

Female labor force participation and religiosity in the patriarchal urban Pakistan

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1. Introduction

Female labor force participation (FLFP) is considered important in poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and bridging gender gaps (World Bank 2011; 2012; Duflo 2012). FLFP can also help in improving the economic situation of households at a micro level, and subsequently, provide a foundation for macroeconomic development. Despite its evident importance both at the national and household/individual levels, FLFP rates remain low in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and South Asian countries, the so-called "patriarchal belt" (Kandiyoti 1988). It has been of great interest for researchers and policy makers how to enhance FLFP in these regions.

Factors explaining low FLFP rates include lack of childcare, necessary skills and education, and income earning opportunities. Recently, the social norm against FLFP, particularly in patriarchal societies has attracted researchers' attention (for example, Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn 2013; Bernhardt et al. 2018; Jayachandran 2021). In these societies, FLFP decisions are often made by male household members such as fathers and husbands, and the randomized controlled trials (RCT) targeting male household members have been conducted. These studies, mainly consisting of new or updated information provision to male household members, have shown mixed results, with limited impact on actual FLFP (Dean and Jayachandran 2019; Bursztyn, Gonzalez, and Yanagizawa-Drott 2020; Makino 2024).

Closely related to the social norm, but relatively understudied, is how the religious norm related to Islam influences FLFP. Inconsistent with the general public image that Islam restricts

women's behavior, the association between Islam and low FLFP rate shown by the macro-level data provides divergent conclusions (Ross 2008; Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales 2003). Besides, the macro-level data complicates the elicitation of causal impact of Islam on FLFP. The micro-level empirical studies concerning the impact of religion in general and Islam in specific, on preventing FLFP are scarce despite the apparent close relationship between the religious and social norms. This is partly because of the lack of variation in religious norms which is required for empirical identification in the “patriarchal belt” where most of them are Muslims. Moreover, even though social constraints are impediments to FLFP, they are either justified or reinforced by Islamization in countries like Pakistan, highlighting the potential role of Islam in modifying FLFP (Hathaway and Lee 2004).

We consider it empirical question whether the religious norm has an impact on FLFP, i.e., it may have a positive or negative impact on FLFP. On one hand, some Quranic passages, teachings by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and guidelines proposed by some religious scholars are interpreted as encouraging FLFP. On the other hand, the strict Islamic guidelines that must be followed by women while they work outside their homes might be perceived a deterrent to FLFP (Biberman et al. 2016). Moreover, some of the Islamic teachings can be misinterpreted in a manner that can discourage female empowerment through education and employment (Ali et al. 2022). Therefore, intervention composed of different passages or guidelines may differentially affect FLFP.

Considering the above background, our study aims to investigate the causal impact of religion on FLFP by implementing the light-touch RCT in urban Pakistan. Our two interventions use two different sets of Islamic information about FLFP; the first intervention presents evidence that Islam allows women to work (positive intervention), and the second intervention discusses rules that

must be followed if women are to work outside their homes (negative intervention). The pure control group receives no information.

We consider Pakistan as an ideal setting to implement RCT because of the reasons as below.

(1) It is one of the lowest FLFP countries (Redaelli and Rahman 2021), and therefore, presents a natural setting where the urgency and relevancy to study whether religion enhances or discourages FLFP is imminent. (2) Men oversee the household decisions including FLFP in Pakistan, and men (husband or father) are largest cited barrier preventing women from working outside the home (Gentile 2022; Makino 2024). (3) 96% of the population in Pakistan is Muslim (the second largest Muslim population in the world)¹, and hence, provides a religiously homogenous environment that is ideal to identify the pure impact of religious intervention on FLFP. In a religiously heterogeneous country, or even in other Muslim majority countries but with significant representation of other religions, the impact of Islam on FLFP might be obscured as teachings and practices from other co-existing religious groups can either directly influence FLFP, or indirectly through modifying social norms about FLFP. (4) Islam plays a pivotal role in the socio-economic and financial decisions both at micro and macro level,² offering an ideal setting to systematically test whether religion influences FLFP as well, and if it does, in what direction.

Our work is not the first to study how religion influences FLFP at the individual level. Dildar

¹ Islam is world's second largest and fastest growing religion (Pew Research Center 2017). Therefore, our findings can have a direct relevance to the global Muslim population.

² Islamic teachings play an integral role in socio-economic decisions in Pakistan. The visible impact can be seen in the financial domain where interest free banking based on Islamic principles has taken a center stage with assets and deposits making up 20% of the total financial system (SBP 2022). Similarly, Islamic teachings promoting harmony and discouraging corruption were added to the school curriculum in KPK province to encourage young people to develop these traits from early childhood (Ashfaq 2015). Misconceptions about Islamic teachings also lead to avoidance and non-acceptance of certain practices. For example, sex education is considered a taboo in Pakistan because people incorrectly believe that all forms of sex education are against Islamic teachings (Nadeem et al. 2021). Overall, we have numerous instances where Islamic teachings are used to either encourage or discourage certain behaviors in Pakistan. Acknowledging the important influence of Islam on decision-making, in the current study we use Islamic intervention to see its impact on FLFP in Pakistan.

(2015) empirically investigated the differentiated impact of the social norm and religiosity on women's labor force participation using individual data in Turkey. Her study measured the religiosity, i.e., intensity of religious practices, and thus made variation in the religious measure among Muslims. The results showed that the social norm had a stronger negative impact on FLFP, and that the religiosity was weakly associated with preventing FLFP only in the urban area. Limitation of her study is that the relationship between religiosity and FLFP was simply an association, but not causality. Furthermore, Dildar (2015) used only ritual-based religiosity measures. While ritual-based measure is a useful proxy for religiosity, research in the last several decades shows that religiosity is best understood as a multidimensional phenomenon (Cornwall et al. 1986). Therefore, the reported negative association of religiosity with FLFP could be an artefact associated with the tool (ritual-based measure) used to elicit religiosity.

Our study adds to several streams of literature. First and foremost, our work contributes to the scant literature on norms and FLFP in Muslim countries. The other two prominent studies in this domain are Dildar (2015) who examined correlation between religion and FLFP in Turkey, and Bursztyn et al. (2020) who studied the impact of correcting injunctive social norms on FLFP in Saudi Arabia. While our work is related to these studies as we target Muslim population, it has notable differences. Unlike Dildar (2015), we provide evidence for the causal impact of religion on attitudes towards FLFP that will include an important policy implication in the “patriarchal belt.” Unlike Bursztyn et al. (2020), we study the impact of religious intervention on attitudes and actual change in FLFP.³ Therefore, our intervention is fundamentally different from Bursztyn et al. (2020). Another important distinction is that we examine FLFP for unmarried young women with

³ Often it is believed that religion and social norms are disjoint elements in a Muslim country. In reality, religion in Muslim countries plays an important role in shaping up social norms including those related to FLFP. Therefore, unlike Bursztyn et al. (2020), our work using religious intervention targets one of the important underlying forces shaping up social norms.

at least graduate degree, while Dildar (2015) and Bursztyn et al. (2020) studied FLFP for married women. Studying the impact of intervention on married women's FLFP is important but has an obvious limitation; the impact of intervention can be confounded by marriage responsibilities (such as childcare, household chores and others). Our work overcomes this limitation by observing the impact of intervention on unmarried women's labor force participation.

Second, we examine the impact of religious intervention on FLFP attitudes measured after the intervention and at the end line, and therefore, report whether such an intervention has an immediate impact or causes a relatively sustainable shift in attitudes in the short run. The detection of impact in the short run can be helpful to the future policies aimed at the enhancement of FLFP in Pakistan. It will also serve to the policy makers and the public by revealing the mechanism inhibiting FLFP. Third, apart from measuring attitudinal shifts, our RCT design and sample selection enables us to study whether there is an actual change in FLFP, which is the ultimate goal of both researchers and policy makers. In this regard, our study extends the work by Bursztyn et al. (2020) who also examined the immediate as well as long-term impact of correcting social norms on attitudes and self-reported FLFP.

Fourth, our findings have a direct relevance to Pakistan, and at the same time are equally applicable to other Muslim countries where low FLFP rates remain a serious concern. As our intervention using Islamic information related to FLFP was checked and approved by a religious scholar, the acceptance of our findings by Muslims in Pakistan and other Muslim countries is likely to be higher due to its credible intervention materials. Moreover, designing an intervention using Islamic materials requires a thorough understanding and knowledge of Islam combined with guidance of a religious expert. This is one of the main hindrances that many studies do not use Islamic information as intervention in RCTs. Our work contributes to this gap in literature by

studying the impact of carefully designed religious intervention on FLFP.

Beyond FLFP, our work contributes to the scarce field literature studying the impact of Islamic information on economic choices, for example, credit card debt repayment of Islamic bank's customers in Indonesia (Bursztyn et al. 2019), and uptake of Islamic savings accounts in Pakistan (Syedah et al., 2023). While these studies examined financial decisions, our work adds a new dimension to this literature by focusing on FLFP. Our work also contributes to the general literature examining the role of religion in economic choices (Iannaccone 1998; McCleary and Barro 2006; Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott 2015; Benjamin et al. 2016 and others).

2. Methodology

The core of our research consists of the light-touch randomized intervention, i.e., information provision. We selected the urban area as research site because of the following reasons. First, FLFP in urban areas in Pakistan remained almost stagnant, increasing from 7% to 11% from 1992 till 2014, while it doubled in the rural areas (increased from 16% to 32.9%) (Amir et al. 2018). Therefore, the issue of low FLFP is acuter in the urban centers and requires urgent attention and intervention. Second, Dildar (2015) shows, in the Turkish context, that religiosity matters for FLFP only in the urban area, and we consider similarly in Pakistan based on our previous research experience. Third, as we explain below, we are interested in the young women's income-earning opportunities in white-collar sector. Except for teaching, white-collar sector jobs are available only in urban area. Fourth, Dean and Jayachandran (2019) and Makino (2024) could not find an increase in actual FLFP after the light-touch intervention of information provision targeting the male decision maker of the household in rural South Asia. One of the reasons may be that their intervention area was rural, and was too conservative, and thus unrealistic, to observe the actual

enhancement of FLFP in the short period. We are certainly interested in enhancing FLFP in rural area, but consider that the first attempt be better addressed in the urban area. We focused on Lahore district in the Lahore city, the second largest city in Pakistan, and obtained observations from four tehsils (Lahore Cantt, Lahore city, Model Town, Shalimar Town) covering 274 union councils.

We define the eligible household as the one with (1) at least one unmarried daughter who completed college education (14 years of education) and do not currently work outside the home, and (2) a male household member who is the main breadwinner and decision-maker, typically her father or elder brother. The following considerations based on our knowledge in urban Pakistan determined this eligibility. To concentrate on social and religious norms as preventive factors rather than childcare or primary responsibility of housework, we focus on unmarried daughters' paid-work participation. Therefore, the decision-maker is most likely their father or elder brother, and our intervention targets these male decision-maker of the households with an aim to eventually encourage FLFP through their change in attitudes towards FLFP. The eligibility of girls is to have graduate degrees or higher because it is realistic to work in the white-collar sector once they obtain college degree. We consider white-collar jobs because they are mostly acceptable for unmarried girls to work in the Pakistani society, which enables us to eliminate any effects of social stigma against women with lower education working in non-white-collar sector. Besides, only 25% of women with college degree work outside the home in Pakistan (Tanaka 2016), which demonstrates an urgent need to target FLFP among these women. We deliberately restrict our sample to non-working women so that we can measure actual change in FLFP, if any, which is the goal of both researchers and policy makers.

The sample size is 500 households: 340 treatment households in which 170 households are assigned to the positive intervention (arm1), and 170 households are assigned to the negative

intervention (arm2) and 160 controlled households (arm3). We have determined the sample size to assure 80% statistical power as if clustered random sampling was feasible (see the Appendix for the effective sample size).

We selected Gallup Pakistan⁴ to implement our study. Gallup Pakistan has extensive experience in conducting surveys, and in implementing academic studies. Based on these eligibility criteria, Gallup conducted a pilot study to examine the cost of obtaining a random sample from Lahore. As our eligibility criteria are very specific, pilot survey revealed that complete random sampling was infeasible given our budgetary constraints. Thus, we employ a mixed methodology, utilizing non-random sampling techniques including references and the snowball method. Initially, families are selected through references obtained by enumerators, and the interviewed households were requested to share five contacts meeting the specified criteria. From these referenced households, we sought consent, confirmed the criteria, and secured appointments for three interviews. The response rate of the households was 50% because some eligible households declined to participate due to the number of interviews. This process was continued until reaching the target sample of 500 households. Note that in this type of experiment of information provision, the convenient sampling is not uncommon (see Bursztyn et al. (2020) and Dean and Jayachandran (2019)).

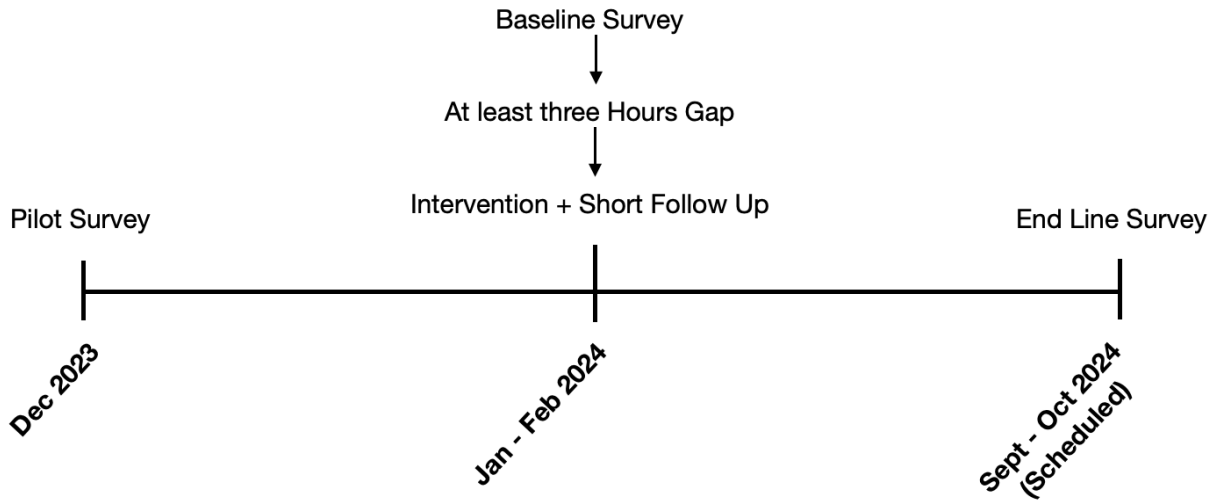
The intervention aims at exogenously influencing the fathers' (or elder brothers') belief on religious norm. The intervention is simple, providing positive religious information concerning FLFP to arm1, potentially negative religious information to arm2, and pure control (no information) to arm3. See the Appendix for information to be provided and details concerning the intervention.

⁴ Gallup Pakistan's website available at: <https://gallup.com.pk>

The structured questionnaire (see the Appendix) will be used for both baseline and endline surveys. It will include the general questions about socioeconomic characteristics of the household, and unique questions measuring the strength of patriarchy and religiosity. We also have a brief follow-up survey concerning their attitudes right after the intervention.

The timeline of the surveys and intervention is presented in Figure 1. The baseline survey and the information provision intervention is conducted in January-March 2024, followed by the brief follow-up survey. Then the endline survey is scheduled to be conducted in September-October 2024.

Figure 1: Timeline of RCT



3. Estimation

We first examine whether the fathers' (or elder brothers') religious norm concerning FLFP is affected by the intervention, and consider the following estimation model:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 T_i + \alpha_2 T_i \times Religiosity_{i1} + \alpha_3 T_i \times Patriarchy_{i1}$$

$$+\alpha_4Religiosity_{i1} + \alpha_5Patriarchy_{i1} + \mathbf{x}'_i\boldsymbol{\alpha}_6 + \varepsilon_i \quad (1),$$

where T_i is a categorical variable indicating treatment (either positive or negative with respect to FLFP)/control status of household i . $ReligiosNorm_{it}$ measures their extent of Islamic knowledge concerning female's right to participate in the labor force right after the intervention $t = 2$ and at the endline survey $t = 3$. As we study the impact of providing religious information concerning FLFP, it is important to control for religiosity. Furthermore, we would also like to examine possible heterogeneities in our findings dependent on the religiosity of the household head. As explained earlier, religiosity is best understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Therefore, taking help from literature on the operationalization of religiosity (Fukuyama 1961; Cornwall et al. 1986), we use three different measures (belief-based, ritual-based and knowledge-based) to elicit comprehensive information about religiosity. Specifically, the knowledge-based subjective $Religiosity_{i1}$ measures the extent of Islamic knowledge about female's right to participate in the labor force at the baseline survey $t = 1$. The belief-based subjective $Religiosity_{i1}$ measures self-declared importance of religion on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1= Very religious and 5 = Least religious, and the frequency of daily prayer $Religiosity_{i1}$ is a ritual-based objective measure. Also, the used three-dimensional religiosity covers the essential elements of Islam (beliefs, worship, Islamic education), and therefore largely captures the core aspects of being a Muslim. In our analysis, we will use three dimensions separately as proxies for individual religiosity. As a robustness check, we will also use a composite measure (average values of all three dimensions) to scrutinize our findings. $Patriarchy_{i1}$ measures the internalization of patriarchal norms by daughters based on their responses to various statements at baseline $t = 1$. For the specific questions measuring the patriarchy, see the questionnaire section 4 in the Appendix. \mathbf{x}_{i1} is the vector of household and

daughters' demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics at baseline $t = 1$.

Intervention reminds the fathers (or elder brothers) the Quranic passages or guidelines which presumably affect attitudes toward FLFP positively or negatively. If α_1 is positive or negative, our intervention actually affects the fathers' (or elder brothers') religiosity. The difference of α_2 and α_3 captures the heterogeneity (if any) in the impact of intervention, depending on the level of patriarchal norm and religiosity at baseline, respectively. If $\alpha_2 < \alpha_3$, it suggests that our intervention is more influential for the more patriarchal fathers (or elder brothers). If $\alpha_2 > \alpha_3$, it suggests that our intervention is more influential for the more religious fathers (or elder brothers).

Next, we replace *ReligiosNorm_{it}* with the variables measuring *FLFP_{it}*. The primary outcome is the attitudes of fathers' (or elder brothers') toward FLFP. Their attitudes are measured both right after the intervention $t = 2$ and at endline $t = 3$. Right after the intervention, we also play a dictator game (DG) with a recipient organization working in Lahore to help females become earning members of the society (Kashf Foundation)⁵, and therefore, working towards FLFP enhancement. The game is played with real stakes (1000 PKR) and subjects can decide whether they want to donate any money to the organization or keep all for themselves. We include the DG as it elicits choices with real money, mitigating issues associated with non-incentivized and hypothetical decisions such as experimenter expectancy effects. We do not disclose the name of the recipient organization because it can affect behavior of the dictators, as witnessed in our pilot study.⁶ The money respondents keep to themselves is provided to them in the form of a mobile

⁵ The official website of the organization can be accessed at: <https://kashf.org>

⁶ In the pilot study, we used three recipients (Kashf Foundation, Edhi Foundation and anonymous citizen) as our recipients, and randomly selected one of the three decisions for payment. The dictators were comparing their donations across the three respondents, rather than treating each decision independently. Therefore, we decided to play only one dictator game with Kashf Foundation as recipient. We did not disclose the name of the recipient because of the two reasons. First, a pleasant or an unpleasant previous experience of the dictator with the organization can impact their current donations. Second, dictator's preconceived positive or negative notions about the organization built through social circles and surrounding environment can impact the donations. To

credit around one month after the intervention (in most cases, mobile credit is transferred within one week). To enhance the credibility of the DG, we provide an option to the respondents to receive the final payment receipt of money transferred to the recipient organization via message (See Appendix for the DG protocol).

We selected Kashf Foundation as recipient organization because it is a dedicated organization working in Lahore and other parts of Pakistan to help women become earning members of the society through various programs. Therefore, the organization has a direct relevance to our intervention related to FLFP, and we expect the religious information to have an impact on donations towards this relevant recipient organization. At the end of the intervention cumulative money donated by all subjects is transferred to the recipient organization.

As a downstream variable, we consider the effects of intervention on the daughters' attitudes toward FLFP (see the Appendix questionnaire, section 6). Though the intervention targets their fathers (or elderly brothers), the change in attitudes of the male decision-maker's attitudes may affect the female members of the household.

The secondary outcome is a binary variable taking the value of 1 if a daughter in household i participates in paid work at endline $t = 3$. Our ultimate interest is rather the secondary outcome, the actual FLFP, however, we recognize that observing the actual FLFP in the context of South Asia is very challenging in light-touch intervention (Dean and Jayachandran 2019; Makino 2024). Therefore, we first examine the primary outcome, i.e., change in attitudes of fathers (or elder brothers) toward FLFP.

Religiosity _{$i1$} and *Patriarchy* _{$i1$} are not necessarily instrumented in the previous study (say, Dildar 2015r). As a robustness check, we instrument them by the community average religious

avoid these unnecessary but possible confounding factors, we decided not to disclose the name of the organization and disclose only its work related to FLFP.

and patriarchal norms, respectively, excluding the own, borrowing an idea from Aizer (2010).

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