

Socio-economic Conditions of Women Home-based Balochi Embroidery Workers in Balochistan, Pakistan

Social Sciences and Humanities

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Abstract

Home-based cottage industry is one of the best income generating activities throughout the developing world in general and Pakistan in particular. An estimated 300 million people in the developing countries are engaged in home-based work; half of them are women, and 80% of these women belong to the poorest socio-economic strata of society. Women home-based workers significantly contribute to their household incomes by engaging in activities, such as handicraft production and livestock rearing etc. Conventionally, Balochi hand-made embroidery production is an important home-based economic activity especially for rural women in Sindh and Balochistan provinces. These embroidered pieces have high demand; both in rural and urban parts of the country. However, Balochi embroidery production business is mostly carried-out through informal means at household or community level. Such women embroidery workers are typically not affiliated with any institutions or organization. Hence, they become susceptible to exploitation by different actors within the value chain. The general objective of the study was to analyze the gender perspective of home-based Balochi embroidery value chain in Quetta and Mastung districts of Balochistan, Pakistan. Data were gathered through semi-structured questionnaire at the household level, focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The

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study findings deliberated that home-based women embroidery workers usually belonged to the poor socio-economic backgrounds and despite of consuming the major part of their day and energies made an inadequate amount. And the wholesaler earned almost the same amount as of producers by only selling the pieces in the market. Sometimes, the middle man, retailer and producer (women) earned more or less the same amount. The reasons for such exploitation involve the ineffective role of the concerned organizations, lack of governmental and institutional support mechanisms, disjoint marketing chain, poor awareness of women workers regarding market trends and their rights. This study is also significant because it suggests important insights for organizations working with women home-based Balochi embroidery workers involved in hand-made embroidery production in a varied rural setting of Balochistan and elsewhere associated with the similar problems, challenges and prospects. Lastly, since the subject is an ignored one, the study provides an entry point for future studies.

Key words: Gender, Value-chain, Home-based workers, Balochi embroidery, Balochistan

1. Introduction

Home-based cottage industry is one of the best income generating sources in most of the developing countries especially for women in South Asian countries like Pakistan, India and Bangladesh (ETI, 2010; Hennon and Loker in Hennon, Loker and Walker, 2000; Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007). An estimated 300 million individuals were engaged in the home-based work in the developing world alone and over half of them were women. Similarly, 80% of them belonged to the poorest families (Baidari, 2011; Gupta, 2001 cited in ETI, 2010). Women home-based workers have significantly contributed to their household incomes by engaging in certain types of home-based activities such as handicraft production, embroidery or weaving work, electrical assembling, garments, footwear and non-traditional handwork on products like football or bag stitching (ETI, 2010).

The number of home-based workers in various regions of the world is increasing (Hennon and Loker in Hennon, Loker and Walker, 2000). The frequently mentioned reasons of women's involvement in home-based work mainly include seeking greater flexibility in employment. This allows women workers to carry out the household activities and fulfilling the family responsibilities beside some income generating work within the household premises (ETI, 2010). Insufficient employment opportunities for women and

lack of women's education leave majority of women with the only option left i.e. home-based work (Own, Carsky, & Dolan, 1992 cited in Hennon, Loker and Walker, 2000). Home-based livelihood is thus seen as an imperative source of employment in Pakistan both in rural and urban areas and a significant proportion of women are directly involved in home-based cottage industry (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007).

1.1 Problem Statement

Women home-based workers throughout the world are playing a vital role, not only as economical suppliers but also as care providers to their families while contributing in the informal economy. Nevertheless, they appear to be the most vulnerable segment of the society with very limited economic choices, less access to social services and owning fewer rights to property and assets. Home-based women workers in Pakistan are significantly an important category amongst others. A large number of women are involved in home-based work for generating income and reducing household poverty. Nevertheless, their participation in home-based work is substantial to country's economy; they still remain the most unprivileged. The earnings that they make through the home-based cottage industry in most of the cases is several times lesser than even one dollar after working for 8 to 10 hours a day. Not only this, their work often goes unrecognized and unacknowledged and this cannot provide them eligibility and accessibility to labor rights and any other safeguards by the national legislations either. Economic pressure, poor working conditions, extensive working hours, inadequate food and nutrition, poor health and educational facilities, and, with no recreational activities; women home-based workers linger far behind than men in terms of human development.

1.2 Significance of Balochi Embroidery

Balochi hand-made embroidery called "Doch" in Balochi language holds some unique position among the traditional crafts of Balochistan. The beauty, richness and elegance that Balochi embroidery carries, assigns it a significantly imperative cultural meaning in the history of Baloch people. This remains an essential symbol of traditional heritage and one of the major parts of art and craft in Balochistan. This handy-craft is not only famous in Balochistan and Pakistan but also in many other countries, such as UAE, Oman and Iran. Balochi hand-made embroidery work is traditionally a women home-based activity produced typically by Baloch women workers in Balochistan and some parts of Sindh province in Pakistan. There are some 54 kinds of hand stitches done in different Parts of Balochistan.

1.3 Home-based Balochi Embroidery Work

In general, Balochi embroidery production skills are known to most of Baloch women; their skills, expertise and the purposes may vary though. Many are commercial workers, while some only produce embroidery pieces for domestic consumption (dressing or other house decorating stuff. This is typically restrained to women folk only and transmitted inevitably to the next generation of girls and women. Until now this industry is not supported by any organization and as such no institutional arrangements are made in this respect. Therefore, this process is carried out mainly through private and informal modes, i.e. production and marketing etc. However, the combination of tradition and innovation has made it highly demanded handy-craft in the market. Since, women in Balochistan are culturally expected to stay at home and accomplish the domestic responsibilities. Cultural restrictions, limited or no education further restricts women's physical mobility and participation in public life. Eventually, with very less involvement in the formal employment, women generally turn to informal employment i.e. home-based work. Embroidery production is one of the important categories within the informal employment for women in general and Baloch women in particular.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

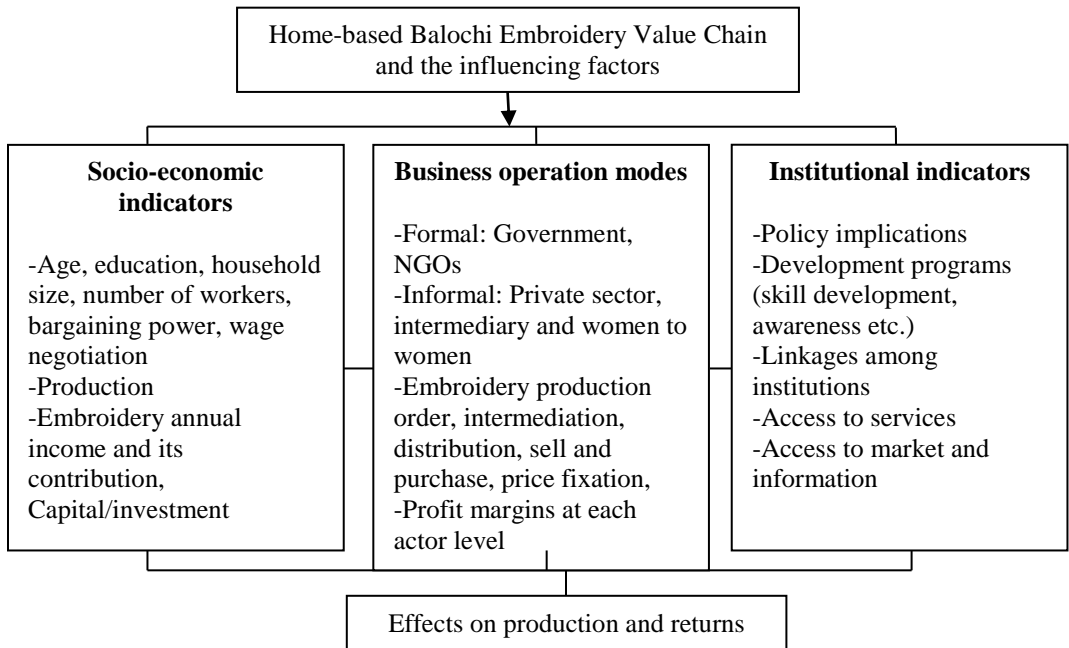
The purpose of the study was to analyze the socioeconomic conditions of Balochi home-based women embroidery workers in Balochistan province of Pakistan.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

The informal sector is unregistered, unorganized and unrecognized in most parts of the developing world. It provides employment to an overwhelming number of individuals especially in South Asia. Thus, informal sector is an imperative contributor to the formal economy (Hennon et al, 2000; ETI, 2010). Both the government statistics and micro-level studies inform that for the majority of home-based workers (HBWs), working conditions and the terms of labour are exploitive. Only a small number can make a reasonable living, whereas the majority of them is working for quite long hours but making very low returns. This has never been an area of concern for the legislative bodies to stress over the safe working conditions of HBWs and to ensure provision of minimum wages, maternity benefits and social security. Generally, there is no legal protection against labour exploitation. Often, HBWs are isolated from the main markets, hence dependent over middle men for getting some work. Nadvi (2004) observes that the employment and

earning opportunities for workers particularly for young women have been improved over the years; nonetheless, huge disparities along the chains are still present. Lund and Nicholson (2003) argue that the value chain analysis is important as “it mainstreams informal workers and informal enterprises into the economic domain”. The link to the domestic and international economy becomes obvious which subsequently helps get better understanding of policy implications of workers’ accessibility to “ladders of protection”.

It is also imperative to mention that no systematic and rigorous studies have been carried out in the in Balochistan, therefore, resulting into creation of knowledge gap which if filled may let researchers know that: how home-based hand-made embroidery workers are acting in the value chain, how the market chain deals with such workers and what is the gender composition of these chains? Moreover, where does home-based women workers stand and what is their position in the value chain as the general perception says that home-based workers particularly women are illiterate, voiceless, marginalized and having no direct influence in marketing their production, getting very low returns mostly due to poor awareness, and the intermediaries’ involvement in Balochistan.



Women in Balochistan are involved in various home-based income generating activities, especially in handicraft production. Balochi hand-made embroidery production is primarily an important home-based income generating activity for women especially in rural Balochistan. It is mostly

used for different purposes such as bearing household expenses. In this regard, some of the demanding varieties are women’s dresses, shawls, Balochi caps, bed sheets, and table or cushion covers etc. In Balochistan, such transactions are normally carried out through a channel, starting from the producer, client then the middle man shop-keeper’s which has high costs of transactions. At the same time, this is also believed that home-based Balochi embroidery products have their demand and supply at the local, national and perhaps international markets (mostly in the Gulf countries).

2. Methodological Approaches

Both primary and secondary data collection methods were used to obtain the required information. Primary information was collected from key-informant interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FDGs) and field observation.

The study was carried out in two districts i.e., Quetta and Mastung of Balochistan where the Balochi embroidery is produced. The snowball sampling technique was employed to identify the respondents. Initially, the researcher contacted home-based Balochi embroidery women workers through an NGO named as Water, Environment & Sanitation Society (WESS). They were then interviewed and asked to suggest other women embroidery workers who might participate in the study. In total, 50 (29 in Quetta and 21 in Mastung) home-based Balochi embroidery women workers were interviewed.

Table 2.1: Location wise distribution of the respondents

Serial No.	Quetta District	Numerical Distribution
1.	Nawa Killi	8
2.	Killi Shahnawaz	11
3.	Killi Habib, Kechi Baig	5
4.	Killi Bangulzai	5
	Sub-total	29
Mastung District		
1.	Ishkina	5
2.	Karez Sor	5
3.	Padha	5
4.	Sorgaz	5
5.	Shahi Bagh	1
	Sub-total	21
	Total	50

Table 2.2: The Venders Selected as Key Informants in Provincial Market

Serial No.	Names of Shops	Location
1.	Nagina Handicrafts	Quetta
2.	Afghan Kochi Center	Quetta
3.	Kakar Handicrafts	Quetta
4.	Chiltan Handicrafts Shop	Quetta
5.	Handi Crafts Showroom	Quetta
6.	Balochistan Handicrafts	Quetta

Source: Semi-structured Interviews, 2012

A detailed interview checklist was formulated taking into account all important dimensions of the study for home-based workers i.e. age, educational and marital status, number of household members, dependent number of persons, income, production of home-based embroidery etc. The semi-structured interview checklist was pre-tested and modified prior to applying. The pre-tested interviews checklists were not included in sample. The focus group discussions played important role in gathering required information. In total, four focused group discussions were conducted in the study area. The selection of the participants in focus group discussion was based on their availability and willingness to participate in FDGs. One of the FDGs was carried out in Mastung district while the other three were conducted in Quetta district. Each FGD consisted of 6 to 8 home-based Balochi embroidery women workers.

Table 2.3: Institutions Selected as Key Informants at District and Provincial level

Serial N	Organizations	Designation of the Key Informant
1.	Directorate of Small Industries Quetta, Balochistan	Deputy Director Small Industries
2.	Department of Small Industries Service Center (Embroidery Showroom)	Assistant Manager
3.	Aik Hunar Aik Nagar (AHAN) originated the idea by One Tambon One Product (OTOP, Thailand)	Program Officer
4.	Balochistan Arts Council, Quetta	Director Culture
5.	Ministry of Social Welfare and Women Development Quetta, Balochistan	Assistant Director Social Welfare
6.	Ministry of Women Development	Ex-Federal Minister

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|----|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| 7. | WESS; WEEB | Program Officer | Quetta Office |
| 8. | WESS; WEEB Mastung | Female Rural Facilitator | |
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Source: Semi-structured Interviews, 2012

2.2 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was uploaded in *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) and systematically analyzed via descriptive statistics i.e. percentage, average, cross tabulation, mean and T-test. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis approach.

2.3 Limitations of the Study

The key limitations included unavailability of secondary information on Balochi embroidery in Balochistan. Financial and human resource constraints, vast geography of the study area with scattered population also limited generalization of the study findings. However, Balochi embroidery production is evident in almost 23 (out of 32) districts in Balochistan. Due to time, human and financial constraints, only two districts were selected in the study. Only those women embroidery workers were included in the sample who worked and sold their embroidery for commercial purposes. Further, not a single respondent was included in the sample size who was working for Government or through Government. Lastly, all intermediaries who were interviewed were women.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Socio-economic features related to women home-based Balochi Embroidery

The empirical findings of this study revealed that women in Balochistan are enriched with embroidery skills, and making a high contribution to their household expenditures i.e. food, nutrition, health, and education of children. The field observations show that girls started working at very young age. In addition, not only young unmarried girls but also married and even elderly women were involved in embroidery work. Those individuals or families living in extreme poverty, embroidery production was the main source of livelihood. Others adopted it as a side business. What so ever the case was women were certainly contributing to their family income regardless of the

social and cultural challenges faced. Through their embroidery producing skills, women played an economically active role.

3.1.1 Age of Producers/Women Workers

Workers' age was an important factor as the age granted the approval or disapproval to go outside of the houses visiting the market and interacting with the market salesmen in particular. Women who have had access to market visits were all elderly women not the young girls due to social and cultural disapproval of girls' interaction with male market men. However, young girls were equally involved and even more efficient than elderly women in embroidery production. Besides, as the transmission of the embroidery skills is done through family, peers, and friends; girl children at an early age were found in the embroidery production during the field observation. The 18% of girls with age below 18 were involved in the embroidery production. They were at one end helping their mothers, elder sisters in the household chores, on the other they were also contributing in the household income through engaging in embroidery. While this is obvious that the girls in this age should be in schools to get education; however, because of poverty, insufficient accessibility and availability of the educational facilities the situation on ground was sad in this regard where 80% of the women workers ranged between 19 to 60 years old. They consisted of both single and married women. This is the economically active age so the data demonstrated that a significant majority of the workers belonged to this age group, contributing economically to their household incomes. A small but visible 2% of women workers belonged to the age group of 61 and above, showing that women even in old age were also affiliated to embroidery production for their own and family survival.

3.1.2 Education of Women Workers

The information obtained via field observations and group discussions revealed that due to lack of awareness toward female education, poverty, and household responsibilities along with culturally embedded gender expectations restricted girls from obtaining education. Because of the gendered division of labour, women were expected to remain at home and engage in household chores. Certainly, significantly large segment (78%) of women embroidery workers were illiterate. And since they did not have any other employment options due to their illiteracy and lack of other employment opportunities, they were highly concentrated in the home-based embroidery cottage industry. This is highlighting the institutional gaps in

provision of job opportunities to the illiterate and low literate women. All these factors pulled women to get involved in embroidery production for income generating. The unmarried girl workers with secondary and above education (6%) were found more confident and satisfied since they could earn money besides their studies. These workers mainly carried out embroidery work for their own educational expenses. Though the proportion of such respondents was very less, there is co-relation of education with workers earning through embroidery work as explained above.

3.1.3 Marital Status

Similar to workers' age, the marital status was also an important factor from a gender and marketing point of view effecting the embroidery production and returns. The unmarried girls were restricted to home; they were not allowed to visit the markets and interact with male as it was considered inappropriate. Significantly large percentages (48%) of the workers were consisted of single/unmarried women. This set of the respondents were mainly replacing their mothers' role. These girls were on one side contributing to their household incomes, making their dowry, and others were working to bear their own or their siblings' educational expenses. A significant proportion (38%) of married women who carried out the embroidery work whether to bear the household expenses as whole or in contribution to the main source of household income. Few (14%) of the respondents were widowed with no other source of household income except embroidery production.

3.2 Economic Conditions

3.2.1 Earning Source

Embroidery production contributed as a source of household income for women workers and their families. On the other hand, women with less income or no other employment or income choices were more likely to get exploited in terms of wages. A widowed woman aged 49 years embroidery worker when asked for how often she makes a choice while selecting the type of embroidery work answered, "Poor people have no choices. I am a poor widowed woman; I work to feed my children. I have one son and three daughters, my son is not yet well grown so myself and my daughters have to work without having or making any choices because this is the only option that we poor and illiterate women could have" (Lal Bibi, 49 year, Quetta).

Table 3.1: Major source of household income

Serial No.	Occupation	Contribution in %
1.	Home-based Balochi Embroidery	64%
2.	Government servant (head of the house)	12%
3.	Private business (shopkeeper,	6%
4.	Daily wages	18%

Source: Semi-structured Interviews, 2012

3.2.2 Availability, Prices and Quality of the Inputs

The findings of the group discussions and interviews showed that the availability, quality and prices of the inputs also sometimes hindered women's embroidery production as well as affected their returns. This is obvious that the quality of the product is conditional to the availability and quality of input, the price of the inputs (fabric, thread, mirror, needle etc.) are also equally important for the good and quality embroidery production as described by the women workers during the focused group discussions. The data obtained from the individual respondents via semi structured interviews revealed their satisfaction level with regard to the availability and quality of such facilities (see table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Women workers' satisfaction level with regard to the availability of services

Serial No.	Key indicators	Satisfied (%)	Neutral (%)	Unsatisfied (%)
1.	Market information source	28.0	68.0	4.0
2..	Production cost	34.0	44.0	22.0
3.	Price negotiation between women and other actors	44.0	32.0	24.0
4.	Middle man role in marketing	48.0	50.0	2.0
5.	Inputs quality	48.0	48.0	4.0
6.	Products prices in market	8.0	58.0	34.0

Source: Semi-structured Interviews, 2012

Table 3.3: Socio-economic contribution of Balochi embroidery

Embroidery contribution	Description
Average number of women involved in home-based Balochi embroidery production	- Two women at each household were involved in HBBEP.

(HBBEP).

Average annual income of home-based women workers (HBWWs).

- Annual earnings of women were 25,000 PKR (264 USD).
- HBBEP served as main income source for 64% of the women and their families.
- On average women contributed 65% of total household income.
- Women's contribution in household including children's educational expenses was significantly higher than the men's contribution.

Health and Nutrition

- Estimated 30% of the women's earnings were spent per annum on health issues (both personal and family).
- Estimated 30% of the women's earnings spent per annum on household food and nutrition.

Education

- Estimated 30% of women's earnings were spent per annum on children's education.
- 6% the respondents (young unmarried girl) spend their income on their own educational and other personal expenses (clothing, dowry making and health).

Investment

- Estimated 5% of investment was used to buy the inputs (thread, mirror, and fabric) to produce embroidered pieces for house-hold consumption and dressing purposes.

Savings

- Due to household expenses, high inflation rates and poor wage, women workers have had no savings. However, they mostly spent for the household, children's health and education with planning.

Source: Semi-structured Interviews, 2012

Conclusion

The findings suggested that home-based embroidery production rendered livelihood opportunities to a significant number of women in the study area. Regardless of being a low-cost handicraft along with its popularity and high demand, the marketing arrangements for Balochi embroidery remained unorganized and this has ever been a complex issue for the women workers in Balochistan. The field observations of the study areas illustrated that women embroidery producers faced numerous challenges in marketing of Balochi embroidery. From the stage of advertising of their embroidery skills to the level of promotion and selling of their embroidered products, there were multiple problems women workers were encountered with. The field data illustrated that 95% of the women workers learnt embroidery skills informally primarily through their family members (mothers, sisters, peers etc.). Due to informal source of learning and transmission of embroidery skills, women's such potential has gone hidden and unacknowledged. Moreover, women workers, without having any vocational certification encountered many challenges in marketing of their skills and embroidered products. Most of the women workers (78%) were illiterate. The main reasons for women's less access to trade and market were illiteracy, male dominated market and women's weak bargaining power. This situation depicted that women relied on other intermediaries or middle men (male family members, relatives, peers, neighbors and elderly women from community or family) for any market information and marketing of their products. Women workers' educational status when seen in correlation with the market information source, they used for embroidery marketing and selling showed that there was a significant relationship of their education with the market information source. Almost all (94.7%) of the workers with no marketing source were illiterate, while the number of literate women with no market information source was evidently less i.e. 5.3%, showing a positive relationship of education with market information source. About 88% of the women workers had no access to market. Both workers' education and their rural or urban location had a negative relationship with the market accessibility. The educated home-based women workers were young unmarried girls; they were restricted to visit the market due to cultural constraints. This is why home-based workers always relied on other family members (aged women and men family members in most cases and peers) to share the market information with them at household level.

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