

STATISTICS show that women in Pakistan, both in rural and in urban areas, are underemployed. In 1951, a survey showed that women were two percent of the labour force, The Economic Survey Of Pakistan, 1977-78, showed that women were six percent, and the Pakistan Fertility Survey that they were 18 percent of the total labour force. Thus the figures fluctuate from survey to survey and from category to category. Despite the fluctuation, the statistics usually show that female participation in productive -activity is low,

Our contention is that this is, to a great extent, a myth. There are sectors in which a large number of women participate, but their activity goes unrecorded and unrecognized.

In and around the major cities of Pakistan are female workers whose existence is little known. These are women involved in home based piece work, in brick kilns, in quarrying and in construction work.

More Than Full Time

In the low income neighbourhoods of Lahore, and possibly in other big cities of Pakistan, there lives a workforce of which most people are unaware. It consists of women who work at home for meagre wages paid on the basis of the quantity of the work they do, regardless of the time and labour they put in. They make paper bags from waste paper, sew readymade clothes, put together trinkets, cut straps for rubber slippers, make tinsel garlands, string *tasbeehs*, shell dry fruit and so on. Each woman is isolated in her separate household, and makes her individual informal contract with the person who supplies her with the work and pays her for it.

These women, who are engaged in piece work, carry also the burden of housework which includes cooking, washing, cleaning, shopping and childcare. In a 1980 study investigating this phenomenon in Kot Lakhpat township scheme, it was discovered that the female piece worker spends seven hours, and sometimes more, a day on her

piece work task, in addition to an average of seven hours a day's spent on housework. The majority of women work more than 20 days a month and some even up to 30 days a month for as long



as they can get work over the year. In other words, when we talk of these women, we are actually talking of full time workers.

About 57 percent of the women in Kot Lakhpat started work three years ago.

The Housewife Myth

—A Report From Pakistan

Of the rest 35.7 percent have been working four to 10 years, and seven percent even longer than that. However, none of these women figure as workers in the official statistics pertaining to the area. The Manpower Training Survey, 1977, records that only three percent of the women in Kot Lakhpat are employed, while the 1980 survey shows that eight percent of women in this area are piece workers. That is, the women engaged exclusively in piece work are almost three times more than the official figure for women workers in all fields. This means that the official statistics have completely ignored the existence of a substantial number of female workers in an activity which is on the increase, and is done full time.

Similarly, of the approximately 400 brick kilns around Lahore, all registered with the labour department of Punjab, not a single kiln has on its rolls the name of even one female worker. Yet a study conducted in 1981-82 revealed that no kiln in the sample was operated totally by men. In fact, whole families including women and children participate in the process of brick making. It is estimated that of the 121,000 strong labour force involved in this activity nearly 50,000 are women. Members of this unrecognized and invisible labour force have the status of unpaid family helpers.

Gain In Confidence

One current view is that middle class and upper class women take up jobs for social, psychological satisfaction while women from low income groups are forced to seek jobs for economic

reasons. The motives attributed to middle class women who seek jobs are questionable, but will not be debated here. However it needs to be emphasized that even though women from the poorer classes are economically motivated, employment has a powerful socio economic impact on them.

The study on piece work labour showed that despite very low earnings most of the women felt very positive about their work, with 65 percent claiming that work had given them more confidence in themselves. In their opinion, this confidence grew from their economic independence, the awareness of their ability to earn for themselves, and in many cases, for the whole family, and their ability to meet their own needs and those of their families.

Some women felt that since they had started contributing to the household income, they had more say in family matters. Others felt that their husbands were more considerate now. Still others reported an improvement in the home atmosphere. There were responses like : Since I have started work, I no longer need to beg my husband for money for small things” or “Since I have started working, I no longer feel I am a burden on the rest of the family.” Some unmarried girls said that since they started working, they felt equal to their brothers, and some of them even earned more than their brothers. Quite a few felt that there would be a more positive impact if they could earn more than they did, indicating a direct relationship between confidence gained and money earned. It was found that women earning Rs 10 or less a month did not report an increase in confidence, but an increase in earnings brought a simultaneous increase in confidence.

Segregation Fosters Exploitation

Society generally does not view women’s work very favourably. It also categorizes jobs into the respectable, such as those of teachers and doctors, and the unrespectable, such as those of secretaries and office workers. Such

attitudes emanate from a social system which deems it desirable for women to remain segregated and to perform tasks according to their traditionally defined roles as housewives and mothers. The sex based segregation and seclusion of women that results limits women’s participation in productive labour, and discourages them from playing their part in the development process. However, economic pressures force women to seek jobs, but because they are secluded and their movements are inhibited by social pressures, they often end up working in very exploitative and disadvantageous conditions.

The piece workers of the Kot



Lakhpur township scheme are a case in point. Most of them are not permitted to move out of their homes and therefore they work in isolated conditions. Often they are unaware of the wage rates paid for similar work elsewhere. They are dependent on the middle person and are entirely at his or her mercy for work, and for payment at rates fixed by him or her. Since the middle person is the only link between the worker and the work, the fear of losing contact with him or her often makes women work at lower and lower wages.

It was discovered that amongst women who work at home, those working through the middle person are paid the lowest wages. On an average, they earn Rs 31.50 a month. The tailors who work through middle persons average Rs 76 to Rs 100 a month, while the tailors who deal directly with customers earn upto Rs 151 to 200 a month.

The extent of the exploitation of women in this kind of work is further indicated by the low remuneration they receive for some of the tasks they undertake, for example, making of earrings. The women are supplied with cut strips of metal which they shape into circles and then attach to pins. They are paid 50 paise to Re 1 per gross. A gross consists of 144 pairs, that is 288 single earrings. The payment works out to less than one paise per pair of earrings while in the market the earrings are sold for Rs 2 to Rs 3 a pair. The women who clip the earrings on to pieces of cardboard are paid only 25 paise per gross.

The plight of the brick kiln worker is far worse. As she is part of a family involved in making bricks, she is not paid directly for her work. Not only is she not recognized as part of the labour force, but she does not even benefit economically or psychologically from her participation in productive work as the payment is made to the family head, usually a male.

In a social set up where women are viewed largely as housewives and childbearing machines, economic need is forcing them to seek work outside of and in addition to their conventional roles. Despite their entering the productive workforce, women are not given due recognition, and are, in fact, ignored. Furthermore, the secluded conditions of work lead to unfair remuneration and leave the women uninformed and deprived of protective laws and opportunities for collective bargaining. Finally, all the adverse conditions notwithstanding, the women, even when their income is very low, do benefit by the confidence they gain through economic independence.