

Breaking Barriers: Socio-Cultural and Economic Challenges in Girls' Higher Education in Interior Sindh, Pakistan

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This study aims to identify the socio-cultural and economic barriers faced by girls in Higher Education in interior Sindh, Pakistan. It also aims to find out possible solutions or strategies to overcome these barriers. Girls from interior Sindh do not have the equal opportunities as men. In interior Sindh there is discrimination when it comes to girls' education. Girls face multiple barriers in their higher education due to certain social, cultural and economic challenges in Sindh. Therefore, mixed method approach was used to collect the data. The setting and participants used for data collection were consisting of the students and Female teachers of The Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University Sukkur. It is located in interior part of Sindh. Firstly, a questionnaire was adapted for female students in order to identify their socio-cultural and economic barriers. The number of responses were 66. Moreover, the semi-structured interviews were conducted from 6 female teachers to find out the possible strategies to overcome these barriers. The collected data covered the districts of interior Sindh such as Khairpur, Shikarpur, Sukkur and Ghotki. After analyzing the data, researchers found that the barriers that girls face in higher education are child marriage, gender discrimination, long-distance institutes and financial issues. The possible solutions to these challenges are community engagement and outreach, policy enforcement, mentorship and support networks, scholarships and financial aid, payment plans and installment options, sponsorships and public-private partnerships. This research is limited in interior parts of Sindh province only. Furthermore, it can also be conducted in different parts of other provinces with different audience in order to find out certain challenges and their possible solutions.

1. Introduction

Education is one of the basic rights that human beings demand. The primary aim of education is to aware human beings about the purpose of a life and to achieve that purpose. It is necessary for all despite of gender discrimination. The civilized as well as uncivilized nations have worked and emphasized on educational institutes (Ahmed et al. 2022). Pakistan one of the developed countries in the world has also established its education system. According to Article 25-A of the Pakistani Constitution, that stated “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 education as one of the fundamental rights of citizens without any gender discrimination.

Higher education is crucial for socioeconomic progress in today's globalized and interdependent world. Higher education institutions have always played a significant role in producing professionals, scientists, political leaders, economics, religious and social experts contribute to society by enriching ideals and developing resources (Habib et al. 2024). Young men and women with higher education abilities can equally drive progress and equity in today's world. However, the problem with developing countries including Pakistan is that they have given low priority to higher education (Haider, 2008). Higher education for girls contributes significantly to a country's economic and socio-cultural growth. Higher education is a pillar of strength for promoting girls' education in a variety of ways by supporting competent female leaders and encouraging them to serve as shining examples for young girls. Girls can choose their fields of knowledge based on their impact on policy issues related to sociological, socioeconomic, and cultural advancement, as well as their role in domestic life (Shaukat & Pell, 2015).

Pakistan is a home to various ethnic groups, each with its own language, traditions, and cultural practices. Major ethnic communities include Sindhis, Punjabis, Pashtuns, Baloch, and Mohajirs, among others. As it is a multicultural country. Different cultures have different customs and traditions. The importance of education is seen quite different by all ethnic groups. In Pakistan, gender disparity is widespread, particularly in rural areas. Poverty, domestic work, co-education, early marriage, and parents' lack of awareness about higher education all contribute to lower female enrollment (Salik & Zhiyong, 2014). The rural areas have a different concept of educating a boy versus a girl. Specifically, the rural people of Sindh have not priorities the Higher Education. There is discrimination when it comes to girls' education. Girls face multiple barriers in their higher education due to certain social, cultural and economic barriers in Sindh (Zeb et al. 2022).

Sindh is Pakistan's second largest province, with a population of 47.9 million (Population Welfare Department Sindh, 2018). According to Census (2017), rural areas are inhabited to 47.97% of the population and 23.08% of women. Rural areas have almost an equal proportion of women, which contributes to rapid population expansion. The majority of Sindh's population is young, making younger females an asset for the development. Women play a vital part in society, including motherhood, sisterhood, and marriage. However, being a woman in Sindhi society is sometimes an ungrateful and risky task. Unfortunately, girls from interior Sindh do not have the

equal opportunities as men. It is a male dominant society where a woman is just considered as their property.

Women in Sindh are especially handicapped by the embedded feudal system in rural Sindh society, religious extremists, and the government, which is dominated by members of the dominant feudal caste. Several issues restrict women's growth in Sindh, including women's extremely low legal standing, as well as a lack of political authority and willingness to rectify the gender disparity. Women's status is reinforced by most family systems, and a majority of women accept this low status, unable to conceive the concept of equal rights. Women continue to perform three separate functions, including reproductive, productive, and community management and are frequently treated poorly throughout. The state of women's education in Sindh is terrible. Rural Sindh has an education system, but there are different concepts for girls' higher education and those concepts set as barriers for girls in higher education.

1.1 Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study is the socio-cultural and economic barriers that restrict girls from pursuing higher education. Socio-cultural norms and economic inequities frequently cause challenges for girls to pursue and thrive in higher education, such as gender stereotypes, limited financial means, and unequal access. The research aims to understand the underlying variables that contribute to educational inequalities and provide effective solutions to enhance fair access to higher education for girls.

1.2 Purpose of Research

This study aims to identify the challenges that girls face at higher Education in interior Sindh. The study accounts socio-cultural and economic challenges specifically. This research has demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that hinder girls' academic progress and personal development in higher educational settings. It has the purpose of searching for certain strategies that helps girls to overcome the obstacles in their academic journey.

1.3 Objectives

The study consists of two main objectives:

1. To identify Socio-cultural and Economic barriers in girls higher education journey in interior Sindh.
2. To find ways in overcoming Socio-cultural and Economic Barriers in Girls higher education.

2. Literature Review

Tabassum et al. (2024) stated that a country's integral progress and development is impossible without the equal involvement of girls in education. It holds that the shortage of a larger portion of educated and skillful girls or women is a major factor in underperformance in economic and social development in the majority of developing countries, including Pakistan. The girls or women are in larger proportion in population of Pakistan. Ahmad et al. (2022) outlined that due

to many socio-cultural and economic barriers and restrictions, most of Pakistan's female population is not enrolled in higher education, which is a main problem in the country. Mostly, girls are not allowed for getting higher education due to the patriarchal system. Due to socio-cultural and economic barriers, girls cannot pursue higher education. Although, the considerable and notable barriers to higher education include a lack of opportunities, patriarchy, old customs and social values, early marriage, and the high cost of public transport.

Furthermore, Zeb et al. (2022) in his study highlighted the major socio-cultural barriers, for example, girls' individuality, the practice of the veil. In a socially restricted society where it becomes a matter of status, reputation and honor for girls, if they move out of home, the continuity of higher education becomes challenge for girls specifically where Purdah (veil) is strictly observed. Malik and Nawaz (2016) reported that most families and community members in Pakistan's rural areas think that having a family and getting married is better than returning for higher education. (Farid et al., 2014) discovered that girls who live in rural areas of Pakistan, especially in Sindh, face many socio-cultural and economic barriers. They are not allowed to get higher education. Higher education helps women or girls to eliminate the stereotypes against them in society, by making women aware of their rights mentioned in the constitution (Murtaza, 2012).

Moreover, Parveen (2008) mentioned that rural girls have a number of challenges and difficulties for getting higher education, because tradition create barriers for them in getting the higher education. For empowering and authorizing girls or women in every sphere of life, higher education is the most essential and basic factor (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005). Higher education empowers qualified women to become leaders in society and it permits them to become role models for the young girls.

Higher Education is mandatory for a society based on merit. It helps in understanding socio-cultural and economic beliefs, which includes self-reliance to individuals, discourages discrimination on the basis of gender discrimination, beliefs, religion and social class; enhances the quality of life, and encourages democratic governance (Isani & Virk, 2003; Kramarae, 2003). The previous studies and literature disclose the Pakistani society, specifically the underdeveloped and rural areas, where girls are facing the challenges for getting higher education due to the socio-cultural, economic and financial barriers. Likewise, this study will identify the significant socio-cultural and economic barriers in girls' higher education in Sukkur, Sindh and also provide the possible strategies to overcome and break their barriers.

3. Methodology

On the basis of nature of research study, a mixed method approach was used to identify the socio-cultural and economic barriers in girls' higher education; to find the possible strategies to break these barriers. The instruments for this study were questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The setting and participants used for data collection were consisting of the students and female teachers of The Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University Sukkur. It is located in interior part of Sindh. The purpose of collecting data from this university was, the students and

teachers belong to different rural areas of Sindh. The collected data covered interior districts such as Khairpur, Shikarpur, Sukkur and Ghotki.

In quantitative approach, the questionnaire was adopted from Habib, Ejaz and Alvi (2024) in the form of 5 points Likert type scale options ranging from “strongly disagree to strongly agree”. The number of responses recorded through questionnaire was 66. Through questionnaire the socio-cultural and economic barriers were identified that hinder girls’ higher education. On the other hand, in qualitative approach semi-structured interviews were conducted from 5 female teachers of the University to know the possible strategies to overcome or break these barriers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Data

This part aims to identify the sociocultural and economic barriers faced by the girls in their higher education. For that purpose, survey questionnaire includes total ten items; first five items cover socio-cultural barriers and later five items cover economic barriers.

Table No 1: It shows students’ responses on Socio-cultural Barriers in Girls’ Higher Education in the form of total number of responses along with percentage

Sr.	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	The early marriage hinders girl’s higher education	3 (4.5%)	6 (9.1%)	11 (16.7%)	27(40.9%)	19 (28.8%)
2.	Higher education will motivate girls to demand appropriate property rights, so they are not permitted for it.	4 (6.1%)	4 (6.1%)	16 (24.2%)	28(42.2%)	14 (21.2%)
3.	Long-distance educational institutes cause hurdles to girls’ higher education.	4 (6.1%)	2 (3%)	7 (10.6%)	37(56.1%)	16 (24.2%)
4.	The traditional customs and social values create problem for girls in getting higher education.	4(6.1%)	2 (3%)	8 (12.1%)	35(53%)	17 (25.8%)
5.	Girls are considered insecure while going for higher education.	3 (4.5%)	7 (10.6%)	23 (34.8%)	29(43.9%)	4 (6.1%)

In the above table different number of participants responded as agree with regard to the first sociocultural barrier. In response to first item, 28.8% participants agreed that early marriages hinder girls’ higher education. In response to second item, 42.2% participants responded that higher education motivates girls to demand their appropriate right in the property. Moreover, in response to third item, 56.1% responded that long-distance educational institutes are hurdles in

girls' higher education. Additionally, with regard to 4th item stating that traditional customs and social values create problem for girls in getting higher education, 53% of the participants agreed on it. Finally, in response of the fifth item, indicating that Girls are considered insecure while going for higher education, 43.9% of the participants responded as agree.

Table No 2: It shows students' responses on Economic Barriers in Girls' Higher Education in the form of total number of responses along with percentage.

Sr.	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
6.	Parents cannot bear the expenses of girls' higher education	4 (6.1%)	11 (16.7%)	29 (43.9%)	14 (21.2%)	8 (12.1%)
7.	Girls' higher education is considered as non-returnable or unprofitable.	8 (12.1%)	13 (19.7%)	15 (22.7%)	21 (31.8%)	9 (13.6%)
8.	Due to financial crisis parents prefer boys over girls for getting higher education.	2 (3%)	3 (4.5%)	9 (13.6%)	32 (48.5%)	20 (30.3%)
9.	Well-off families allow their daughters for getting higher education.	3 (4.5%)	1 (1.5%)	8 (12.1%)	38 (57.6%)	16 (24.2%)
10.	Financial problems apart from education, such as (residence food, bills and other expenses) due to long distance institutes cause barriers in girls' higher education.	2 (3%)	1 (1.5%)	12 (18.2%)	35 (53%)	16 (24.2%)

This part highlights the responses of the participants related to the economic barriers faced by the girls in their higher education. This part is also consisted of the survey questionnaire containing later five items.

On responding to the sixth item that Parents cannot bear the expenses of girls' higher education, 43.95% of the participants were not sure about it and responded as neutral. Additionally, with regard to the seventh item, stating that Girls' higher education is considered as non-returnable or unprofitable, 31.8% of the participants responded agree to it. Furthermore, on responding to eighth item, highlighting that due to financial crisis parents prefer boys over girls for getting higher education, 48.5% of the participants were agreed. Moreover, in response of ninth item, posing that well-off families allow their daughters for getting higher education, 57.6% of the participants answered as agree. Finally, tenth item stating that financial problems apart from education cause barriers in girls' higher education, 53% of the participants responded as agree.

4.2 Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was collected from female teachers through semi-structured interviews. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis. The responses showed numerous strategies to break the barriers in girls' higher education in interior Sindh. To facilitate data analysis, the study's findings were categorized into the following themes and sub-themes:

4.2.1 Theme 1-Initiatives to change attitudes towards child marriage and promote higher education for girls

- **Community engagement and outreach**

Awareness campaigns such as community engagement and outreach should be designed to change the community attitudes towards Child marriage and promote girls' education.

Respondent 3: *Educating communities on the negative impacts of child marriage and the benefits of education for girls through grassroots campaigns.*

Respondent 4: *Communities should be aware about importance of women education, by increasing the number of school and colleges in rural areas.*

Respondent 5: *Campaigns that emphasize the economic, social and health benefits of delaying marriage and investing in education can create a strong narrative for change.*

- **Policy Enforcement**

New policies should be implemented that support girls' education and combat child marriage.

Respondent 3: *Laws must be enforced that prohibit child marriage while incentivizing education for girls, such as through scholarships or conditional cash transfers.*

Respondent 5: *Strict legal frameworks must be enforced that set the minimum age for marriage, while providing incentives for families who prioritize education, can significantly influence attitudes.*

4.2.2 Theme 2-Solutions to overcome gender discrimination in girls' higher education

- **Addressing bias and stereotypes**

Efforts should be taken to change societal biases and stereotypes that undermine girls' education. This can include training programs to promote gender equality. New policies should be implemented that addresses gender disparities in education.

Respondent 3: *Gender equality must be promoted through media and educational programs to challenge stereotypes and cultural biases.*

Respondent 5: *Educational policies must be reviewed to ensure they are gender-sensitive, with a focus on equal opportunities for girls.*

- **Mentorship and support networks**

Certain programs should be designed that provide mentorship and support to female students. This can include collaborative techniques such as students-female mentoring, counseling services, and peer support groups.

Respondent 3: *Safe and supportive learning environment must be created, including mentorship programs for girls and gender-sensitive training for teachers.*

Respondent 5: *Female role models must be promoted and introduced in educational settings.*

4.2.3 Theme 3-Strategies for improving academic fees issues for girls' higher education

- **Scholarships and financial aids**

Scholarships and financial aids should be offered to cover the cost of education. This can include merit-based or need-based scholarships, grants, and other forms of scholarships and financial aids.

Respondent 3: *Scholarship programs should be extended targeting girls from low-income families.*

- **Reduction in Fees**

Reduction in academic fees can reduce financial burden on students. This can be targeted at students from low-income families or those facing significant financial hardships.

Respondent 4: *Academic fees should be reduced by government at higher levels.*

- **Payment plans and installment options**

Students should be allowed to pay their fees in installments. This makes it easier for families to manage expenses.

Respondent 1: *Institutes structure certain plans to facilitate girls such as installments*

Respondent 5: *Implementing income-based sliding scale fees and providing flexible payment plans can make higher education more accessible.*

- **Sponsorships and Public-Private Partnerships**

Sponsorship and public-private partnerships can better support girls' financial crises. It can include funding for academic expenses and resources.

Respondent 1: *Encouraging businesses to sponsor girls' education through corporate social responsibility initiatives.*

Respondent 5: *Public-private partnerships can also play a role by creating endowment funds specifically aimed at supporting girls' education.*

4.2.4 Theme 4-Measures for girls to overcome expenses apart from academic fees

- **Internships and Work-Study Programs**

Students should be encouraged to join paid internships and work-study programs. Students can earn money while gaining practical experience related to their field of study. It can help them to overcome their expenses apart from academic expenditure.

Respondent 3: *Enabling girls to work part-time on or near campus to cover living expenses.*

Respondent 5: *Participating in work-study programs or internships that provide a stipend can help cover living costs.*

- **Shared Accommodation and Living Expenses**

Shared housing arrangements should be promoted to reduce living costs. This includes creating student housing cooperatives or providing support for shared living situations.

Respondent 3: *Partnership with local organizations to provide affordable or subsidized accommodation for female students.*

Respondent 5: *Affordable housing options should be given, such as student dormitories or shared accommodations can reduce the burden of rent.*

- **Home-Based Business Programs**

Girls should be encouraged and supported in starting their own home-based businesses to earn money. This can include training on entrepreneurship, business planning, and access to resources for starting and running a business.

Respondent 4: *Go for home-based business programs such as Freelancing, digital marketing, blogging, etc.*

Respondent 5: *Financial literacy programs should be planned that teach budgeting and savings skills. It can also empower girls to manage their finances effectively while pursuing their higher education.*

Overall, the findings indicate that a collaborative effort between policymakers, educators, community leaders, and financial institutions are required to create an encouraging environment for girls' higher education. By employing these measures, we can make substantial progress in eliminating the barriers that currently prevent girls from pursuing and succeeding in higher education in interior Sindh. The collective impact of these projects will help to empower females, increase educational achievement, and promote gender equity in the region.

5. Conclusion

In this research paper, the results and findings show the socio-cultural and economic barriers that hinder girls' higher education in interior Sindh as well as the possible way outs or strategies to break these barriers. The socio-cultural barriers include the early marriage, motivation to get rights in property, long distance institutes, traditional customs and social values and considered higher education as insecure. While, economic barriers include that parents cannot bear the expenses of girls' higher education, well off families allow their daughters for higher education, girls' higher education is considered as non-profitable and financial problems apart from education. These barriers were investigated by using the questionnaire. On the other hand, the possible strategies to break these barriers were highlighted by the female teachers through semi-structured interviews that include the Initiatives to change attitudes towards child marriage and promote higher education for girls, Solutions to overcome gender discrimination in girls' higher education, Strategies for improving academic fees issues for girls' higher education, and measures for girls to overcome the expenses apart from academic fees.

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