

Women's Economic Empowerment Sans Labour Rights: Inadvertent Oversight or Tacit Omission

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Abstract

Empowering women has come to be seen as a primary means to achieve women's development in the discourse of development and policy initiatives. This has led to greater attention than before on the questions that expand the conventional understanding of empowerment itself. Much consideration has been given to answering these questions. What, however, has been ignored is the due emphasis on labour rights. The studies conducted by the feminists in the recent years have not only expanded the understanding of empowerment but have also highlighted the challenges and barriers to achieving it. Despite the fact that almost all studies have referred to the issue of weak enforcement of labour laws, the workings of development agencies do not reflect a keen commitment to this issue, in particular issue. With this backdrop, this paper reviews the existing development literature on empowerment and maps the ways in which empowerment has been measured using macro-economic indices like Gender Inequality Index (GII), Gender Disparity Index (GDI) and Gender Gap Index (GGI). It identifies the discrepancies and contradictions in the evaluations that data generated from these indices, arguing that 'instrumentalist feminist goals,' which are achieved through a top-down policy-level approach, are often at odds with 'micro-level' qualitative assessments of economic empowerment. The paper concludes with casting doubt on the compatibility of 'development' with women's economic empowerment as it ignores the concomitant discussion on labour rights. It also ponders whether this omission is serving the needs of global capitalism and offers an insight into the deliberate or an unintentional oversight by the development actors.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Economic Empowerment, Labour Laws, Labour Rights, Capitalism, Development Studies.

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Introduction

In recent years, women's development through empowerment has acquired a central place in the development discourse and policy initiatives. It heralds an important shift in development policy, especially from the idea that women in the developing countries are victims of under-development to the notion that their recognition as agents of change. However, certain question must be answered before furthering the debate on the issue under consideration in this study. What is empowerment? How it could be achieved and once achieved how it could be measured? All these questions are very important. They require an unambiguous conceptualisation of the notion of empowerment followed by equally reliable measure to assess whether women have been empowered or not as a result of development policy initiatives.

Feminist insights have found their way into these gender and development debates, and over the years, some remarkable studies have been produced in this regard, for example by Rubina Saigol (2011), Naila Kabeer (2012) and Yasmin Zaidi (2016),¹ which have been funded by the United States Agency of International Development (USAID), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Department for International Development (DFID) and the United Nations (UN) Women. These studies have not only expanded the understanding of empowerment but have also highlighted the challenges and barriers to achieving it. Where economic empowerment is strongly linked to waged labour, almost all studies have some in passing and some strongly, alluded to the issue of weak enforcement of labour laws and rampant abrogation of labour rights of workers, in general, and women in particular. The uptake of such studies by the actors involved in the practice of development whether international or national, however, has been devoid of this vital aspect of economic empowerment. In fact, two things are obvious from the empowerment literature in development studies:

¹ Rubina Saigol, *Women's Empowerment in Pakistan: A Scoping Study* (Lahore: Aurat Publication and Information Services Foundation, 2011); Naila Kabeer, "Women's Economic Empowerment and Inclusive Growth: Labour Markets and Enterprise Development," *Working Paper* (DFID and IDRC, 2012) and Yasmin Zaidi, Shujaat Farooq S. et al, *Women's Economic Participation and Empowerment in Pakistan — Status Report 2016*; (Islamabad: UN Women Pakistan, 2016).

- i. Economic empowerment is understood as economic opportunities made available to women and the extent of their participation in those activities. The rights discussion is relegated to 'political rights' measured in terms of women's parliamentary participation, voting activity and women's role in decision-making process, within private and public arenas. Economic empowerment is not measured on the "quality" of the waged work opportunities made available to women.
- ii. The onus of economic empowerment is always on women. As Saigol points out that "women are capable of empowering themselves while external actors and agencies can create supportive environments."² Supportive environments also include labour laws and upholding of labour rights, which is the weakest area in this ambit.

At the outset, a clarification is to be made that this paper avows no legal expertise on the subject. It only entails an analysis of the existing development literature on empowerment. Before delving into empowerment debate or more specifically economic empowerment, it is thus, important to lay out what is meant by development itself.

Women Development: a Contextual Framework

There is general realisation that development itself, in many ways, has been a contested concept.³ Beginning as a means of improving the economies of the developing countries, it has now evolved into a broader concept of human development. In the history of human development, women have come to be seen as important as men. In fact the status, employment and work done by women in society are the key markers of a nation's advancement. Without the participation of women in various socio-economic and political spheres of national life, the progress of a country comes at a standstill. This realisation of the importance of women, like the evolution of the concept of development, has taken many forms and meanings over the past decades. Initially, women were seen only within their mothering and caring roles and, hence, were targeted as vulnerable

² Saigol, *Women's Empowerment in Pakistan*, v.

³ Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (London: Verso, 1994), x.

groups that were only the passive recipients of development aid. The evidence presented in Ester Boserup's 1970 seminal publication, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, changed the development discourse in the favour of women's active participation in economic processes.

Since women came to be seen as active contributors to the development process, policy prescriptions have seen gradual shifts in their orientation. 'Welfare' oriented policies catered to women's motherhood roles. 'Equity' based policies satisfied women's strategic needs and 'anti-poverty' ones looked after their practical needs. The era of globalised economies ushered in 'efficiency' centred policy interventions that sought to capitalise on women's labour and its benefits for development of countries leading to a feminisation of the labour workforce in many developing countries. Lastly 'Empowerment' based development interventions came in with a re-think of development itself, warranting a relational analysis of gender inequality at all the levels — be it household, market or the state. 'Empowerment of Women' in this frame then has far-reaching implications for social, economic and political rights of women.

Women Empowerment: Reflections of Survey-based Macro Indices

Women's empowerment is not an elusive goal. Empowerment is not only an end in itself but also one of the means to achieve other ends. It has intrinsic as well as instrumental value both in terms of feminist ideals as well as achievable goals in development policy making and practice. Women's empowerment has usually been mapped through survey based indices. Prime among them are the Gender Gap Index (GGI), Gender Inequality Index (GII) and Gender Disparity Index (GDI). These indices serve as a reference to measure whether a country is developed or not. The information detailed in these indices reflects the situation of women based on large scale objectively observed and classified data, which could be used for policy formulation. An improvement in these indicators is supposed to better the lives of women thereby empowering them. Development agenda, whether national or international, has been driven by this particular objective. The South Asian countries have incorporated this theme into their line of action. Some of them have been more successful than others. A few have performed dismally.

A general view of the situation of women is an indicator of the performance of the South Asian countries with regards to these indices. One can begin with some of the telling statistics presented in the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum. The GGI scrutinises the disparity between men and women in four basic areas of social life: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival and political empowerment. Afterwards, it assigns ranks to the countries based on their performance in these indices.

At present, Pakistan's overall ranking is 143 out of 144 countries, with only Yemen lagging behind it. Even a war-ravaged Syria is rung above at 142nd position. Unfortunately, over the years, Pakistan has consistently been among the last five countries in its position in the GGI ranking from 112/115 in 2006; 133/135 in 2011; 134/135 in 2012; 135/136 in 2013; 141/142 in 2014; 144/145 in 2015 and 143/144 in 2016. In the individual categories too, it has the worst ranking in economic participation i.e., 139/144, whereas it ranks best in political participation standing at 90 out of 144 countries. One of the pressing questions is that why the increased political participation has not translated into achievements in other fields, in terms of women empowerment? The same can be said of India, where a 9 rank in political participation has not resulted in improved conditions for women in health and survival, education and economic participation. Sri Lanka was the best performer in the region until 2012, with the 39th position, which has now slid down to 84th. Bangladesh has shown the most improvement moving from 86th position in 2012 to 72nd in 2016. Dhaka is also the best overall performer in the region. Ranked first, Sri Lanka compares with the developed countries in health and survival category, whereas Bangladesh outshines in the political participation of women at no. 7.

A glimpse of the selected statistics from the Global Gender Gap Report 2016 for the South Asian region is given in the subsequent table.

Table No. 1.
Global Gender Gap Report 2016

Country	Overall Ranking	Economic Participation & Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health & Survival	Political Empowerment
Bangladesh	72	135	114	93	7
Bhutan	121	99	121	125	132
India	87	136	113	142	9
Maldives	115	112	81	129	133
Nepal	110	115	123	92	68
Pakistan	143	139	135	124	90
Sri Lanka	100	124	82	1	57

Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2016.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced the GII in 2010, with a view to address some of the criticisms raised at earlier adopted measures of the GDI and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The programme aims to capture the disparities that women continue to face in more than 150 countries and, hence, reflects the potential incoherencies in the process of women development. The index is composed of three important aspects: reproductive health, empowerment and labour market participation. It has been designed in a way that less-developed countries can also perform well, provided that they have little gender inequality across the measured dimensions.

If any measure in this category is to be picked, such as Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR), one can get a snapshot of women's situation in the South Asian region, according to the Human Development Report 2016. The MMR is basically an indicator of women's access to healthcare during pregnancy and child bearing. The lower it is for 100,000 live births, the better the condition of women in the country is. South Asia's MMR ranges from 35 in Sri Lanka to 460 in Afghanistan. The arithmetic mean is 200, which is just below the global average for developing countries, i.e., 230. However, it is quite divergent from the global average for developed

countries, which stands at only 16. The table below gives a glimpse of how some of the countries in the region fare:

Table No.2.
Maternal Mortality Ratio in South Asia

Country	HDI*Rank	GIIRank	Maternal Mortality
Afghanistan	169	154	396
Bangladesh	139	119	176
Bhutan	132	110	148
India	131	125	174
Maldives	105	64	68
Nepal	144	115	258
Pakistan	147	147	178
Sri Lanka	73	87	30

Source: Human Development Index Report, 2016.

A brief overview of the current status of women in the South Asian states, as depicted by the macro indicators of empowerment, has been presented in the above table. These macro-indicators measure empowerment of women in broad societal dimensions allowing for cross-country evaluations. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are some of the better performing South Asian states on these indicators. Afghanistan and Pakistan are among the poorest performers. India, Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal fall in the average-performing countries. These macro-level indicators give baseline information on the state, in terms of the 'ends of development practice.'

However, it warrants careful analysis whether these surveys can be accused of what Mohanty calls the categorisation of the Third World women as 'universal dependents' and 'disempowered victims' through 'the mode of appropriation and codification of "scholarship" and "knowledge" about women in the Third World by the particular analytic categories

employed in the specific writings on the subject.’⁴ Yet, as per Kabeer,⁵ one pressing question remains to be answered, how does one translate feminist aspirations into policy goals? The Intrinsic feminist goals do not curry the same favour with development policy makers as do the instrumentalist feminist goals. Measurement and quantification of empowerment has been largely driven by the instrumentalist understanding of empowerment. Hence, the preponderance of macro-indicators-based surveys to gauge the empowerment of women in the developing countries that can guide future course of policy making. Women’s empowerment as reflected in macro-indicators, often rely on top-down measures taken by the states or international agencies to improve the status of women. It may make sense then to try and achieve a more nuanced understanding of the evolution and progress of women’s empowerment by assessing a move towards a more micro-indicator based assessment of women’s status. The micro-indicators of women’s empowerment consider women as agents of change and evaluate the bottom-up processes of change that empower women.

Economic Empowerment of Women: a Micro-reflection

Both the scholars and practitioners agree on the worsening economic situation of women in the developing countries. The solutions largely centre on increasing economic participation of women and efficient management of money. The studies have called attention to the fact-gendered approaches to development, aid and poverty reduction, which result in rapid economic growth than “gender neutral” ones. It also leads to more equitable outcomes. Women have a greater role in household management and are more concerned about its welfare. Men, on the other hand, more focused on the personal use than the welfare of the household. Hence, increased economic opportunities for women would automatically translate into increased and equitable welfare for themselves and their families. Nobody can deny the value of this course of action. Nonetheless, an analysis of certain cases such as women involved in informal work, home-based work, domestic labour and entrepreneurial economic activities, financed through microcredit

⁴ Chandra T. Mohanty, “Under the Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Boundary 2*, 12, no. 3 (Spring-Autumn 1984): 333, <http://jstor.org/stable/302821>

⁵ Naila Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment,” *Development and Change* 30, issue 3 (July 1999): 435-464.

schemes, raise questions as to whether an increased emphasis on economic participation of women alone will transpire into their development.

Women and Informal Work

Some excellent studies done on women and work in Pakistan highlight the problems faced by women workers in the informal sector of the economy. Kamran Ali's⁶ ethnographic study of poor women, who work in Karachi's ready-to wear export garment industry, brings to fore their experiences of the gendered public spaces. In the light of this article, one is forced to take account of the larger structural forces that create socioeconomic insecurities in their lives. The hardships they face while traversing the public spaces, both at work and on the way to or from work, as well as the social hardship due to notions of familial honour and respectability need to be taken into account while framing discussions of the empowerment of women through employment — something that is often overlooked.

Similarly, Saba Gul Khattak and Asad Sayeed's work, *Subcontracted Women Workers*,⁷ gives a detailed description of the problems, unfair remuneration and dismal work conditions of the informal sector women workers. It also highlights the discouraging fact that any focus on the rights of women workers is virtually absent in Pakistan, allowing for the easy incorporation of women into these exploitative low-paid jobs. The study also explicitly remarks that women are pushed into such work due to macro-economic factors and not due to the internal compulsions or their desire to work, which takes us back to discussions of honour and respectability by Ali. This state of affairs, coupled with the reality that such employment enables these women to help meet the demands of everyday life without shaking the status quo allowing for the continued subordination of women, questions the empowerment thesis. Khattak and Sayeed's work also alludes to women's double burden, which now has tripled and we talk of triple burden, thanks to sustainable development that sees women's role in maintenance of communities and protection of environment.

⁶ Kamran A. Ali, "Voicing Difference: Gender and Civic Engagement Among Karachi's Poor," *Current Anthropology* 51, no. S 2 (October 2010): S313-S320, [//www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/653422](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/653422)

⁷ Saba G. Khattak and Asad Sayeed, *Subcontracted Women Workers in the World Economy: The Case of Pakistan* (Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute and Pakistan Institute of Labour, Education and Research, 2004).

Home-based Work, Domestic Labour and Microcredit Schemes

Are women faring any better in other domains of economic generation? Anita Weiss's⁸ work on *The Walled City of Lahore* includes an excellent discussion of the exploitation of the home-based workers at the hands of male family members as well as middlemen through notions of *purdah* and particular gendering of private and public spaces. Home-based work is, thus, highly exploitative, undervalued and unrecognised. Microcredit has also been linked with women's economic and social empowerment, hence, a number of programmes targeting women for microcredit are underway in Pakistan. In this regard, Bangladesh's grass root development experience has set some fascinating examples of microcredit aiding women's empowerment through entrepreneurship. The replication of the experience and its success in Pakistan is yet to be seen,⁹ where an increased income may not necessarily translate into loosening the hold of the cultural ideologies that reinforce women's inferior position in society. Some researchers like Bina Agarwal are sceptical of microcredit's ability to empower women and have instead proposed land reforms that favour women as a better and more empowering solution.¹⁰

Most of the poor women in urban areas are employed in domestic labour. Tabinda Khawar's research study¹¹ on women living in the slums of Islamabad and working as domestic labour highlights how these women did not consider themselves empowered despite being wage earners. Almost all these women worked due to extenuating circumstances and expressed their desire to quit this exploitative work. They hoped to become more 'respectable' through elevated social and financial statuses of their spouses.

⁸ Anita M. Weiss, "Within Walls: Home Based Work in Lahore," in Sadaf Ahmad, ed., *Pakistani Women: Multiple Locations and Competing Narratives* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 12-24.

⁹ Sadiqa Batool, "Empowerment of Women Through Entrepreneurship in Chitral," (Submitted for fulfilment of MPhil in International Development Studies at Iqra University, 2015).

¹⁰ Bina Agarwal, "Are We Not Peasants Too? Land Rights and Women's Claims in India," *SEEDS*, no. 21 (2002).

¹¹ Tabinda Khawar, "Impact of Economic Empowerment on the Social Status of Women," (Submitted for fulfilment of MPhil in International Development Studies at Iqra University).

Formal Sector

It is assumed that women will fare better in the formal segments of economy. The global economy driven by big businesses, however, leaves little room for hope. Consider the following examples cited by a scathing news report in *Dawn* by Jahanzaib Hussain.¹² Over 250 workers perished in a fire that consumed a garment factory on September 11, 2012. The factory produced for a German textile discount store chain. Despite the fact that the workers at the factory were underpaid and safety regulations had been grossly violated, the factory had been awarded an International certification SA8000, where SA ironically stands for Social Accountability and is an international standard for improving working conditions around the world. The standard is founded on the principles of 13 international human rights conventions. Pakistan has ratified 10 of these conventions as they are also conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Pakistan is a signatory to it. Pakistan is also a signatory to women specific labour resolutions like UN Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and ILO Conventions 100 and 111 that call for equal remuneration for male and female workers for the work of equal value.

Despite such commitments, Pakistan's industry is not new to labour rights violations. According to Hussain, workers in the textile industry toil on contracts through third party contractors without any proof of employment. Some of the workers have been on contracts for years, one even as long as 30. Their employment punch cards that clock their work do not carry the name of the factory they work for and are renewed every 11 months, erasing proof of previous employment record. Hussain writes:

“Employing around 15 million workers and making up 54 per cent of Pakistan's total export earnings, the textile and garments sector is the country's second largest employer and the backbone of Pakistan's manufacturing industry. This sector gives Pakistan its fashionable brands, with top models displaying their latest collections on billboards all over the country. Many of the factories in Landhi and other parts of Pakistan also export to high street European and North American stores. While garments return handsome profits, the glitz and glam of Pakistani textile exports often camouflages the ugly truth behind them: workers' rights violation assumes criminal proportions, and yet, workers have little recourse to justice.”

¹² Jhanzaib Hussain, “The Ugly Truth Behind the Glitz and Glamour of Textile Reports,” *Dawn*, November 30, 2016.

According to conservative estimates, women workers constitute 20 per cent of the total workforce.¹³ The total employment of female workers in the Pakistani textile and clothing industry may be about 20 per cent but the stitching units in the textile sector employ over 75 per cent female works. Women are at the bottom rung of the marginalisation ladder as well being the poorest of the poor. If men in the well-established textile industry fare no better, how can women be empowered through such precarious employment? These case studies cast a shadow over the economic empowerment of women thesis. Also with such dismal statistics of the various gender-based development indicators, one is forced to ask what has happened since almost more than half a century of development, sustainable or otherwise and the discovery of women as a critical category?

Women Workers and Labour Rights in Pakistan

The place where work is the basic dimension of our existence, most of it may be unrecognised and unremunerated especially the work done by women.¹⁴ Women form a greater portion of over 200 million population of Pakistan and hence this precious resource is crucial for the development of the country.¹⁵ The visibility of women in all spheres of Pakistani society is on the rise and women are joining new fields every day. The place where the majority (around 72.7 per cent) is employed in the agricultural sector,¹⁶ individual women are making headlines in unconventional professions as well. The sheer visibility of women employed as domestic help, in farms as part of unwaged family labour, on brick kilns, again as part of family bonded labour and in packaging units of industries etc., casts a doubt on the official statistics as the highly unregulated and informal sector makes accounting of women a problem.

The Government of Pakistan uses positive discrimination policies to strengthen women in conventional workforce as well as establish safety nets for them. For example, there is a 10 per cent quota for women's employment

¹³ "Labour Force Survey 2007," Government of Pakistan.

¹⁴ Susan Bullock, *Women and Work* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Limited, 1991), 1.

¹⁵ "Population, Labour Force and Employment," Report of Ministry of Finance, 2015-2016, Government of Pakistan,

http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_16/12_Population.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid.

in the civil services of Pakistan. The National Women Transfer Scheme and Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) also give a monthly cash transfer to the female head of the household.¹⁷ To protect women at work, anti-harassment laws have been passed. Women's Ombudsperson Offices have been set up at the federal and provincial level to guarantee implementation of these laws.

To protect workers' rights, Pakistan has ratified 36 ILO conventions together with all eight fundamental conventions.¹⁸ The constitution of Pakistan guarantees women the right to employment. Article 18, 25 and 37 guarantee equal work opportunities, equal employment rights and safeguard their health and safety at work place.¹⁹

The biggest challenge lies in the implementation of the laws. After the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the legislation on labour has been devolved to the provinces. Observance of international commitments, such as the ILO Conventions in letter and spirit through provincial legislation appears to be a major task for the federal government in the future.²⁰ This is important as provincial administrators do not have direct interface with the international arena. They may face difficulties in understanding the bounds of International Labour Standards and their interconnections with global markets.²¹ They may also be more malleable in terms of colluding with the global firms and in turning a blind eye to non-conformity of some of these laws to compete with other provinces in bettering their score on foreign investments.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Haroon M. Janjua, "Women in the World of Work," *Daily Times*, July 20, 2014.

¹⁹ Article 18 prescribes the right of its citizen to enter upon any lawful profession or occupation and to conduct any lawful trade or business. Article 25 lays down the right to equality before the law and prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of sex alone. Article 37 makes provision for securing just and human conditions of work, ensuring that children and women are not employed in vocations unsuited to their age or sex, and for maternity benefits for women in employment.

"Scribd.com," Labour Laws of Pakistan,

<https://www.scribd.com/doc/28667951/Labor-Laws-of-Pakistan>.

²⁰ Muhammad Javaid Iqbal, "ILO Conventions and Gender Dimensions of Labour Laws in Pakistan," *South Asian Studies* 30, no.1 (2015): 269.

²¹ Ibid., 267.

There may also be the cases of conflict between the ILO Conventions and local labour legislation. The Punjab Industrial Relations Act, 2010, may be taken as an example. The law does not allow formation of trade union in an establishment with lesser than 50 workers.²² The archaic law of the Factories Act, 1934, does not apply to industrial enterprises with under ten workers. The Standing Orders Ordinance, 1968, is valid for concerns with 20 or more workers. The Maternity Benefits Ordinance, 1958, safeguards only women working in factories²³ and not in the informal sector. With most women working as part of family gangs like in brick kilns, which is a formal workplace, women escape the pay role register.²⁴ The case is even worse in informal economy especially home-based workers such as domestic servants, which are not legally recognised as workers and have no social security or minimum wage benefits.²⁵ Without the ratification of the ILO Convention 177 Act²⁶ the exploitation of the labour force continues.²⁷ The labour laws of Pakistan lack both scope as well as coverage. They need overhauling, updating, simplification, consolidation and rationalisation.²⁸

Conclusion

Agarwal's understanding of empowerment is a useful starting point, which defines empowerment "as a process that enhances the ability of the disadvantaged ('powerless') individuals or groups to challenge and change (in their favour) existing power relationships that place them in subordinate economic, social and political positions."²⁹ If economic empowerment of women is one of the ingredients of general empowerment of women, a nuanced understanding will not be useful without a supporting framework of rights.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 268.

²⁴ Shehryar Warriach, "Pakistani Activists Want Kilns to Pay Working Women, not their Husbands," *News Lens Pakistan*, January 29, 2015.

²⁵ Ayesha Shahid, *Silent Voices, Untold Stories: Women Domestic Workers in Pakistan and their Struggle for Empowerment* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁶ ILO Convention 177 Act, recognises home based workers as legitimate employees.

²⁷ Sadya Siddiqui, "Challenges For Working Women in Pakistan," *Dawn*, March 3, 2013.

²⁸ Iqbal, 268.

²⁹ Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 39.

It is not that the existing laws are not utterly insufficient but poor implementation and enforcement of the laws compounds the problem. In Pakistan, there are more than 70 different laws addressing the issue of labour force like the Trade Union Act 1946, Industrial Employment Act 1946, Industrial dispute Act 1947 and Factories Act 1934. Pakistan's Constitution has separate provisions for labour rights, some of which are gender specific.

There is also no concrete pressure on national or at the international level on the governments to implement/enforce these laws. At national level, the debate on labour violations is virtually missing. I consider this silence a tacit omission. The silence of those who have class or academic privilege alludes to the fact that many of us are the beneficiaries of the exploitative labour of poor women. The possibility of the poor representing themselves and speaking up is also limited. The official data available in Pakistan Statistical Year Book, 2008, shows that the unions in the formal sector only represent five per cent of workers. Out of 318 unions existing in 1996, there are only 39 operational in 2005. According to secondary data, out of the registered trade unions the female members are less than two per cent.

On the international scene, power relations are now being determined overwhelmingly by the agenda of what Kamla Bhasin calls, LPG: Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation. The global economies that have heralded achieving competitive edge based on cheap exploitative labour can be at odds with a development agenda that talks too much of labour rights. The entire emphasis of the economic empowerment thesis, as highlighted in the various debates mentioned above, on defining empowerment, achieving it and measuring results through indicators that do not speak of labour rights makes one wonder if it is a tacit acknowledgement of these global pressures. This paper then contends that if this is not a tacit omission and just an inadvertent oversight then development actors should show a stronger commitment to labour rights. It must also be pointed out in conclusion that those who write these reports and academic papers on the economic empowerment of women, those who present them in the conferences and those who listen to these discussions are not among the 60 per cent in Pakistan, who live on or below the poverty line and are struggling to work for survival and, hence, their voices need to be heard and acted upon in policy making.