**Women workers**

B Y S A U L E H A K A M A L 2020-11-16

IN a 1992 speech at Quaid-i-Azam University, then World Bank chief economist Lawrence Summers declared that educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world. Since, then focus on girls` education as a pathway to economic prosperity has been pronounced. The refrain goes that educating women gives them greater control over household resources and the ability to change spending patterns in ways that benefit children, improve health outcomes and raise GDP.

Pakistan`s Vision 2025 aims to increase female labour force participation (FLFP) from 22 per cent to 45pc by 2025. Over the past few decades, the ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education has been on a trajectory upwards but these gains do not map onto gains in workforce participation as they do for boys and men. Pakistan has one of the lowest FLFP rates, trailing a globalaverage of47pcandregionalaverage of 28pc. Urban FLFP remains particularly resistant to growth even among women with high levels of education. Only about 25pc of Pakistani women with university degrees report working outside the home.

Recently, a video clip in which a manager at a prominent bank harasses a woman went viral. Authorities took swift action against the perpetrator because of the availability of clear evidence. It is worth noting that existence of such evidence is rare and the majority of cases go unreported. What does this have to do with education and workforce participation? Any unchecl(ed prevalence of such incidents is likely to deter FLFP. In order to meet its ambitious targets, Pakistan must reckon with the interlinked causes behind low FLFP, which can be broadly described as sociocultural norms, mobility and safety concerns.

First, even though interest in educating girls has risen, there is still resistance to high levels of education. Data show that women only experience gains from education after a threshold level of about 10 years` education. Researchers find that education must be combined with other measures to be effective in increasing FLFP. Otherwise, a U-shaped relationship between education and FLFP appears where only women with the lowest and highest levels of education participate in the workforce.

Second, norms that dictate the preservation of gender roles will continue to push women out of the workforce. If paid work is simply placed on top of invisible work and household responsibilities, women experience a split that forces them to give up work in favour of household responsibilities something that damages the country`s economy and the well-being of its citizens. Thisis also where the `doctor bride` phenomenon, which pushes medical graduates outside the workforce contributing to a shortage of doctors, appears. When women`s work is not normalised, it remains fragile.

Notably, women`s workforce participation has risen in countries with gender-sensitive policies offering flexibility, subsidised childcare and parental leave.

A large factor behind low FLFP involves the perceived respectability of working outside the home. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics surveys, nearly 55pc of women outside the workforce cite either their own or family members` discomfort at their working outside the home as the reason behind their absence from the workforce. Of those who do participate in the workforce, 30pc work from their homes.

This is crucialbecause itindicates that the rise of remote jobs and normalisation of work-from-home as a result of Covid-19 could positively impact women`s workforce participation. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that remote work is not withoutcomplications for women who face an uphill battle, juggling responsibilities at home with the demands of paid work.

Additionally, safety is a leading concern for women`s mobility and ability to work.

Without workplace protections, incidentsof gender-based workplace harassment are likely to keep women out of the workforce.

The absence of safe and affordable transport likewise limits women and keeps FLFP low.

Finally, for women in the workforce, the wage gap remains high, there is rampant occupational segregation and benefits are restricted to those with very high levels of education. Women are concentrated in occupations where seclusion which is confiated with respectability is assured. In order for education to become a force for economic empowerment, policymakers must pay attention to the reasons behind the low FLFP.

Low FLFP not only slows Pakistan`s economic growth but also places pressure on families forced to survive on a single income and leaves women in a precarious financial position in the event of the death of male family members. Policymakers must address the sociocultural factors that push women out of the workforce before expecting FLFP to rise because education alone cannot empower women.  The writer is a PhD candidate at the University of York.