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Socio-Cultural Barriers to Female Education in Pakistan: A Case Study of Rural Sindh **Roomasa Ibrahim**

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ABSTRACT

Female education in rural Sindh is still limited as a result of inadequate socio-cultural and structural barriers. Although Article 25-A in the constitution offers the guarantee of free and compulsory education, many girls are constrained by the patriarchal attitude, early marriages, poverty, the absence of female teachers, school physical structures of safety, and substandard policies to be implemented. The subsequent work examines a qualitative method of conducting secondary research, comprising government reports, research articles, and documents of international organizations. The analysis results indicate that cultural norms, gendered expectations and economic factors are making significant impacts in influencing the education choice of girls among parents. Early marriages and misinterpretations of religion lead to the extra effects of mobility and access to education by girls. Women deficiency in general is another contributing factor to education dropout through the non-availability of safe school spaces. Some of the policy and practice interventions, which have been found to help curb such problems, are implementation plans, which focus on community involvement and awareness, financial incentives among families, and safe and accessible school structure, recruiting more female teachers, enhanced enforcement of anti-child marriage acts and vocational education to females. Overall, growing female education in rural Sindh is about more than education; it relates to literacy, women's empowerment, social development, and economic development. Educating girls holds the potential to change entire communities, and responding to previous types of issues and developing accurate education actions require increasing the inclusivity of further provision within the context based on the data provided here.

Keywords: *Female Education, Rural Sindh, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Early Marriage, Policy Implementation, Gender Equality*

Introduction

Education is one of the most important aspects in human life which plays a pivotal role in promoting individual development, economic growth and social well-being. Around the world, education seems as a basic human right for all and a crucial step toward achieving equality between Male

and Female. When girls become educated, they become more confident and contribute to the economy, health, social well-being of their families and communities.

Despite this, in Pakistan education remains a major challenge, especially for Women. According to the Article 25A of the constitution of Pakistan 1973, Right to education “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law.” It indicates the education is the fundamental right for the individual without any gender discrimination Even though the government of Pakistan has made several policies to increase literacy, a large number of girls are still out of school. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (Census 2023), the literacy rate in Pakistan is 60.6% with 68% males and 52.8% female. This exactly show how women are still behind men when its come to education. Furthermore, the gap is even bigger if compare the rural and urban areas. Literacy rate in urban Pakistan is around 74% but in rural it drops to 51%.

Similarly, in Sindh, the literacy rate according to the Pakistan Economic Survey is about 57.54%, But, in rural Sindh the condition is even worse female literacy rate is between 30% and 40%. Many girls cannot go to the school because of the problems like poverty, cultural traditions, beliefs and school at long distance. This issue shows that there are deep socio-cultural barriers that limit girl’s access to education in rural Sindh.

Research also supports these challenges. Studies show that parents often prefer educating sons over daughters due to cultural expectations and domestic responsibilities placed on girls (Hashmi & Alam, 2022). According to UNICEF, many schools fail to meet safety, hygiene and sanitation standards required for girls, and a shortage of female teachers remains a barrier to girls’ education globally.

On the same note, Kakar (2023) draws attention to the fact that early marriages and gender stereotypes are also significant contributors to the high rates of school dropouts among females. The objective of the research is to recognize the most influential socio- cultural issues constraining the education of women in rural Sindh and to learn how traditions, cultural norms and belief interrelate to confine girls in the learning institutions.

This article also provides practical and policy relevant recommendations in solving these challenges to make it effective and sustainable. This study is significant not only in the sense that it is researched on a single sector but also because it forms part of national and international discussion of women right and development. By illuminating the realities and often silenced stories of Sindhi girl, this research aims to incite a move towards more participatory processes for policy making, better process for implementation. And different ways of understanding the concept of gender equity.

Socio-Cultural Context of Rural Areas

Rural Sindh is one of the most traditional and socially conservative regions of Pakistan. where traditions and social values play a crucial role in the lives of people. Education, especially for the girls of Sindh, often effected by these norms. Many families believe that girl’s main job is to manage household chores and get married at a young age. Due to this mindset education for girls become unnecessary or even discouraged. Poverty and lack of nearby schools and cultural norms make this problem worse. Parents who cannot afford school expenses often prioritize boys’ education instead of girls. (Rasheed et al., 2023).

Another major factor is lack of educational facilities in rural areas of Sindh. Schools in these areas are far away that the girls can’t travel alone or the absence of female teachers in schools. Cultural

limitations restrict parents to send their daughters to school outside the community. Studies also shows that poor infrastructure and absence of safe transport discourage regular attendance. (Ali et al., 2023). Not only are these barriers just educational but societal one which linked with the gender inequality.

However, the literacy rate is considerably lower in Rural Sindh than it is in urban Sindh for women, not only because of poverty but due to their strong culture belief and it become the reason which restrict women's role outside of the home. (Ziauddin and Mangi, 2022). In Sum, the social and cultural context of rural part of the sindh indicates that it is an issue that ultimately linked with traditions, early marriages, lack of schools. Additionally, great community awareness and supportive government help, to facilitate educations for the girls of sindh.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative secondary research method that gathers information from previously published sources rather than collecting new, primary data. As for various sources of information, these include research articles, government reports (Pakistan Economic Survey, Census 2023), and reports from international organizations (UNICEF, World Bank). The literature relevant to the research was located using databases (ex: Google Scholar) and official government websites.

Discussion

Socio-Cultural and Structural Barriers to Girls' Education in Rural Sindh

1. Patriarchal Mindset and Traditional Gender Roles

The choice made in education about girls in rural Sindh influences decision-making according to the patriarchal values. Education is also perceived as an investment that will yield returns later on in the economy and because of the tradition that boys are the providers of the future, parents have favored boys over girls (Ameen, 2023). Girls, on the other hand, would be taking up domestic duties at a tender age like cooking, cleaning, and taking care with minimal time to go to school (UNESCO, 2022). This can be said to be indicative of an ideology that the main task of a girl is to acquire skills and education to become a wife rather than to develop personal skills or information to become financially independent. Studies show that parents believe the education of girls to be a transient activity as a result of the fact that daughters have to break the parental house in order to get married (Ali and Nazar, 2023). On the other hand, boys are considered as more enduring income earners of the household. Rasheed et al. (2023) state that even in poor households, parents prioritized sending boys to school while they kept their daughters at home. Such beliefs promote inequity and further minimize opportunities for girls to break barriers of social class.

These gender expectations also condition the parental perception towards school attendance and retention. In response, in the case the girls proceed their schooling beyond primary into higher education, they frequently face resistance on the part of family members who will tend to doubt the utility of that schooling (World Bank, 2023). The social narrative of an educated girl as a problem to control is still maintained in many rural villages and helps in the formation of the idea that education is a danger to the cultural stability.

Similar studies in rural Sindh also discovered that mothers do not typically make a decision regarding education; it is usually a male relative of the family who makes the decision; a father, older brother, or a paternal uncle (Ziauddin and Mangi, 2022). The mothers are not usually in a

role of championing the education of the girl and this shows the bigger trend of marginalized women.

2. Early Marriage and Cultural Expectations

Early and forced marriages are one of the strongest barriers to female education in rural Sindh. Girls often marry just after they reach puberty, after which they withdraw from school altogether (UNICEF, 2023). Many families see marriage as a social obligation that girls should enter early in life to protect family honor (izzat), and parents believe that postponing marriage may worsen the risk of “social criticism” (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In their study, Khan et al. (2021) observed that girls between the ages of 12-16 are at the greatest risk of dropping out of school because community members believe that any girl who spends time outside her home may be at reputational risk. Families link schooling to increased independence and fear that their daughter may adopt “modern ideas” relating to women who may make her less desirable as a young bride (Ahmed & Ali, 2024).

When a girl is married her education paths are immediately interrupted. The rules change after marriage to the domestic labor and childbearing without much time to engage in other activities and the intergenerational cycles of illiteracy cannot be broken in case women get married to a husband (Saleem, 2023). According to the estimates provided by UNICEF (2023), every fifth girl in rural Sindh is married off before the age of 18, and almost all of them will discontinue their education permanently by leaving schools.

In addition, the dowry system adds pressure to parents to prepare daughters for marriage through domestic training as opposed to schooling (Soomro & Hussain, 2022). Parents prefer sewing, cooking, and cleaning skills to literacy. As a result, early marriage not only disrupts education but also ruins the opportunity to pursue education in the future.

3. Religious Misinterpretations and Cultural Taboos

Religious factors alone do not hinder girls’ education; rather, it is the misuse of religion that is often the reason for the denial of girls’ school attendance (Haq, 2022). The elders within the community will insist that girls should be at home because of the necessity to be pure, even though both boys and girls can receive education in Islam (Ahmed and Rehman, 2023).

The misuse of religious factors is mixed with cultural taboos that existed between the interaction of men and women in the past. As an example, parents fear the stigma of gossiping among their communities in case they permit their daughter to attend boys or male teachers (Ali et al., 2023). This stigmatization or fear makes it hard to socialize or move around in society and have girls traveling even within their school environments which are short distances.

In rural Sindh, a powerful purdah (female seclusion) culture exists that is sometimes confused with religious obligation. Under purdah, girls are discouraged from leaving the home unaided, even with the intention of attending school (World Bank, 2022). Girls that challenge these constructs are viewed as being “immodest.” The constructs hindering girl’s education are not religious, but rather cultural.

4. Lack of Female Teachers and Safe School Infrastructure

When schools exist in rural Sindh, they may exist in miserable conditions. Many schools do not have proper walls, toilets separated from boys, drinking water, or even basic furniture (UNICEF, 2023). These unsafe conditions discourage girls from attending school. Parents would rather their daughters have female teachers, but there is a major lack of female educators in rural Sindh (Ali

et al., 2023). When girls must learn from male teachers, families often pull them out of school due to fears relating to safety and reputation.

Long distances to schools and lack of transportation further intensify safety concerns. Girls frequently walk several kilometers to reach school, exposing them to harassment and verbal abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2023). A multi-district study in Sindh found that distance to school is one of the strongest predictors of female dropout (Rasheed et al., 2023).

5. Poverty and Financial Barriers

Economic hardship is an undeniable constraint. While primary education is supposed to be free, there are costs associated with: Uniforms, books, transportation and stationery. For poor families living on daily wages, these costs are unaffordable (World Bank, 2023).

Parents also rely on girls as free household labor cooking, cleaning, babysitting, and collecting water. Sending them to school means losing a helping hand (UNESCO, 2022). Therefore, girls are considered an economic asset only when they stay home, not when they study.

A study in rural Sindh showed that 62% of female dropouts were due to financial constraints (Saleem, 2023). Poverty combines with cultural beliefs to form a double burden even when money is available, families prefer investing in boys.

6. Weak Government Policy and Implementation Failure

Although Article 25-A of the Constitution guarantees free and compulsory education, implementation remains extremely weak. Many schools in rural Sindh exist only “on paper” referred to as ghost schools. Teachers remain absent but continue to receive salaries; buildings are abandoned.

Even education initiatives such as cash stipends for girls are either delayed or never reach rural communities (Soomro & Hussain, 2022). Insufficient monitoring and corruption worsen the situation (Ahmed & Ali, 2024). Unfortunately, the government has policies but no accountability.

Conclusion

The education of girls in rural Sindh is constrained by patriarchal attitudes, cultural constraints, early marriages, poverty, and an ineffective education system and policies. While girls have a constitutional right to free and compulsory education as defined by Article 25-A, their primary role is viewed as relative to household responsibilities and boys are perceived as the beneficiaries of education. These barriers are not just economic; they are social and cultural. Even where schools exist, parents are reluctant to send their daughters due to issues around safety, distance from home, and no female teachers. Poverty makes worse these inequalities since most families have to then choose whether to educate their sons or their daughters. In order to increase girls' education in rural Sindh it is necessary to change perceptions within communities, create safe and supported educational environments, introduce economic incentives to families, and strictly enforce anti-child marriage laws. Educating a girl is not only about her potential as an academic learner of knowledge, and attaining a designated title of 'student', it is truly about education linking to social justice, economic development and gender equity. An educated girl can help uplift herself, her family and future generations. Educating a girl is to educate an entire society.

Recommendations

To improve girls' education in rural Sindh, the following measures are recommended:

1. Enforce Existing Legal Frameworks: While the Constitution of Pakistan (Article 25-A) guarantees free and compulsory education for all children, implementation remains

insufficient. The government must prioritize the effective enforcement of existing education policies, with a particular focus on rural areas.

2. **Expand Financial Incentives:** The Government of Sindh should introduce stipends or financial assistance programs, modeled after the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), to support families in keeping their daughters enrolled in school.
3. **Prioritize Female Teachers and Local Staffing:** To address cultural sensitivities and parental concerns, rural schools must be staffed with female teachers. Recruitment policies should prioritize hiring women, especially those from the local community, to foster a safer and more trusted learning environment.
4. **Ensure Safe Infrastructure and Access:** The government must guarantee safe access to schools by ensuring facilities are fenced, equipped with separate washrooms for girls, and supported by secure transportation routes. These measures are essential to increasing attendance and reassuring parents.
5. **Enforce Laws Against Child Marriage:** Strict enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act is critical, particularly in rural areas. Child marriage remains a primary barrier to girls' education and must be met with legal consequences.
6. **Conduct Community Awareness Campaigns:** To counter negative cultural beliefs, organized awareness campaigns should involve community leaders, religious figures, and teachers. Changing societal mindsets about the value of girls' education is as vital as building physical school infrastructure.
7. **Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability:** A robust monitoring system should be established to assess school conditions, address teacher absenteeism, and prevent the mismanagement of funds. Effective school leadership and regular oversight are necessary for operational efficiency.
8. **Introduce Vocational and Skills Training:** Vocational training and skill-development programs should be offered to girls, enabling them to achieve economic independence and contribute to their families' well-being.

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