

## **Refugee Women Factory Workers: Profile from the Frontier Province of Pakistan<sup>1</sup>**

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The average woman worker in factories situated in the Peshawar industrial estate as well as the Gadoon Amazai industrial estate in the Frontier province is usually a vulnerable young girl between 15 and 17 years of age. She is often an Afghan refugee. Her meager income, between 1200 and 1500 rupees<sup>2</sup>, helps support a household of 7-9 persons. The same factory worker can be an older woman, between 35-38 years of age, working due to economic compulsions. Upon meeting these women, one finds out that there are usually three earning members per household. That is the only way the household can survive. Where they might be two women who are earning, one finds that they are also dependent upon charity for survival. It also happens that sometimes they are over-qualified for the job they hold, however, given their situation, they are forced to work in unskilled capacities.

Women are mostly employed in the packing departments of the foods, plastics and pharmaceutical industries. Their working conditions appear reasonable on surface. Most work 8 to 8 1/2 hours a day, six days a week. However, their work is tedious and monotonous, and requires that they stand most of the time. Their supervisors claim that the new ones get used to standing for hours at a stretch after a couple of weeks.

Most women say that their own as well as household earnings are spent on rent, utility bills, medicines and day-to-day living expenses. Most households are in a state of constant indebtedness because they are unable to make ends meet. Many have borrowed money for treatment of a sick family member or for marriage and continue to work in order to pay off the debt. Sometimes they borrow from a friend and return money to a relative, continuing to borrow and return each month, yet never quite overcoming the debt. In a sense, the debt keeps rotating while they keep trying to pay it off by

continuing to work in an exploitative situation. None of the women we surveyed save any money for personal spending. Even the younger ones reported that no money is saved for their future, e.g., for their dowry or marriage. The idea was alien to them.

Women workers, like the majority of women, are also responsible for housework. When they go home, they usually clean the house, wash clothes and cook for the next day. Older women report that they have transferred some of their household responsibilities to a daughter or another woman in the house. This indicates that there has been no change in the gendered nature of household chores and responsibilities.

In the same vein, one finds that the women workers' mobility is strongly curtailed by culture and tradition. This is paradoxical because one expects that since they work and earn a living, they would have achieved some degree of autonomy and independence. However, their mobility is restricted to their workplace and going anywhere else is either out of the question or conditional upon parental/male permission and being accompanied by a male relative even if it's an 8-year old boy.

It is also interesting to note that there are some breakdowns in patriarchal controls and boundaries. While there is no doubt that Afghan refugee women have faced far more controls over their movement in their home country, they are seen working in factories in Pakistan-something unimaginable for them in their native Afghanistan. The fact that there appears to be a breakdown to some degree in patriarchal controls may be a blessing in disguise in the long run. This does not take them away from the extreme levels of exploitation that they face at present.

Refugee women workers' disempowerment is not restricted to the private realm. It extends into the public realm also. Their perceived "docility" plays a large part in their being hired. They have no awareness about a minimum wage and express gratitude for the job they hold. Most of them feel that the management is very kind to them because by providing them employment, they have been spared worse conditions of poverty. Thus the fact that they are paid below minimum wage does not appear to be a major issue in their lives. Similarly, they have no awareness of their legal rights

(if there are any) or about labor laws. They usually do not have a formal contract and are employed provisionally. After two to three years of work during which they seldom avail any leave, their contracts are not renewed on the basis of a flimsy excuse. They are ineligible for any social security or old age benefits, thereby, helping the factory owners to save money by not contributing toward these funds. Their mindset is one of gratefulness, even if they are being exploited.

Refugee women's specific insecurity and "docility" prevents them from organizing for any collective action. The problem in this context has several aspects. Traditionally, trade union activity or the formation of a collective are discouraged by factory management. Any worker who is seen to be interested in such activity is threatened with termination. No woman who has stepped out into the job market is interested in losing her job by being perceived to be anti-management. Therefore, even if there is any workers organization, the woman will stay away from it. Additionally, because refugee women are not nationals, they feel much more vulnerable and try their best to conform rather than be perceived as threats.

Women workers' relationship with management is complicated and intricate because it has several cross-currents. The owners and managers act like patriarchs-while they have the ability to punish, they also reward and are perceived to be sympathetic and supportive. Therefore, going against them also amounts to destroying an almost familial relationship. For example, if a worker needs a loan or help during illness, the management helps. Similarly, the management keeps a strict code of morality by frowning upon interactions between young women and men. Marriage among workers is particularly discouraged as it might bring a bad name to the factory since it would imply that the two met and fell in love in the factory. Hence the different types of relationships within a factory end up discouraging any kind of rights based activity.

Women workers' non-participation in trade unions where they exist is related to the structure and environment within trade unions. These are not conducive toward women's participation. Women usually perceive them to be exclusive male enclaves with little space for them. They do not relate to

them. Furthermore, and as mentioned before, refugee women cannot even consider joining or inquiring about a trade union for fear of losing their jobs. Thus there is little incentive to organize or become part of a rights based organization.

The question arises what can be done about this situation? As it is women are paid less than men; however, we find that refugee women fare even more poorly than local women. With the chances of organizing almost non-existent and the challenge to survive almost constant, there are few vantage points from which women, especially refugee women who are at a greater disadvantage compared to like ones in Pakistan, may negotiate for a fairer arrangement. A fairer bargain would include meeting a minimum wage requirement, it would include skill development, and the liberty as well as freedom to form associations without nationalist biases and prejudices.

In the present context, a worker's first identity should be that of a worker and not national identity if exploitation is to be challenged. Secondly, laws must be instituted and implemented to this effect so that refugee workers are not exploited and pitted against similar low-income workers of the home country. Thirdly, collective action, even if it appears a far-dream is a must. Civil society organizations must take partial responsibility for capacity building and exploring with local administration as well as other organizations ways of ensuring better conditions. They will simultaneously have to work with workers and try to help them organize in newer and more imaginative ways to ensure a better future and fairer remuneration as well as conditions of work.

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<sup>1</sup> This short article has used information gleaned from a survey (based upon semi-structured questionnaires) of 30 refugee women workers in two major industrial estates of the North West Frontier Province. The questionnaires were supplemented by case studies. PILER and SDPI carried out a larger survey of over 600 women workers in the formal and informal sectors to assess the impact of structural adjustment policies in Pakistan upon their lives. In the present case, refugee women were found to be working in the formal sector and were employed in the foods, pharmaceuticals and plastics sectors.

<sup>2</sup> The rupee/US dollar exchange rate at the time was approximately 54 rupees to one US dollar.