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Exploring 'Employee Voice' of Informal Female Workers of the Textiles Industry in Pakistan: A Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract: *Firm restructuring and labour subcontracting has paved the way for the rise of informalisation in the female-dominated textiles industry of Pakistan after the expiry of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC). Despite the emergence of low quality of employment available for women in the informal economy, there is a dearth of knowledge on their position at the workplace, namely 'employee voice.' This study therefore explores the employee voice of informal female workers of the stitching and ginning sections of the textiles industry in Pakistan in the post ATC period. A grounded theory approach, involving 25 in-depth interviews with informal female workers and employers, is used to explore employer-employee interactions. The findings reveal that the core requirements of the 'capability for voice' of informal female workers centre on 'decisions of employers', 'bearing of tradition' and 'worker performance'. The grounded theory clarifies the procedure and identifies the interaction of the above categories to form the contextual conditions that direct the expectations of employers and female workers in the informal labour market. The expectations of a 'perfect fit' of informal female workers, within the hierarchy of the textiles industry, gives rise to a situation of 'tolerance/no voice', despite the negative workplace culture. The findings indicate that strategies to advance gender equality in Pakistan must consider informalisation of the labour market through a gender perspective.*

Keywords: Employee voice; Informal female workers; Ginning and stitching; Grounded theory; Pakistan
JEL Classification: J21, J53, Z13

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1. Introduction

Firm restructuring following from the quota elimination under the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC)[1] since January 1, 2005, has had profound implications for Asian labour markets (Purnamawati & Yuniarta, 2020; Ernst et al., 2015; Adhikari & Yamamoto, 2006; Din 2005). Employment, wages and working conditions were impacted. New work horizons unfolded for female workers in the labour-intensive textiles (including garments) industry in developing countries (Makino, 2012). That said, their job opportunities did not expand permanently, as these workers entered the marketplace when global competition for textiles intensified along the lines of price and quality with the expiry of the ATC.

Pakistan is good case study for assessing the labour market implications of the restructuring processes in the quota-free regime (or post-liberalisation) as firms led two significant changes in the textiles industry. The first shift involved moving from a framework that depended on male workers that were paid piece-rates under informal work agreements, to an increasingly mechanical, salaried model, with a point-by-point division of work and administrative supervision. The second change, which is the focus of this study, included the recruitment of salaried female workers (Braunstein, 2013; Adhikari & Yamamoto, 2006), who received about half the average wage of the male workers they replaced (Fair Wear Foundation, 2019). The latter shift saw a dramatic increase in the employment of female workers, from 10% of 700,000 workers in the textiles industry in 2004, to 20% of the total workforce by 2009 (Haque, 2009), and 37% in 2018 (Fair Wear Foundation, 2019). Unlike their male counterparts, female workers, however, were active in the informal sector.[2]

Despite the increasing prominence and informality (vulnerability) of female workers in the textiles industry since the 2005 ATC expiry, there is a dearth of knowledge in understanding their experiences (Munir et al., 2018) within the formal context.[3] Previous studies on the informal sectors of Pakistan focused on the experiences of home-based workers (HBWs), domestic workers, agriculture workers and micro-enterprise owners. However, the position and interactions of informal female workers in the formal setting of wholesale and retail trade manufacturing, which is where they "fit" given "employee voice,"[4] is yet to be understood, as the informal experiences are somewhat context specific.

This study therefore explores employee voice and representation of informal female workers in the stitching (value-added) and ginning (intermediate) sections of the textile industry in Pakistan. With strategic decisions taken during the restructuring of firms since the ATC expiry, the study articulates the "capability for voice" (Sen, 2004; Alkire, 2004; Bartelheimer et al., 2012; Bonvin & Moachon, 2012; Dagsvik, 2013) of female workers and the process of "social inclusion[5] in the realm of work" (Carr & Chen, 2004). The study provides answers to the following questions: Do informal female workers have any voice and bargaining power, in the firms they are employed in? Given the capability for voice, what is the pattern of social inclusion of informal female workers?

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the state of informalisation of female workers in the textiles industry in Pakistan. Section 3 discusses the methodology of the research, which is the constructivist version of grounded theory, details the process of data collection and data analysis techniques. Section 4 reports the results and establishes the grounded theory, while Section 5 concludes.

2. Informal Female Workers in Textiles

The textiles (including garments) industry is female-intensive in much of the Asian region, except for India and Pakistan, and where decent work deficits pervade this industry (ILO, 2021). However, unlike the (lower quality) formal feminisation of the textiles industry in India and Bangladesh, the phenomenon of feminisation that has been underway in Pakistan is basically informal. Even within a formal setting like the manufacturing sector, female workers constitute 55.9% of the vulnerable group lacking decent work in Pakistan (Fair Wear Foundation, 2019).

By industry, textiles (including garments) are the largest employer of female workers in Pakistan's manufacturing sector, constituting 30% of the current workforce (Government of Pakistan, 2017). Female workers dominated the ginning and stitching sections of the industry, as both were regarded as appropriate work for "nimble hands" (Elson & Pearson, 1981). From the perspective of producers, female workers were considered "docile" and "less expensive" in contrast to their male counterparts, and they were generally more accessible (Akram & Kashmir, 2015).

While the Pakistan textile industry progressed[6] in the medium term of the quota-free regime and became a worldwide provider in fabrics and cotton yarns, the role of female workers in the labour market ranked at the lowest end of the Asian distribution (Boris et al., 2018). Female workers experienced long working hours, received less than one-third of the average income of their male counterparts, and they were mostly employed informally (Munir et al., 2018; Beghini et al., 2019). Female workers had no information on their organisations' set of accepted rules, collective bargaining and the rights to unionise (Akram & Kashmir, 2015). Workplace conditions in the textiles industry were also found to endanger the workers' wellbeing, as they experienced health risks from exposure to hazardous substances, like chemicals, pesticides, and cotton dust.

Global competition post-ATC expiry compelled manufacturers to informalise the supply chain to save on costs, resulting in a stream of companies supplying informal labour that paved the way for subcontracting, with minimum concern for work conditions (Nordås, 2004; Papyrakis et al., 2012) and labour rights. The competition, in turn, increased pressure on workers to deliver more in less time, settling on substandard conditions at the workplace. Female workers bore the outcomes of these weakening work conditions as they were employed in sections where unstable agreements and piece rates were already in practice. Compounded with subsumed gender hierarchies in the patriarchal system of Pakistan, women were less able to exercise their work-related labour rights, which in turn constrained their bargaining power and position in the labour market. Furthermore, factory owners in Pakistan were considerably powerful given their political affiliations, hence, the enforcement and implementation of labour laws were at times compromised (Arslan, 2019). Power disparity between factory owners, retailers and the government and less powerful stakeholders, such as labour unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), was therefore sustained within the industrial structure to preserve worker exploitation. Workers were merely used as a means of accomplishing the business agenda (Munir et al., 2018). Therefore, institutional mechanisms, such as power distance, profit, and oppression, continued to increase exploitation.

It seems that female workers' welfare no longer benefitted from the bounded restrictions of the ATC. It is therefore not surprising to note that Pakistan's progress towards equality had eased back significantly since 2006, slipping from the 112th position in 2006 to 151st in 2020 out of 153

nations in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (WEF, 2020). That said, reforms, albeit fragmented, to the formalisation of female workers are now more evident in Pakistan. For example, laws to recognise informal HBWs as formal workers were passed by the provincial Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan assemblies in August 2021 and April 2022 respectively. Worth mentioning here is that the transformation of formalising women in the textiles industry in Pakistan is still somewhat slow relative to Bangladesh and India.

3. Research Design and Data

3.1 Grounded theory and symbolic interactionism

To understand the experiences of female workers engaged in informal work and the contextual factors that have influenced these experiences, the study is situated in the constructivist paradigm (see Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Constructivist grounded theory, which emerges from symbolic interactionism (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Ancillo et al., 2021), is chosen to frame the study since the research focuses on understanding the interactions between employers and informal female workers at the workplace. The theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Ezzy, 2002; Denzin, 2004; Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Clarke, 2005), in turn, assume individual interactions through social collaboration (Charon, 1989; Charmaz, 2006) and between the context of procedures, and structures. In short, members of a group show patterned attitudes, known as "joint action" (Blumer, 1969), which shapes the social life of a society. These attitudes are often linked to community, class, and gender (Denzin, 2004).

3.2 Data

Data were compiled from 25 participants. They include 21 informal female workers from the ginning[7] and stitching sections (the female-dominated sections), three employers of the stitching section, and the director of Chamber of Commerce of the Multan division (see Table 1). Of the 21 informal female workers, 15 were from the ginning section and six workers were from the stitching section. Within the 15 female participants in the ginning section, 13 were laid-off workers while two were still offering

their services. All the female workers had five or more years on the job experience at three established privately-owned firms (more than 30 years in operation) in Multan, Punjab. The choice of a minimum of five years' work experience was based on the rationale that these workers would have been in the industry for a sufficient length of time to experience firm restructuring processes post-ATC expiry. The study was also restricted to private establishments to ensure that the firm strategic decisions were motivated by profit, and to Multan, due to the high concentration of textiles and clothing firms in that city/ division.

Table 1: Study Participants, by Age Group

Age group	Focus group	Individual interviews	
	Female	Female	Male
< 24	3	-	-
25-39	4	5	-
40-45	6	-	1
> 45	2	1	3
Total	15	6	4

The study employed purposive sampling to gather the necessary data from the participants, who were in different divisions of the city of Multan. The participants chosen for the focused group discussion had to furnish their demographic information in advance to ensure they met the conditions of heterogeneity (Nyumba, et al., 2018; Morse, 2001). The participants of the study, as explained above, comprise informal female workers with sufficient experience of five years and more in the ginning and stitching sections, and are of diverse age groups and work status (employed and laid-off) in the informal job market. At the initial sampling stage, a pilot study was conducted with four participants, three female workers and one employer of the stitching sub-sector.

Data for this study were gathered by using two fundamental data collection instruments—focused group discussions, directed by discussing some explicit questions linked with the study objectives, and semi-structured individual in-depth interviews, in which open ended questions were used to investigate the experiences of informal female workers—over a period of 14 months (May 2019 to July 2020). The focused group discussions took approximately two hours, while the individual interviews lasted between

20 minutes to 70 minutes. The focused group discussions were conducted with 15 female workers, both laid-off and work cohorts of the ginning section. Most of the participants were aged 40 years and above, completed secondary education, and had previous informal work experience working as cotton pickers. Due to the informal nature of their work, several of the participants had experience in more than one industrial unit. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with the six participants from the stitching section, who came with diverse backgrounds, and with a minimum of five years' informal job market experience. Additionally, interviews were conducted with three employers and the director of the Multan Chamber of the Commerce and Industry. All interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace.

Ethical approval to carry out the fieldwork investigation was obtained from the researchers' institution. The permission to interview female workers was obtained from the approval of human resource departments of the concerned industrial units. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants before starting data collection, with the guarantee of anonymity, privacy and confidentiality, and assurance of the voluntary nature of their participation. The study objectives were fully clarified to participants in Siraiki, the local language. Siraiki was also used to carry out the fieldwork whenever it was deemed necessary.

3.3 Data analysis

All discussions with the participants were taped, and the data transcribed. The data of the focused group discussions were examined at the group perspective, concurrently having a view on the serial and interactional analysis. Conformity, censoring, and groupthink were subsequently considered. While the individual interview data were analysed without any consideration given to the group context, the six participants reactions were still contrasted against the group information (21 participants) to examine them situationally. Importantly, the in-depth interviews conducted with the two stakeholders—three employers and one government agency (director of the Multan Chamber of the Commerce and Industry)—and document analysis (based on government laws, regulations and policies, government reports and other relevant literature) were used to cross-reference the information from the informal female workers as part of the triangulation

process to check on the credibility and reliability of the data gathered through the focused group discussions.

Addressing confidentiality consideration, all recognising information of the participants were deleted from the data, where each participant was given an alphanumeric code based on the employment status (informal female worker and employer) mode of data collection (focused group discussion and interview) and age of participant, as indicated below:

Wf	Informal female worker (focused group discussion)
Wi	Informal female worker (individual interview)
E	Employer, age group (e.g.: E, 40-45)
EHR	Employer, human resource manager

The constant comparative approach was employed to compare occurrences, to determine the differences and similarities that stand up against the situation and against other data and ideas, and to simplify the evolution of conceptions. It was also used to categorise perceptions in greater command groups and then to integrate those categories and finally the writing of theory. This approach is composed of three distinct phases—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—as detailed below.

Open (manual) coding was utilised where significant part of the transcriptions and the data were fractured in sections for further analysis, and for the determination of labels (Charmaz, 2005; 2006). This phase resulted in a first list of codes and a classification was made between the various codes. They were discussed between the employers and female employees, altered until consensus was reached. The second phase involved the axial coding process, where the various codes were further divided into subcategories to refine the first initial classification of codes. This involved thematically connecting the existing codes and rephrasing them, where needed, to grasp the central category and subcategories. The categories emerging from the narratives of employers and female workers based on "when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences" questions (Corbin & Strauss, 1998), were further developed and refined in the next phase. In the third phase, that is selective coding, the theory was cultivated by creating a core category alongside other subcategory.

4. Findings

Three subcategories were borne from the data, decisions of employers, bearing of tradition and performance of workers. The convergence of these categories is the core category, marked as tolerance/no voice of female informal workers. The intersection of the three categories brings about the distinguishing proof of expectations. Because of tolerance/no voice, female workers do not experience any internal conflict, while they attempt to realise their 'perfect fit' or state.

4.1 Decisions of employers

Decisions of employers emerged as a subcategory, which is a consequence of interactions with informal female workers. Four properties—work experience, employer satisfaction, employer security and professional role—that affected the decisions of employers were identified.

Work experience mattered, as longer serving female workers were likely to have better employment prospects, job continuity and higher wages. The expectation is that that experience will sharpen the required skills and lead to higher productivity. With this standard in mind, the researcher posed the following question:

> *Interviewer: What are the criteria on which you employ female workers? Is it education, experience, skills or anything else?*

Employers indicated that they could expect higher productivity from a female worker who has been in the specific industrial section for 20 years, rather than a worker who had less than three years' work experience. Experience would also enable laid-off workers from certain units or sections to move to another unit within the facility. Longer-serving female workers achieved a certain level of comfort and self-satisfaction in their work surroundings, which in turn, provided employers with a certain control over them. That said, employers also perceived negative aspects linked with longer-serving female workers, who were seen as more likely to indoctrinate other female workers into a particular culture and adopt a 'contractors' demeanour' to control new female employees.

The data suggests that employer satisfaction, given the ability of female workers to perform tasks to perfection, and the ability to exercise some form of control over them, are among the reasons why these workers remain in the same facility for an extended time period. However, in the competitive post-ATC expiry environment, employers claimed that the quality of production had sometimes been compromised, as huge production levels had to be achieved in a limited span of time to meet demand. Such stressful work conditions caused workers to commit production errors, thereby calling for more internal monitoring. In such situations, employers expected production errors to be corrected by the workers themselves with minimal cost implications for the facility, as they reckoned that this reflects commitment to the job.

The growing preference for female workers in the ginning and stitching sections is also dictated by the unprofessional behaviour of male workers. In a response to the replacement of male workers with female workers in these sections of the textile industry, an employer remarked:

> *...yes, of course we have. For example, suppose if I had 100% male workers now it would have dropped to 60%-70%. (E, 40-45)*

A few instances in the data depict that male worker took extended breaks, more than was officially allowed. An employer stated that male workers tended to take job breaks with wages and decide to stay in the same status for extended periods, for two reasons: first, they tend to work only when they are penniless, and second, they do not realise the scarcity of work opportunities in the community. The views expressed by the employers with respect to the work behaviour of male workers included the following:

> *...Manipulation, it is a big problem with the male workers that whenever they are out for working, they manipulate. It is easy for a man to manipulate the owner…my production is pending, and they left for celebrating Eid (masha Allah) two weeks back and have not yet returned. At the end of the day, I must be answerable to my client. So, it is one aspect of manipulation…I told you they went for holidays and unless their money is finished, they will not return.* (E, 40-45)

> *...They have that much of experience and exposure, so they can decide accordingly. Rather they play with our needs.* (E, > 45)

> *...the greatest drawback with the male workers is that once they have collected some money, they would prefer to stay at home and be absent from the job.* (E, 40-45)

Hence, employers secured their production by replacing male workers with female workers. Employer security is therefore highly connected to the decisions of employers in hiring female workers. Female workers, according to employers, demonstrate higher professionalism, perform better on their jobs, and incur less cost as they accepted lower wages:

> *Female members achieve better work performance than male members. They have a lower price than the male members and work a lot better than them…one important aspect is that female workers are very loyal. Our experience is that they do not leave you in between. If they have any problem, then they discuss but they do not leave you just like that.* (E, 25-39)

Female workers also did not exercise any level of confrontation with the employers, for fear of losing their jobs. This passive behaviour contributed towards consolidating employer security. Contrary to previous evidence (Sengstock, 2009), there is complete harmony among employers and female workers. The work attitude and loyalty of female workers are therefore considered exemplary of their professionalism, which influences the decisions of employers.

Cutting production costs, demanding work perfection and job commitment are strategies used by employers that resemble an autocratic leadership style over female workers. Unfortunately, the job demands of the employers come at the expense of complying with international labour standards:[8]

> *...we totally comply by the ILO labour laws…the minimum wage criteria requirement, the infrastructure requirements, issues related to yearly bonuses and trainings of the workers…but sometimes we close our eyes and take an edge…after all we must survive the*

business in such odd times of competition. (EHR, > 45)

Female workers, surprisingly, remained in a state of denial of such disparate treatment and they continued work at the same place because of restricted job opportunities within their territories.

4.2 Bearing of tradition

Bearing of tradition emerged as a second subcategory in response to the participants' (both employers and female workers) expectations of demonstrating anticipated behaviour, employers exercising autocratic behaviour, and female workers showing obedience to authority. Bearing of tradition has the following characteristics—education, professional relations, unrecorded rules, pigeonholing and traditional roles.

From the pilot study to the theoretical sampling, the perception of the employers hiring female workers is:

...for them, something is better than nothing. (E, > 45)

It is only recently that they have started to go to the labour market, otherwise this was not the trend before. (E, > 45)

Employers feel that informal female workers are just there as an additional arrangement of low paid hands that could be used to finish the undertakings that the male workers do not want to do. In order to continue paying them lower wages, employers also projected a defensive attitude, in terms of not recognising informal female workers' prior training or experience. They justify this by stating that they had to invest in training female workers:

...we continue to invest in them for at least three months and monitor them, then we can expect that they are now on ready, and in a position to reward us…so ultimately this becomes a reason that females are very cheap in terms of basic cost. (E, 40-45)

Workplace training for female workers is considered a platform of education by employers. This training makes workers further obliged to maintain their work tenure with those employers.

Professional relations emerged as a property of bearing of tradition with dimensions of acceptance, strategies and style. Female workers were asked to shed some light on their mutual professional relations. Their responses include:

> *...all is well.* (Wi, 25-39)

> *...no problem at all.* (Wi, 40-45)

> *...we have no difficulties at the workplace.* (Wf, < 24)

> *...when I come to the work (factory), my in-laws take care of my (three) kids…I find wage enough…I have no problem at the workplace…the supervisor is OK and tells us how to do the work.* (Wf, 25-39)

That said, some informal female workers from the focused group discussions related the poor communication between employers and workers, as they are appointed by contractors.

> *...we do not have a separate washroom and no restroom either. But that is no problem. The only problem is the colour of the uniform, which is white…we have at various times raised this issue of white uniform and even requested to change the colour of the shirt only, but the supervisor says that it looks nice, all wearing white clothes.* (Wf, 25-39)

Female workers remained non-assertive as the contractors and supervisors expected them to know the existing rules and abide by them. As echoed multiple times in the data by employers/supervisors— "something is better than nothing"—female workers were coerced into remaining content with workplace rules and conditions. Employers/supervisors seemed to use different communication styles to exercise traditional autocratic leadership in the industrial sections. The outcome is that the personal needs of female workers were not accounted for, and they are excluded from any decision-making process (see Domingo et al., 2015).

There are some unwritten rules that female workers were required to observe, if they are to ensure employment in the informal job market. The data indicates that they are expected to be able, confident and knowledgeable on the one hand, but on the other, ingenuous. This means that if they demonstrate any level of knowledge like their male counterparts, those views and opinions will potentially not be accepted by the employers. Another obvious unwritten rule is that female workers should not question employers. Questioning and seeking further clarification regarding employers' decisions result in the form of unwritten sanctions. These may be in the form of depriving workers from rewards and annual increments.

Alternatively, employers perceived that if female workers can perform at work, they would be considered 'good workers' (an immediate outcome), they would not encounter what they thought are negative authorisations associated with being seen as 'poor workers' (an indirect outcome). It becomes explicit from the data analysis that the employers pigeonhole informal female workers as a disadvantaged group in terms of job security and gender-based cultural demands, and as generally untrained in order to take control of their position in the industrial setting. Female workers, in turn, remain passive, enforcing the traditional ethos, as they believe the employers are extending favours by employing them, as narrated below:

> *...they (employers) are very kind to provide pick and drop from home to factory and then back home on working days…and they also provide money for medical checkups whenever needed* (Wf, 25-39)

> *...We never go to meet the employer, rather we only know the supervisor who has also helped us to get appointed.* (Wf, 40-45)

However, further probing into an informal female worker participant revealed that once a serious illness is diagnosed due to prolonged exposure to unhygienic working conditions, then that worker is laid off.

Female workers, even among those with vocational education, are expected to perform tasks complying with the scope of practice as specified by employers. Such compliance and the supernumerary status of female workers often leads to role confusion, namely, the role and importance of informal female workers in an industrial context. The manipulative work

behaviour of male workers, coupled with contractors directing work roles in the informal job market (see preceding discussion) feeds into the model of oppression where, ultimately, employers (oppressors) enforce work assignments by implementing the work rules of their choice. The ambiguity created by employers' perceptions and attitudes towards female workers further obstructs the accessibility of female workers in industrial settings.

Employers constantly use procedures of custom inculcation targeted at female workers. Accordingly, employers enforce the traditional role of female workers, and the latter accept the delegation of tasks (see also Mihail, 2006; ILO, 2016) based on gender suitability, as expressed below by one of the participants:

> *...male workers receive better salary because they put in great muscular effort…we separate the impurities from the cotton fibres, especially polypropylene particles…and then the huge bulk of cleared cotton bales are collected and put in big bags by male members. This requires quite a lot of effort.* (Wf, 25-39)

Female workers justify being paid less than minimum wages based only on one single criteria, that is they are not able to undertake physically demanding tasks like their male counterparts.

Considering female workers being laid off in huge numbers in the ginning subsector, one female worker from the focused group revealed:

> *...now almost every ginner has purchased blowers, these are used to separate impurities from cotton. One blower replaces 20–25 female workers. However, the polypropylene particles are so much intertwined in the cotton fibres that they still need female fingers to separate them. So, when the content of polypropylene increases then more female are called to be hired ...otherwise 4–5 female workers are considered to be more than enough to separate the usually present content of polypropylene particles…now we will have to go back to fields, to work in open sun and rain, as no more factory work now. However, factory work is better…hopefully we will be called by anyone of the nearby factories.* (Wf, > 45)

Employers therefore ride on the gendered perception of "nimble fingers" (see also Elson & Pearson, 1981), placing female workers at the lower end of the hierarchical textile industrial structure (Munir et al., 2018). Evidently, the role of informal female workers is to be available when required from the employers' perspective, while female workers believe that they are to comply to employers' decisions to maintain their jobs in the informal labour market. Analysis of the data reveal that even less-qualified contractors are involved in denying female workers access to 'voice' openings—as supervisors and employers—and this forms the basis of workplace compliance. The stereotype of employer/supervisor behaviour that has been carried down by contractors, who have served in work facilities for lengthy time periods, is conceivably a wellspring of bearing of tradition (Game & Pringle, 1983). Interestingly and contrary to the literature, the study identifies almost no internal dissatisfaction and retaliation from the female workers.

4.3 Performance of workers

Performance of workers emerged as a third subcategory because of the volume of discourse on time management and the task time basics intrinsic to the industrial informal job market. Employers provided views on the performance of female workers during periods of immense workloads:

> *...whenever there is work overload, it must be overtime work, but female workers cannot make it...they must go home, attend to the house activities, look after their children.* (E, 40-45)

This perceived inability to bear increased burden and the constraint on the time that female workers can spend at the workplace during these periods of increased workload emerged as negative expectations of the employers. Consequently, these negative perceptions compelled female workers to perform beyond their capacities, thereby causing them to endure additional work stress.

4.4 Interconnectivity of categories: Expectations

The identified subcategories discussed above converge towards creating expectations, both on the part of informal female workers and employers.

These expectations impact the vital social problem, which is recognised as the quest for figuring out the 'fit' for female workers in the textile industry.

Decisions of employers and bearing of tradition create expectations about maintaining the traditions of female workers—home confinement and gender-related conventional roles. Employers behave in an inferring way, and so these traditions are passed on to the new generation of employers. Previous discourse exhibits that employers in the informal job market, who have embraced the custom conveyor role, keep using unwritten standards and practices to socialise female workers into what are believed to be acknowledged ways:

> *They cannot bargain, as they are not in the position to do so. On the other hand, a male worker can quickly decide, looking at the production level that how much he can bargain and to what extent.* (Participant B) (1E)

> *...beggars cannot be choosers, in a regional setting.* (Participant N) (4E)

Despite the relegation that female workers experience at the workplace, they remained tolerant and somewhat defensive of their position, as the available work in their divisions is constrained by the populace base. The expectations of tradition bearers affect female workers' capacity to recognise where they fit within the industrial hierarchy. It is obvious that female workers are frequently expected to build up their social character as per the traditions of industrial workers. Female workers report absolutely no conflict, neither external nor internal, as they attempt to define their place in the industrial sections. Their non-conflicting attitude is opportunistically availed by employers, even though employers indicate at different times that the manipulation of male workers is no longer accepted.

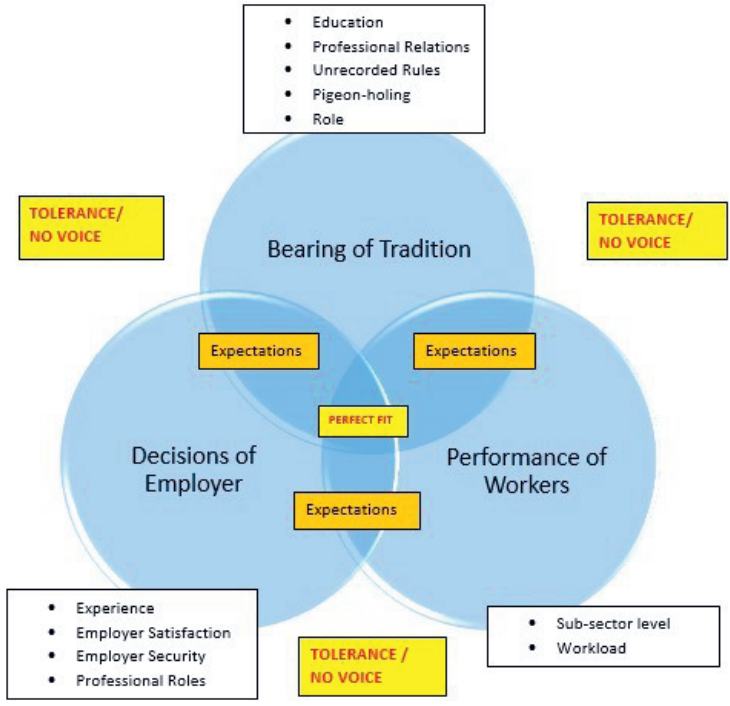
Data analysis reveals that employers' perceived expectations of female workers affect the latter's capacity to distinguish their place in the industrial hierarchy of workers. Female workers are constantly informed that they are low performers relative to their male counterparts. These employer expectations lead to a settlement regarding the place of female workers in industrial worker hierarchy. Female workers are unsure of their place in the industry; employers, however, find them to be a 'perfect fit'.

4.5 'Perfect fit' and 'tolerance/ no voice'

The three identified subcategories discussed above—decisions of employers, bearing of tradition and performance of workers—interact to shape the logical conditions that prompt the expectations of employers and female workers in the informal job market. They shape the vital social problem, the fit of informal female workers, in the hierarchy of the textiles industry. Employers symbolise the 'perfect place', where the female workers fit ideally, completely fulfilling their expectations.

Analysis of the data reveals that the vital social process (core category) experienced by female workers is tolerance/no voice, despite the adversarial situation at the stitching and ginning sections. This attitude deprives them from any kind of rights they are entitled to and relegates them to become a perfect fit as workers in the informal job market. Figure 1 provides a visual portrayal of the substantive analytical framework.

Figure 1: Proposed Analytical Framework: Tolerance/ 'No Voice'



Though it has been widely acknowledged that women's voice and representation is largely absent in relevant decision-making processes in Asia (ILO, 2021), the situation appears be even more compelling in Pakistan, as there seems to be no drive among informal female workers to increase their voice. Despite realising that they have no control over the decisions of employers (Branisa et al., 2013) regarding their work environment, surprisingly, there is also no retaliation and capacity to drive changes. Employers' strategic decision-making is, in fact, accepted by these female workers as an internalised component of the work facility.

Employers/supervisors/contractors who have embraced the role of bearers of tradition in the workplace therefore continue to upkeep past conventions of a subservient female workforce. Female workers are forced to find their value in relation to male workers; in doing so, they assume that the latter are the standard and thus cannot themselves have a 'place' in the work facility until they attain that standard. Worker performance becomes a determinant of expectations. Ultimately, female workers adjust and fit in the specific position strategically created for them. Female workers, with their tradition of obedience, are assimilated into a state of living affairs (Munir et al., 2018) in the prevailing patriarchy model (Charles & Bradley, 2009; Bettio et al., 2009; Burchell et al., 2014; Wong & Charles, 2020). This perpetuates an autocratic work environment which ultimately results in the lack of capability for voice, or rather, 'no voice'.

'No voice', and more importantly, the tolerance of female workers, are associated with powerlessness, oppression (Branisa et al. 2013) and marginalised identities. The capitalist and patriarchal oppression of informal female workers is reinforced by the latter's own failure to identify themselves workers, which underpins the way that female workers interact with one another and how they work as feeble and tolerant individuals under the rule of employers. Hence, increasing the employee voice of informal female workers remains critical for equality and inclusivity at the workplace or firm (Domingo et al., 2015).

5. Conclusion

This study is placed in the context of employers' increasing preference for informal female workers, where provisions of decent work—e.g., minimum wage and secure work contracts—is undermined by the strategic decision-

making from employers post-ATC expiry. The findings reveal that decisions of employers, bearing of tradition and worker performance interact to form the contextual conditions that direct the expectations of employers and female workers in the informal labour market. These expectations of a 'perfect fit' of informal female workers within the hierarchy of the textile industrial facility give rise to a situation of 'tolerance/no voice'. Informal female workers tend to willingly accept their place in an environment of negative workplace behaviour.

The study contributes towards egalitarian gender relations by identifying the basic social problem, that is the place of female workers, through the basic social process of 'tolerance/no voice'. There are not many studies on the experiences and marginalised identities of informal female workers in terms of capability for voice in the context of negative workplace conditions, given that the experience of informality is contextual. The current study therefore gives a distinctive understanding into female worker's experiences that have not been addressed, i.e., informal female workers react to negative work environment practices within a formal setting with absolute tolerance and zero-level friction. The findings allow for the construction of a new analytical framework for conceptualising informal female workers' experiences of the textile industry in Pakistan.

It is worth mentioning here is that the data compiled from the study participants in relation to their experiences in the informal job market are not generalisable to the overall experience of female workers, which is beyond the scope of this study.

Notes

[1] The 1995 ATC, bound by restrictions of the 1974 Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA), expired on January 1, 2005.

[2] There is no clear dichotomy between the formal and informal economy in Pakistan's textile and garment sector, as the informal economy often feeds into the formal economy and what happens in the informal economy impacts upon workers and enterprises in the formal economy. Consequently, the formal and informal workers "coexist along a continuum" (Zhou, 2016).

[3] The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace

(Amendment) Bill 2022, enacted January 14, expands the definition of workplaces to encompass both formal and informal workplaces.

[4] The issue of employee voice is a key element of "capability for work" and "capability for voice," where bargaining power assigns the degree to which individuals are permitted to communicate their desires and worries in aggregate decision-making procedures and make the most of them, that is have some effect on the ultimate result (Sen, 2004; Strauss, 2006).

[5] It is the process of improving the "ability, opportunity, and dignity of people disadvantaged on the basis of their identity to take part in society" (World Bank, 2013).

[6] Pakistan is the 8th biggest exporter of textile products and 4th largest cotton producer, contributing 5% of the total global spinning capacity. The textile industry, largely located in the Punjab province, is the biggest industry in the manufacturing sector of Pakistan, and second largest employer contributing more than 60% of the total exports, around 46 percent of total output (Government of Pakistan, 2017a).

[7] Ginning processing plants hold a vital position in the cotton value chain with many individuals depending on this section for their livelihood.

[8] Pakistan is the second country in South Asia that has ratified all eight fundamental conventions as enshrined in the International Labour Organization (ILO) Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

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