

How have collective bargaining and government policies influenced gender equality in the labor markets of Bangladesh and Pakistan?

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Background Context and Introduction

Striving for gender equality in the labor market is pivotal for societal advancement and economic stability. In South Asia, Bangladesh and Pakistan offer compelling insights into gender dynamics amidst economic growth, particularly within their vital textile and garment sectors. Despite significant employment opportunities for women in these industries, challenges such as wage disparities, precarious working conditions, and limited leadership roles highlight the ongoing struggle for gender parity.

Collective bargaining and government policy-making are central to addressing gender equality. Collective bargaining advocates for equitable wages and safe work conditions, addressing gender-specific concerns like wage discrimination and maternity leave. Meanwhile, government policies establish legal frameworks and support mechanisms crucial for advancing or hindering gender equality through measures like equal remuneration regulations and anti-discrimination laws.

This study explores how collective bargaining and government policies have impacted gender equality in the labor markets of Bangladesh and Pakistan. By analyzing Bangladesh's female labor force participation (FLFP), Age-Specific Unemployment Rates (ASUR) by Gender in Pakistan, and Employment by sector and gender in Bangladesh, the research aims to uncover these nations' strategies to overcome challenges and seize opportunities for gender equity in the labor market.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

The interplay between collective bargaining, government policies, and gender equality within the labor markets of Bangladesh and Pakistan is grounded in the theoretical frameworks

of Gendered Political Economy and Social Reproduction Theory, alongside the Decent Work and Gender Equality frameworks.

Gendered Political Economy offers a nuanced lens through which gender inequalities within economic policies and labor practices can be discerned, emphasizing the variegated impacts on men and women (Leschke, 2024). This framework examines the gendered dimensions inherent in collective bargaining processes and the formulation of government policies, spotlighting the mechanisms through which these practices either reinforce or challenge the status quo of gender disparities in the labor market.

Social Reproduction Theory complements this perspective by bringing to light the critical yet often undervalued realm of unpaid care work, predominantly undertaken by women. This theory challenges the labor market and policy frameworks to recognize and integrate the value of reproductive labor into their constructs, arguing that without such acknowledgment, aspirations for gender equality remain elusive (Porte, 2024).

The Decent Work and Gender Equality frameworks, propounded by the International Labour Organization (ILO), enrich this analysis by advocating for an evaluation of employment quality, social protection, and labor rights through a gendered lens. Thus, they provide a comprehensive framework to assess the outcomes of policies and collective bargaining from the perspective of gender equity.

Methodology

The choice of Bangladesh and Pakistan highlights their shared heritage and differing approaches to workplace gender equality. Bangladesh's economic rise, fueled by the garment industry, offers women employment opportunities yet faces hurdles in achieving full gender

equality. Pakistan's diverse economy faces cultural and socio-political barriers limiting women's workforce participation despite governmental efforts to address these challenges.

Central to both countries' economies, the garment industry is a focal point for examining labor rights and gender equality. Following the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, Bangladesh has seen reforms to protect its predominantly female workforce, though challenges remain. In Pakistan, fluctuating political landscapes influence the efficacy of labor rights and gender policies, with the garment sector often at the debate's center.

Empirical Analysis

In Bangladesh, the female labor force participation (FLFP) rate has gradually increased, climbing from 26 percent in 2003 to 36 percent in 2016 (Solotaroff & Kotikula, 2019). Despite this upward trend, the FLFP rate remains significantly lower than that of males, and a considerable wage gap persists. Women earn less than men across various sectors, even when factors such as education and employment are accounted for (Bidisha et al., 2022). This wage disparity underscores the need for more robust collective bargaining mechanisms to advocate equitable pay.

Pakistan's labor market showcases a stark gender disparity, with women constituting only 22.53 percent of the workforce (GIZ, 2018). Unemployment rates for women are notably higher than men's, reflecting a structural barrier to women's economic participation (Concern Worldwide, 2022). Government initiatives like the Prime Minister's Youth Program have been implemented to bolster female labor market participation. However, their effectiveness remains limited, particularly in rural areas where traditional gender roles dominate (GIZ, 2018).

Figures and Tables

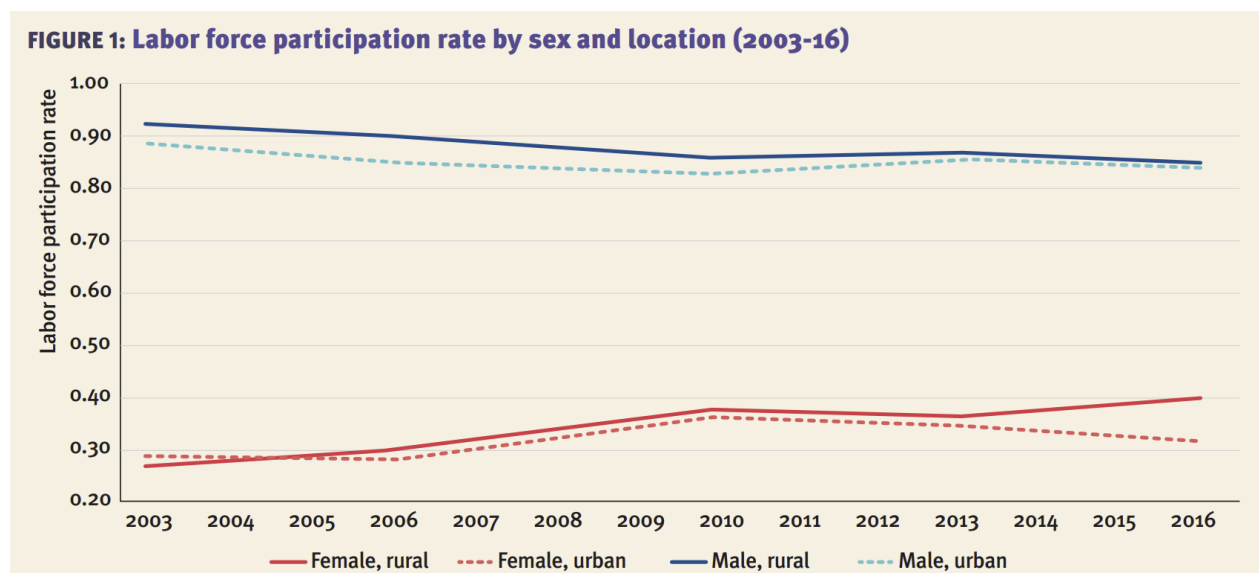


Figure 1: Trends in Female Labor Force Participation in Bangladesh, 2003-2016 (Kotikula et al., W. A., 2019)

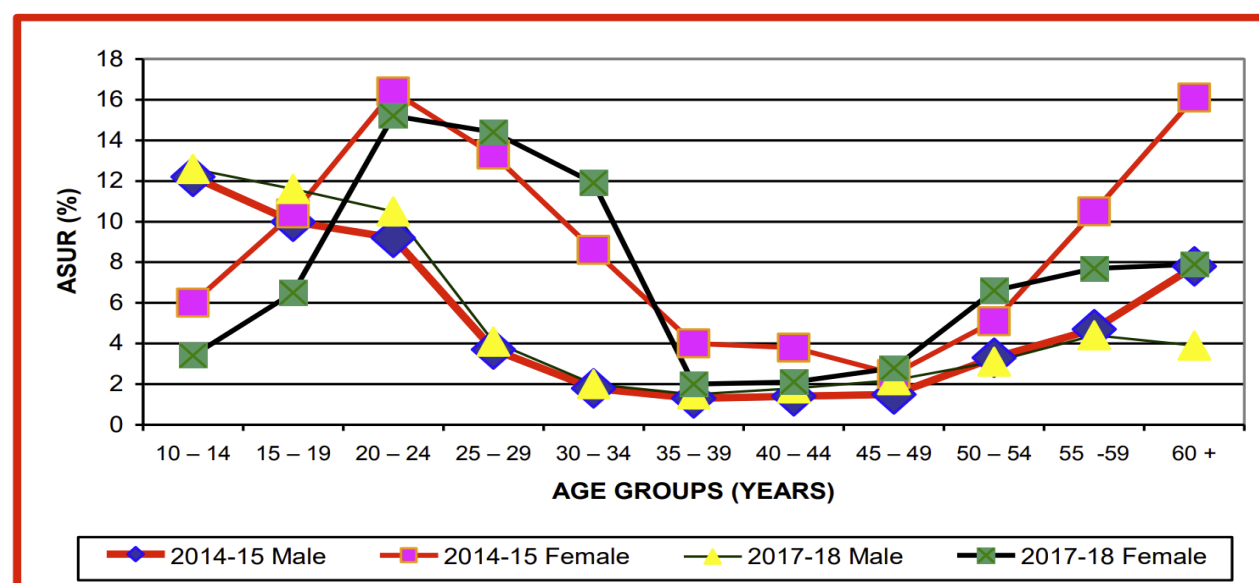


Figure 2: Age-Specific Unemployment Rates (ASUR) by Gender (2017-18), Pakistan (Khan et al., M. N., 2018)

	Women	Men
Agriculture	67.19	30.43
Industry	16.25	26.97
Services	16.56	42.60
Total	100	100

Table 1: Employment by sector and gender, 2017 (% of total gendered employment) Pakistan
(Majid et al., K. A., 2021)

Discussion

Empirical evidence, such as Figure One, underscores the significant gender gap in labor force participation. Males consistently maintained an 80% participation rate from 2003 to 2016, while females never exceeded a 40% threshold. This disparity is further shown in Figure Two, where age-specific unemployment rates in Pakistan reveal significant gender disparities, particularly in the prime working age group of 20 to 34, where female unemployment rates significantly surpass those of males.

Table One elaborates on the pronounced segmentation in employment sectors within Pakistan. It highlights the confinement of most women to the agricultural sector, in stark contrast to the more diversified occupational distribution among men. This gendered occupational segregation underscores existing inequalities and signals areas ripe for policy intervention to foster more balanced employment opportunities across sectors.

The Gendered Political Economy framework provides a potent analytical lens, revealing the deep entanglement of economic structures, political processes, and gender relations. It

prompts a critical examination of the mechanisms sustaining gender disparities in the labor market and advocates for comprehensive policy reforms to dismantle the root causes of gender inequality (Leschke, 2024).

Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) broadens this analysis by spotlighting the pivotal role of unpaid labor, predominantly undertaken by women, in sustaining the workforce and the capitalist economy. This theory advocates for a paradigm shift in policy frameworks towards recognizing, valuing, and supporting this vital yet often overlooked segment of economic activity (Porte, 2024).

Furthermore, the Decent Work and Gender Equality frameworks serve as essential yardsticks for evaluating labor market conditions, emphasizing the need for work environments that uphold equity, safety, and dignity for all genders. Despite notable progress, the significant gaps observed, especially for women in Bangladesh and Pakistan, call for targeted, impactful policy interventions to achieve authentic gender equality within their labor markets (Jahan & Rahman, 2021).

These insights compel a multifaceted response from policymakers, labor organizations, and employers to embrace a holistic approach to redress gender inequality. However, the intricacy of these issues is compounded by challenges such as potential data interpretation biases and the difficulty in capturing the full extent of informal labor practices.

Legislative endeavors in Bangladesh, such as the National Women Development Policy and the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, exemplify a commitment to considering gender considerations in development strategies and enhancing workplace conditions through a gender lens (Gender equality brief: Bangladesh: October 2022; Sign the Accord., 2013).

In contrast, Pakistan's constitutional commitment to gender equality necessitates a leap towards actionable, gender-responsive legislation and practice. Measures like the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act signify progress. Yet, the scarcity of female representation in unions and comprehensive support initiatives underscores ongoing integration challenges (Benazir et al., 2019).

The disparity in policy efficacy between Bangladesh and Pakistan underscores the intricate challenge of fostering gender equality. Bangladesh's experience highlights the concrete benefits of cohesive legal and collective efforts toward gender equity in the labor market. At the same time, Pakistan's context accentuates the crucial role of cultural acceptance and robust enforcement in realizing policy objectives.

Attaining gender equality demands concerted efforts across societal, cultural, and economic realms to cultivate a labor market that is genuinely inclusive and equitable for women in South Asia. Exploring the hurdles and advancements in Bangladesh and Pakistan provides pivotal insights into the broader quest for gender equality in global labor markets, underscoring the imperative for a comprehensive, sustained strategy to overcome systemic barriers (Bano et al.; K., 2020).

Conclusion

Gender equality in the labor markets of Bangladesh and Pakistan through the lens of collective bargaining, government policies, and theoretical frameworks reveals a complex landscape marked by both strides and persistent challenges. This study has highlighted the disparities in female labor force participation (FLFP), unemployment rates, and sectorial employment, shedding light on the barriers that continue to hinder gender parity in these nations.

Despite gradual improvements, such as the increase in FLFP in Bangladesh and initiatives aimed at boosting female employment in Pakistan, significant gaps remain, emphasizing the need for targeted and robust interventions.

The analysis, grounded in the Gendered Political Economy and Social Reproduction Theory, alongside the Decent Work and Gender Equality frameworks, underscores the multifaceted nature of gender inequality in the labor market. These theoretical perspectives compel a reevaluation of labor's economic and political dimensions and the critical role of unpaid labor predominantly undertaken by women. The empirical evidence, combined with these frameworks, calls for comprehensive policy reforms and collective bargaining strategies that address the root causes of gender inequality and recognize the value of reproductive labor.

These findings have profound implications, urging policymakers, labor organizations, and employers to adopt a holistic approach to redressing gender inequality. This entails crafting and implementing inclusive strategies that encompass the economic, socio-political, and cultural dimensions of gender disparity. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of enhancing female representation in unions and fostering gender-sensitive workplace cultures to facilitate work-life balance and equitable treatment.

However, the discussion acknowledges limitations such as potential biases in data interpretation and the challenge of fully capturing informal labor practices. The dynamic economic and policy environments in Bangladesh and Pakistan further complicate the applicability and sustainability of these findings over time.

Legislative endeavors in Bangladesh, like the National Women Development Policy and the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, demonstrate a commitment to integrating gender considerations into development strategies. Conversely, Pakistan's journey from

constitutional commitments to actionable, gender-responsive legislation underscores the need for more comprehensive support initiatives to integrate women fully into the labor force.

Achieving gender equality in the labor markets of Bangladesh and Pakistan—and, by extension, globally—requires concerted efforts across societal, cultural, and economic sectors. This study underscores the necessity of a comprehensive, enduring approach to surmounting systemic barriers, highlighting the indispensable role of cultural acceptance, enforcement mechanisms, and a supportive socio-cultural backdrop. The insights derived from Bangladesh and Pakistan's experiences provide critical guidance for the broader endeavor to foster a labor market that is genuinely inclusive and equitable for women, emphasizing the imperative for sustained and multifaceted strategies to achieve gender equality.

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