



## Job search behaviour and access to references on a job-matching platform in Pakistan

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- Reference letters could give firms more useful information about job applicants' skills and performance, but providing and collecting references for many different applications is costly.
- We assess how centralised reference checks can be integrated into an online job-matching platform.
- Women are less likely to list references than men, and referees provided by women are more likely to respond to requests for references.
- Women's referees are more likely to be from educational institutions, while men's references are more likely from past employers.

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## Policy motivation

Labour markets in developing economies often experience substantial inefficiencies due to information asymmetries that hinder matching firms with qualified workers. These asymmetries prevent employers from accurately assessing a jobseeker's skills, work experience, and potential, leading to hiring inefficiencies and suboptimal matches. Information gaps, such as a lack of reliable references, can be especially harmful to certain groups, including women and unemployed individuals, who may have limited access to networks or other tools that help signal their qualifications to potential employers.

These barriers are particularly pronounced for women. In many developing countries, including Pakistan, women face additional labour market challenges, such as lower workforce participation rates, limited access to professional networks, and greater susceptibility to gender-based discrimination. Without robust systems to verify past employment or skills, women are more likely to be disadvantaged in the hiring process. As a result, they may struggle to access job opportunities that could improve their economic position.

This policy brief explores differences in reference provision by jobseekers on a job matching platform. References—whether from past employers or educational institutions—are important for employers to verify jobseekers' skills and past performance. However, acquiring and verifying references can be challenging, especially for those lacking access to strong professional networks. A centralised reference checking system can help mitigate these frictions, offering jobseekers, particularly women, a more level playing field to demonstrate their qualifications and increase their chances of securing employment.

## Introduction to Job Talash and relevant experiments

This policy brief draws on data from the Job Talash platform, a researcher-operated platform designed to capture rich data on both the supply and demand in the labour market. Through this phone-based platform, we track job applications, interview decisions, and updates to CV content over time. The platform also incorporates surveys of jobseekers and firms, which helps to gather insights into off-platform search behaviour and hiring outcomes.

We implement a two-sided experiment on Job Talash designed to examine how jobseekers and firms respond to reference verification. On the jobseeker side, the experiment tests how the prospect of an audit affects reference reporting and job search behaviour. Jobseekers with secondary or higher education are randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Those in the treatment

group are asked to list a reference, who is then contacted to verify job information. Job search behaviour is tracked before and after this intervention. On the firm side, the experiment assesses how reference verification influences hiring decisions. Firms are randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Employers in the treatment group receive a verification page summarising jobseekers' reported experiences and their references' responses, with refusals also indicated. This design enables an analysis of how firms respond to verified versus unverified credentials, contributing to a broader understanding of labour market frictions.

This policy brief focuses on jobseekers who have provided references so far, analysing key patterns in gender, reference reachability, and age-based differences.

## Gender differences in reference provision

**FIGURE 1: Percentage of jobseekers who provide references, by gender**

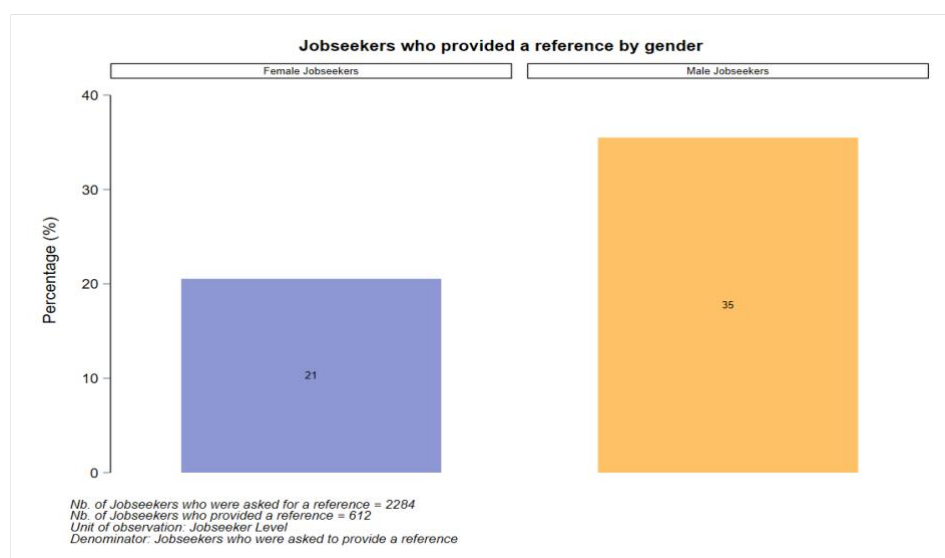


Figure 1 shows that men are likelier than women to provide a reference. Among those asked, 35% of men provided a reference compared to only 21% of women.

**FIGURE 2: Breakdown of reference types by jobseekers' gender**

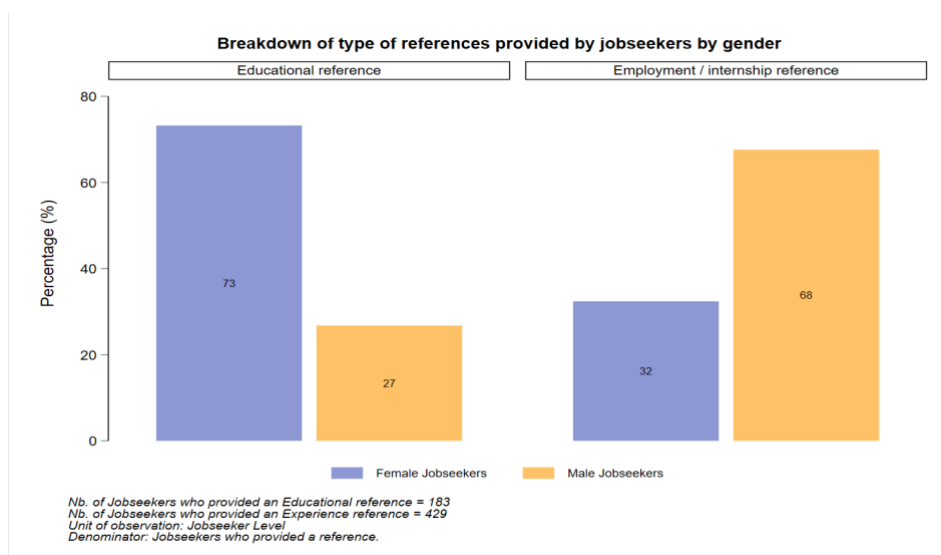


Figure 2 shows that among the 612 jobseekers who submitted references, 429 provided employment references, while 183 provided educational references. Gender differences emerge in the type of references provided: 68% of those submitting employment references are male, whereas 73% of those providing educational references are female. Given the low female labour force participation in Pakistan, this pattern suggests that male jobseekers are more likely to have access to employment references. In contrast, female jobseekers may rely more on educational credentials when signalling their qualifications to employers. Because male jobseekers have higher employment participation rates, they are more likely to build networks that allow them to obtain work-related references, reinforcing existing gender disparities in hiring outcomes.

## Employment status and reference provision

**FIGURE 3: Employment status of jobseekers who provided a reference by gender**

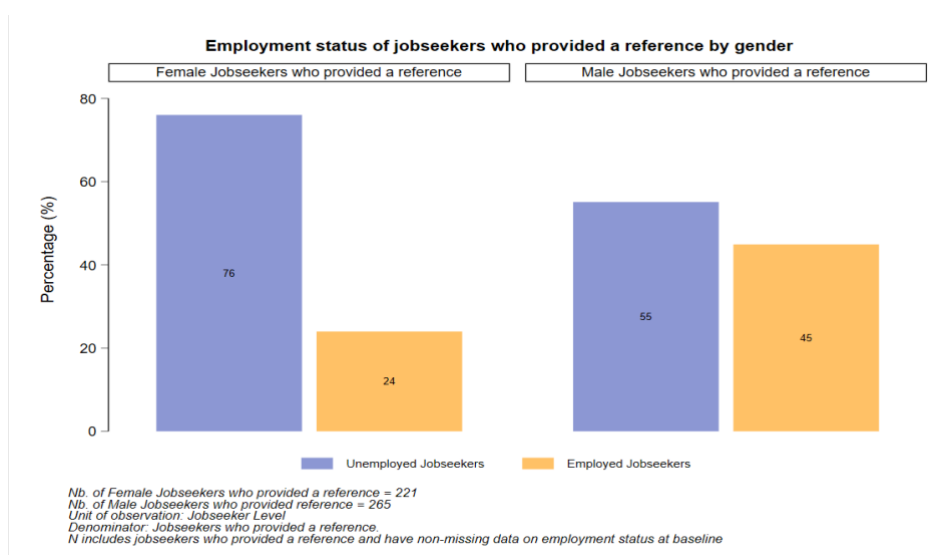
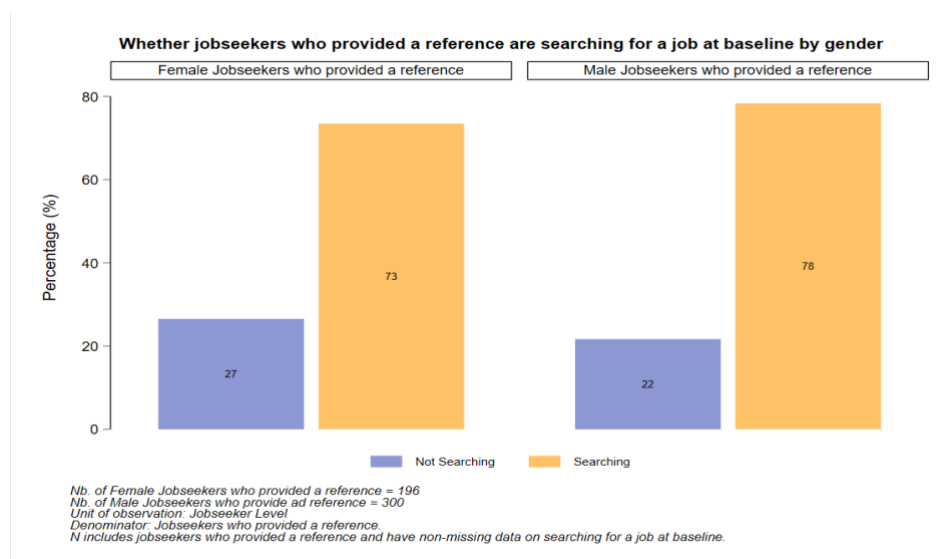


Figure 3 shows that 76% of the female jobseekers who provided a reference were unemployed at baseline, while only 55% of the male jobseekers who provided a reference were unemployed. This largely reflects gender differences in employment rather than gender differences in the relationship between employment and providing a reference—83% of the female jobseekers who we asked for references were unemployed at baseline, compared to 61% for male jobseekers.

**FIGURE 4: Employment status of jobseekers who provided a reference by gender**



At baseline, most jobseekers were actively searching for employment. Among those asked to provide a reference, 59% of women and 75% of men were actively searching for jobs. However, as shown in Figure 4, actively searching jobseekers were more likely to provide references, particularly for women.

This pattern may reflect higher motivation among active jobseekers, who may view providing a reference as a way to strengthen their job applications. Additionally, active jobseekers may find it easier to share referee details since they are more engaged with the job market. In contrast, inactive jobseekers may be more disconnected from the labour market and past employers, hence less able to identify suitable referees.

## Reachability of references

**FIGURE 5: Percentage of references reached, by jobseeker gender**

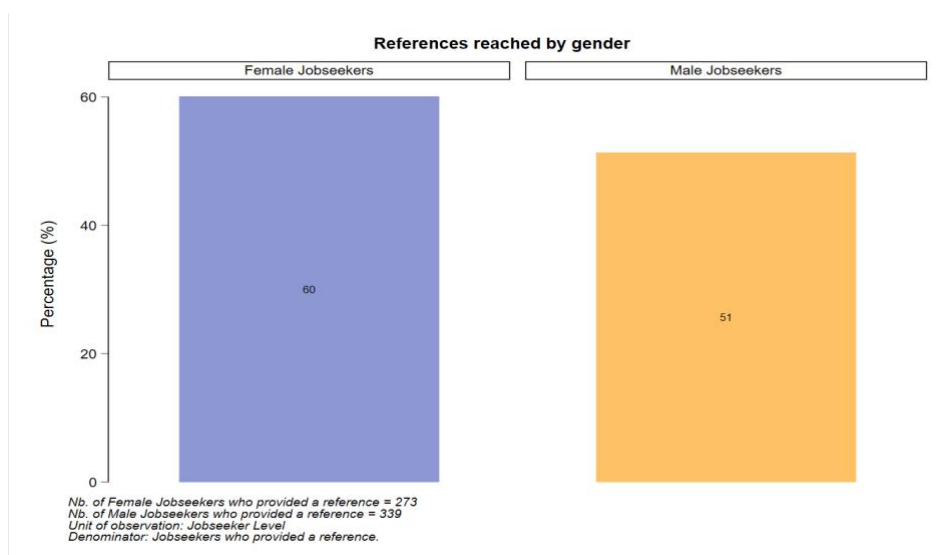
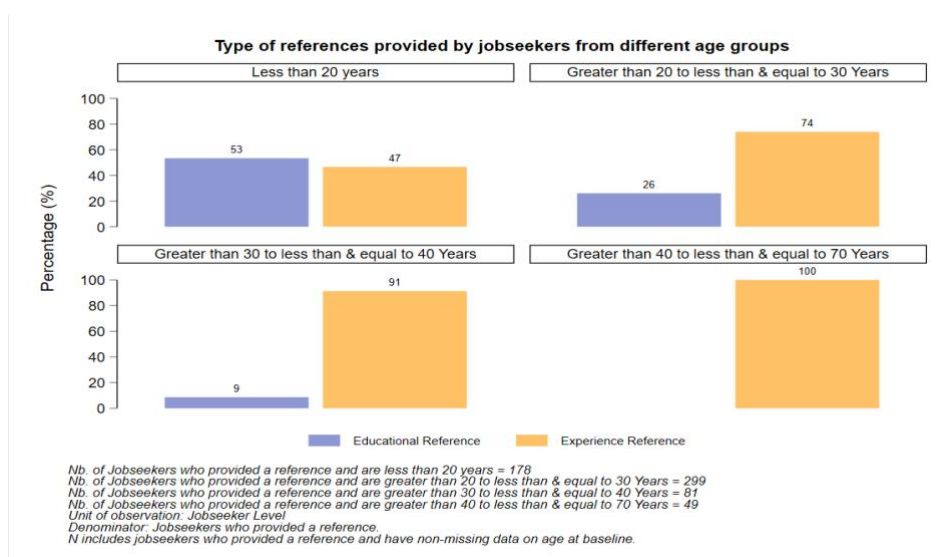


Figure 5 shows that among female jobseekers who listed a reference, 60% of their references were successfully contacted. In contrast, only 51% of the references provided by male jobseekers were reachable. We do not observe the reasons for this gap, although differences in the types of references listed could be a cause. Since female jobseekers are more likely to list educational references, they may have more structured record-keeping systems, making it easier to verify their credentials. In contrast, employment references may be harder to reach due to turnover, firm closures, or changes in contact information.

## Age and reference type preferences

**FIGURE 6: Percentage of jobseekers providing references across different age groups**



The type of reference provided also varies by age at baseline. Figure 6 shows that among jobseekers under age 20, 53% provided an educational reference, indicating that younger applicants often rely on educational references. This trend is expected, as younger jobseekers have not yet had substantial work experience to draw upon. However, as jobseekers gain experience, they shift towards listing employment references. For those aged 20–30, 74% provided an experience reference, and for those over 30, this percentage rises to 91%.

## Policy implications and future directions

The findings of this study have important implications for both firm-level hiring practices and broader government labour market policies. Across our sample, we observe gender- and age-based disparities in jobseekers' ability to name references and our ability to reach those references. These disparities may be linked to deeper structural differences in access to professional networks and labour market experience, which have consequences for the job matching process.

### For firms:

1. *Institutionalising reference verification systems*: Firms may benefit from integrating centralised or automated reference verification processes. Doing so can reduce the burden on individual hiring managers to follow up on references, increase consistency in vetting applicants, and lower the chances of hiring mismatches.
2. *Accepting diverse reference types*: Employers may benefit from broadening their criteria for acceptable references. For example, treating educational references as valid proxies for soft skills or trainability—especially for women and younger applicants—can help prevent the exclusion of qualified candidates who lack employment references due to structural barriers.
3. *Improved transparency*: Reference verification systems can reduce biases by providing valuable data points for evaluating candidates. Making it clear when referees could not be contacted or declined to provide references—without penalising the applicant automatically—could help contextualise gaps in reference provision.
4. *Opportunities for early career applicants*: Going beyond the scope of our study, firms can implement internship programs that allow younger applicants or those lacking job experience to build employment references, which may improve hiring outcomes and contribute to workforce development.

### For government and labour market platforms:

1. *Centralised reference checking*: Government job matching services or public-private employment exchanges can adopt centralised reference collection and verification tools, particularly for populations that lack access

to professional networks, such as women and younger workers. This can help reduce the burden of reference-checking on individual firms and reference-provision on individual referees.

2. *Incentivising reference provision*: Active labour market programs could encourage jobseekers to build and maintain references through training, apprenticeships, or volunteer work. These activities could be recognised and incorporated into jobseeker profiles, ensuring that non-traditional experience is valued in hiring processes.
3. *Investing in centralised credential systems*: Governments could invest in national credential systems integrating educational records, skills assessments, and verified references. These systems would allow jobseekers to port their education and work history across platforms, reducing the need to verify references repeatedly.
4. *Increased collaboration across institutions*: Cooperation between educational institutions, employers, and job platforms can enable faster and more reliable reference verification. Government regulation or support in building secure data-sharing protocols could address privacy concerns and allow for secure data sharing.

Our ongoing experimental work seeks to build on these insights by examining how reference verification affects hiring decisions and jobseekers' search behaviour. We are expanding our audit experiment to assess whether firms respond differently to jobseekers with verified references and whether jobseekers adjust their search strategies in anticipation of verification. Future research will explore whether reference verification influences application rates and interview opportunities, as well as how jobseekers invest in building their skills over time.

Understanding these frictions and gendered differences in reference provision is important for policymakers and firms seeking to improve hiring efficiency and reduce barriers to employment. Addressing disparities in access to employment references could help level the playing field for jobseekers, particularly women, while improving verification mechanisms may enhance trust in hiring processes and facilitate better firm-worker matching.