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## A Critical Review of Low School Enrollment and Literacy Rates among Girls in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan

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**Abstract:** Patriarchal principles dominate the social structure in Pakistani society. Moreover, Pakistan's culture is firmly anchored in traditions and practices that confine a woman's role to that of procreation, household management, child rearing, cleaning, and food preparation, which significantly reduces their enrollment in formal education. The present study not only provides a critical review of the existing literature but also adds primary data on the problems/challenges closely associated with low school enrollment and literacy among girls in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A qualitative approach, including unstructured interviews along with secondary data, was adopted in this paper. The findings of the study show that several empirical studies examine the general causes of the low ratio of female education in the study area. However, this empirical work identified gaps in previous scholarly work, particularly from sociological perspectives, intending to inspire further studies from the lenses of local people regarding the low enrollment of female education.

**Key Words:** Low Enrollment, Girls, Education

### Introduction

Pakistan is among the twelve countries in the world that spend less than 2 to 2.5 percent of their gross domestic product on education and is one of the five countries with the lowest rates of literacy. According to the World Bank, Pakistani boys spend five years in education, compared to 2.5 years for girls. Only one-third of Pakistani children (ages five to nine) who have ever attended their school succeed in finishing elementary education, according to the United States Agency for International Development. In addition, females' primary school completion rates are twice as low in urban regions and three times lower in rural areas than for boys (Farah & Shera, 2007; Herz et al., 2004; Kronstadt, 2004; Latif, 2009; Nenova et al., 2009; Shah, 2003). Low literacy in female education is triggered by various social and cultural factors. For instance, in Pakistani society, patriarchal principles dominate the social structure. A woman's legitimate physical and ideological territory is her home, where she fulfills her productive roles as a wife and mother, while a man rules the outer world and fulfills his productive duty as the breadwinner. Conceptually, women and men are divided into two separate universes (Rowbotham, 2015; Sharma, 2014). Due to their productive roles, sons (the family's male members) are given preference when it comes to household resources. Boys' education is prioritized over girls' because it is believed that boys need to have the knowledge to compete for resources in the public sphere, while girls are thought to need to specialise in domestic skills to be excellent mothers and wives. Hence, education is not considered as important for girls (Charlton et al., 2007). Girls and women do not have many options to alter these patriarchal realities of their lives because this gender division of labor has been institutionalized by society. Girls and women are prevented from pursuing an education by society, which prevents them from developing their human potential. One of the defining characteristics of gender equality in Pakistan is the absence of emphasis on the value of women's education. With a female literacy rate of 30%, Pakistan is classified as having "poor human development" and is ranked 145 globally in terms of human development according to the Human Development Report (HDR) (Mehmood et al., 2018; Mosedale, 2005; Murtaza, 2013; Ramanaiik et al., 2018).

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## Pakistani Constitution

The right to education in Pakistan was not as clearly defined or as legally binding as it is now. As clearly mentioned in Article 37 B of the Pakistani constitution:

*“The state shall remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory secondary education within minimal possible time.”*

It is obvious that the aforementioned article (37B) was insufficient to launch campaigns or file petitions to force the execution of the right to education. The Constitution of Pakistan 1973, however, has undergone significant changes since the passage of the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment in 2010, and the addition of Article 25-A to the Chapter of Fundamental Rights has altered the circumstances and obligations of the State (I-SAPS 2012), requiring it to uphold the right to education. The State is now required to guarantee free and compulsory education to all children aged 5 to 16 (Farooq, 2018; Khan, 2018; Khan, 2010). In light of this, education is now a provincial subject as a result of the 18th Amendment's implementation. Provinces are in charge of all legislative and executive functions relating to important aspects of education, such as standards, curriculum planning, and policy-making (Butt et al., 2020; Rana, 2020). In spite of this, the Pakistani government initiated a federal-level process of curriculum modifications in 2015 after realizing the value of maintaining national unity, particularly in light of the rise of extremism. Regarding free and obligatory education, the provinces of Sindh, Punjab, and ICT (Islamabad Capital Territory) have all enacted laws; however, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) are still working on drafting legislation. To ensure that the passed bills are implemented, the Rules of Business have not yet been created. In addition, provincial governments must lay the foundation upon which future administrations will build to guarantee that Pakistan achieves the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or, at the least, approaches its necessary benchmarks. The budget for 2014–2015 saw a significant change, with all provinces doubling the amount of money allocated to their individual education ministries and placing a greater emphasis on student enrollment, infrastructural development, and retention of students. There is much more to be done! (Haq, 2014; Soomro & Tanveer, 2017; Zaidi, 2016).

## Literature Review

The necessity to work was another factor in stopping studies. Mothers and teachers spoke about the issue of low income, which forced students, particularly females, to drop out of school in order to work for money to support the family, especially in the circumstances of big families in the low-income bracket. Despite the fact that child labor was prohibited by law in Pakistan due to poverty, many kids nevertheless worked to support their families (Ali & Ali, 2020; Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Choudhry et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2020; Kennedy et al., 2020). Likewise, the agricultural industry employed rural girls as well (IPEC, 2005), and the teachers reported that attendance was low during times when the girls were required in the fields, such as during harvest. The study's participants agreed that caring for younger siblings or elderly relatives took up a significant amount of girls' time in addition to helping the family in the fields. The notion of the male role in rural communities was another significant element identified as a barrier to girls' education. The allocation of household resources is dictated by the preference for sons because of their productive function, which marginalizes girls (Begam & Mujahid, 2019; Mushtaq & Ahmed, 2022). Boy was entitled to opportunities and investment because he was seen as the household's future breadwinner and prospective head of household. In addition to financial necessity, cultural norms and customs that place a strong focus on the domestic sphere appeared to limit girls to the home. According to Chitrakar, feudal institutions are to blame for "female discrimination and social exclusion." Gender roles were set by societal institutions in Pakistan's feudal, patriarchal society. Additionally, hurdles to girls' education in that isolated rural location were exacerbated by cultural constructs of the female roles in Muslim societies (Shah & Sobehart, 2008), with a focus on sex segregation (Shah & Conchar, 2009) and gendered division of labor. The difficulties were exacerbated by discussions of family, izzat (honor), and veiling. Notwithstanding, the fact that although some parents mentioned "guys not wanting to study," in the case of girls, it was their parents, families, or imams who were keeping them from studying was an interesting discovery. In certain circumstances, the old society mandated that girls stay at home, making it very challenging for them to attend school. Parents frequently refused to let their daughters attend a girl's school if it was far away out of worry for her safety and protection: There were sincere worries for



the safety and protection of females. Parents wouldn't send their daughters to school if it was too far away because they didn't want them to go large distances by themselves. The normal girl's parents wouldn't let her attend school even if she wanted to because it was too far away, too expensive, or not safe enough. Distance was a concern in particular since parents frequently feared rape and kidnapping, which might cause everyone in the family to suffer social disgrace (Cammish, [1993](#); Paul, [2019](#); Sarker et al., [2017](#); Simkhada et al., [2008](#); Suleman et al., [2015](#)).

## Current Study

Today, Pakistani women still have a lesser social status than men, especially in rural regions. There are several traditions and rituals that serve as proof of this. Pakistani society favors sons, contributing to male dominance, much like its neighbor India, where one million female fetuses are aborted annually so that families can secure male heirs (Goodwin, [2002](#); Latif, [2009](#); Miller, [2001](#)). As a result of colonialism and other non-Islamic Indian religions, Pakistan's culture is firmly anchored in traditions and practices that confine a woman's role to that of procreation, household management, child rearing, cleaning, and food preparation. She is said to be a more emotional version of man with significantly less knowledge of the outside world. She is said to be a more emotional version of man with significantly less knowledge of the outside world. She is treated as a sexual object and lacks a voice and thoughts of her own. If she works, she will be responsible for both her home and her job. In light of this, although Islam grants women freeing rights, the culture, particularly in rural areas, is nonetheless governed by standards that oppress women (Ali et al., [2011](#); Khalid & Razem, [2022](#); Khalid & Sunikka-Blank, [2017](#)). Additionally, the dowry system, which pushes parents to save money for a girl's wedding and consequently denies her the right to and costs associated with education, is widely used. Young girls are pressured by marriage traditions and customs to get married as soon as they reach puberty so that their parents are relieved of the responsibility of providing for them. Islam has been interpreted in various ways in Pakistan, where the majority of people live in rural areas, and 65 percent of people are illiterate (Ullah et al., [2020](#)). These interpretations are typically based on "hearing and believing" the teachings of religious scholars. In most situations, religious authorities, politicians, and feudal lords utilize Islam for their own ends to oppress, limit, and control people in rural areas. The victims of this type of oppression are girls and women. This study is merely focused on exploring the various factors that negatively affect female enrollment in education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

## Approach

The present study is qualitative in nature. In addition, we also critically examine the existing literature and prior empirical studies that have inspected the social, economic, and legal aspects of low female literacy in general and particularly in KP Pakistan. Notwithstanding, secondary data regarding the present study was collected from e-books, journals, institutional reports, and non-government reports. The sole purpose was to identify gaps in the existing literature. Furthermore, from the previous studies, we have developed the following themes, which are described in the analysis section. However, in the present study, we also collected data from different scholars, laymen, and students through an unstructured interview schedule. Moreover, it is important to mention that the sampling technique adopted in this study was purposive.

## Themes

### Poverty

One of the significant obstacles to girls' education in Pakistan has evolved as a result of socioeconomic class and poverty. Pakistan is predominantly an agricultural nation, and due to its feudal past, farmers and peasants there have limited rights and low salaries. Pakistan's per capita income is around \$770 per year, but the poverty rate between urban and rural areas is very high, which has an impact on education in rural Pakistan, where the majority of the rural population finds it difficult to afford this luxury. About 43% of people in rural areas and 26% of those in cities live in poverty. As a result, many people are unable to pay for their children's education. Due to gender dynamics, this is made worse for females, as shown by their higher dropout and low completion rates, particularly in rural areas (Anwar et al., [2004](#); Bank, [2002](#); Shah & Shah, [2012](#)). Furthermore, Parents view the education of girls as being financially and socially costly. It

may result in additional direct expenses like specific transportation for safety and "decency." Education may potentially decrease girls' chances of getting married and drive up dowry costs to unaffordable levels. Since boys are more likely to obtain employment and earn better pay, investing in sons is thought to yield higher financial benefits for families than investing in daughters. There are numerous girls' schools that require pupils to wear a uniform, but parents object to the added expense. Sending only one daughter to school is frequently the solution, and this trend will persist unless attitudes shift and additional human and financial resources are made available (Danes & Haberman, 2007; Farah & Shera, 2007; Shepherd et al., 2020; Tsui & Rich, 2002). Similar views patriating women's education were shared by respondent A, who stated that

*"Our cultures see women as being primarily responsible for domestic duties and child-rearing, and therefore, education may be viewed as less relevant for our daughters. Moreover, investing in his son's education is more important, as he is expected to be the breadwinner of the family. Moreover, poverty, lack of transportation, and cultural barriers can make it difficult for our daughters to attend school regularly."*

### Cultural Norms

cultural norms and customs that place a strong focus on the domestic sphere appeared to limit girls to the home. According to Chitrakar (2009), feudal institutions are to blame for "female discrimination and social exclusion." Gender roles were set by societal institutions in Pakistan's feudal, patriarchal society. Additionally, hurdles to girls' education in that isolated rural location were exacerbated by cultural constructs of the female role in Muslim societies, with a focus on sex segregation (Shah & Conchar, 2009; Shah & Sobehart, 2008) and gendered division of labor. The difficulties were exacerbated by discussions of family, izzat (honor), and veiling. Since it was widely believed that women played household roles, it was important for the girls to be trained for them (Shah & Shah, 2012). One of the participants expressed their view that

*"Our Pashtun community is a male-dominated society that is deeply rooted in traditional customs and cultural norms, which often results in Pashtun girls being confined to four walls of their homes and often prohibited from pursuing education, particularly in our rural areas."*

### Early Marriages

Early marriages have also been linked to dropout rates. Many girls, especially those from big families, got married young, leaving their parents with fewer people to feed. These girls would work for free and not be entitled to amenities like schooling in their in-laws' household. The information gave several instances of extremely young girls becoming married to elderly men for financial gain, in exchange for a bride for a male relative, or in order to pay off a debt. In a challenging economic climate and amid complex cultural constraints, particularly in distant locations, it appears that poor parents did not prioritize their children's education, indicating that gender discrepancy was "even wider in remote and more conservative provinces" (Chitrakar, 2009; Shah et al., 2022). One of the participants, X, disclosed that

*"The practice of early marriage is prevalent in our community due to poverty, as most of our families view marriage as a way to reduce their economic burden. Early marriage has significant negative impacts on girls' education. Girls who marry early are often forced to drop out of school."*

### Parda System

In most Muslim countries, a certain izzat discourse that is gendered and discriminatory is dominant, subjecting women and girls to surveillance, exclusion, and suppression, with repercussions for their access to the right to education (Shah & Conchar, 2009). As in most feudal patriarchal civilizations, male-dominated structures predominated in Pakistan. These structures acted as the family's governing body and spoke for the female family members. Girls and women are marginalized by economic and social roles that limit their access to education and other fundamental rights. Women's positions are shaped by a dual set of factors that are drawn from both gender relations and the economic structure of the society (Afshar, 1991). Respondent X stated that





“The practice of veiling or segregating women from men in public spaces can have an impact on girls' education. In our communities where the *parda* system is practiced, girls may face barriers to accessing education, such as limited opportunities to attend school or social pressure to prioritize domestic duties over schooling. Efforts to promote girls' education in these communities may need to take into account cultural and religious traditions, such as working with community leaders and religious figures to build support for girls' education and providing safe and supportive learning environments that are sensitive to cultural norms.”

### Availability of Teachers

In remote schools, there were occasionally even no teachers available to teach. Due to their obligations to their families, women teachers from other parts of the country feared leaving their hometowns, and educated girls were frequently scarce locally (Shah & Shah, 2012). Smellier view was also shared by one of the respondents, X.

“The lack of available teachers can certainly have a negative impact on girls' education. Without enough qualified teachers, the majority of the students lose interest in their studies, and most of the time, they leave their studies. The lack of available teachers can pose a challenge to girls' education.”

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The present study identified many factors that can negatively affect female enrollment in education. The study area has deeply ingrained beliefs about gender roles and the value of education for women, which can discourage girls from pursuing education. Likewise, Girls are prevented from attending school due to poverty or because they are expected to contribute to household income through domestic or agricultural work. Similarly, in some areas, schools are too far away or unsafe for girls to attend, or there are not enough schools or teachers to meet the needs of the community. Besides, girls who are married off at a young age or become pregnant are often forced to drop out of school or prevented from attending altogether. Addressing these factors requires a comprehensive approach that involves addressing the root causes of gender inequality, promoting access to education, and addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by girls and women in different contexts.

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