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Exploring the Socio-cultural Barriers to Girls' Education: A Qualitative Study of Parents' Perspective of School Dropout of Girls of South Punjab

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Abstract

Gender equality is the priority of any nation that makes progress in the social and economic spheres of life. Despite efforts by the government and non-government organizations, Pakistan has been unable to achieve gender equity, and gaps in girls' education are one of the significant reasons. The current study has aimed to investigate the social and cultural constraints of female higher education in the South of Punjab, Pakistan. The qualitative research has deeply investigated parents' perspectives on girls' higher education in the southern Punjab districts of Rajun Pur and Dera Ghazi Khan. Focus group discussions were used to collect data to understand parents' perspectives on their daughters not pursuing higher education. Thematic analysis was used to obtain the research findings. The study findings revealed certain socio-cultural factors as hurdles in the way of higher education for girls, including early puberty, son preferences, poor economic status of parents, early marriages of girls, non-acceptance of co-education, lack of decision-making by girls, cultural restriction, and a particular mind set on employment of women as primary factors behind girls' lower enrollment in higher education. The study recommends that states focus on girls' education through strict legislation and create awareness through communication, particularly with the help of non-government organizations.

Keywords: Socio-cultural Barriers, Girls' Education, Rural, South Punjab, Gender Equality

Introduction

In the pursuit of the mental, social, and material fulfillment of human beings, education is a powerful and significant tool. The prime objective of education is to equip human beings with a realization of their purpose in life and prepare them to achieve that purpose.

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The developing and underdeveloped nations place lots of emphasis on education. The same is the case with the constitution of Pakistan, which indicates education as one of the fundamental rights of citizens without any gender discrimination. Education is essential to build human capital. One may create a trained workforce to drive the economy toward long-term, sustainable economic growth by increasing productivity and efficiency (Khurram, Rauf & Saleem, 2019). Education achievements and the equal distribution of education among men and women are critical factors in a nation's progress. Education for girls is more complex and essential than education for boys. The tendency for male and female students to receive education in unequal proportions causes issues for a country's development (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In impoverished nations like Pakistan, providing girls with education faces numerous obstacles (Sultana & Haque, 2018). The state of Pakistan's education system is not very promising, like that of many other developing nations.

Pakistan is ranked as the fifth-most populous country globally, with 232,423 million people (World Meter, 2023). Of the overall population, 62.56 percent live in rural areas, while 49.08 percent of women live there (Government of Pakistan, 2022). The higher number of women in rural areas is the cause of the population's rapid growth. Younger females can be considered a resource that needs to be embedded with human capital because most of Pakistan's population is young. They need to play a big part in the country's economy (Rasheed et al., 2021).

But girls in Pakistan do not, sadly, have the same opportunities as men. Parents in rural areas tend to be less supportive of girls' educations than their urban counterparts. Girls' education is worthless in their eyes. Many variables influence our girls' education. As a result, our female educational system has an extremely low literacy rate. Thus, it hinders the country's progress. Several additional issues hinder girls' secondary education, particularly in rural areas. They include a lack of resources, parental attitudes, parental education, cultural and traditional beliefs, travel time to and from school, inadequate facilities, and a lack of teachers. The main thing that hurts girls' secondary education is poverty. The majority of rural families struggle to pay for school supplies like uniforms and textbooks. Some families frequently keep their girls at home to take care of their siblings. With their mothers, they assist in the task. Girls participate in agricultural activities in rural areas because they don't attend school there. Families can't pay for and provide for girls' secondary education if they cannot meet their basic needs (Suleman et al., 2015).

Due to the poor quality of the governmental systems in charge of defending its rights, Pakistan's rural population is gravely underserved and is negatively impacted disproportionately. Inequalities between urban and rural areas are evident in education, where girls and young women are disproportionately affected by poor public services.

Even though only around two-thirds of school-aged children live in rural regions, four out of every five of the 20 million children who are not in school dwell there, and of them, 60% are female (Zulfiqar & Ch., (2019).. For every five children who are not in school in rural areas, three out of five are girls (Saleem, 2023). It should come as no surprise that this unequal access to education leads to unequal educational outcomes; Pakistan is one of the very few low-to-middle-income nations where a significant gender gap still exists at the primary completion level (Evans et al., 2021).

Due to the forthcoming Population and Housing Census in 2022, the PSLM Survey was not conducted during 2021–2022. However, the Labor Force Survey 2020–21 shows that literacy rates are going down, from 62.4 percent in 2018–19 to 62.8 percent in 2020–21. The percentage of men who are literate rose from 73.0 to 73.4 percent, whereas the percentage of literate women fell from 51.5 to 51.9 percent. Literacy rates are increasing both in urban (76.1 to 77.3 percent) and rural (53.7 to 54.0 percent) areas (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Punjab has 110 million residents, with 63.3 percent living in rural areas. Much has been done in recent years to raise literacy rates across the province. Literacy is a crucial indicator of education because, as stated in the PLNFEP 2019, improvements in this area are anticipated to have a long-term effect on other significant welfare indicators (Punjab Education Sector Plan, Government of the Punjab, 2019).

A lack of physical infrastructure, such as schools, colleges, teachers, and transportation, hampered girls' education. The results demonstrate that many girls choose not to attend school due to these issues. Schools are far from home, and there are no transportation options, so parents are reluctant to send their daughters to school. As our society is also dealing with issues like terrorism and religious extremism, and there is no security accessible for protection, this situation presents a challenge for women's education. As a result, parents do not agree to enroll their daughters in school (Jamal, 2016).

Secondary education for girls is significantly impacted by poverty because most parents in rural areas are from disadvantaged backgrounds and cannot afford to pay for their children's education. As a result, they opt out of sending their kids to school, particularly the girls, instead of the guys. According to Khan et al. (2022), most girls take care of their domestic duties like cooking, washing, cleaning, caring for siblings, taking care of animals, carrying water, bringing firewood, etc. Pakistan's position in the worldwide context of gender inequalities in education is a result of both social ideas that give girls' education less significance than they do for boys' education and infrastructure problems that impede girls from acquiring a sufficient education. Cultural beliefs opposed to expanding gender-equitable access to education are directly tied to attitudes about girls' education (Purewal & Hashmi, 2014).

Parental attitudes are a significant barrier to higher education for female students. The majority of parents in Pakistan's rural and underprivileged areas have unfavorable attitudes toward their daughters' education. Girls' education is not significant to them. They believe investing time and resources in women's education is a waste because they will not get anything from it. Additionally, they think it to be against their traditions and culture. The sons of a family will be chosen for schooling above the daughters (Ahsan, 2022). According to the theory of returns, the decision to invest in children's education and future well-being is made based on an assessment of who will eventually become household members who contribute to the economy. In this context, girls are perceived as useless investments because it is anticipated that they will marry and leave their birthplaces, whereas boys are seen as reliable assets deserving of a higher share of the family's financial resources (Purewal & Hashmi, 2014). So, considering the current situation, particularly the poor educational circumstances in the south belt of Punjab, this study has aimed to investigate the social and cultural constraints in the way of female higher education in the south belt of Punjab, Pakistan.

Objectives

The following were the objectives of the research:

- To explore the reasons for not sending young girls to school
- To find out the socio-cultural factors that are barriers to girls education in the southern Punjab
- To identify the challenges of providing girls education in south Punjab and suggest some policy implications

Review of the Literature

The alarming and noticeable social and economic issues that exist in any country are the outcome of the illiteracy that prevails and Pakistan is no exception. Saqib et al., (2020) found that for sustainable growth in any country, education which is inclusive and provides equal opportunity to all is significant to strengthen the fabric of the society truly. The commitment of Pakistan to international agencies to ensure the provision of education to all and its constitutional promises puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of education in this country. Kiani (2010) in her research "The Role of Education in Economic Growth in Pakistan" reiterated the fact with firmness regarding the significance of education in the socio-economic development of any nation.

However the continually rising inflation and unemployment and the deterioration in the state institutions in general, the sector of education as a chief producer in the socio-economic domain in the country has acquired greater significance than ever in a country.

Hassan, Hina & Ali (2023), in their latest significant study found a major gap between the existing and required level of education in the country and revealed a consistently low enrollment of children in schools despite efforts made in the country. Gender disparities in such a scenario not only exist and widen but further complicate the picture of the education system in Pakistan. Almost half of the population of Pakistan is comprised of women and the country has not been successful in enrolling girls with boys even at primary schools.

Rasheed et al. (2021), emphasized that younger educated females are certainly an asset and resource in a country resource that needs to be embedded with human capital. This is necessary for them to play a big part in the country's economy. But the voices remaining unheard and muted in general, the disheartening state of women's education in Pakistan further deepens the social and economic issues of the country. While talking of girls' education, there is also a stark disparity that exists in the rural and urban areas where urban area literacy is far better than rural areas, in particular, the dropout rate of girls from schools in rural areas is very alarming.

The situation visibly deteriorates in many areas of the country including the Southern Punjab. Malik and Anwar (2023), in their findings in a research "Constitutional Pledges, Ground Realities and Horizontal Inequalities for Education in South Punjab, Pakistan" dive into the situation by adding greater gender disparities found in southern Punjab. The low socio-economic indicators and certain social and cultural factors make the provision of education difficult particularly for girls in the region. Their Study revealed the reason for the lack of parental interest in their daughters lies in the heart of cultural and religious beliefs in traditional agrarian societies.

The stereo-type gender roles in such societies work with full force and girl's abilities are limited to household chores and early marriage is the only solution to get rid of the burden of having young girls around. In many studies, for instance, Fatima (2023) and Musaddiq and Said (2023), in their studies found that rapid population growth also has a negative impact on the provision of educational facilities, particularly for girls. The illiterate families with large family sizes in rural societies are inclined towards boys' education while considering boys as providers for a family in the future and girls are the suffering end. Moreover, the more the society is closed, as rural societies are, the social and cultural practices are the barriers in the way of social and economic development of women in particular. Zeb et al. (2022), in their study highlighted significant cultural barriers, for instance, women's mobility, the practice of the veil, and its relation with education. In a socially restricted environment where it becomes a matter of reputation and honor for women if they step out of home, the continuity of education becomes difficult for girls specifically where Purdah (veil) is strictly observed. Additionally, many

families raise objections to their daughters attending co-educational institutions that auxiliary limit their approach and access to educational institutions.

Nawaz et al. (2021) and Malik (2021), in their studies, while talking of barriers in girls' education emphasize security for females while throwing light on incidents of harassment in society. The societies where a large number of harassment cases are reported, families with less resources and knowledge in particular are more careful in deciding for their girls, thus stopping them from going outside to attain education is much more common in such scenarios. Similarly, distance from schools and fewer girls' institutes in villages further aggravate the issue of female education in rural communities. A study by Mussadiq and Said (2023), exposed that the distance from school in rural settings has resulted in a 20% reduction in attendance overall.

The studies and literature overall reveal that the Pakistani society, especially the underdeveloped regions of the country and their communities are not fully convinced of the importance of girls' education and its relation with the socio-economic development of the country. The current study has investigated deeply while documenting first-hand information on barriers to girls' education in our rural areas which can help policymakers emphasize the micro level of social and cultural barriers that are major hindrances in keeping a large segment of the population uneducated.

Research Methodology

This study adopted an interpretative philosophical perspective and was qualitative. This study acknowledges how socio-cultural and community-based norms influenced the parents' decision to send their daughter to the school based on the ontological viewpoint of interpretivism and the epistemological position of social constructionists. According to the social constructionist perspective, "truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. It also explains how constructionists explained reality, as stated by Crotty (1998), who claimed that "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, was contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of the interaction between human beings and their world, and transmitted in an essentially social context."

Researchers attempted to take into account the socio-cultural factors in this study's analysis of parents' views and the various components influencing the problem. Four focus group discussions were conducted to gather the data, after which thematic content analysis was applied. The study has deeply investigated parents' perspectives on girls' education in the southern Punjab districts of Rajun Pur and Dera Ghazi Khan. As per the Punjab Gender Parity Report (2021) generated by Government of Ounjab, on a provincial level, in Punjab, 22% of the school-going-age children are not in schools, while 26% of

the students are female (Government of the Punjab, 2021). It was also made evident that districts in the southern part of the province had the lowest parity in terms of the proportion of female teachers, students, and schools. The districts with the lowest gender parity were Dera Ghazi Khan and Rajanpur. According to the report, except for nine districts, more girls than boys in the province are out of school. At 48 percent, Rajanpur has the highest rate of out-of-school children. So these two districts were targeted. Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents to the FGDs. The data on girls who did not pursue studies after primary education was collected from the education department of the study area. Four focus group discussions were conducted with the families of those girls, where the prime respondents were either a father or mother. The researchers contacted them through the education department and obtained their permission to speak with them after describing the nature of the study. The following were the inclusion criteria for the study: (a) Respondents had girl children who dropped out of school after getting a grade five education. (b) Those who also had at least one male child; (c) those who agreed to participate in the discussion. Each focus group comprised eight respondents; two were conducted with fathers and two with girls. The duration of the focus group was 2.0 to 2.5 hours.

Focus groups were conducted in Urdu and Punjabi using an interview guide. They covered a range of topics, such as background information, individual details, parents' low socio-economic standing, early marriages of girls, opposition to coeducation, girls' lack of decision-making abilities, cultural restrictions, and unique mindsets, among the socio-economic and cultural reasons that prevent girls from pursuing higher education. This guide makes it easy to work on developing topics for the analysis. With the respondents' permission, focus group discussions were audio recorded. However, to uphold the norms of confidentiality and anonymity, the respondents' identities were not declared. They were treated as a code, like Respondent A in FGD1, Respondent Bin in FGD 2, and so on. Using Express Scribe, each discussion was translated from Urdu to English, after which it was transcribed. The researchers wrote summary notes following each discussion and then double-checked each to ensure no information was omitted.

Data Analysis

The four focus group discussions in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis. The text and codes are placed in a socio-cultural context during thematic analysis, which makes it unique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Ferreday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), through conceptual ties and networks, theme analysis enables the researcher to consider the data on various levels. Thematic analysis was used in this study to pinpoint the elements contributing to girls dropping out of school after the fifth grade. Two researchers coded the data and double-checked the outcomes against the main hypotheses. To establish an interceding agreement, a set of normative coding technique

recommendations was created. Codes were combined and improved at the weekly research team debate meetings to develop concepts, categories, and subcategories.

This study's reliability was established through dependability and credibility. Field notes and analytical triangulation were integrated to increase plausibility. Sustained engagement was further enhanced by persistent interest in the subject. Formal member screening was introduced to ensure the validity of the research. Peer reviews during the analysis helped clarify how the consensus was reached. The research team proved its dependability by reaching similar findings and conclusions.

Results

The study's findings showed numerous reasons for girls dropping out early in the rural areas of southern Punjab. This study looked at the socio-cultural factors that influence the early dropout of girls. To facilitate data analysis, the study's findings were categorized into the following themes:

Demographic Characteristics of the Focus Group Participants

A total of four focus group discussions were conducted, two with fathers and two with mothers, each in Rajun Pur and Dera Ghazi Khan districts. A total of 32 respondents were study participants, with an age range of 30–50 years. The age of marriage for females was found to be 13–15 years, and for males, it was 14–18 years, showing an early marriage trend in the area. Almost all of the women were illiterate, with two exceptions having grade 2 and 3 levels of education. Out of 16 males, 10 were illiterate, and six had a primary level of education. A majority of women were involved in household chores and cotton picking without having any formal employment. Similar was the case with males; only four were engaged in janitorial services; the rest were involved in agricultural lands, which they usually did not own.

Poor Socio-Economic Status

The first question asked the respondents focused on their socio-economic condition. The study found that most respondents reported an income of less than one US dollar daily, and parents find it challenging to make ends meet. Every respondent's situation claimed that the economy is in bad shape. Men who responded to the poll stated that they assisted in crop harvesting and worked for a daily wage. During harvest, the husband and wife both had jobs. Cotton picking was done by women as well. A 40-kilo cotton bail cost 300 rupees. The family's income was insufficient to meet even the most basic needs. None of the participants owned a house or other real estate. Only a small percentage of families (10 out of 32) had enough money to live independently; therefore, they shared houses.

More severe poverty was experienced by families with just one earner. Three meals a day were not available to these families. In such a scenario, sending children to school to pursue their education is not the priority of parents. One mother stated:

> *"The school until primary education was free, but teachers every second-day demand money in the name of uniforms, books, or school functions." Affording three meals here is a blessing. I cannot fulfill this demand further. Also, I think education will make my daughter cunning. It is better that, she stays home."*

Due to their scant or nonexistent attention to their children's education, these homes did not prioritize education (Government of the Punjab, 2019). The neighborhood included public schools. They kept their kids out of school even though the state offered free textbooks and stationery. Poverty may play a big role in parents' careless attitudes toward their children's education, particularly girls' education. It was clear that these households frequently used child labor. Their children were bringing in between Rs. 50 and Rs. 70 every day to help with the household budget.

We conclude that low wages at the site of origin made it difficult for families to meet even the most basic needs. Instead of being sent to school, children were kept as slaves.

Preference for the Male Child over Girls

Preference for a son over a female child is a common phenomenon, particularly in rural households where the average family size is almost eight people and girls are often considered burdens. So, marrying them off at an early age is the only solution for poor parents. There are many obstacles to girls' education in the districts. Some cultural viewpoints stigmatize female education and work to exclude them from society. Early marriages are encouraged, especially in rural communities, and the chances of receiving a good education are permanently lost. In some areas of the district, females are typically married off around 14 or 15. Early marriage not only reduces a girl's prospects of continuing her education but also prevents her from exercising some liberties and typically results in larger families.

A father revealed,

> *"My son has to be strong, as he is going to share my burden. Neither I nor this society have allowed my daughter to work in some offices. Our culture does not allow this."*

In the tribal area, where there are few educational opportunities for girls, the situation may be the worst. Thousands of girls old enough to attend school are denied educational

opportunities. However, in such cases, boys are allowed to attend school if they want. As one of the mother respondents said:

> *"He is a boy; he can go anywhere, so he may go; however, we cannot send females to the schools in other villages." And there is no need, as we intend to marry her; we don't want her to do any job."*

Negative gender stereotypes create financial incentives to prioritize the education of men. Sending guys to school is seen as a greater investment in the family's financial future since sons are more likely than daughters to stay with their parents and live with their husband's families.

Distance of School from Home

The study found that there have been some barriers that prevent parents from sending their girls to school. The likelihood of secondary and higher education is lower among households with fewer mobility options to secondary schools. In rural areas, girls' access to education is a severe problem that affects their chances of acquiring an education. There is only one middle school for girls, making it the only formal educational option available to girls there. There is one primary school for females in Village Bhattiwallah, although it is housed under a tent. Girls in that neighborhood do not attend school as a result. At every level, there are fewer schools for females, and if they choose to attend one that is fairly far away, the chances are already against them.

A father added,

> *"My boy can ride a bicycle; my girl cannot. She is not allowed to use any mode of transport alone. I can either do my labor work or take responsibility for my daughter's secondary schooling."*

The serious issues are the lack of schools or having schools at a distance. There are frequently no operational schools within a reasonable driving distance. There isn't a girls' high school in every UC in the district. Many remote UCs have no high schools for girls, so parents must decide whether to send their daughters to a distant school or stop their academic pursuits. Additionally, it can be challenging for instructors to travel to rural places daily. Large distances, inadequate road systems, and a shortage of public transportation are all present. So these realities also prove to be barriers to sending girls to school.

Insecurity and Harassment While Traveling to School

The study found parents were anxious about their young girls' physical security and harassment incidents once they were on their way to school. Many parents viewed security as a barrier to women's education. They talked about a variety of security issues, including assault, kidnapping, crime, hostility, and attacks on educational institutions. Some families claim that recent increases in neighborhood insecurity imply that younger children now have less access to education than older children. Families worry about clogged roads, and many girls' long distances to school increase danger and anxiety. Many girls have experienced sexual harassment while walking to school, and the cops aren't doing much to stop it. Girls may be reluctant to report harassment for fear of repercussions or of having their parents withdraw them from school.

As a mother informed me:

> *"My daughter once finished her fifth grade when she was 11 years old, and middle school, as in most of the villages, is four to five kilometers away. My neighbor's daughter was once raped, and that horrific incident resulted in the decision of many families to keep their girls home. We hear of such incidents every day. Law and order in villages is extremely poor, and the presence of feudal forces in areas does not allow the state to fully exercise its powers."*

Another issue that affects both families and girls is kidnapping, which is exacerbated by lengthy trips to school. This anxiety increases as females get older and are regarded as more vulnerable to sexual assault. Attacks on education are alarmingly common in Pakistan and the long-term effects of violence in a school or area on female students' academic performance. Parents from these areas recounted tales of horrific incidents in their communities that kept girls out of school for many years thereafter.

The Conservative and Outdated Local Cultural Norms

The study also draws attention to archaic and conservative local cultural norms and beliefs. Peasants are forced not to send their daughters to higher education by feudalism and its variants, the Jaghirdar and Zamindari systems**.** The lowest wages, which are insufficient for existence, are paid to peasants by the feudal system, who are therefore exploited. In addition to the purdah system and restrictions on women's mobility, another key element found in the study was that respondents were of the view that girls are supposed to be homemakers from a very young age, and they are expected to be by their mothers' sides in household chores.

A mother said:

> *"Household chores or helping me in this sufficient; my girl can read and write Urdu a little bit. It is enough. She better learn the agricultural field or take care of their siblings. This is the prime role of any girl in our village."*

Some families believe that girls shouldn't enroll in school or continue their education after a certain age. There is a vast range of perspectives on women's education in diverse civilizations. In these two districts, parents who defy cultural customs prohibiting girls from attending school abroad run the risk of pressure and hostility. Families that defy social norms prohibiting females from attending school run the danger of harming their daughters themselves (Faran & Zaidi, 2021).

In these areas, as reported in FGDs, parents frequently remove girls from school as they approach puberty, sometimes out of worry that they could start dating. Teenage girls being sexually harassed at school, on the way to and from school, and in public areas is a concern for some families. Child marriage is both caused by and influenced by women who don't go to school. Girls may be deemed ready for marriage when they reach puberty; in some cultures, child marriage is even encouraged. Due to their inability to afford it, some parents are forced to marry off their daughters, while others view it as a method to protect their daughters from the potential of adulterous affairs. They may be forced to stop attending school as soon as they get married or even just engaged, which helps them put off getting married.

Discussion

Pakistan faces severe challenges related to its socio-economic structure, reflecting its long-standing structural feebleness. With rapid poverty increase amid the political crisis, particularly in the country, the human capital outcomes in Pakistan are stagnant. One of its examples is Pakistan's learning poverty rate, which stands close to 75 percent (Ahmad & Faridi, 2020). The country stands second in number worldwide for children aged 5 to 16 out of school. There is no other opinion except that the country's overall socio-economic development is compromised when a considerable number of young people are out of school. Besides, to achieve international promises Pakistan has made, the retention of children in school is necessary to achieve given targets, particularly when we talk of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and National Education Policy 2022 (Mossvi, 2022). The current study conducted in southern Punjab, Pakistan, reveals that the areas have poor social and economic indicators, which are pivotal reasons behind children's being out of school. The households of southern Punjab have a high poverty and unemployment ratio compared to other Punjab districts. Furthermore, social and cultural practices also play a role in many disparities in the area, including people's preference for

their children's education, particularly girls (Zilifqar, Shabbir & Ishfaq, 2020). It is a worldwide phenomenon that educating a girl is considered the best investment a family can make, eventually benefiting any society. Excluding girls from the path of awareness through education not only hits the country's economic development but also weakens the fabric of society as these girls are further responsible for the upbringing of future generations of the nation (Khan et al., 2022). The poor socio-economic and cultural indicators of southern Punjab make it harder for young girls to receive education (Zulfiqar, Shabbir & Ishfaq, 2020).

The current study exhibits extremely low social and economic indicators of the respondents, where the more significant majority was living under the poverty line. With high illiteracy in the area and no formal employment, the general population's living standards were found to be very low. The study area has very little industrial development which forces people to rely only on agriculture (Akbar et al., 2022). The study found the respondents were unable to make ends meet, and education in such circumstances was not the priority of the parents. Despite the provision of government schools, the parents still think sending school to children does add to their expenditures, thus resulting in a more significant majority of children remaining out of school. Gender discrimination in terms of schooling of children is very high in the research area. The boys are allowed to attend school compared to girls as they are considered providers in the future.

The cultural elements of the Purdah (veil) are another obstacle on the way of girl's education. The existence of feudalism and orthodox cultural practices makes the situation complicated for the girl child to attend school (Amin & Gillani, 2023). Similarly, early girl's marriages are another social stigma that has distanced girls from education. The early marriages of girls add to the vulnerability of women and girls (Ali & Hilali, 2021). The scientific evidence reveals that this adds to poverty among women and affects their overall well-being (Malik, Nadeem & Adil, 2022). The study further exposed distance from school as another more significant obstacle as parents due to different factors such as time, affordability, lack of means of transportation, and harassment issues discourage girls from attending school. The longer distance and travel time perhaps seem obstacles only for girls as parents do like to spend resources on boys (Tabassum, 2023). The parents' fear of harassment of young girls and such incidents reported in these underdeveloped arrears at a large scale is yet another finding of the study that explains why girls are out of school. Several studies have thrown light on incidents of harassment as another reason behind the lack of girls' registration (Khan et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Educating a girl child is found to be enormous social and economic returns that any country can receive for its socio and economic development. Investment in girls'

education decreases their vulnerability and gives them access to and awareness of their fundamental rights. It further upsurges their access to available resources, reduces maternal mortalities, decreases early marriages, and breaks the vicious cycles of poverty. The dismal situation of Pakistan in many aspects has further damaged the provision of maximum enrolment of our children as per our commitment to international treaties and for the sake of the country's progress. Pakistan has been unable to meet at least 100 percent of its primary education goals. The gender disparities in the enrolment of girls in schools are yet another element that is causing greater damage to the growth and development of the country. The southern part of Punjab is a highly fertile land that can generate more revenue than expected. The home of millions of people is yet deprived of basic needs. The social and cultural elements, apart from economic challenges, are great hindrances to the growth of this area. The restrictions on women's mobility, their purdah system (veil), feudalism, the poor infrastructure of existing schools, including lack of means of transportation, the poverty of people, and harassment issues are adding serious troubles for girls, mainly to join the pathway of literacy.

Recommendations

There is a dire need to promote and protect the rights of girls and increase awareness of their needs and potential. The focus of the state needs to be on eliminating violence against girls if we want to see our young girls accelerate in all areas. The mass media can play an essential role in highlighting negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls. The underdeveloped regions of Pakistan demand extra-governmental attention. Industrial development can open employment doors in these regions and guarantee better standards of living in the future.

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