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## **From rhetoric to reality:**

### **A multilevel analysis of gender equality in Pakistani organisations**

#### **Abstract**

Despite numerous governmental efforts to improve women's employment and equality in Pakistan, statistics suggest that these efforts are not completely fruitful. Steps taken by the government are usually in response to pressures by international donors and rights groups. However, there seem to be important contextual and socio-cultural differences at play when it comes to how gender equality is to be achieved in organisational practice. Such differences as well as an apparent lack of genuine commitment at the policy level may explain why there remains a gap between the policy and praxis of gender equality in Pakistan. Informed by structural and relational perspectives of gender, this paper draws on in depth qualitative interviews with female employees to explore the multilevel issues related to gender equality at the macro-national, meso-organisational and micro-individual levels. In particular, the paper highlights such issues as societal norms of female modesty and gender segregation (macro), sexual harassment, career related challenges and income gap (meso), and family status and agency (micro).

**Key words:** context; gender equality; multilevel analysis; Pakistan; relational perspective; structural perspective

## **Introduction**

It is now widely acknowledged that institutional pressures are an important determinant of administrative structures and a major factor to reform the status of disadvantaged groups, e.g., women's employment (Beller, 1982; Blau & Beller, 1988; Jacobs, 1992; Kelly & Dobbin, 1999; Leonard, 1986; Meyer & Scott, 1992; Terjesen et al., 2015). If implemented effectively, laws and policies related to gender equality may enable and enhance equal opportunities in the workplace (Ali & Kramar, 2015). However, the translation of laws and policies into practice at organisational level is often inadequately achieved (Collinson et al., 1990; Coyle, 1989; Hoque & Noon, 2004; McGauran, 2001; Rao et al., 2015; Solomos, 1989; Tomlinson, 2007). To address this issue, this paper offers a relational and structural perspective of gender equality at work (Risman, 2004; Syed & Özbilgin, 2009) and draws on a qualitative study of workingwomen in Pakistan to illustrate how socio-cultural and other contextual factors may mediate laws and other institutional policies thus contributing to the policy-practice gap.

Organisations are often characterised as scenes of constraint as well as opportunity, sites where gender often passes unnoticed, denied or disavowed partly because it is 'done' routinely in manner that conceals its precariousness and performativity (Pullen & Knights, 2007). Butler (2004) shows how 'doing gender' involves considerable ambiguity, incompleteness, fragmentation and fluidity, since it is often tied up with processes of undoing at levels of self, text, and practice. Scholars have argued for context-specific approaches to gender equality as Western approaches to equality may not be consistent with local contexts or ideologies (Cornelius et al., 2015; Syed, 2008a). More recently, Syed and Van Buren (2014) have argued that while Western liberal individualist approaches may offer some help in reforming local patriarchal practices, important contextual variances continue to pose

challenge, which may be addressed through a dialectical approach to understanding the relationships among religion, culture, and business.

Previous studies suggest that to theorise and achieve gender quality, there is a need to consider socio-cultural factors and laws (Ali, 2013; Risman, 2003; Syed, 2008a, 2008b). Syed and Özbilgin (2009) argue that single-level conceptualisations of gender and diversity within the territory of legal or organisational policy fail to capture the relational interplay of structural- and agentic-level concerns of equality. They propose a relational framework that takes into consideration multilevel factors when developing a contextual approach to diversity management. A similar theory is offered by Risman (2004, p.429) who argues that gender may be conceptualised as a social structure, and by doing so, one may examine how gender is embedded in the individual and institutional dimensions of society. We use Risman's (2004) concept of gender as social structure and Syed and Özbilgin's (2009) relational, multilevel lens to study gender equality in the context of Pakistani organisations.

In recent decades, Pakistan has demonstrated a commitment to women's employment by ratifying key international conventions, e.g., International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Equal Remuneration Convention No.100 in 2001 and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996. This indicates policy-level progress towards gender equality in that country. However, overall female labour force participation remains quite low (26%) when compared with other developing countries in South Asia, e.g., Bangladesh (60%), Sri Lanka (39%) and India (29%) (Labour Force Survey, 2013; WEF (World Economic Forum), 2015). In fact, in a recent Gender Gap Report, Pakistan is ranked very low, 144<sup>th</sup> out of 145 countries, indicating a high level of gender inequality (WEF, 2015).

At the legal policy level, Pakistani constitution ensures equality before the law and calls upon the State to eliminate all forms of exploitation, e.g., Articles 3 and 25. Similar commitment to gender equality is evident in local labour laws, e.g., Factories Act 1934 has several positive action clauses for women, such as provision of childcare and separate rest rooms. Similarly, Labour Protection Policy (LPP, 2006) reaffirms the Government's resolve to eliminate gender discrimination and states that the Government is committed to improving the role of women in the labour force, providing women with equal opportunities for employment, and making workplaces more conducive for women workers. It further stipulates that wages will be paid on the basis of equal pay for equal work, and equal pay for work of equal value to men and women. However, the low participation in formal employment and significant gender gaps in income and unemployment indicate that there remain disturbing gaps between the gender equality policy and its practice. This paper sheds light on some of the reasons for these gaps through qualitative interviews with female employees in Pakistan.

The paper is structured as follow. The first part offers theoretical background highlighting the significance of law and policies related to gender equality, and actual translation of such laws into practice. The second part offers an overview of female employment and societal context in Pakistan. The third part comprises the field study. The discussion identifies the macro-national, meso-organisational, and micro-individual issues that female participants experience within Pakistani labour market. It also indicates how, despite socio-cultural and other contextual barriers, some female employees are able to exercise their agency and resilience to address at least some of the multilevel challenges facing them.

## **Structural and relational perspectives of gender**

In this section, we review relevant literature on gender from social structure and relational perspectives. Risman (2004) highlights the need to conceptualise gender as a social structure to better analyse the ways in which gender is embedded at individual, interactional, and institutional levels within a society. Gender is deeply embedded as a basis for stratification not just in personalities, cultural rules, or institutions, but in all of these and in complicated ways (Lorber, 1994). Risman (2004) argues that attention should be paid both to how structure shapes individual choice and social interaction and to how human agency creates, sustains, and modifies current structure. She argues that a theory of gender as a social structure must integrate this notion of recursive causality (a situation in which causal relations themselves are causes or effects in a recurring manner) with attention to gender consequences at multiple levels of analysis (p.433). She further argues that social structure differentiates opportunities and constraints based on gender and thus has consequences on three dimensions: (1) at the individual level, for the development of gendered selves, (2) during interaction as women and men face different cultural expectations even when they fill the identical structural positions, and (3) in institutional domains where explicit regulations regarding resource distribution and material goods are gender specific.

Risman's conceptualisation of gender as a social structure is also broadly consistent with a relational perspective of gender equality at workplace. Syed and Özbilgin (2009) propose a relational framework that considers multilevel factors when developing a context-specific approach to gender equality or diversity management. At the macro-national level, it considers national structures and institutions, e.g. laws, socio-cultural and religious strictures, and gender relations. At the meso-organisational level, relational framework considers the organisational processes, policies and behaviours at work. The absence of egalitarian traditions at work means that meso-level relationships may reflect a hierarchical organisation

of discriminatory practices, embedded within the broader social relations. At the micro-individual level, issues related to individual power, motivation, and agency to affect change are considered.

The question of whether equal opportunity efforts have been effective has generated much debate in social and organisational research (Ali & Knox, 2008; Hoque & Noon, 2004; Strachan et al., 2015). A number of studies seem to show that the employment status of women and other disadvantaged groups has improved as a result of such efforts. For example, Beller (1982) found out that women made gains in employment during the 1970s in America after the issuance of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Executive Order, which requires affirmative action on the part of federal contractors. Similarly in the US, Blau and Beller (1988) found that women's earnings relative to men's rose significantly between the periods of 1971 and 1981. Brown (1982) and Leonard (1986) argue that such gains are partly due to equal opportunity legislation. However, while some studies indicate that legislation can improve the status of female employees, other findings illustrate that women are still grossly underrepresented in positions of power and underpaid compared to their male colleagues (Syed & Murray, 2008; Woodward & Özbilgin, 1999).

In South Asian countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, despite basic legislative framework of equality, there are significant gender gaps (Strachan et al., 2015). India and Bangladesh have relatively more robust equal opportunity laws as compared with Pakistan (Ali, 2010, p. 47). In order to operationalise equality for the most disadvantaged castes and tribes, India introduced reserved places in employment in 1950. However, the overall implementation of equality laws is rather weak in South Asian countries (Ali, 2010). Haq (2014) notes that:

‘while the strong legal framework and government inclusion is a reflection of India’s national vision for equality, the low scores for workplace diversity and social inclusion are a reflection of the reality regarding the continued discrimination and exclusion of certain groups in the Indian labour market and society’. (p. 102)

Indeed, the adoption or formulation of policy does not ensure its enactment into action plans or improved opportunities for minority groups such as women. Legislation is often not adequately transferred into policy and practice at the organisational level. When legislation takes a soft or suggestive approach, it is possible that organisational policy makers and individual managers will interpret requirements and recommendations in different ways (Hoque & Noon, 2004).

In South Asian context, macro-level socio-cultural factors seem to mediate institutional influences at times contributing to the policy-practice gap. As a result of deep-rooted discriminatory socio-cultural values (such as female modesty and gender segregation), women do not enjoy the same status as men (Roomi & Parrott, 2008). Another possible reason for the policy-practice gap is that a foreign discourse on gender equality faces the traditional challenges of local non-compatibility (Syed, 2008a). Some scholars in the area of work and organisations studies have argued for using a contextual lens also taking into account issues of gender, religion, ethnicity and other dimensions of diversity (Vachhani, 2012). Jones et al. (2000: 364) suggest that ‘a concept of multi-voiced international discourse on issues of difference in organisations is a better model than ‘knowledge transfer’.

In the next section, the context of the qualitative study will be briefly discussed. Pakistani organisations being the focus of research, we discuss the situation of female employment and legislative framework of gender equality in the country.



## **Context**

Pakistan came into being in 1947 as a result of Muslims' struggle for an independent homeland in the Subcontinent. Despite the visibly communal dimension of the 'Pakistan Movement', the country's founding fathers were quite secular and pluralistic in their approach to governance, and included several non-Muslim ministers in the country's first cabinet. However, Islamic faith was always a key consideration and a formal commitment in this regard was made by the parliament through the Objectives Resolution in 1949 (Hassan, 1985; Islam, 1981; Wolpert, 2006). The Islamisation of the state became further institutionalised during the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq (ruled 1977-1988). Today, the country is constitutionally an Islamic Republic with more than 96% of its citizens adhering to Islamic faith (Syed, 2008b). The legacy of its genesis and how the country has overtime structured and institutionalised the role of religion is also evident in its approach to gender (Özbilgin et al., 2012). Owing to the Subcontinent's traditional culture coupled with patriarchal interpretations of Islam, there are specific stereotypes and expectations of gender roles in Pakistani society. Ferdoos (2005) notes that Pakistan is a male dominated society where women are considered as no more than secondary citizens mainly due to traditional norms prevailing in the whole society. Scio-cultural and economic factors play an important role in determining women's roles and opportunities in the labour market (Ali & Kramar, 2015; Ali & Knox, 2008). Occupational choices of women are limited due to socio-cultural and religious constraints, inherent gender bias in the labour market, and lack of supportive facilities such as childcare and transport in the formal sector of employment (Rehman & Roomi, 2012). Women's labour power is considered inferior because of employers' predetermined notion of women's primary role as homemakers (Syed et al., 2005). As a result, many women are concentrated in jobs that are low paid and offer limited opportunities

for upward mobility. Ahl (2007) asserts that women are unable to compete with men because of the disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities.

Women in Islamic societies are, in general, subject to sexual segregation for religious reasons (Ali, 2000; Kazemi, 2000). Religion and its commonly practiced patriarchal interpretations have historically restricted women's opportunities in the social, economic and political spheres (Syed et al., 2005). A woman is expected to remain in *chadar* (loose piece of cloth, a form of veil) whenever she is in the presence of men, related or unrelated to her, as a sign of modesty. Her mobility outside *chardiwari* (four walls of house) is restricted because of the socio-religious norms of modesty.

However, despite these challenges, female participation in labour force has been gradually increasing in Pakistan over the years, e.g., 16.2 per cent of male participation rate in 2002 to 26 per cent in 2014 (Labour Force Survey, 2013; WEF, 2015). Multiple factors are thought to have contributed to this increase in female employment, including an increased awareness about women's rights, an increased rate of literacy in females, urbanisation, and introduction of equality policies and laws.

Previous research has outlined the legislative framework of gender equality at work in Pakistan (Ali, 2000; Ali, 2007; Goheer, 2003; Mullally, 1995; Özbilgin et al., 2012). The legislative framework includes the Constitution of Pakistan, its equality and anti-discrimination laws, and the international conventions and related instruments ratified by the country. Pakistan's constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender (Articles 25 and 27) and provides that 'steps shall be taken to ensure full participation of women in all spheres of national life' (Article 34). In an apparently gender neutral law which may also be interpreted as subsuming female into male, Article 263 (a) states that 'words importing the masculine gender shall be taken to include female.' Several constitutional provisions

undertake a positive obligation on the part of the state for affirmative action to improve the status of women. For instance, Article 25(3) states, ‘Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the protection of women and children.’ Within employment contexts, Article 37 (e) requires the State to take special measures for the protection of women workers (NAP, 2012).

However, the translation of such laws into practice remains a major challenge. This is not withstanding the rhetoric of commitment to equality that is evident at the policy level. For example, in March 2016, Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN, Dr Maleeha Lodhi, claimed that the country was determined to achieve gender equality and empower women as part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Dawn, 2016). Such rhetoric, nevertheless, does not match the bitter reality that Pakistan is currently at the second lowest in the list of 145 countries evaluated on gender gap (WEF, 2015). The present research examines the extent and outcome of gender equality policies and practices at the workplace level in Pakistani organisations.

### **The study**

In order to acquire in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural and organisational factors affecting gender equality at work, a qualitative approach was used. The approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of female participants’ lived experiences (Goulding, 2005). The qualitative nature of inquiry is appropriate where “the topic needs to be explored” (Creswell, 1998, p. 17). A number of past studies have used qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of women (Lewis, 2003; Millward, 2006; Woodward, 2007). The approach is characterised by its commitment to data collection in context in which social phenomena naturally occur and to generate an understanding of social phenomena grounded in the perspectives of research participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To develop a contextual and relational understanding of women's experiences of workplace equality, questions were asked with a specific focus on socio-cultural issues (macro-level), organisational equality issues (meso-level) and individual circumstances and resilience (micro-level). Pilot interviews were conducted with two women to refine the interview protocol. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 women working in various service based-organisations in Lahore, Pakistan, including banking, education and telecommunication sectors (see Table 1 for the demographic data of participants).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Being a cultural insider provided the researcher (first author, a bilingual Muslim female of Pakistan origin) an advantage. Being aware of local culture and sensitivities of Pakistani female employees, the researcher took extra care in generating interview data by choosing suitable queries during the interviews. Participants also felt at ease with the researcher who spoke the same language and understood their issues and concerns. Most importantly, frank conversations took place which were deemed useful for this kind of research.

All of the participants shared high educational qualifications (bachelors degree or above), religion (Muslims), belonged to the same geographical region (Lahore) and were aged between 22-32 years. Half of the women were married while the other half were single. All of them were working in formal organisational at the time of this research. These characteristics ensured that the participants broadly shared similar issues at the organisational

and social level. These women were accessed through personal networking of the first author and the snowball method.

An interview guide was created to provide structure to the interview process through use of a set of semi-structured questions. The questions sought to encourage participants to share their individual experiences, perceptions, and reflections on their work environment. An open-ended format was used allowing participants the ability to control the depth and breadth of information shared. This methodology also presented opportunities to ask follow-up questions to clarify and elicit additional information. The average duration of each interview was 60 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in Urdu and English languages, often using a mix of both languages, depending upon the interviewee's preference and convenience. Urdu interviews or sections were translated into English by the first author (a bilingual Muslim male of Pakistan origin) while the translation was rechecked and minor improvements suggested by the second author who too is fluent in both languages. Typical challenges of conceptual understanding and interpretation across cultures and languages were thus overcome due to the researchers' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and skills (Temple & Young, 2004). Next, the interview data were analysed both manually and electronically through NVivo, for cross-verification of the emerging themes. Repeated readings of the transcripts led to the identification of key multilevel experiences and relationships between categories within and across each level.

The first step was to interpret and understand the data collected. This required reading and re-reading the narratives from the interviews searching for patterns, themes and exceptions (such as the multilevel categorisation). The next step was coding the data to identify patterns that emerged from the interviews (such as career related issues, family-status related issues). The researchers organised these data accordingly in related groupings. Then, themes and exceptions within the different groupings were analysed. This helped in

discovering relationships between the categories (such as the inter-level interactions and effects). Connections helped create sequences and were instrumental in helping the researcher answer each research question.

While discussing the different themes that emerged as a result of this study, the researchers support the analysis of each theme with various quotes from the actual interviews. Each quote is followed by a code to identify the participant who made the observation.

## **Findings**

Narratives in this study reveal the multilevel challenges facing women within and outside the organisation. Informed by relational and structural perspectives of gender and diversity, we produce below the findings of this study categorised into three inter-related levels namely macro-national, meso-organisational and micro-individual, depicting the multilevel issues facing female employees.

### ***Macro-national issues***

At the macro-national level, the study points towards socio-cultural challenges facing female employees in Pakistan. While some of these challenges are embedded within the organisation, others are rooted in contexts outside the organisation. For example, one participant, a customer service officer, thus described the socio-cultural problems facing her in the organisation.

‘It is very difficult to deal with the general public. Sometime a customer treats us as if we - female employees in particular - are their personal servants. Either customers or male colleagues, they both treat alike and we [women] are not able to do much about it.’ (1F2)

The above account suggests that despite a culture which is at times hostile to female presence in the workplace, women exercise inhibition. Indeed, owing to socio-cultural norms of female modesty, many Muslim women refrain from discussing certain problems, such as those related to sexual harassment at work (Ali & Kramar, 2015).

In a previous study, Syed, Ali and Winstanley (2005) explored the experiences of workingwomen in Islamic societies from the perspective of female modesty. The authors suggest that female modesty is a strong feature of Pakistani culture. This current study supports these findings. For example, a female participant from education sector stated:

‘I am always careful when dealing with males. This is our culture. I always maintain a distance to avoid false rumours about me’ (5F1).

Similar themes were evident in other participants’ narratives. For example:

‘We live in kind of culture where blame is always placed on woman when issues such as sexual harassment are brought up. So women avoid discussing such issues so that they do not become the victim again.’ (1F2).

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1996) notes the strong “inside/outside” dichotomy in Pakistan, where women are restricted to the “inside” space of home and household, embodied in the tradition of veiling. This restricts women's access to education, employment, training opportunities and social services. Further, even women with careers face the problem that they cannot live independently but rather require a male to look after them (Ali & Kramar, 2015).

The narratives reveal how socio-cultural concept of gender segregation and institution of purdah (veiling) affects career opportunities for female employees. This is relevant to Risman’s (2004) theorisation of gender as social structure where she mentions the cultural

component of the social structure that includes the interactional expectations that women and men have to meet in every social encounter. This concept may also be linked to patriarchal practices of Islam as well as local culture which tend to place restrictions on women's mobility (Ahmed, 1992). For example, this statement by a participant from the education sector:

‘Women in our society have to deal with issues outside of organisation more as compared to issues inside the organisation. If I get promotion in job in a city outside my hometown, then unfortunately I have to reject it because a workingwoman on her own - without a male family member's support - cannot survive in this culture’ (5F2).

Previous research suggests that a static or functionalist analysis of sex roles in the private and public domains of life does not capture the complex relationships between the two domains. As more women enter employment, the myth of male breadwinner has lost its empirical basis (Smith, 2009). However, the two roles theory (Moen, 1992) offers an explanation. It considers the domestic and work roles of women, suggesting that structural conflicts exist between the two. The present study also reveals that workingwomen in Pakistan face conflict between their domestic and public role.

‘Married workingwomen face more hurdles because they have to perform double tasks. For example, if both husband and wife work and they return home from work, probably woman will leave her bag and straight away start doing house chores such as cooking while man will watch TV’ (4F2).

Overall, the participants' accounts suggest that macro-level factors especially socio-cultural issues influence their careers either directly or indirectly.



### *Meso-organisational level issues*

Interestingly, many participants claimed to be aware of organisational policies of equality at meso level. However, when questioned in depth, it was revealed that in reality many female employees were facing issues such as sexual harassment, glass ceiling and income inequality.

### *Sexual harassment - an invisible crime*

About 70 to 80 per cent of workingwomen in Pakistan are reported to be victims of sexual harassment (SH) (AASHA, 2002; Rafique, 2016). The present study reveals that women do not feel comfortable discussing or complaining about sexual harassment at work. It was found that female employees face sexual harassment in different ways. The participants informed that sexual harassment is a common 'invisible crime' in Pakistani organisations. However, females tend to not disclose experiences of SH because of the notion of female modesty and inhibition embedded in the culture. A participant talked about the double victimisation of women regarding SH:

'Females cannot afford to discuss harassment issue easily because it is considered a matter of shame. In Pakistani culture, people will only blame the female while the male culprit will get away with it easily' (4F2).

Although the national and institutional policies prohibit SH, there seems to be an element of lip service. Weak policy implementation has resulted in large gaps between the intended and implemented policies (Ali & Kramar, 2015). For example, even when SH is covered in formal training, employees have no clue about the specific process of filing a formal complaint. The general response to incidents of SH was silence or informally contacting a senior supervisor. The study also found out that females face victimisation in the workplace. Such women are sabotaged through different tactics by their male and female

colleagues. For example, one participant revealed how her career growth is sabotaged because she complained against her supervisor.

‘I am being punished for taking action against my director. You won’t believe it but my job contract was not renewed based on the recommendation of the same director against whom I had lodged a complaint. All other colleagues, including those junior to me, got an extension but I was penalised’ (5F1).

### *Career growth and the hurdles*

Another major challenge which females face in formal organisations is obstacles in their careers. The findings suggest that many participants consider that women cannot be career oriented because of their expected social roles. While women get many opportunities at lower level, moving up the ladder becomes difficult for them. Many participants acknowledged that they were treated equally at the time of recruitment; however, they also reported to face obstacles when it comes to promotion.

‘I think the society is changing as women are getting more and more opportunities for getting into formal employment. However we [women] face more hurdles in our progression to senior and managerial level’ (1F1).

It was revealed in the study that women are discouraged from promotion by their male colleagues. Many participants reported that females face barriers created by the male colleagues regarding job promotion. For example, a female participant working in a bank described how females face resistance from colleagues regarding promotion.

‘In our society, male colleagues do not like to work under a female manager. In fact, colleagues, including women, will prefer to have a male manager transferred from

another branch than to have an eligible female manager from within the branch’  
(4F2).

One reason for such attitude could be non-acceptance of women working outside the home. From the above statement, we can notice that macro socio-cultural stereotypes overlap with meso-organisational factors. Hence, although formal policies on promotion may not be discriminatory, the embedded cultural traits produce discriminatory routines and attitudes.

### *Income gap*

There is a significant gender-based income gap in Pakistan as compared to other developing countries in South Asia (Ali & Akhtar, 2014; WEF, 2015). Women earn only 61% of male’s income for similar work (WEF, 2015). Even skilled females face income discrimination. A few participants were loud and clear about this issue. A female from a private bank corroborated her issue of unequal pay in the organisation where she had been working for the past three years.

‘Here, it’s a common practice that women earn less than men. It is unbelievable but I am being paid less than my junior male colleagues and I have no idea why is it so’  
(4F2).

It was interesting to note that most of the females did not complain about income discrimination on the basis of gender. However, when asked in-depth questions, it was found out that they do face income discrimination but they do not explicitly identify the issue as gender discrimination.

Overall, the participants’ accounts suggest that females in Pakistan face issues such as sexual harassment, career hurdles, and income inequality at workplace. The findings suggest

that social stereotypes proliferate into the workplace and have important implications for female employees' experiences.

### *Micro-individual issues*

At the micro-individual level, issues related to individual identity (e.g., family status) and agency are relevant. Each recollection reflects unique personalities, a different account of experiences and interpretations. The participants with family or care responsibilities were more concerned about flexible work policies. For example, one participant said that:

'I chose this job only because I wanted to have two days off which gives me at least some time to pay attention to my children' (2F4).

The participants' accounts demonstrate some kind of connection between their gender and employment practices. Although most of the participants claimed that they were treated equally, there were also reports of inequality and reaction. For example, a female working as a front desk officer noted that the gender difference is embedded in the organisations and in the society. The participant had been a victim of sexual harassment and left her job because of this reason.

'In our society men and women are not equal for sure. I was the victim of harassment and I was the one who had to leave the job not the culprit. I noticed the gender difference in my previous and current organisations. It exists everywhere' (1F2).

The participants shared a feeling of powerlessness in changing organisational culture or policies. In fact, some even admired the apparently 'benevolent' culture that regarded women as less able than men, hence, 'looked after' women. Examples included excluding women from specific assignments that involved fieldwork and rural areas and providing transport to women between office and residence.

‘Sometimes women get more facilities in organisation based on their gender. For example, in our organisation only females get the pick-and-drop facility while men have to arrange their own transport’ (1F1).

Participants also revealed that they receive some benefits for being a female in Pakistani society. For example, a female employee working in a bank mentioned that her male colleagues take ‘special care’ of females in their organisations. According to her:

‘we get a lot of support from our male colleagues. For example, if I have to deal with a problem customer, a male colleague will handle it and I do not have to worry about it’ (4F1).

As such, some participants view at least some gendered practices as favourable, thereby gendering themselves. What is evident as a common theme in most interviews is a positive outlook towards career and life, a belief in their own potential, goodwill towards organisational aspirations of equality, and a ray of hope in a world of work otherwise characterised by discrimination and stereotypes.

There is also evidence of agency and resilience, for example, the efforts that some of these women made to acquire education and/or employment.

‘I completed my BA degree privately from home because girls college was away from my home. And I knew without good qualification I couldn’t find a decent job.’ (4F5).

Many participants believed that career growth and opportunities mainly depend on performance, and women are not discriminated against on the basis of gender.

‘Women do progress when they enter the organisation with the intention of career progression. Although, in the beginning they face a lot of hurdles but if they perform well consistently, they achieve their goal of promotion’ (2F2).

Another participant, a victim of SH, explained how she decided to file a complaint despite literally no support from her colleagues or organisation:

‘Although I did not know where to complain but I just wanted to do something about it. So I sent a written complaint to senior authorities. I took this action all by myself and there was no one on my side’ (5F1).

Overall, the participants’ accounts suggest that their individual identity, including their gender, family status, as well as resilience play a key role in shaping their employment. However, despite certain individual and macro-level influences and constraints (e.g. socio-cultural challenges, family responsibilities), the participants exercise resilience and agency to tackle issues and challenges they encounter in their career.

## **Discussion**

The multilevel analysis suggests that there is an overlap of issues facing Pakistani women mainly from socio-cultural context (macro-national level) to meso-organisational and micro-individual levels. This is consistent with Risman’s (2004) theorisation that gender as a social structure is embedded in the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of society. The analysis is also consistent with Syed & Özbilgin’s (2009) relational theorising of diversity and the issues they highlighted in the international transfer of gender equality policies. The study brings to fore the contextual nature of gender and highlights the need to develop a multilevel understanding of gender before setting on to investigate any policy-practice gaps.

The study also indicates an overlap and interrelation of the multilevel factors. For example, each of the meso-level issues such as sexual harassment and income gap is rooted in the wider macro-level issues such as gender segregation and socio-cultural restrictions on women. Similarly, micro-level issues of family roles and gender identity are connected with macro-level socio-cultural factors and meso-level factors of gaps in income and career progression. At the macro-national level, socio-cultural issues are also lined with religious interpretation and practice, e.g., Islamic female modesty. The ways in which religion provides legitimacy for gender related values and practices seems to be a significant factor in the shape of Islamic female modesty in Pakistan. Similarly, micro-level issues seem to be drawn from macro-level dynamics. For instance, one reading of the benefits noted in the findings may be internalised subordination, the ‘special care’ status of females, a view which is a characteristic of patriarchal societies, and which can entrench structural subordination (Lorber, 1994).

Thus, the multilevel issues highlighted in the study seem to be intertwined and enacted in organisations. Socio-cultural barriers may also be linked to the fact that, in public discourses, there is too much tiptoeing around the ways in which religious interpretations allow for practices around modesty, and associated restrictions, expectations and stereotypes (Syed, 2008a). As a result, practices of gender segregation and veiling are considered to be legitimate expectations, notwithstanding the fact that the universality of these practices has been challenged by Islamic scholars, such as Barlas (2002) and Mernissi (1987).

Overall, the study highlights a clear discrepancy between the policy framework at national level and on-ground implementation of the same with reference to gender equality in organisations. Despite the presence of legislative framework of gender equality (Ali, 2000; Ali & Knox, 2008, Özbilgin et al., 2012), the implementation of such laws and policies in organisational practice remains a sore area.

The various challenges faced by women in Pakistan's formal employment sector can be grouped into three broad divisions, which are also inter-related; namely, macro-national, meso-organisational and micro-individual level issues. Discussion at the macro level revolved around socio-cultural issues. At the meso level, workplace related issues and challenges of discrimination were outlined. At the micro level, identity- and agency-related matters were discussed.

Firstly, at the macro-national level, socio-cultural related factors, such as patriarchy and gender stereotypes, appear to significantly hamper women's freedom to join the economic sector. This finding is also supported by the argument made by Syed, Ali and Winstanley (2005) that while many cultures place great value on female modesty, it is far more prominent and stronger a force within the Islamic doctrine. Issues such as female inhibition, modesty and purdah may be dealt adequately at the societal level through interventions such as education, media and legislation. Although the constitution and labour laws ensure gender equality, the full implementation of such laws is yet to be achieved.

Secondly, it may be observed that while direct or more blatant forms of discrimination are no longer common, indirect or subliminal forms of discrimination are becoming more prevalent (Ali & Kramar, 2015). It is evident from the present study that the meso-organisational level issues of gender inequality are mainly shaped by the macro-national level issues. This finding resonates Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes, i.e., the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organisations. Indeed such regimes are likely to be rather robust and restricting in an Islamic context due to sociocultural norms of gender segregation and female modesty. The socio-cultural stereotypes attached with females directly affect organisational practices. Women deal with significant problems such as sexual harassment, income inequality and hurdles in career growth at organisational level. To achieve better equality at work, it is important to



consider not only issues such as pay equity and career growth, but also to maintain a flexible work environment that allows women to meet both their job and family responsibilities.

Finally, there is a range of experiences for individual expressed in this study including their family status and also the need for flexible work. In fact, women's agency and resistance in responding to gender discrimination also indicates inter-level tensions, which may be interpreted as unstable or sites of change in the future.

The study suggests that policy makers, academics and practitioners need to develop a contextual and holistic understanding relating to multilevel issues and challenges that women face in the formal employment sector and other domains of life. The gap between policies and actual practices may be narrowed by ensuring the development of such informed and context-specific research studies, as these are commonly implemented in developing countries in the form of guidelines by international global actors, such as the European Union (EU, 2016).

In a unique way this study brings the two theoretical lenses, gender as a social structure and relational perspective, together to investigate the issues and challenges of female employees in a unique context of Pakistani organisations.

In terms of the study's limitations, we acknowledge that there may be many other experiences of female employees that are not captured in this study. For example, it is important to note that the sample in this study is an elite one, in terms of education and employment. Their accounts may not represent insights and experiences of unskilled or semi-skilled women in organisations. Further, the views of the interviewees in this study were retrospective accounts of their experiences, which might not be entirely related to their specific organisation or industry. Also, interviews in this study were conducted with those participants who were already employed and who were classified as professional

workingwomen. Presumably those who are working as non-professional or are unemployed may have different perspectives and experiences.

Future researchers might conduct more detailed investigations in other sectors such as textile sector in Pakistan for further understanding of issues of female workers. The multilevel approach adopted here might assist policy makers and managers, both in the public and private sector organisations, to better understand the range of issues at stake. The approach may also assist other stakeholders such as academics and human resource practitioners to develop a realistic understanding of gender equality policies in diverse societies and organisations.

The study suggests that holding organisations solely responsible for diversity policies may be deeply insufficient as the practices of diversity management and gender equality are interrelated with both macro-societal and micro-individual issues. Indeed, in Pakistan the policy makers need to focus on multi-level challenges facing women in order to understand and improve female economic activity and employment.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has shown that while institutions including Governments formulate and implement frameworks of gender equality through policy, these are mitigated by deeply embedded socio-cultural and other contextual factors. The paper has used structural and relational perspectives of gender to examine this phenomenon in Pakistan. The qualitative study suggests that policy makers and employers need to be mindful of and address the multilevel issues and challenges at socio-cultural and organisational levels to promote gender in practice. At the same time, efforts ought to be made to consider individual circumstance and differences while enabling women's agency and participation in formal employment. The

socio-cultural impact highlighted in the study is consistent with cultural relativism theory, i.e., the principle that an individual's beliefs and activities ought to be understood by others in terms of that individual's own culture (Nayak, 2013). However, when addressed at multiple levels, models of gender equality in organisations and other domains may be developed and theorised in a realistic and holistic manner. When put into practice, such policies addressing real-world contextual challenges and issues faced by workingwomen are likely to be better-informed and more meaningful, thus leading to effective narrowing of the gap that currently exists between rhetoric and practice, thereby enabling more women to participate in economic activities and employment.

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Table 1. Profile of participants

Participant code	Age	Marital status	Employment sector	Time in organisation (in years)
1F1	20-29	Single	Bank	2
1F2	20-29	Single	Bank	3
1F3	20-29	Married	Bank	3
1F4	20-29	Single	Bank	2
1F5	30-35	Married	Bank	4
2F1	30-35	Single	Telecommunication	1
2F2	30-35	Single	Telecommunication	0.5
2F3	30-35	Married	Telecommunication	1
2F4	20-29	Married	Telecommunication	2
2F5	30-35	Single	Telecommunication	1
3F1	30-35	Single	Telecommunication	3
3F2	20-29	Married	Telecommunication	3

3F3	30-35	Married	Telecommunication	2
3F4	20-29	Single	Telecommunication	2
3F5	20-29	Married	Telecommunication	2
4F1	30-35	Married	Bank	4
4F2	20-29	Single	Bank	2
4F3	30-35	Married	Bank	2.5
4F4	30-35	Single	Bank	2
4F5	20-29	Single	Bank	1.5
5F1	30-35	Married	Education	3.5
5F2	20-29	Married	Education	0.5
5F3	20-29	Single	Education	2
5F4	30-35	Married	Education	2
5F5	20-29	Single	Education	3
6F1	20-29	Married	Education	2
6F2	30-35	Single	Education	3
6F3	30-35	Single	Education	1
6F4	20-29	Single	Education	1.5
6F5	20-29	Married	Education	3.5