

Gallup Pakistan History Project - **Weekend Read 9** ‘**Pakistani Women: Progress on the Road towards Economic Empowerment**’: by Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

Gender relations in Pakistan often elicit complex and intense debates on the status and role of women in homes, as well as the larger society. For many who view and understand Pakistan through a gendered lens, the landscape appears discouraging. The majority of Pakistani women are entangled and encumbered in unequal power dynamic with men; both within their homes, as well as in the public space. Most women in Pakistan face an uphill battle to exercise their agency (in the private and public arenas), as well as break through the various structural and societal barriers and ceilings that inhibit socioeconomic and political progress in Pakistan. In this sense, women in Pakistan are doubly marginalized and excluded. They are locked in an unequal power relationship with men in general – and this imbalance is legitimized and perpetuated by a variety of social norms, legal provisions, and cultural practices. On a second front, women who are able to rectify and overcome this basic power differential then face another battle: to overcome structural barriers that disincentivize and actively prohibit women’s participation as equal members of the society in the public sphere.

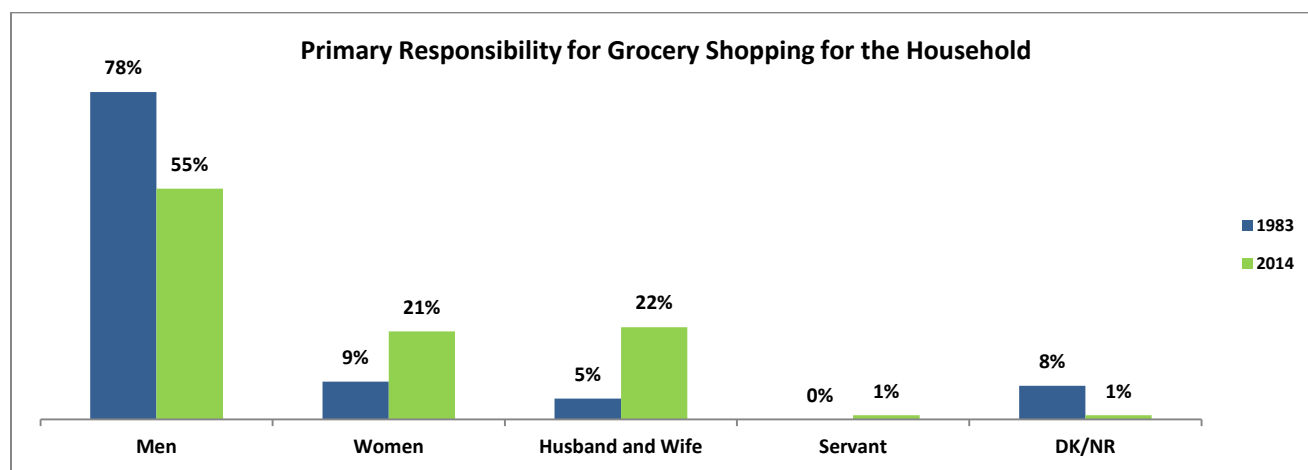
Readers will notice that these aforementioned claims are deeply contested by many who dismiss the notion of gender inequality as a Western construct that lacks the capacity to engage with, deconstruct, and understand the cultural norms and institutions that govern the relationship between men and women in Pakistan. This contention is based on cultural relativism, and identifies the preceding analysis of gender imbalance in Pakistan as another face of imposed cultural and mental hegemony.

This brief survey of two mainstream positions on gender in Pakistan provides a flavor of the intensity of differing perspectives on the issue. Notwithstanding these strong claims, practitioners and analysts can step outside of debating the very nature of gender relations in Pakistan to zoom in on the practical state of affairs with regards to women’s role and participation in the private and public sphere. Specifically, women’s economic empowerment has been an important theme for policymakers, gender practitioners, and development stakeholders. For many of these actors, women’s economic empowerment is “crucial for attaining and protecting women’s rights, as well as a pathway towards inclusive economic growth, poverty reduction, and improvements in health, education, and social welfare.” In conceptualizing and operationalizing strategies for women’s economic empowerment in Pakistan, longitudinal data on the shifts and trends in women’s economic involvement at the household level can provide critical input into understanding how Pakistani women’s status and role is changing in the private, and public economic sphere.

This is where Gallup Pakistan’s immensely valuable repository of longitudinal data from 1980 onwards enables new insights to emerge out of the thicket of different opinions and disagreements. The organization has been conducting public opinion surveys in Pakistan for over three decades on a wide range of subjects, including data on women’s roles and opportunities for participation in household economic decision-making. The public opinion exercise has tracked two questions at two points (1983 and 2014) to yield a crucial insight into the changing nature of women’s economic empowerment in Pakistan. Put together, these questions help develop an empirical understanding of women’s role in Pakistan’s economy.

The first question is built around the idea of an elemental and fundamental economic activity at the household level: grocery shopping. Specifically, Gallup Pakistan asked a representative sample of Pakistanis across the country the following question: *I will read out to you a list of different actions. In some households, in different parts of the country, men do these chores, while in others, women do. In your household who usually carries out these chores: **buying groceries for the house?***

The responses to this question were captured and recorded in 1983, and repeated in 2014. The following figure provides an indication of the changes in Pakistani households on this economic metric:

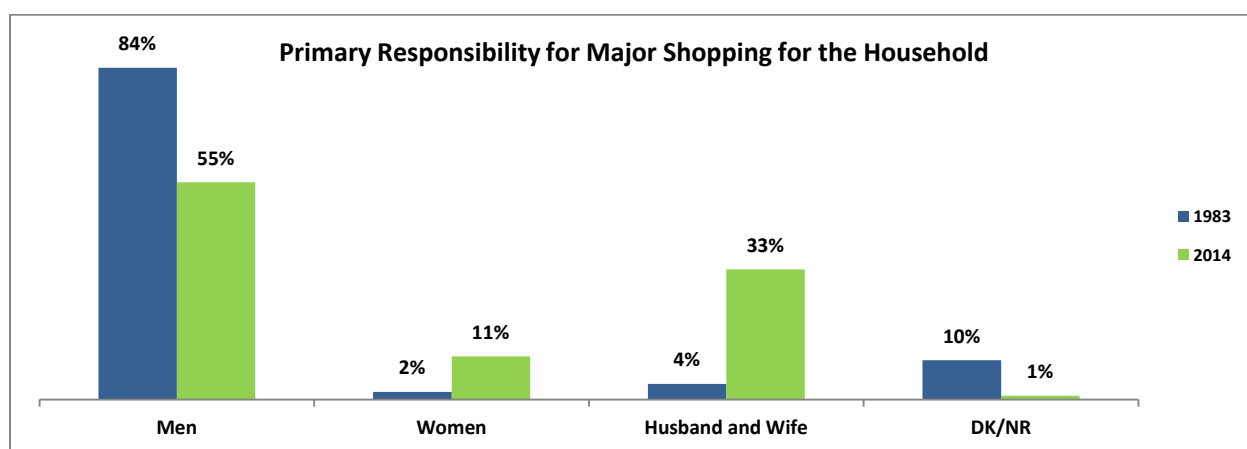


Things have changed for Pakistani women over the last 31 years, especially with regards to their economic involvement in elemental economic decision-making. As seen above, the greatest shift has been registered on two channels of grocery-shopping for the household: first, in cases where women alone are primarily responsible for buying groceries; and second, cases in which women partake in grocery shopping alongside their husbands. Both channels indicate that women are making significant headway in terms of carving out a space within households for getting actively involved in basic economic decisions and actions. Grocery shopping is one of the most

vital consumption and expenditure decisions taken by a household. In 1983, only 9% of Pakistani women had the opportunity to buy groceries for their households, while only 5% found space to participate in grocery shopping alongside their husbands. By 2014, things have changed for Pakistani women. 21% Pakistani households have women responsible for grocery shopping, while 22% women are able to participate in this activity alongside their husbands. In 1983, the sole responsibility for buying household groceries rested with men: 78% men undertook this activity in Pakistani households in 1983. In 2014, this had declined to 55% of all men who are solely responsible for buying household groceries. These shifts contribute towards building a better understanding of women's overall economic empowerment in the country, and dissecting components that enable economic empowerment.

The second question designed by Gallup Pakistan asked respondents to respond to a different gradient of household economic consumption/expenditure decisions. Specifically, Gallup Pakistan asked a representative sample of Pakistani households the following question in 1983 and 2014: *I will read out to you a list of different actions. In some households, in different parts of the country, men do these chores, while in others women do. In your household who usually carries out these activities: **major shopping for the household?***

The responses to this question were captured and recorded in 1982, and repeated in 2014. The following figure provides an indication of the changes in Pakistani households on this economic metric:



As seen in this Figure, women's involvement in major shopping decisions at the household level is also increasing in Pakistan. In 1983, the overwhelming majority, 83%, of all major household

shopping decisions and actions were taken by men. In that year, only 2% women had the opportunity to be the sole actors and decision-makers in major shopping decisions, while only 4% were able to participate alongside their husbands in making this decision. By 2014, three crucial shifts have taken root in this household level economic activity. First, 55% men are now responsible for major shopping decisions and actions for the household. Last year, 11% women in Pakistan were able to participate in this activity on their own. Crucially, 31 years later, 33% Pakistani women are able to participate with their husbands in the major household shopping decisions and actions.

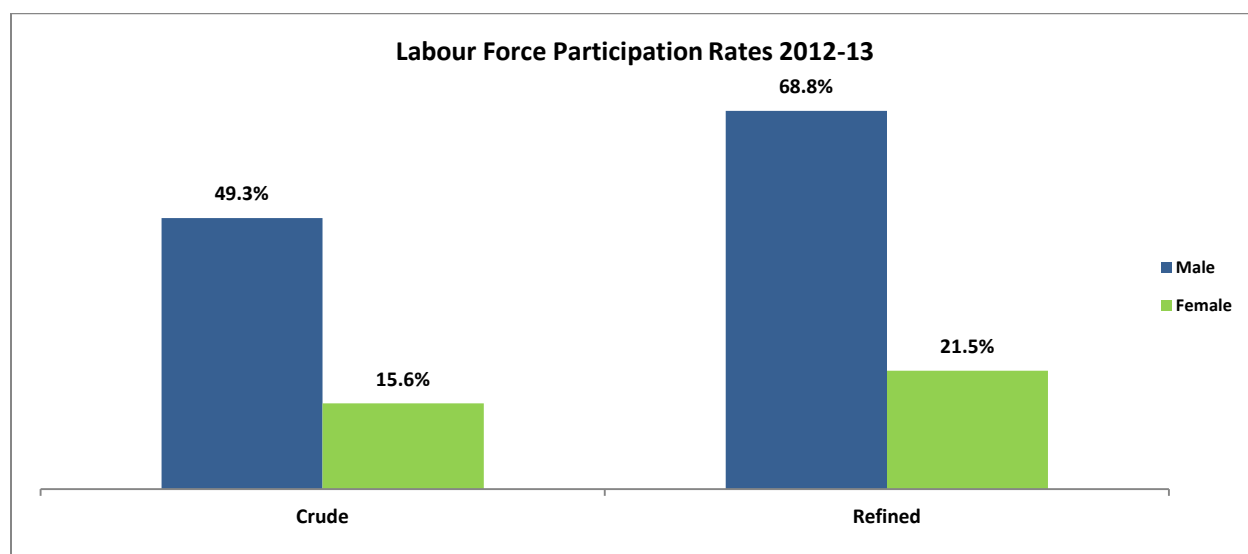
The changes recorded in the data shared above enable a number of conclusions to be drawn that can help practitioners and analysts in developing a longitudinal understanding of women's economic empowerment. Participation in consumption/expenditure activities as decision-makers and actors is only one element of complete economic empowerment; albeit, an important one. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) defines women's economic empowerment as a situation in which "a woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions."¹ This definition identifies two elements required for achieving complete economic empowerment and agency: ability to participate fully in economic activities; opportunities and ability to make and act on economic decision-making. The data shared and analyzed here shows that over the last three decades or so in Pakistan, women's ability to make and act on economic decisions at the household level has expanded. This ability has increased in terms of making and enacting a foundational economic decision (buying household groceries), as well as a major household economic decision (major shopping). On both these indicators, at the household level, more women are getting opportunities to participate in basic household expenditure and consumption decisions.

However, this shift is not a game-changer for women economic empowerment in Pakistan. While it is true that more women are now responsible for singularly taking and acting on crucial household consumption/expenditure decision, a higher proportion of women are able to participate in these decisions and activities as joint partners with their husbands. This sharing of

¹ ICRW: <http://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/publications/Understanding-measuring-womens-economic-empowerment.pdf>

responsibilities highlights shared agency, in which women's power and ability to make basic household consumption/expenditure decisions is still contingent on the male partner's involvement. This contingency/dependency is an improvement from three decades ago. However, it is not the complete economic independence that would herald economic empowerment for women at the household level.

Another critical observation regarding this data is that there are two core elements of economic empowerment for an individual: income-generation/economic participation vs. consumption/expenditure. This data shows one side of the picture by revealing the shift on the household consumption/expenditure side. On the income generation side (which could be argued as being more central and critical to attaining full economic empowerment) women in Pakistan lag far behind men. Latest data from the economic survey of Pakistan shows labour force participation rates differ quite significantly for men and women in Pakistan. This gender participation difference in crude (size of the labour force in proportion to the size of the population) and refined (total labour force in proportion to the specified minimum age) labour force participation rates is given in the Figure below:²



These numbers show that on the income generations side, women are not as actively involved in economic activities as men. In fact, men dominate the country's labour force, and are the primary economic actors engaged in income generation activities. Women do not get the same

² Economic Survey of Pakistan: http://finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_14/12_Population.pdf

opportunities for participating in the labour force for a variety of different and interrelated factors. These differences are crucial in that they show that while women might have made crucial strides on one side of the equation that defines economic participation, their opportunities are far less restricted on the income-generation side. Another important observation that needs to be established is that even women's increased involvement at the household consumption level needs to be further deconstructed. For instance, their involvement in different forms of expenditure and consumption indicators should be tracked over time to understand if women's economic empowerment is increasing in Pakistan. For example, it would be enlightening to record and understand if Pakistani women are involved, individually or in situations of contingent/shared agency (with husbands, fathers, brothers etc), in other types of household consumption decisions and activities e.g. financial decisions and actions (formal and informal); asset-related decisions (property etc); decisions and actions related to undertaking expenditures with disposable income. These are just some of the many different elements that would, in theory, have an impact on the complete economic empowerment of Pakistani women.

Crucially, men are still the primary economic agents at the household level (assuming the conventional definition of economic activity and production). While their sole control over grocery shopping and major shopping decisions might have declined and changed over the last three decades, in most Pakistani households, they still take and act upon these foundational economic decisions regarding consumption and expenditure. Similarly, critical input is required from the fascinating tools and approaches contributed by behavioural economics to understand what, if any, impact does increased involvement in primary economic decision-making have on multiplying additional opportunities for participation in advanced and higher tiers of economic decision-making and activities.

Pakistani women and their status is a terrain that involves continued analytical, advocacy, and resource investments. Women's economic empowerment is an integral and indispensable component of maximizing the potentialities for equitable economic growth and human development. In that sense, women's economic empowerment should be a priority target in Pakistan, given its developmental needs and targets. Gallup's valuable public opinion data shows that women's economic empowerment and profiles are improving in Pakistan, albeit in a restricted sense. More needs to be done in this arena to further our knowledge and practice of

women's economic empowerment, as well as its impact on society, culture, economy, and politics.