

Understanding Gender, Health and Income

Key Takeaways



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CDPR hosted a workshop to understand linkages between gender, health and income and how these affect vulnerability of low-income households. Participants included government representatives, gender experts, private sector experts and international experts. An engaging conversation led to an insightful discussion regarding the topic.

This workshop is part of a series that aims to generate discussion on how government initiatives on increasing income opportunities of low-income households can be made more effective in meeting their objectives. These vulnerable households are susceptible to quickly slipping back into poverty when faced with adverse economic events (such as the one associated with COVID 19). In the current slow growth scenario, it will be particularly important to prioritise the vulnerable and address vulnerability. The previous government aimed to do this through the Kamyab Pakistan Programme (KPP), by providing subsidized, interest-free cash loans to help transition vulnerable households towards sustainable livelihoods. The loans were intended to be complemented with skills development and mandatory healthcare, and an opportunity to avail low-cost housing. The workshops will inform the development of a Strategy Paper that will focus on how the resilience of households can be magnified through tackling environmental risk factors affecting health

and increasing women's contribution in the labour force.

Female Labour Force Participation in Pakistan

One indicator to examine how progressive a society is to check the economic inclusion of women. Pakistan's female labour force participation is amongst the lowest in the South Asian region and in the world. Labour force participation rates even among women with high levels of education is abysmally low. This should be an alarming situation for Pakistan as low female labour force participation reflects a loss of potential productivity in the economy. Furthermore, it has major implications for women empowerment. Studies have shown that women who work have greater participation in household decision making and a greater say in how household expenditures are run as compared to women who do not work outside their homes. They tend to spend greater amount of money to increase their children's welfare, especially that of girls.

However, it is important to note that the number of working women in Pakistan might be under-documented as many are involved in low-paying agricultural and informal (such as home-based) work. Women constitute the majority of the overall labour force engaged in the informal sector, and women from vulnerable households are primarily employed in low-income informal jobs. This employment stems from necessity: they do not have a choice but to work as the income of one family member is not enough to sustain the household. Multiple incomes act as an insurance strategy: if one income stream dries up, the household has another to support livelihood. Additional income earned by the woman in a vulnerable household might also act as a cushion against economic

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or health shocks. However, earning for the household does not reduce their responsibilities of household work, social reproduction and childrearing. In addition, informal work is more susceptible to economic shocks. For instance, in recent times, it has been harder for women to return to work and earn pre-pandemic incomes compared to men because of a decrease in demand for home-based informal work. Furthermore, women in these households are more susceptible to health problems. There is a higher level of malnutrition among women as men's nutritional needs are prioritized over women and girls in a household. Pakistan faces a high maternal mortality rate as women are not provided with adequate care after childbirth and instances of cardiovascular diseases are also higher among women than men as they are mainly responsible for collecting and burning biomass fuel.

Women in lower income households resort to informal work as they lack education and skills to get employed in formal work. However, even after attaining education, their connection to employment is low. Many interconnected factors inhibit women's ability to work, and these conditions have persisted over time, preventing women from entering the workforce. Firstly, the social construct of the man being the main breadwinner and woman the caretaker of the household inhibits women from going to work outside the home and participating in economic activity. Secondly, women's mobility is hindered due to safety concerns. Many females cite transport to be the major constraint in accessing schools or workplaces. Distance from school/workplace is a major determinant in women's education and employment as men have the option of accessing public transport, rickshaws etc., but women have to find safe, often more costly, means of transport to prevent instances of harassment. Parents' perceptions may have changed over time, and they want their children, including daughters, to receive education but one of their major

concerns is the safety of the school environment. Thirdly, women's accessibility to different resources is low and likely hinders their economic standing. Digital literacy among women in Pakistan is critically poor. A small proportion of women have access to mobile phones and an even smaller percentage have access to internet and laptops. Mobile outreach in rural areas is skewed towards men. Lack of communication among programme implementers and women inhibits women from connecting effectively with the job market, hampering economic and entrepreneurial opportunities for women.

Data regarding women's economic participation

Data collection methods and the data available on economic participation by women and the poor in Pakistan is dated, resulting in a huge data gap. Gender disaggregated data at provincial and national level on some of the key indicators is not available, making it difficult for policy makers to study and analyze the need and impact of certain interventions, which forms weak foundations for subsequent programmes. Moreover, poor women are unable to register themselves on portals such as the National Socio-Economic Registry due to technical issues and are left out of welfare schemes. Women who are not registered as working women because they are employed in the informal sector are unable to access social security, emergency capital, unemployment allowances etc. Moreover, the current survey designs could lead to biased results regarding female labour force participation. In most national surveys, questions are put forward to the head of household, which is usually a male member.

Women microloan borrowers

Women currently form less than half of the portion of active borrowers in the micro-finance sector and the number has been declining since the onset of Covid-19. One reason provided for the share of female borrowers shrinking is because the Micro-

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finance Banks (MFBs), that constitute more than half of the sector, largely target men. This should not be interpreted, however, as women being bad borrowers: NRSP reports that loan repayment record is better for women than for male borrowers. Moreover, Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) that lend mostly to women provide anecdotal evidence about their entrepreneurial success and increased decision-making power in the household.

Women's access to microloans is also low: they may not be well informed about existing schemes due to the asymmetry of technology and unequal access to digital technology. Women who may know about such initiatives are faced with other set of challenges. For instance, they are not comfortable approaching banks because of instances of harassment and fear of exploitation. Most female borrowers have to take a male guarantor along, which can increase the probability of funds being misappropriated by other members of the household. Many times, loans taken by women are used by men, and women end up having to bear the responsibility of repaying the loan on time. According to NRSP, 30% of loans approved for women are used by a male household member instead.

Initiatives and aligning the agenda with KPP

Unfortunately, the factors that prevented women from joining the workforce decades ago are still prevalent today. Pakistan continues to lag behind other developing countries in women's economic participation. If this has to be changed, Pakistan needs to ensure that programmes on economic empowerment include KPIs focused on women's inclusion. With a majority of the women population uneducated or unskilled -

and those who are educated but unable to work due to societal construct or security concerns - it is necessary to provide them with adequate skills and a safe environment. This is important especially for women in rural areas. Providing digital literacy should also be a priority as it would help women to approach initiatives like the KPP and Benazir Income support Programme (BISP). Access to schools and workplaces should be made safer through private and public transport.

Initiatives and aligning the agenda with KPP Unfortunately, the factors that prevented women from joining the workforce decades ago are still prevalent today. Pakistan continues to lag behind other developing countries in women's economic participation. If this has to be changed, Pakistan needs to ensure that programmes on economic empowerment include KPIs focused on women's inclusion. With a majority of the women population uneducated or unskilled - and those who are educated but unable to work due to societal construct or security concerns - it is necessary to provide them with adequate skills and a safe environment. This is important especially for women in rural areas. Providing digital literacy should also be a priority as it would help women to approach initiatives like the KPP and Benazir Income support Programme (BISP). Access to schools and workplaces should be made safer through private and public transport.

Any issues in the implementation of the KPP should be addressed proactively as they arise to increase the uptake of loans among vulnerable households. For instance, treatment for cancer is not covered under Sehat Card yet, but the exposure of women to biomass fuels, increases their risk to cancer as well as heart attacks and strokes. Women are more vulnerable to these health shocks as

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they do not seek treatment until it is something absolutely urgent or last stage. It is important to address these issues as health concerns are a contributing factor in female labour force participation.

Monitoring and evaluation should also be incorporated in the KPP's agenda in order to better understand its impact. The monitoring and evaluation should take place at various stages and feedback should be integrated in the programme's subsequent planning and roll-out. There is a lack of trust in people when it comes to government programmes and their implementation. Therefore, these programmes and their objectives, eligibility criteria and results should be communicated in a more effective way to the intended audience. A robust and transparent grievance redressal mechanism should be introduced so that citizens can voice their concerns regarding the programme and its implementation. Quick resolution of such issues and grievances can help increase public trust in government initiatives.

It will be important to have different programmes linked in order to create synergy and boost support for all initiatives involved. For example, credit support program should be linked with digital literacy and awareness campaigns. Coordination among provincial and federal departments should also be improved to enhance capacity building of implementers for better outcomes. Provincial initiatives are sometimes not in line with the federal ones, and better coordination among departments and programmes can lead to improved outcomes. Data collection should be improved by redesigning surveys, data registration processes and collection methods to improve inclusion, documentation and impact analysis of the programme.

Conclusion

KPP aims to improve livelihoods of vulnerable households by increasing income opportunities available to them. In order to this, it is critical that the role of female labour force participation on productivity of households is acknowledged, and action taken on

incorporating gender diversity in the programme. There are important lessons to be learned from programmes launched earlier, such as the on-going Kamyab Jawan program (that also provides loans for business) that received 16% applications for women (of which only 12% were successful) despite designating 25% loans for women. It will be useful to understand why the take-up was low. Any programme that aims to empower women has to be designed with the gender intentionality keeping in mind and the specific factors that have hindered the success of predecessor programs. Variation by region, income and education strata, can shed light on constraints faced by potential female applicants. The challenges faced by working women are manifold and largely dependent on the social environment that hinders their progress. Enhancing results on the gender dimension in KPP can be approached in two ways; one, through spreading awareness of these initiatives through better communication and coordination; and two, through addressing issues which prevent women from working and equipping them with knowledge of tools (such as mobile phones) which could assist them in taking loans under KPP. For the success of the programme, it would be crucial to include indicators that are linked to the social impact, as well as building the capacity of implementers to achieve the gender outcomes. Incorporating gender initiatives in KPP would improve women empowerment and productivity in the society along with helping vulnerable households in generating sustainable livelihoods.

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