

Gender Inequality in the Workplace: A Case Study in HK and Pakistan

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Abstract:

Gender inequality is a pressing worldwide issue affecting both society and individuals. Certain gender groups are being treated unfairly in multiple aspects, including unequal family status, payroll differences, widening wage gap, work-life imbalance, and occupational segregation. The gender group facing discrimination is usually female due to biological traits and cultural factors. The study focuses on exploring gender inequality phenomena in specific cases of Hong Kong and Pakistan. Collecting and analyzing data from various sources, such as women and men in Hong Kong's key statistics, the study also explores what kind of gender stereotype would cultivate this social norm and how particular cultural backgrounds contribute to gender inequality. Ultimately, the study addresses the coping strategies, including improving social welfare and empowering projects by the Women Workers Association. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of policies and interventions and fostering gender equality, paving the way to a more inclusive future.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Workplace, Case Study.

1. Introduction

Gender inequality is a complex issue for both individuals and society. The persistent phenomenon of gender roles and social expectations has damaged female's overall health mentally and physically, particularly when it comes to work-related aspects. Workplace inequalities include the widening wage gap, work-life balance challenges, and occupational segregation. This study will focus on Gender inequality in particular areas of Hong Kong and Pakistan. In Hong Kong, males' overall rates, such as employment and salary, are all higher than females' (from the website of Women and Men in Hong Kong Key Statistics 2021 Edition) [1]. The study [2] found that just over half of the faculty members in Pakistani higher education institutions enjoy full gender equality. The researchers tested a three-element model of female inequality through a survey of 180 faculty staff, examining five aspects of their work environment: decision-making, professional development, utilization of resources, academic affairs, and job satisfaction. The data was collected from 10 public and private universities in Lahore using random sampling. The results indicate that the only area where males dominate is in decision-making, suggesting that there has been some progress towards gender equality in Pakistani higher education institutions, as intended by the adoption of national equality policies [2]. Gender inequality in the region tends

to reflect its social and cultural nature. Comparing these two regions may indicate how gender inequality is affected by different cultures.

These data and studies indicate that gender inequality is having a significant impact in areas with specific cultural backgrounds. What kind of gender stereotype would cause this social norm? How does a particular cultural background affect gender inequality? Discussions toward these social norms may aid worldwide gender inequality to study and promote coping strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1 Gender Stereotype

Many phenomena related to gender inequality can be connected to gender stereotypes; they are not only the reflection of actual gender differences but also affect how society defines individuals. According to the study [3], although gender stereotypes may have a "kernel of truth", those are generally based on different gender biological characteristics. However, these differences are often exaggerated and do not represent all gender characteristics. Aside from biological factors, socialization plays a more significant role in creating gender differences. Gender stereotypes can be a problem when it is used to evaluate and judge specific individuals, causing biases in how the capability and potential of males and females are

valued. It is hard for people to eliminate the influence of gender stereotypes since these widely shared, deeply rooted impressions are implicit and hidden in people's subconscious. These gender differences form gender roles and stereotypes and eventually cause gender inequality. Instead of denying gender stereotypes while implicitly reproducing them, accepting and acknowledging the existence of stereotypical thinking makes it easier to correct any undesired result.

2.2 Widening Wage Gap

Widening wage gap is a typical social norm that reflects gender inequality. According to the figure 1 [3], the Female-To-Male Earnings Ratios of Full-Time Workers between 1955-2003 had a remarkable change in data, since the late 1970s, the gains in reducing the gender wage gap have been quite remarkable, especially when considering

the long-standing constancy in the gender wage ratio that preceded this period. For example, based on the weekly earnings series, the gender wage ratio rose from about 61% in 1978 to about 71% in 2003. More importantly, much of this increase was accomplished in a relatively short span of time, with the ratio reaching 76.8% as early as 1993. Nevertheless, the current 77-79% figure still remains below full earnings parity between men and women. Thus, it is clear that all sources of the pay differential between the genders have not yet been fully eradicated. Although the gender wage ratio increased, women still gain less than men. There are also many factors cause the wage gap, such as being less or lack of working experience due to female's care-giving family role or discrimination.

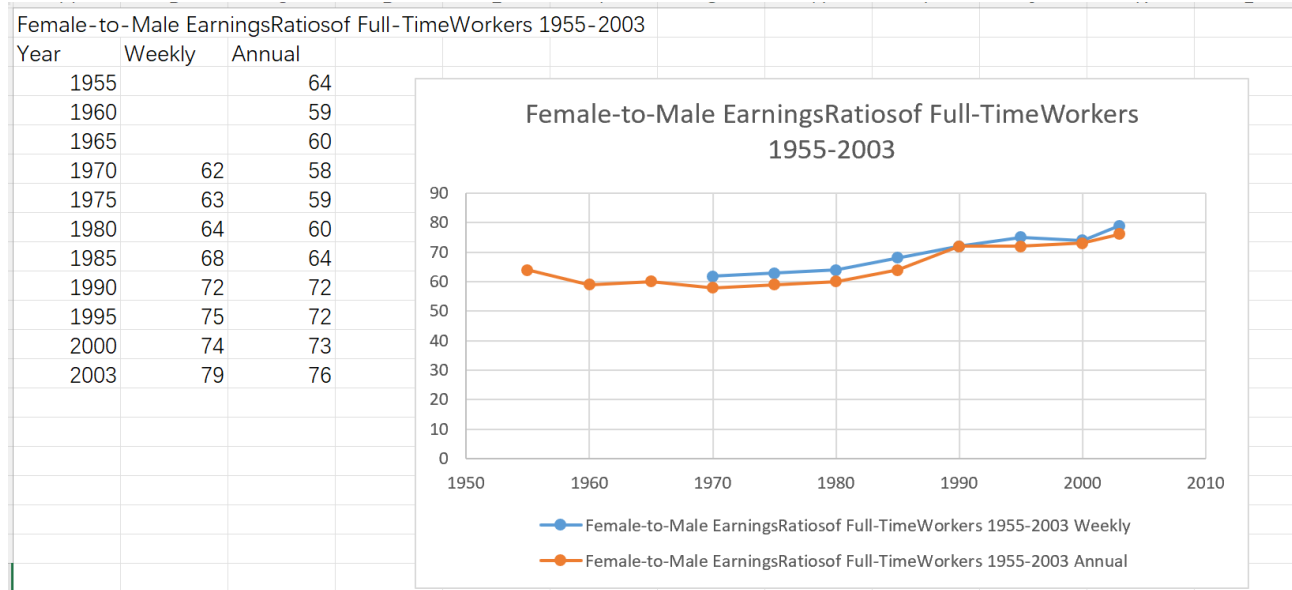


Figure 1. Female-to-Male Earnings Ratios of Full-time Workers 1955-2003

2.3 Labour Market

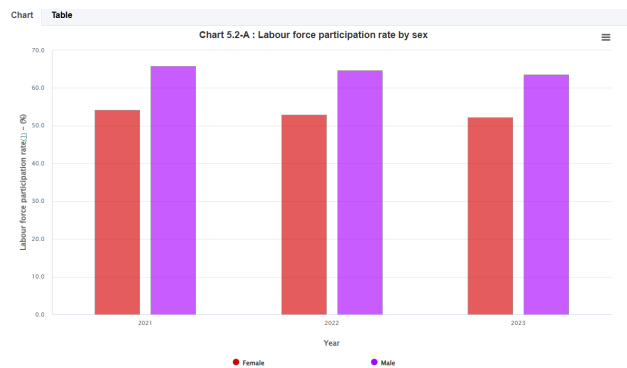


Figure 2. Labour force participation rate by sex

According to the Figure 2 [1], The overall labour force participation rate dropped from 58.2% in 2022 (females for 52.9%; males for 64.7%) to 57.3% in 2023 (females for 52.2%; males for 63.6%). Analyzed by age group, the labour force participation rate was lower for females than for males in each age group in 2023, except for persons aged 15 to 24.

Despite both of them had varying degree of decrease, male's overall labour force participation rates are constantly higher than female's in the years presented (2021,2022,2023), During the COVID-19 period, female's labour participation rate is experiencing a more pronouncing decrease than male, which reflects the female's fragile position in the labour market.

2.4 Work-life Balance

Female’s participation in the labour market creates challenges for them to balance work and family obligation. Traditional gender stereotype usually demands female to act as a caregiving family role and take up extra responsibility such as raising children. In Pakistan, its religion, cultural norms as well as females’ stereotypical family roles make the situation more complicated. As a result of deep-rooted discriminatory socio-cultural values, Women do not share the same status as men. According to the study[4], women in Pakistan start their own businesses to gain flexibility and control over work-life balance issue. The overall amalgamation of a woman’s family responsibilities and the requirements of her entrepreneurial venture creates an excessive burden on her that becomes too difficult to manage simultaneously. The high expectations they have on themselves to be an “ideal mother” while working also present a challenge for many women entrepreneurs. As a result, women tend to work hard, which negatively affects their personal lives. Due to the increased responsibilities, business owners typically work longer hours and may experience more work-life balance issues than employees in organizations.

In addition to the family and personal challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, societal norms and regional beliefs further expose them to greater pressure. The societal perception of women as primary caregivers leads them to take on abundant responsibilities to work in business while fulfilling the role of ideal caregiver and mother. “women entrepreneurs devote significantly more time to family than men”.[5]

2.5 Occupational Segregation

Occupational segregation by sex is not only a reflection of gender inequality, but also a source of male-female earning differences. females are usually focused on part time job due to their family role. As for full time occupation, females tend to be excluded from leading position in the organization. The study[6] focus on two questions: First, are women less likely than men to possess authority and autonomy, and can these differences be accounted for by human capital factors ? Where sex differences cannot be explained by individual characteristics, the evidence for

sex discrimination is strengthened. Second, does the sex composition of one’s occupation affect the level of workplace authority and autonomy?

The findings show that sex differences in autonomy and authority are significant and cannot be fully reduced to variations in human capital factors. However, gender differences in autonomy and supervisory authority are reduced considerably when female occupational sex composition is taken into account, suggesting that occupational segregation depresses the opportunities for material and psychological job rewards among women. In the case of decision-making authority, sex differences are not reduced when including female occupational sex composition, indicating that women tend to be excluded from this type of authority regardless of the sex composition of their occupation. Gender inequality in the workplace extends beyond wage gap and other factors and is also reflected in the unequal distribution of autonomy and authority. Occupational segregation is a key factor contributing to these inequalities, discrimination may also play a role in excluding women from positions of power and decision-making. Avoid occupational segregation requires governmental policies support to erase gender stereotype in the workplace and improve females’ overall pay.

3. Analysis

What kind of gender stereotype would cause this social norm ? In Pakistan, the gender inequality situation is not the same as in Western countries or other developing/ developed countries. Those gender stereotypes are widely spread and deeply rooted in Pakistani people’s minds. Take the education aspect, for example; according to the study [7], the analysis indicates that in Urdu, English school textbooks of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province in north-west Pakistan, continue to be located within traditional discourses of masculinity and femininity. More significantly, male characters and images still outnumber females. Despite the imbalance, these textbooks tried to portray the image of traditional gender roles for women, like housewives, mothers, or working in medicine and teaching. And men were shown in positions of authority or other public domains like office work.

Table 1. The Reinforcement of Sex-based Division of Labour

| A | B | C | D | E |
|--|----------|-------------|-------|---|
| The reinforcement of sex-based division of labour | | | | |
| Categories | Men/boys | Women/girls | Total | |
| Men/women carrying out domestic chores | 5 | 48 | 53 | |
| Men/women having paid economic activity in the public domain | 113 | 37 | 150 | |
| Boys/girls playing sports | 85 | 17 | 102 | |
| Grand total | 203 | 102 | 105 | |

Table 1(The reinforcement of sex -based division of labour) [7] further indicates the existing gender stereotype and gender status.Domestic chores are overwhelmingly carried out by women/girls, comprising 48% compared to only 5% for men/boys. This reflects the persistent gender norms that assign domestic responsibilities primarily to women.

In the public domain, men/boys have a much larger share (113%) of paid economic activity than women/girls (37%). This suggests that there is unequal access to and participation in the formal workforce between genders.Sports engagement shows a large disparity, with 85% for boys/girls comparing only 17% for women/girls. This points to differences in socialization and opportunities provided to each gender regarding sports activities. These gendered presentations serve to perpetuate the social norm of gender inequality. gender stereotype in the textbook had deepened the typical gender role of homemakers, further cultivating the cultural norm of gender stereotype.

3.1 How Particular Cultural Background Affect Gender Inequality

By comparing Hong Kong and Pakistan, two regions where had different history and cultural norms.The effect made by cultural background would be clearer to indicate. In Hongkong, the social norm is that grassroots women usually do part time job and receive relatively low pay, meanwhile married women had to depend on their husband. Those phenomenon also cause the problem of alienation from themselves.As shown by Hong Kong Women Workers Association[hereafter WWA], the study [9] demonstrates how gender stereotypes and male dominance prevent women from achieving autonomy, self-determination, and self-efficacy, and instead make them more reliant, submissive, and fearful of making decisions on their own. Participating in a particular program sponsored by the WWA, one of the grassroots women states, “the main reason is that I work on a full-time job and when I do the job, I felt so self-abased without dignity at all.” I became quite depressed and lost confidence as a result, especially in social situations, while other participants also reported feeling as though they had lost their “selves” in their day-to-day jobs.[8].

As for Pakistan, according to the study[10], it reveals that despite Pakistan’s claim of being an Islamic state, it has failed miserably to uphold the core Islamic principle of gender equality. Pakistani women are allocated significantly fewer household resources and have minimal or

even no share in property ownership, owing to the deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset in the society.Poverty is also identified as a major contributing factor that perpetuates gender inequality. Poverty restricts children, especially girls, from accessing education, and consequently, these archaic, discriminatory practices continue to prevail. The research findings clearly demonstrate that the various social and cultural practices carried out in the name of Islam in Pakistan, which limit women’s access to education, employment and deprive them of their basic human rights, are fundamentally at odds with the teachings of Islam. Islam clearly does not allow any form of discrimination against women by men.In light of these findings, it is evident that Pakistan needs to decisively abandon these regressive practices that violate the Islamic principles of gender equality. Instead, it must take specific steps to truly uphold and protect the rights of women, in order to achieve genuine parity between the genders - which is the righteous path aligned with Islamic teachings.In Pakistan, women are usually expected to fulfill traditional domestic roles as primary caregivers and housewives, which creates significant barrier for them to balance obligations between work and family. The notion of “Izzat” (honor) also places restrictions on women’s mobility for various needs [11]. Women entrepreneurs in Pakistan choose to start their own businesses primarily to gain the flexibility, control and freedom required to better balance work and family responsibilities [4]. However, they still face significant obstacles such as lack of time, gender bias, social and cultural norms, as well as family responsibilities.

The heavy burden of domestic responsibilities hinders women’s career advancement and success, as it is not their first priority. Women also have fewer working opportunities due to societal mindset and gender bias, which negatively impacts their opportunities to gain success.

Despite the increasing participation of women in the Pakistani workforce, their economic contribution is still perceived as a social duty rather than an economic one. The social disapproval of working women reflects the invisibility of their labor force involvement [4].

3.2 Coping strategies

Aimed at solving gender inequality, coping strategies have been taken. According to the Hong Kong democratic, more and more women in old age and women being single parents are receiving benefits from social welfare, such as Figure 3 [1].

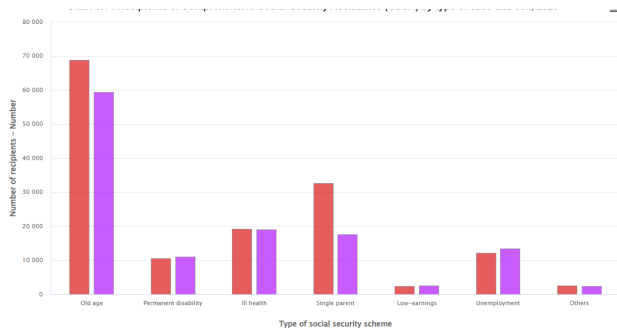


Figure 3. Recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) by type of case sex, 2023[1].

Established in 1989, the Hong Kong Women Worker Association is one of the representative organizations in Hong Kong that pay attention to the living situation of Hong Kong women, particularly for middle-aged women who suffer from employment barriers like discrimination and low education levels. Aimed at addressing the poor situation of females, the Hong Kong Women Worker Association took measures to empower these grassroots women by providing courses for them to gain more skills and essential knowledge, allowing them to cultivate leadership and give assistance to other female working groups[9].

4. Conclusion

Gender stereotype is the main source of gender inequality. It exists in various forms of widening wage gap, uneven work-life balance and occupational segregation. In Pakistan, traditional gender roles are deeply rooted in social value, which cause in female being restricted in various aspects of education, employment and family obligations. Under comparison, situation in Hongkong are relatively better, but females are facing the issues like wage gap and promotion opportunities, women in hongkong usually have to bear not only the stress of the family role of unpaid caregiver and mother, but also receive low pay from occupational segregation or doing part time job as a complementary economic source. Aimed at addressing the issue, many coping strategies have been taken from

different aspects, such as welfare improvement from government and empowerment strategies from WWA.

To help women achieve better work-life balance, interventions and policies are needed at multiple levels, including addressing social norms, cultural values, and legal frameworks, as well as providing more support and opportunities for women.

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