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COMPROMISING RIGHTS: CASE OF FEMALE HOME WORKERS IN GARMENT SUPPLY CHAINS OF PAKISTAN

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Background

There is intense debate in development literature and feminist theorizing about the causes, consequences and implication of feminization of labour force from gender perspective. One group is optimistic about the transformative potential of female labour force participation (Chhachi, 2006, Kabeer, 2004). Where as opponents take it as another form of female exploitation (Pearson, 1998). This paper is based on the evidence from the Pakistan garment industry. It is more compatible with the view that women are placed as a gender subject in the labour market of Pakistan. However, from the available evidences I supported the argument that feminization of labour force in Pakistan has multiple and contradictory impact on the women. Women have potential gains, in terms of their immediate subsistence need. However, they are facing multiple social and economic discriminations and compromising their own fundamental rights in the labour market as well as fundamental rights of their children in the private sphere.

There are about 20 million home-based workers in Pakistan, including 12 million women. Almost every women working in these sectors earns only 20-40 rupees per day against 12-16 hours of work (daily, Jang, 23 Dec, 2008). This research paper focuses on female home workers in the garment industry of Pakistan. The objectives of this study was to examined the challenges faced by female home-based workers in Pakistan and make an endeavor to understand the ways through which women's involvement in home work has affected their children rights to education.

Research Questions

This research was designed to answer the following questions:

What is the role of home workers in the local/global supply chains of the garment industry in Pakistan?

Has women's involvement in home working enhanced their capabilities to make effective choices, and thereby improved their access to their basic rights and entitlements?

How women involvement in home work has influenced the prospects of their children (girls) right to education

Methods

The paper uses a human rights based approach to analyze the situation of female homeworkers in the garment supply chains of Pakistan. While locating their role in the global supply chains, including their invisibility and marginalization with regard to work and labour rights, the paper uses anthropological insights based on work in the field, and some familiarity with the women's daily situations, to analyze their perceptions and their access to labour rights in particular. This research relied on primary and secondary sources of information to understand the dynamic of homework and location of homeworkers in the garment industry in Pakistan. Primary information has been used to build a case to conduct a situational analysis of female homeworkers.

It is hard to get the exact number and extent of homework in Pakistan garment sector for the reason that female homeworkers and their contribution to the economy are 'veiled' in the available official statistics. Due to lack of such historical information regarding female engagement in homework, a

survey of female homeworkers in garment sector had to be conducted to get a snap shot of the female home workers and explore the nature of problems faced by them in the garment sector. A self-administered semi-structured Questionnaire and in-depth interviews were used to get information about the situation of homeworkers in their respective productive and reproductive spheres. The sample was comprised of fifty homeworkers selected through the snowball sampling method. These women were residing in different localities in Lahore and the city's outskirts.

Frame

Patriarchal norms in Pakistan define women's role in society primarily in terms of their role as mothers and wives within the household. This is in contradistinction to the role of men, which is defined in terms of their role as 'breadwinners'. In this research, the general thesis is that these strictly gendered notions of appropriate roles for women (and men) complement and reinforce women's specific exploitation not only as a cheap labour through sub-contacting practices in the garment supply chains but also has serious implication for their children and specifically the girl children fundamental right to education (Rani & Unni, 2004, Jaffrey, J & Reschovsky, A, 2001, Felstead, A et. al., 2000, Christensen, 1998). This in turn leaves relatively little space available to these women home workers to exercise their agency and there by gain-improved access to their labour rights and related human rights entitlements.

The analytical framework uses insights gained from existing research on globalization, global commodity chains, and on home-based work, including in the garment industry, elsewhere in the world

Research findings

According to the findings of this research, home workers still continue to construct their identities primarily as mothers and wives. It was also supported by the data that their families and society marginalized women's paid work in the private domain. Homework carried with in the private sphere of household was completely blended with the other household chores despite the fact that women were spending on average seven and a half hour per day on their productive work, but still it failed to bring them the recognition of a worker. Although majority of the respondent reported that they have the consent of the male family members for their homework. However, there is no corresponding change in the expectation of family members regarding the household chores. Care work, especially the childcare and elder care is also exclusive domain of the women. It is supported by the data that in many cases girl children have to leave the school to replace their mother in care chain and their right to education is compromised for immediate subsistence needs of their families. This wide spread practice of female child labour is effectively camouflaged in private sphere of household. The overall grim situation is further aggravated by the fact that the women home workers themselves seem severely constrained in their ability to take on board the importance of claiming their labour rights, because of their focus on immediate income and subsistence.