SPDC
Changing gender roles in the labour force

Pakistan’s *Social Policy and Development Centre* (SPDC) applied a gendered lens to its work, conducting much-needed research on female employment.

**SETTING THE SCENE** — The growth of Pakistan’s economy has decelerated in recent years. Though the impact of this weakened economy on employment opportunities has, in general, been rather limited, its impact on women during the economic crisis has been disproportionately worse. In some cases this has led to social isolation, psychological trauma, reduced nutrition, elevated school dropout rates among girls, child abandonment and suicides among women.

In Pakistan, the participation of women in the labour force is traditionally low; women are often prevented from working due to social and cultural norms. Fortunately, in recent years there has been a slight increase in female employment ratios due to enhanced education, urban living and the growth of a number of civil society organizations working for female development. However, women rarely enter the formal sector - predominantly working informally - and when they do they face persistent gender discrimination and a lack of access to leadership opportunities. The Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) identified a need to comprehensively address these multifaceted challenges in order to improve female labour force participation.

**WHAT SPDC DID** — Established in 1995, SPDC is a non-profit, policy research institute that provides independent reviews of social policies in Pakistan, often with a gendered perspective. In 2009, it launched its *Annual Review of Social Development in Pakistan 2007-08* entitled *Women at Work*. This pioneering study presented objective and in-depth analyses of women’s employment in the country. It focused on topics such as entrepreneurship, microcredit, occupational segregation, the gender wage gap, sexual harassment in the workplace and labour laws. While a lack of opportunities for women in Pakistan is often attributed to poverty, this study made it clear that exploitation, harassment and legal issues also play key roles. The report noted that over 78 per cent of women of productive age are out of the labour force and that the ratio of male to female workers is approximately 4:1 in Pakistan.

Based on these findings, SPDC made recommendations on how to effectively encourage female participation in the workforce. These proposals include access to credit, tax benefits, labour law reforms, social protection and other gender specific labour policies. SPDC understood that, in order to enact any policy change it would be necessary to share its findings with policymakers,
parliamentarians and the broader public. The institute therefore set out to raise awareness about these issues with a broad range of stakeholders, and its efforts to communicate these findings led to real results.

**THE OUTCOME** — Since 2009, SPDC has worked to disseminate the findings of its *Women at Work* report. The institute conducted dissemination seminars, participated in conferences, wrote and distributed research reports and journal articles, published policy briefs aimed at influencing policymakers and wrote articles for local and national newspapers. As a result, state and privately-owned television showcased the report, SPDC staff participated in numerous talk shows and radio programs, and parliamentarians widely cited the findings of the research. In addition, while Pakistan's *Protection Against Harassment at the Workplace Act 2008* had not initially included harassment in public places, this policy was updated following SPDC’s findings. Overall, the findings from the *Women at Work* report informed national discussions about limited workforce opportunities for women in Pakistan.

Today SPDC is working to raise awareness about the implications of social and macroeconomic policies with a particular focus on women's work and poverty, and to develop gender statistics and indicators that map changes in gender roles. As evidence of its success, SPDC received a five-year grant for its *2008-2013 Gender Research Programme* from the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Pakistan. It has launched six studies through this initiative to date, on topics including the gender dimension of displacement and resettlement and the socio-economic cost of violence against women. The institute continues to broadly disseminate its findings.

For more information on SPDC, visit [www.spdc.org.pk](http://www.spdc.org.pk)

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