The Gendered Organization of Work and Space in the Office Sector in Pakistan[1]

JASMIN MIRZA

1. Introduction

During the 1990s a new phenomenon has emerged in urban Pakistan that has started to significantly change the gendered structure of the urban labor market: women, particularly from the lower middle classes, have increasingly entered the office sector and have started to work in middle-level occupations that were regarded as exclusively "male occupations" only few years ago. They work as secretaries, receptionists, and telephone operators, as draftswomen, designers, and computer operators. In Pakistan, a distinctly patriarchal Islamic society, this phenomenon of women entering the office sector is particularly interesting against the background of the norms of *purdah* – which include gender segregation, female seclusion, and the absence of concepts for social interaction between the sexes – that pervade the social and gender order of society. The ongoing process of Islamization (see Rashid 1996; Shaheed/Mumtaz 1987: 71–122), too, has rather strengthened the segregation of the life worlds of men and women instead of providing concepts for mixed interaction between the sexes in all spheres of life, including the workplace.

Due to the strong gender segregation in everyday life, the formal female participation rate in the labor force in Pakistan has always been one of the lowest worldwide. The crude labor force participation rate for women in urban areas is only 5.9 %[2], with 55.3 % of the urban female workforce

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[1] This article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation *Between* Chaddor *and the Market: Female Office Workers in Lahore* (Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University, Germany), which analyzes the increasing market integration of lower middle class women into technical and secretarial occupations in the office sector in urban Pakistan (Mirza 2001). The empirical data were collected during one year of field research in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1996 and 1997.

[2] The crude labor force participation rate is defined as the percentage of persons in the labor force in proportion to the total population. The refined labor force participation rate,

being engaged in informal sector activities (Government of Pakistan 1998). Women in the urban economy are heavily concentrated in a few "female" occupations in which gender segregation can be maintained: in highly quali-fied professions such as teaching (in girls' schools and colleges) and medi-cine (i.e., treating female patients); and in the informal sector, where they perform home-based and low-paying piece-rate work, which also includes handicraft like sewing, crochet, and embroidery. Since the segregation of the sexes cannot be upheld in most middle-range occupations, for example, in sales jobs, trade, industry and crafts, women have virtually remained absent from these fields of employment. The office sector, too, has tradi-tionally been a male domain, and until a few years ago secretarial and tech-nical office jobs were performed almost exclusively by men. Even to date only 1.7 % of the clerical workers in urban areas are women (Government of Pakistan 1998).

Ironically, the women who are nowadays entering the office sector be-long mainly to the lower middle classes, which constitute the most conser-vative sections of Pakistani society. Lower middle class women, who are commonly not qualified enough to occupy positions with a high social status, such as teachers or doctors, but are too educated and well-off to be home-based workers in the informal sector, are usually not gainfully em-ployed. Keeping women out of the labor market (and in *purdah*) has been a religious as well as social status symbol for the lower middle classes, who strictly adhere to what they perceive as "true Islamic values", and who have been most adaptive to ongoing Islamization processes and conservative Islamic politics as a whole (Rashid 1996: 60ff; Kaushik 1993: 183; for detailed discussions see Mirza 2001, chapter 2). The Islamic concept of *purdah* constitutes an important feature of the gender order of the lower middle classes. This is manifest in a far-reaching segregation of the life worlds of women and men, the gendered allocation of space in which the public sphere is perceived as a traditionally male space, the absence of concepts for social interaction between the sexes, and in a strong sexualiza-tion of gender relations outside the kinship system. Female employment is considered a disgrace, particularly in fields in which the mingling with male colleagues and the (male) public cannot be avoided, and it is associated with a fall in social standing of the respective family.[3]

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which is 8.4 % for women in urban Pakistan, is defined as the percentage of persons in the labor force relative to the population of 10 years of age and above.

[3] The strong equation of female work with disgrace and a fall in social standing has also been pointed out by Shaheed (1989: 26) in her study of lower middle class women in Kot Lakhpat, Lahore. On this point see also Alavi (1991: 130).

Yet, it is particularly this section of society that has been hit hard by the deteriorating economic conditions. High annual yearly inflation, heavy taxation, the removal of price subsidies and controls, and (at the same time) stagnating wages and a high unemployment rate have made it increasingly difficult for the men to maintain the standard of living of their families without any additional income from the female family members. Thus, more and more lower middle class women are entering the few occupations that are open to them; namely, technical and secretarial office jobs. Between 1980 and 1990 the numbers of female office workers increased twelve fold.[4] In the late 1990s 1.2 % of the urban working women were already clerical workers (Government of Pakistan 1998); and women have become much more visible in the offices during the recent years. These women still constitute a very small minority and are hence regarded as "strange birds" among the (male) office workers as well as among the lower middle class women. Yet, their presence in the work world has altered the working environment in the offices; through the increasing entry of women into the office sector women's access to and the gendered organization of public (male) space are being renegotiated and redefined, and societal perceptions regarding the (un-)suitability of office jobs for women are changing.

This study aims to analyze the "embeddedness" (Granovetter 1992 [1985]) of the market in society from a gender perspective, i.e., to look at the "gendered embeddedness" (Lachenmann 1999: 7) of the market in Pakistani society.[5] It will show that gender relations (and gender inequalities) are reflected in the market and influence the way economic processes take place (Gagatay 1995: 1827f; Elson 1993: 545; Elson 1995: 1864); or, in other words, that "(i)nstead of thinking of the economy as something external that has an impact on women, we can think of the economy as a gendered structure, and economic change as a gendered process. Gender relations condition all the operations of the economy. That is, economic institutions and processes must be perceived as permeated by gender, even though at first sight they may appear to be gender neutral (Elson/McGee 1995: 1991; see also Bakker 1994: 5; Elson 1995: 1863)." Specifically, we discuss how the gendered allocation of public (male) space as well as societal gender constructs and gender relations, *inter alia*, the lack of socially sanctioned modes of communication between the sexes, a strong sexualization of gender relations between unrelated men and women, and the ubiquitous "eve-teasing" and harassment of women in public male spaces that characterize

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[4] In 1980, only 1373 women were included in the category "office workers"; in 1990 their number was already 15877 (INBAS 1993: 27)

[5] For a detailed discussion of the concept of "gendered embeddedness of the economy in society" see Lachenmann 1999.

Pakistani society, are reflected in the market; and how they affect the work-
ing conditions of female office workers, particularly the gendered organi-
zation of work and space inside the offices. The study shall further show
that female office workers are far from being passive victims of societal
transformation processes; on the contrary, they are active agents of change
who use many strategies to maneuver in the office sector, to appropriate
public (male) space, and to accommodate the *purdah* system to the office
environment. In this way they do not only gain access to occupations from
which they were formerly excluded; they also manage to prevent (sexual-
ized) gender relations and male (mis-)behavior toward women that charac-
terize public male spaces, inside the offices.

2. Lower Middle Class Women in Pakistan: Life World and Gender Relations

One of the most striking phenomena in Pakistan – as in many other Muslim
countries – is the absence of women from public life. Men, on the other
hand, are everywhere. Leisurely, they stroll down the roads or stand to-
gether in groups in front of their houses, in the streets and *bazaars*. In their
leisure time they sit with friends in public parks and on the grass at the
roadside, chatting and exchanging the latest news. And they are omnipres-
ent in the world of work, in the markets, the offices and shops. Women,
particularly younger women, are rarely seen. Clad in a *burqa*, a *chaddor*
(large veil that covers the whole body) or a *dupatta* (smaller, about 2.5
meter long veil), their head bowed and their eyes cast down they walk
quickly, even hastily, through the streets, while everybody's eyes follow
them until they are out of sight again. Commonly they are seen in pairs,
small groups, or accompanied by a man, or they pillion-ride in the side-
saddle style on a bicycle or motorbike with a man sitting on the front seat.

In Pakistan's lower middle class, everyday life is dominated by *purdah*
restrictions, which lead to a far-reaching segregation between the life
worlds of men and women without many interfaces for social intercourse.
The whole organization of social life is geared towards shielding women
from men, protecting women from men gazing at them. In the *mohalle*, the
residential areas, the houses are constructed in a way that they shield the
female inhabitants from (male) strangers. A distinctive feature of the small
lanes and pathways of the *mohalle* are the high walls on both sides. Com-
monly two doors lead into a house: one door is used by the family members
and opens the way directly into the house or to a little courtyard which is
used by the female inhabitants when sitting outside doing household chores

or just for chatting or sleeping at night during the long, hot summer, at the same time shielding them from by-passing strangers through the high walls. The other door is for visitors and leads to a visitors' room – which, however, is also used by the family during the absence of guests – from which neither the courtyard nor any other part of the house can be seen. Even in houses with no courtyard or only one entrance door there is always some kind of visitors' room. Windows commonly look out on the courtyard, but if they can be seen from the street they are covered with curtains. (Young) women are not supposed to open the door and lead a stranger in; this task is performed by a man, a boy or an older woman. Male visitors who do not belong to the inner family circle are not allowed beyond the visitors' room. Even tea and snacks, which are commonly served to visitors, are not brought in by a woman but by a man or child, or food is placed on a tray outside the visitors' room and then taken inside by the man who is entertaining the guests. It rarely happens that couples who are not immediate kin go visiting together, but if that is the case the woman is led to the female family members inside the house or in the courtyard. Visitors for women are mainly restricted to female relatives, who visit each other quite frequently. But even when other women drop in, for example, neighbors who just want to chat or exchange the latest gossip, they are often allowed to go beyond the visitors' room and sit together with the women of the family. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to spend their leisure time outside. When men spend too much time inside the house they even run the danger of being ridiculed that they are not men, but women, because they stay at home all the time. Therefore, as far as the private realm of the houses is concerned, the *purdah* rules for men are much stricter. Men who belong to the same *mohalla* often stand together in groups in front of their houses or go to one of the small teashops or snackbars nearby when they want to meet and talk. They are not really supposed to bring friends into the house, because that would mean exposing "their" women to male strangers.[6]

When girls reach the age of seven or eight, they are not longer allowed to go outside. They stay in the house with the women. Girls of the lower middle class nowadays attend school at least up to Matriculation, i.e., 10th grade. They even study up to FA./FSc (12th grade) or BA/BSc (14th grade). However, since all educational institutes up to college level (BA/BSc) are gender-segregated[7] (except in primary school), girls do not come into contact with males. Students as well as teachers are females. Even transport to school/

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[6]   An interesting account of the gendered organization of space in different residential areas of Lahore is also presented by Weiss (1998).

[7]   Only few colleges, especially in the field of Commerce and Economics, are coeducational. Otherwise, only at university do men and women study together.

college is commonly organized through a *rickshaw* or by a mini-bus that picks the girls from the same neighborhood up in the morning and brings them back home when school/college has finished, or a male relative takes them and brings them home by motorbike or bicycle. Once their education is finished the girls stay at home until they get married. The marriage is usually arranged by the parents.

Men of the family make the daily purchases, or a boy from the neighborhood is sent to the next shop or *bazaar* to buy urgently needed items. Doing all outside work is regarded as the duty of the men. Women just give the orders to their brothers and get the things delivered to their homes. Recreational activities, which men seek outside the house, are brought into the home for the women, for example, women don't go to the cinema but from time to time a video player is rented for a day so that they can watch an Indian movie at home. Snacks which are sold at every corner and which are eaten outside by the men are packed and then carried home for the women. Shielding women from men even goes beyond the mere physical level. Once I was sitting in the visitors' room of one of the working women I had interviewed earlier, when the mother proudly showed me the snaps of her sons which were hanging on the walls. When I asked her why she had not hung up her daughters' snaps she answered that "you know, here in Pakistan the set-up is not like this. Sometimes [male] visitors come to meet my sons and then they sit in this room. It would not be proper if I exposed my daughters' photos so that they could see them. I have snaps from my daughters, too, but they are in the other rooms of the house, not here."

Despite the rigorous *purdah* restrictions, spaces for women do exist in the public sphere; they segregate women from men but at the same time enable them to take part in public life. Lachenmann (1993) describes these spaces as "parallel structures" (18), "women's spaces" and a "women's world" (7). Minces (1992: 55f) uses the terms "parallel culture" of women, and Vagt speaks about a "dual public" (1992: 50). Spaces for women in the public are even a precondition for the maintenance of gender segregation, particularly schools and colleges for girls with female staff and surgeries and hospitals with female doctors to treat female patients. But other spaces for women can also be found in the public sphere; for example, at celebrations like weddings, engagements and religious ceremonies, or at funerals, separate rooms for women enable their participation. In some restaurants, ice-cream parlors, and snackbars a corner of the room, often separated by a curtain or partition, is reserved for women only. In the public transportation system two seats in the busses, the front seats next to the driver that can be reached through a separate front door, are reserved for women. The public libraries offer segregated areas for women where they can sit and study. New spaces for women that provide them with access to spheres that are

normally restricted to men have evolved during recent years, like the first public parks for women only in Rawalpindi (*Dawn*, 21.09.1999) and the town of Sobhodero (*Der Spiegel* 40/1993).

Violations of *purdah* rules by women, particularly their venturing into public male spaces, are quickly countered with harassment, a phenomenon that is not least based on the close link between *purdah* and the sexualization of gender relations in Muslim societies in general.[8] Staring at and touching women, giving harassing compliments or verbally abusing women while passing by, and trying to talk to them unnecessarily are common forms of harassment in public spaces. What is even worse is when cars and motorbikes stop in front of women with the purpose of enticing them into the car or onto the motorbike by offering them a lift, and the fact that women are followed on foot, on motorbikes and even in cars. This can last for hours and it makes women afraid because they do not know the intentions of the person(s) following them.[9] A survey conducted by an English language newspaper (*Frontier Post*, 14.03.1994) reveals that harassment has become a common part of the everyday life of women. All the women questioned in the survey (100 %) had already experienced harassment, and nearly two out of three (62 %) were afraid to go out alone.

3. Gender Relations in the Office Sector[10]

In the offices under study gender relations showed an astonishing uniformity. Male colleagues commonly did not acknowledge work-related (de-sexualized) relationships between the sexes at the workplace. In the offices they had, often for the first time, the chance to come into contact with unrelated women; and they took advantage of this situation by trying to get close to their female colleagues and developing personal relations with them. Common methods adopted by men to try to come into closer contact with female colleagues were approaching women unnecessarily under the pretext of work-related issues, trying to involve them in needless small talk about

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[8]   See on this point Guenther 1993:67; Heller/Mosbahi 1993:191; Minces 1992:49; Dahl 1997:104/134; Mernissi 1987:45/140.

[9]   For more information and case studies about sexual violence against women see Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (1999:215–223); Human Rights Watch (1999; 1992); Goodwin (1995); Haeri (1995); *The News*, 22.04.1997.

[10]   Some of the office workers who were interviewed did not want their real names to be mentioned in this study. Therefore, a few names have been changed in order to provide these women with the anonymity they desired. Furthermore, the names of all offices were also changed.

personal matters, often in a low voice or when nobody else was around, inviting women for tea, lunch, etc, offering them a lift with the motorbike, dirty talking, cutting jokes, speaking loudly within women's earshot in order to attract their attention, or even directly asking female colleagues whether they wanted to become their girlfriends. Touching women while passing over things like pencils or a phone receiver, coming very near to women physically while passing by or talking to them, or staring at them furtively was also a common way to "establish contacts".[11]

The worst behavior toward female office workers was exhibited by men who were connected to the office only loosely and temporarily; namely, clients, customers, and visitors. The shortness of the encounters, together with the lack of social control (which makes permanent office staff account-able for their behavior, however slightly) facilitated behavior patterns typi-cally evinced by men toward unrelated women in public (male) spaces.

Receptionists and telephone operators complained about the numerous "wrong calls" – as they called them. Clients and visitors who came to the office and saw them working there called them later, knowing that they would answer the phone; and they tried to get them involved in a conver-sation or to meet them outside of the office:

> I get such phone calls. If some customer comes [to the office], then of course he has our phone number. He sees me working here and after he has left the office he phones me, 'I liked you and I would like you to be my [girl]friend', he will say. 'Let's meet outside'. 'Have lunch with me'. 'Have dinner with me.' (Ghazal, receptionist, 25.05.1997)

Women also faced difficulties with clients they had to deal with inside the offices. Shazia and her colleagues, Shamzi and Farhat, all designers at the publishing house Ali & Ali Communications, design book covers and magazines on the computer, and sometimes clients come to their work-places to appraise and sanction the designs they have developed:

> Some clients come very close to us. Then we act in a disapproving manner – for example, we look at them, or stare at them, or try to give them the feel-ing that they should not stand here. Then they realize this themselves and retreat. And there are others who are not influenced by our behavior, that we are staring at them or trying to indicate that they should not do that [i.e., come so close]; but our [male] executives are also caring. They react imme-diately and say, 'please sit down in our [visitors'] room. When they have done the work we will show it to you.' (Shazia, designer, 03.01.1997)

When women had to leave their office on work-related tasks, they were confronted with (sexualized) gender relations that characterize public male spaces. Asieh, a designer working at a small advertising agency, Rainbow

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[11] For similar findings see Macleod's study (1991) of female office workers in Cairo, Egypt.

Advertising, told me that her boss once took her to the printing press. Work inside the printing press, a traditionally male field of employment, was usually handled by the male employees or the boss himself; but on that particular day he took her along just to show her the procedures, how scanning and printing was done, and how a printing press looked:

> There were a lot of men. They were all staring at me in a strange way, 'Where has this woman come from?', 'What kind of relationship does she have with this man?' [And this,] although he only took me to that place to show me how the work is done there. I did not like it. I said, 'I won't go there again; the men stare in a dirty manner.' (Asieh, designer, 15.01.1997)

Sexualized gender relations and men's continual attempts to gradually extend the boundaries in their daily interactions with female office workers were a structural phenomenon all women experienced as an integral part of their daily lives as office workers. The need to fix the boundaries of male-female interactions at the workplace (and beyond) and not to give men the chance to extend these was therefore very frequently mentioned by the women:

> The [office] set-up depends on yourself. After five years of [working] experience I can say that it absolutely depends on you. ... They [i.e., the men] do as you like. It is not true that nothing happens, but it depends on you and how you behave to the others. You must conduct yourself in such a way that they cannot do anything except work. You should be mature enough not to give them any chance. And if you have only given someone the chance to get close to you once, then you cannot go back to the old relationship. ... If there are no obstacles on your part, then problems can emerge. Therefore, one has to remain careful. ... Everything depends on the girl. If she wants she can live in a very good [office] set-up. ... I think that men are all the same. If they get a chance they will definitely use it. I have seen this many times. (Shagufta, software developer, 01.12.1996)

One crucial strategy of female office workers to prevent male misbehavior at their workplaces was to accommodate the *purdah* system and its concepts of gender segregation and female seclusion, to the office environment.[12] This way they not only maintained physical distance between male and female colleagues; they also minimized interfaces for interaction with clients, customers, and visitors, viz., men, who were not part of the office staff.

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[12] Other strategies female office workers employed were "creating socially obligatory relationships" with male colleagues, "integrating male colleagues into a (fictive) kinship system", and "creating social distance". For a detailed discussion see Mirza 2001, chapter 5.

4. Inside the Offices

4.1 The Gendered Organization of Space

In the offices under study female office workers usually sat in corners, behind poles or partitions, or in backrooms where they were shielded from the gazes of their male colleagues as well as those of incoming customers. When men and women were not segregated physically, their workplaces were so arranged that they did not have to face each other but could work with their backs to each other or side by side with their faces to the wall. Furthermore, there was usually enough space between the workplaces of male and female employees so that men and women did not have to work or pass in close proximity to one another.

Spatial provisions for women were most prominent in offices with employers belonging to the "conservative type".[13] Such spatial provisions were evident, for example, in the allocation of a separate room to the female employees, as could be found at the small advertising agency, Creative Designers, in which one woman, Sadia, a designer, works. Asif Sahib, the owner of Creative Designers, told me,

> Women sometimes get confused when a man sits too close to them; then they cannot work well, their speed slows down. Even if you let a girl stand next to me my work speed will slow down. (04.04.1997)

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[13] In the research process, three different kinds of employers/superiors could be identified; namely, a "Westernized type", a "conservative type", and a "mixed type". "Westernized type" employers had a (Westernized) upper- or upper middle class family background and had often studied or lived in a Western country for some years. Having a mixed working environment was not considered a problem or constraint in any way. These employers even had women among the highly-qualified employees who worked partially outside of their offices – architects who had to go to construction sites, designers who regularly visited clients to discuss the designs they developed, etc. – and it was not perceived as inappropriate to employ women for tasks which required this kind of public exposure. In the "conservative type" employer's life world, gender segregation and *purdah* were much more ingrained. Although he did not oppose female employment in the office sector, such an employer nevertheless tried to provide segregated working areas for his female staff so that the integration of women into the office remained in accordance with the gender order of society and his own (conservative) life world. The "mixed type" of employers did not provide segregated working areas for women, and they also deployed women in fields that required public contact and exposure. However, they were actually very conservative as far as their own family was concerned. Although they themselves recruited women and promoted a desegregated office environment, they were not in favor of their own female family members being employed; and being conservative at home did not stop such employers from making amorous advances toward women in public spaces or even their own female staff.

Thus, Asif Sahib created enough space in his office so that men and women would be able to work comfortably. He allocated one separate room to Sadia, and clients and visitors did not have access to it, nor did most of the staff:

> Sadia is in our computer section. No man goes there and no man is supposed to go there either. There are only few staff members – one sweeper, me, my elder brother, and two men who work on the computer – who enter this room. No one is supposed to go into this room ... We have made this [arrangement] very consciously, and usually the room remains closed. Men sit in the office; friends come [to visit them] and sit down. And from the beginning we established such a set-up. I do not like that a girl sits in the computer room, and all the guys start coming to the office only to glance at her. (Asif Sahib, 05.04.1997)

One woman in my sample, Shagufta, a software developer, experienced exactly what Asif Sahib had tried to prevent by allocating a separate room to his female employee, Sadia. Shagufta also used to work in a separate room, but when she shifted to another branch of her company the lack of space there required her to share a room with about 5–6 male employees. Only a few women work in her field, and suddenly there was a rush to Shagufta's room because male staff from other departments of the company and friends began to visit the men working with Shagufta – only to glance at her. They even congratulated the men sitting together with her because now they "had some entertainment in the room". Shagufta could not do much except concentrate on her work, ignore the male staff, and particularly their visitors, and remain strict when men tried to entangle her in unnecessary conversations.

But also in offices in which no special provisions were made for female employees, for example, in offices with a "Westernized type" of employer, women tried to create gender-segregated spatial arrangements for themselves. Several examples can be cited here. When Tasneem started to work as a draftswoman in the medium-size architectural office, Premier Architects, she worked together with the draftsmen in a room that was allocated to the architectural drafting department. The room was separated from the hallway by a glass wall, and every employee, visitor or client entering the office could immediately see her working in this room. Furthermore, her workplace was in the middle of the room, and she was thus clearly visible for all the draftsmen working around her too. A couple of weeks later her workplace had changed. She was now sitting in the corner of another small room of the office. Here, no incoming visitor could see her, and male colleagues only came in when they had to discuss work-related issues with her, because otherwise there was no reason to enter that room. When I asked her why her workplace had changed, she told me,

> I asked my boss to give me a proper workplace, not a workplace in the mid-
> dle of the room. Now I sit in the corner of this room; this is much better
> because I am protected (01.04.1997).

Interestingly, a female architect working in the same office for many years
– the only female employee apart from Tasneem – had her workplace in the
same room; and except for the two women only one more male architect
used to sit and work there from time to time.

A second example of female office workers' proactive attempts to create
women's spaces in the offices is manifest in the computer department of
Red Crescent Hospital. When I visited Shaheen, a software developer, there
for the first time in the fall of 1996 the employees had their workplaces
along the three walls of the department, and the staff was visible for every
incoming person. At that time Shaheen, who was the only female employee,
preferred to work in a small backroom attached to the large one, which
nobody entered, except the staff from the computer department. Later, par-
titions were placed in front of the workplaces so that the staff was no longer
visible to people entering the department. Four employees were seated
along the walls, left and right of the entrance, and another two along the
wall opposite the entrance. Meanwhile, two more female employees had
been recruited as Shaheen's assistants, and since two employees always sit
at one big work desk with two computers, both women were sitting together
at the first two joint workplaces on the right side of the entrance. Two men
were sitting at the other two joint work desks on the same side; and for that
reason the women placed another partition between themselves and their
male colleagues. They felt that they could thus work undisturbed, without
being observed by their male colleagues. Along the opposite wall, though,
where four men worked, no partition was placed between the workplaces.
Once when I went to Red Crescent Hospital to conduct an interview with
Shaheen, a loud dispute was going on in the computer department. One
male employee, the one sitting at the last workplace on the left side of the
entrance, had taken away the partition which was placed between the male
and female staff and placed it behind his own workplace. From there, a
door leads into the small backroom in which the head of the department
usually works, and he felt disturbed by staff entering that room from time to
time. One of the affected female employees and the male colleague were in
this small backroom having their argument, and the woman tried to con-
vince her boss that she needed the partition more urgently than he did. Al-
though her employer was a "Westernized type" who himself did not feel
any differences between male and female employees, she won the battle
and, triumphantly, once again placed the partition between her workplace
and that of the men. Shaheen, the third woman, with more seniority than the
others, used to sit at one of the workplaces opposite the entrance. There

were only two workplaces there, not four; and she thus only had one man sitting next to her. After a while, when one of the two female assistants quit her job, the other one left her workplace and started to sit next to Shaheen. This way, again, the female employees in the computer department had reorganized space and did not have any men sitting on their left or right.

The only exception to such a gendered organization of space was in the case of receptionists/secretaries. These were expected to be visible to everybody, particularly clients and visitors entering the office; and their workplaces were positioned accordingly. It is interesting to note that even (some) "conservative type" employers had female secretarial workers in their offices without perceiving this as conflicting with their own conservative worldview. In an interview with the owner of the agency Creative Designers, Asif Sahib, for instance, he stressed the importance of allocating a separate room to his female designer, Sadia. Yet, he did not consider the provision of spatial arrangements for Sadia inconsistent with the fact that he later employed a second female employee, a receptionist, for whom of course no spatial arrangements were made. On the contrary, she sat directly behind the entrance, visible to every incoming person; and she was also the first contact person for all people visiting or phoning the office.

When I raised this issue to "conservative type" employers who had secretarial workers in their offices or planned to recruit women for secretarial positions, I found they had either not consciously thought about this inconsistency, or they stressed the positive aspects of employing women for office jobs.[14] When the latter was the case, they acknowledged that particular spatial arrangements were not possible for secretarial workers, but the advantages of having a woman for such positions outweighed their con-

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[14] The experiences of employers with recruiting female office workers for middle-level positions were overwhelmingly positive. In the interviews the employers stressed that women worked harder and with more concentration than men; they took their work more seriously and were more trustworthy; and they were very punctual. Women did not disappear for hours during work time or the lunch break (as men did); they did not get personal visitors who kept them away from their work; and they did not take many casual leaves. The latter qualities of female office workers that were mentioned by employers are certainly linked to women's restricted mobility. Any work which has to be done in public spaces is the responsibility of men; for example, the payments for electricity, gas, water, and telephone bills have to be deposited regularly at the different authorized banks, letters have to be posted, the motorbike has to be tuned, certain goods have to be purchased, etc. Therefore, men frequently disappear for a while during working hours or take casual leaves for one day or half of a day, in order to get such tasks done. Women are not responsible for this kind of work but pass it on to their brothers or other male relatives. Furthermore, it is common that men get visitors in their offices – friends or relatives who drop in for a chat – while women cannot visit each other so easily. They remain in the office the whole day and do not leave their seats.

cerns for maintaining the gender order of society inside the offices. This point brings back to mind an observation already made elsewhere (Mirza 2001, chapter 2); namely, that spatial arrangements for women in public (male) spaces in order to keep up gender segregation are only acknowledged and upheld by men as long as they do not cause financial or other personal disadvantages.

4.2 The Gendered Allocation of Work

The gendered organization of space illustrated above was complemented by a gender-specific allocation of work that was omnipresent in the offices under study. Women did not generally perform tasks that required contact with the public, not to mention mobility outside of the office. This way, interfaces for communication between the sexes, particularly with men who were not immediate colleagues or part of the office staff, were reduced to a minimum. Most of the women in my sample did not have any contact with the public at all, and for the few that had such contact, it was restricted to a limited number of the company's clients or (male) staff members from other departments.

Many employers did not allocate work to women that required public contact and exposure. But even in offices with "Westernized" or "mixed" types of employers women avoided jobs that involved customer service or required them to leave their offices to do outside work. Instead, they preferred jobs in which the mingling of the sexes was minimal. Zaheer Salam, director of the well-known publishing house Ali & Ali Communications and a "Westernized type" employer, told me that he also recruited women for tasks which required dealing with the public. For him, the qualifications of a person, not the gender, were crucial for the recruitment of staff and the assignment of tasks to them. Although a female designer – a (Westernized) upper-class woman with a five-year university education in Fine Arts from the exclusive National College of Arts – had formerly worked for the company, and had also been responsible for customer service, including visiting clients in their own offices, Mr. Salam concluded that many women did not want to work in fields which required such public exposure:

> When women apply here they often say, 'we do not want to do outside work but work inside [the office].' Then I ask them, 'why did you study so much? You studied Marketing and Sales, so why don't you go to the market?' But they say, 'no, we don't want to go outside, we want to sit in the office and work there'... (Zaheer Salam, 05.06.1997).

When Shazia joined Ali & Ali Communications as a designer she too made it clear from the start that she did not want to do any work outside of the office. Thus, from the beginning her superiors knew that she could not be

deployed for tasks like visiting customers in their offices or making presentations in other companies, and nobody ever asked her to do so. The designs Shazia and her male colleague Asif develop have to be presented at the clients' offices, but this task is taken over by Asif. Shazia, as well as her female colleagues, Shamzi and Farhat, remain in the office the whole day. Work is allocated to them by their supervisor, who also takes back the completed work and then tells them whether corrections have to be made. Shazia only went to a client once, and before leaving her office she phoned her parents and asked for permission:

> I don't like to go out of the office in this way. I don't like to go to different places. From the beginning I felt that they can give me as much work as they'd like except for going to different places. ... Once I had to go, and I said that 'I won't go, I can stay here and work'; and I said that I don't have the permission from my family. It is true that I do not have the permission from my family, but I did not want to go either ... I did not like it ... If there were two or three more girls with me, then it would be different ... And when I go somewhere I do not know whether there will be girls or not. If I was the only girl I would get confused there. Therefore I do not like to go to different companies to visit clients. (Shazia, designer, 20.04.1997)

When male and female employees had the same skills and were recruited for the same positions, all tasks that had to be performed outside of the office were assigned to men. Women remained inside the office, doing exactly the same kind of work as their male colleagues. One example is found in the two computer companies I visited during my research, both of which also serviced and repaired computers. Female employees who were responsible for repairing computers were sitting in a room that not even the customers bringing the defective equipment had access to. They handed the computers over to men at the reception desk and explained the problems that had arisen to them, and the male staff then forwarded the computers to the women. Male employees were also sent out to clients (mainly to offices but also to residences) to check defective computer equipment, while women remained in the office and never left their workplace for such tasks.

Even when women were formally responsible for dealing with the public they, at least unofficially, handed over all work which involved contact with customers and clients to their male colleagues and only took over such tasks temporarily when by chance no male colleague was available.

The illustrated gender-specific allocation of work did not apply to receptionists and secretaries, whose very work was to deal with all persons entering and phoning the office. Here, the comments already made above apply.

5. Discussion

This study has analyzed how female employment in urban Pakistan is embedded in its societal context. It has shown that gender images and gender constructs inherent in the social order of Pakistani society, particularly the strong sexualization of gender relations outside the kinship system and the ubiquitous harassment of women in public (male) spaces, surface inside the office sector. They influence gender relations at the workplace and, subsequently, the working conditions of female office workers; and they determine which tasks women can and cannot perform in their occupations. Lower middle class women straddle their own conservative life world in which, due to the norms of *purdah*, strict gender segregation is practiced, and the (at least to a certain extent) de-segregated working environment in the offices. They use many strategies, derived from their own life world, to maneuver in the office sector, to appropriate public (male) space, and to accommodate the *purdah* system to the office environment. Concepts of *purdah*, especially the segregation of the sexes and female seclusion, are perpetuated inside the offices; but this way women are getting access to new, formerly "male" occupations and at the same time preventing male misbehavior toward women that is omnipresent in extremely gendered male spaces, inside the offices.

The analysis has further shown that the *purdah* system – which is a central feature of the gender order of Pakistani society – is flexible and has many breaches, and *purdah* rules can be redefined and adjusted to new situations. Therefore, the boundaries between male and female spaces, and gender constructs as such, are constantly being renegotiated and redefined. During the economic transformation processes, new socio-economic opportunities are being created for women, and, through their agency, women are taking advantage of these; they are using and enlarging their room for maneuver, and trying to define ways to embed these new spaces in society at large (for Bangladesh see also Dannecker 1998).

By accommodating *purdah* to the office environment female office workers are also changing societal perceptions regarding the (un)suitability of office jobs for women; and particularly technical office jobs are increasingly becoming legitimate and socially approved career options for lower middle class women. Choosing a secretarial job, on the other hand, is still closely associated with severe economic need; and the inability to perform secretarial jobs, which require continual interactions with male strangers has, in accordance with *purdah*, led to a hierarchy between secretarial and technical jobs, the latter having slightly better reputations (and work conditions).

Just how far lower middle class women's entry into the work world will promote societal changes in women's access to and the gendered organization of public space, will depend on future economic trends, i.e., on the numbers of women able to join the labor market, particularly the office sector, and to actively contribute to the current transformation processes of Pakistani society. However, it seems that the rapid integration of lower middle class women into the urban labor market that can currently be observed is very likely to shake (and probably even transform) the existing gender order of society, especially by creating more and more socially acceptable spaces for women in (public) spheres that have traditionally been considered male domains and from which women have largely remained excluded to date.

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