

Is Education a Basic Right for All? A glimpse into the Successes and Challenges in Enrolling this Marginalized Population

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Abstract

Primary education is one of the basic human rights and is considered essential for the economic growth and development of a country. However, in certain countries including Pakistan, this basic right is not appropriately recognized or encouraged. In Pakistan's patricidal society, educating girls, who are marginalized and not provided the same opportunities for education as boys, is especially challenging. A qualitative study was conducted on elementary school teachers and administrators in Pakistan to understand systemic barriers against Pakistani girls in achieving education, and how certain schools have succeeded in increasing enrollment despite these challenges. Results demonstrate that specific barriers to enrolling girls in Pakistani schools include the mindset of the population, societal and familial taboos, lack of reliable, safe and affordable transportation to school, societal and cultural beliefs regarding gender segregation, early marriages, and poverty. Participants whose schools have increased female enrollment and retention rates provided recommendations for better serving this marginalized population.

Primary education, which is at the base of the educational pyramid, is considered one of the basic human rights, and is essential for the economic growth and development of a country (Arif, Saqib, & Zahid, 1997).¹ Although an educated population establishes the foundation for a nation's prosperity, in certain countries including Pakistan, this basic right is not appropriately recognized or encouraged. The disparity in educational achievement is more compelling in the case of Pakistani girls, who are marginalized for a number of social, cultural and religious reasons, and are not provided the same resources as boys. These gender disparities in education are especially evident in developing countries, despite a compelling body of evidence that suggests that investing in the education of girls is critical to poverty alleviation (Klasen, 2002; Rihani, 2006; Tembon & Fort, 2008; Duflo, 2011).² Brown (2006)³ describes marginalization as ignoring the perspectives of a section of people, which contributes to a sense of powerlessness and insecurity, and perpetuates a cycle of poverty, ignorance, and helplessness. Marginalized populations are often disempowered and have little control over their lives or the decisions that they are allowed to make, and are often looked down upon by the dominant society. Pakistan is a predominantly a patricidal and conservative society and therefore, girls are often restricted from appearing in the public sphere including attending schools, where they might receive a secular education. Using Freire's (2012)⁴ theoretical perspective, this study highlights the presence of systematic patterns of inequality applied by what he calls the dominant majority to anybody who is different. According to Freire, social justice does not merely mean providing racial equality, but also includes equality and equity across all domains. This is especially relevant if the target group is also underprivileged, as in the case of girls in Pakistani schools.

Within this context, a qualitative study was conducted to understand the successes and challenges of enrolling girls in Pakistani schools. Four elementary schools (grades 1-8) in Pakistan were selected for the study based on whether they encouraged enrollment from girls from a low socio-economic background. One administrator and two teachers from each school site, a total of 12 participants, were selected for the study through a purposeful sampling strategy. Research tools included interviews and document collection. The interviews were used to collect data regarding the specific site's successes and challenges in enrolling girls. According to Locke (1989),⁵ research questions help guide methodology, and therefore, the interviews were open-ended to encourage dialogue from study participants and provided their perspective regarding the research question. Relevant documents pertaining to enrollment and retention efforts were also collected, and these served as another primary data collection method, particularly with respect to understanding how schools promote and encourage girl's education in Pakistan.

Methodology

Interviews conducted for this study were transcribed and the entire data set, including the documents and interviews, were analyzed in a systematic and consistent manner. After the interviews had been transcribed, the researchers reviewed each transcript between four and five times before beginning the coding process,

¹ G. M. Arif, Najam U. Saqib, and G. M. Zahid, "Poverty, Gender, and Primary School Enrolment in Pakistan," *The Pakistan Development Review* 38, no. 4II (1999): doi:10.30541/v38i4iipp.979-992.

² S. Klasen, "Low Schooling for Girls, Slower Growth for All? Cross-Country Evidence on the Effect of Gender Inequality in Education on Economic Development," *The World Bank Economic Review* 16, no. 3 (2002): doi:10.1093/wber/lhf00; May A. Rihani, "Keeping the Promise: Five Benefits of Girls' Secondary Education," *Eric*, 2006, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED500794.pdf>; Mercy Tembon and Lucia Fort, *Girls' Education in the 21st Century: Equality, Empowerment, and Growth* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2008); Esther Duflo, "Women Empowerment and Economic Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no. 4 (2012): doi:10.1257/jel.50.4.1051.

³ Steven R. Brown, "A Match Made in Heaven: A Marginalized Methodology for Studying the Marginalized," *Quality & Quantity* 40, no. 3 (2006): doi:10.1007/s11135-005-8828-2

⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2017)

⁵ Lawrence F. Locke, "Qualitative Research as a Form of Scientific Inquiry in Sport and Physical Education," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 60, no. 1 (1989): doi:10.1080/02701367.1989.10607407.

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utilizing the first and second cycle coding method for the analysis of data (Saldana, 2009).⁶ Data coding was conducted in a systematic and rigorous manner, to create categories and themes from the coded interviews and documents, which allowed the researchers to avoid expectation bias.

| Excerpts from interview | First cycle In-Vivo codes |
|---|---|
| It so happens, if a girl is educated, then she is able to motivate her younger brother and sisters to educate them ¹ and after marriage, she can motivate her in-laws ² who are not educate them and she is able to motivate her own children. ³ | Motivate her younger brother and sisters Motivate her in-laws Motivate her own children |

| In Vivo | First Cycle | Second Cycle |
|---|---|--------------|
| It so happens, if a girl is educated, then she is able to motivate her younger brother and sisters to educate them ¹ and after marriage, she can motivate her in-laws ² who are not educate them and she is able to motivate her own children. ³ | Motivate her younger brother and sisters Motivate her in-laws Motivate her own children | Benefits |

Barriers to Girls' Education Identified by Participants

Results from the study demonstrated that there are multiple barriers to enrolling girls in Pakistani schools including the mindset of the conservative population, who believe that a girl's place is in the house and therefore she should not leave the house to receive education. The response from a participant highlights how marginalized females are routinely disempowered by the male dominated Pakistani society. For example, she discusses how systemic barriers are created against girls who desire to leave their homes to receive education. The society "does not give respect to those women who are coming out of their houses. They think that if a lady is walking on the road then she must be doing something wrong."

Perceptions regarding co-education within a conservative society was cited as one of the biggest challenges in enrolling and retaining girls in school. Many of the administrators in this study are aware of this particular issue, but not all schools accommodate this concern, and girls are often forced to discontinue their education.

Pakistan is a developing country and therefore, many people do not enjoy the benefits and resources that people in other developed countries may take for granted. A participant reported, "Education is not the first thing on their mind." Many parents take their daughters to work with them, as domestic servants for the affluent, or the girls are left at home to take care of their siblings.

Availability of safe, reliable and affordable transportation to school, is a significant constraint. Neighbors and relatives often approach parents who allow their daughters to walk to school and ask why they are allowing their girls leave home, given that the streets in Pakistan are not safe. Parents often succumb to the pressure and stop sending their daughters to school. A participant stated:

⁶ Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researcher* (London: Sage Publishers, 2009)

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In areas where they are affected by Taliban, they have blown away all the school girls. And they know there is a long conspiracy behind it. They know that if the girls are educated then generations are educated so they thought they should blow away in the name of religion.

The difficulty educated girls might have in getting married was also cited as reasons for not encouraging girls' education. A participant reported:

A big society barrier which I can see even in urban areas as well as girls are getting highly educated, at the time of marriage they are facing the problem that girls are more educated than boys. They will not get married to boys who are less educated than the girls so the parents have these fears. And the society again has this mindset

Efforts by Schools to Address this Challenge

The study participants were asked to discuss the efforts they (or their organization) might have taken to increase female enrollment and retention rates, and what suggestions they can offer to achieve a higher enrollment and retention rate within this population.

To address religious and cultural concerns regarding comingling of sexes, one of the schools in the study has stopped enrolling boys after Class 8, because other schools within the community can serve the male population. Education for girls in this school continues through Class 10. Another school principal reported that they had dedicated separate facilities for girls to enable them to continue their education in a segregated setting, which addresses most religious and social concerns.

To alleviate the financial burden on parents, tuition fees and auxiliary charges for the uniform, and supplies for girls who cannot afford the cost, is waived by some schools. However, not all schools have free tuition. The administrator in one of these schools reported that, in order to address financial barriers to education, they collect used books and resells them at a discounted price to low-income families. They also offer scholarships to deserving students. This process is "very confidential as in who gets help, how much, and from where; only people of the trust know that." Another school provides their students with food to encourage regular attendance. According to the principal, "they get a chicken every fortnight. Similarly, every fortnight we give them nuggets, along with buns, so that they are fed properly. Every day children get biscuits and milk." The school also hosts outreach programs for the community to assist in creating a "livable place" for their students, which facilitates learning outside of school. For example, school members might paint the walls of their students' homes or provide them with a table to study.

All participants generally acknowledged concerns regarding safety and limited choices regarding reliable transportation. However, one of the study participants reported that their school provides a stipend for students who cannot afford transportation to attend school.

To address concerns regarding cultural or religious pressures, possible moral corruption, and difficulties in getting married in the future, the schools have initiated community outreach programs. According to a study participant, their school hosts monthly meetings for members of the village to listen to their problems and offer solutions. The participant explained that during these meetings, the teachers and administrators provide their own example and success stories from past graduates, thereby encouraging community members to send their children to school. They attempt to demonstrate that that education does not violate Islamic teachings, and their daughters become more desirable as a prospective marriage partner because they are able to run their household more effectively and may even contribute to the income stream. A participant provided an example of a recent meeting, wherein the school invited people from the community to discuss girls' education and view a PowerPoint presentation that addressed the importance and benefits

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of enrolling girls in school. After this meeting, some mothers in the village, who had previously prevented their daughters from pursuing an education, expressed a strong interest in enrolling them.

Even after a child drops out or informs their school that she is considering dropping out of school, some school administrators may arrange for a meeting with the student and her parents to discuss the reasons for withdrawing from school. A participant reported that since their school is run by a Non-Governmental Organization (i.e. it is a privately funded school), they are responsible for maintaining enrollment and are required to track the progress of every student who has been funded. Therefore, they expend significant effort in retaining their students. However, she agreed that this might not be the case with public (i.e. government-funded) schools, which continue to face significantly higher attrition rates within their female student population.

Recommendations from Study Participants to Increase Girls' Enrollment

Recommendations were solicited from participants on what additional steps might be taken to increase enrollment of girls in Pakistani schools. Participants recognized the role poverty plays in educational attainment in Pakistan and understood that many young children are forced to work instead of pursuing their education. Within this environment, education is not a priority for parents. To address the challenges related to poverty, several participants suggested that the government should develop programs to offer guaranteed employment for female graduates. Observable and tangible financial benefits, would be an effective way to encourage more parents to send their daughter to school.

In this context, one suggestion was to offer flexible school schedules to allow girls to fulfill their family obligations while attending school. Two study participants suggested that if the government and the NGO's developed a program that minimized the cost of education without compromising the quality, it would make it easier for parents to send their children to school. A participant suggested that the government should develop a "door to door" program to convince parents to send their daughters to school, and media and educational campaigns should be developed to generate greater awareness about the importance of education and gender equality.

Other suggestions included obtaining agreement from religious and community leaders that girl's education is desirable and necessary. A participant stated that, "politicians, social justice, and other such leaders should promote the importance of education, as they can change the mindset of people". Another participant recommended NGOs to intervene and address feudal thinking that reinforces traditional gender roles that prevent girls from receiving an education.

Many girls have to walk long distance to reach school, which creates accessibility and transportation challenges. This is a greater challenge for girls than boys because conservative parents will often allow their boys to walk long distances to schools but are reluctant to extend similar liberties to their girls. The lack of reliable, safe and affordable transportation was also reported as a financial challenge by participants, who felt that being required to pay for transportation creates an additional burden for parents. To address these, study participants suggested establishing more schools in rural areas and providing incentives and safe transportation facilities for financially challenged students in urban areas.

Developing better teacher training programs was also highlighted. A participant explained that there are "mushroom schools" in Pakistan, which are funded, but the teachers do not regularly attend the school or even if they spend their time in social activities such that they are "imparting zero education". To address this problem, she recommended greater investment in teacher training to improve the quality of primary schools. A participant also suggested developing robust checks-and-balances systems to ensure educational policies are implemented effectively. Although the government has developed policies to increase girls'

enrollment in schools, it has not been implemented effectively and remains “only in papers”. The participant recommended developing media, seminars, and campaigns to educate people and raise awareness about girls’ education in rural areas.

Limitations and Conclusion

Although the sample size (5 schools) yielded valuable information about the state of girls’ education in Pakistan, the findings from this study cannot be applied to all schools in traditional Muslim societies. In addition, interviews and document collection were the only two methods that were utilized for this study, triangulation of the data using other methods, such as observations or focus groups might be a useful approach for further studies on this topic.

Notwithstanding, this study provides principals and other educational leaders with viable suggestions for overcoming economic, social, and cultural barriers to enrolling and retaining female students in Pakistan and encourage the enrollment and retention of education for this marginalized population . The methods presented in this study have been used successfully in Pakistan and may be adapted and can be replicated in similar societies so that all children can have access to this basic rights as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2014)⁷

⁷ United Nations, "United Nations Millennium Development Goals," Welcome to the United Nations, accessed August 26, 2018, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/education.shtml>

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