the country`s having one of the lowest labour force participation rates for women in the region; as per the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the figure was only 22.53pc in 2018-19. The traditional role of women as the `homemaker` restricts her entry into the job market; this is especially true for women with small children. There is little to no consideration for the need of flexible hours or the availability of affordable childcare.  
  
Pakistan ranks third from the bottom in 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, having closed only 56pc of its gender gap. This poor ranking is primarily due to the limited income contribution made by women only 18pc of Pakistan`s total income, according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020. Labour force participation differs significantly between the rural and urban areas of Pakistan, where the rural areas make up more than 70pc of women`s total labour force participation. The informal and flexible nature of rural work allows children to accompany their mothers to work; joint family set-ups, where all the women of the household share domestic and childcare duties; and the social assumption that women will participate in agricultural activities, have played a pivotalroleintheincreasedrepresentadonof women in the rural workforce. All around the world, women spend more time performing unpaid work versus men. From the economic perspective alone, tapping into this market of unpaid labour could significantly boost GDP, which is important during times of near-zero economic growth.  
  
This National Working Women`s Day (today), the fact that women are persistently less present in the labour market, is a red flag indicating the extremely limited `real` economic opportunities available to women in Pakistan. Keeping in mind the cultural context where men are regarded as the breadwinners who are providing shelter, security and cash for household expenditure, whereas thewomen are seen as homemakers, taking care of the house and the children, the job market needs to be more accommodating and flexible.  
  
A rigid working culture along with the lack of affordable, quality childcare, has made a large percentage of women in the urban areas unproductive, wasting their quality education by forcing them out of the job market. It is not enough for the government to claim they are increasing women`s quota for employment or for private organisations to assert that they do not discriminate against women, the policy nee ds to be more thorough, where women are not only promised equal pay but also facilitated as mothers and provided childcare options and flexible work hours so that they can manage both their domestic duties and their work.  
  
This currentriseinthe costofurbanliving makes it even more crucial for women to join the labour force in order to help maintain a certain standard of living. Not only do dual-income households providegreaternnancialsecurity to the household, they also have a positive impact on both intraand inter-generational mobility. Households with dual sources of income have a higher average disposable income.  
  
In most cases, the additional incomeearned by the women not only empowers them but also provides better health, nutrition and education to their children.  
  
Therefore, there is a need for a paradigm shif t in the way women are included in the workplace through flexible hours, workfrom-home options and better and inexpensive childcarefacilities.  
  
This barrier to entry for women will not end overnight, but it is time for the government to help create policies, and to work together with the private sector to create affordable childcare facilities to ease women`s entry into and retention in the workspace. In the meanwhile, we must also learn from our Covid-19 experiences where the traditional nine-to-five desk job has seen transformation, offering more flexible and unique work prospects for women to help break through this invisible glass door.  The writer works at the Centre for Excellence in Responsible Business, a Pakistan Business Council initiative as Sustainability and Social Impact Research associate.