Gender Based Barriers to Girls' Education in Rural Punjab, Pakistan

An Issue of Socio-Cultural Constructs

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Vienna, 02 June, 2025

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Abstract

The thesis identifies the gender-based barrier to girls' education in rural Punjab and analyzes how these barriers relate to socio-cultural constructs. Despite the constitution guaranteeing equal education for all and various projects working towards improving access to education for girls, a huge proportion of girls remain out of school due to gendered discrimination. The thesis focuses on the case study analysis of rural Punjab and how various social norms such as early marriage, mobility restrictions, dependence on male members of the household, patriarchy, gendered stereotypes, culturally fabricated gender roles which tie the identity of females with household work only, and future economic dependence on sons and not daughters, leads to imbalance in education attainment and retention. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews of education experts and a comprehensive literature review, which provided appropriate insights on how access is an issue of socio-cultural constructs. The thesis outlines the culturally sensitive aspects of policy interventions and localized education reforms to mitigate the impacts of socio-cultural constructs, leading to improved education access for girls.

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This thesis is dedicated to all the girls in Pakistan – who are working hard for their education and to fulfil their dreams. You are our brightest stars of the future!

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List of Abbreviations

ASER   Annual Status of Education Report

PEF   Punjab Education Foundation

TCF   The Citizens Foundation

ITA   Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi

Chapter One – Introduction

The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan includes education as the fundamental human right. Despite this, lots of children and more specifically girls have limited or no access to education. Though there is a clear linkage of these barriers with the economic factors, this has a deep-rooted linkage with social and cultural factors prevalent in Pakistan, specifically in the rural areas.

The thesis focuses on the gender-based barriers to girls' education in Rural Punjab, Pakistan, specifically exploring socio-cultural norms which disseminate these barriers. The idea of these barriers is hugely impacted by the societal expectations of household chores and responsibilities, early marriage, mobility limitations, preference to education of boys, and these factors have a combined effect on the enrollment and education outcomes for girls.

By analyzing the intersectionality of gender, social norms, culture, and education, the thesis aims to examine the underlying reasons which propagate education inequality and its sustenance and to highlight the already existing culturally sensitive policy interventions and the potential interventions in this context.

Context

With a growing population of 252 million, Pakistan faces challenges in ensuring education for all and particularly while dealing with disparities. The tiers are divided into primary school (grade 1-5), middle school (grade 6-8), secondary school (9-10), higher secondary school (11-12), higher education (university level education). There have been continuous efforts from the state but due to deeply rooted socio-cultural problems, the disparities persist. A significant number of girls remain out of school, especially in the rural areas. In some rural areas, patriarchy is one of

the most important factors leading to the prevalent trends. Population wise, Punjab is the largest province of Pakistan and is the backbone of the agrarian economy of the country. The province is divided into urban and rural areas, with major cities like Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Rawalpindi, Sialkot, etc. as part of urban areas and villages and smaller communities as part of rural areas. There is a huge difference between the urban and rural areas when it comes to development, funds allocation, infrastructure, and access to education and health facilities, with urban areas showing significantly better indicators in these fields. While both public and private schools are available in urban areas, for rural areas there are mainly public schools with very few private schools. The public and private education system divide is also a key factor in determining the quality of education. In most cases, private schools have less student to teacher ratio, more fees, better facilities and infrastructure, and strict evaluation criteria for each student, as compared to public schools. It is important to mention that majority of the poorer households, if at all, send their children to public schools as they cannot afford to send their children to private schools. For rural areas, there is less availability of private schools due to lesser demand, and the major factor is financial constraints of families living in these rural areas.

The urban centers in the province have shown progress when it comes to education of girls, but the education scenario in rural Punjab faces the challenges of culture and tradition, leading to marginalization of access to education for girls. Major factors include household economic conditions, poor school infrastructure, perceived linkage of role of girls with domestic chores, lack of female teachers, schools at greater distances from households, and considering males as household heads and the ones who ae supposed to be educated and to eventually bear the economic responsibility of the household.

The household income and household size play a pivotal role in determining the access to education for girls in Rural Punjab. For families with economic constraints, when it comes to making a decision regarding sending a girl child to school or a boy child to school, parents prefer to send the boys to school as according to social customs, boys are expected to live with their parents and look after them financially. Girls on the other hand get married and move out of their parents' home after a certain age. In these situations of economic tradeoff, parents must make a choice on where to spend the funds.

In rural Punjab, many households depend on agricultural output as the sole source of income. It is a common perception that the responsibility of household chores is on girls. If the girls are enrolled in school, this particularly means that they wouldn't be available from seven in the morning till two in the afternoon to help with cooking, cleaning and in certain scenarios to take care of their younger siblings. Apart from the social norm of girls to marry at a younger age, in certain households this is also done to reduce the economic burden of the family. Given this background and context, it becomes a huge cost to spend on girls' education as the social structure is such that the payback is extremely low.

Another important aspect to consider is that education becomes a secondary preference in scenarios where survival is at stake. A lot of families living in rural Punjab live closer to poverty line and it becomes extremely difficult for these families to allocate funds for the education of their children; both girls and boys, when the primary focus is to make sure that they have food for one mealtime of the day. For these situations, interventions like cash transfers prove to be inefficient as the preferences of these households diverge from the mainstream preferences when it comes to educating children, and hence the success of these interventions is adversely impacted due to the structural complexity of the situation.

Another major barrier to girls' education is lack of female teachers in schools in rural areas. Due to the societal norms, it is considered inappropriate to send girls to schools which have male staff members. Proximity of girls with a male member outside of the family is a taboo in the rural setting. For schools to be considered a safe space, it is considered necessary for certain families to have female teachers at schools to ensure that their daughters are in a safe space. This could also be linked to the fact that girls feel more comfortable when taught by female teachers and they feel it easier to ask questions. Another preference by families is to send their girls to schools which don't have co-education, specifically beyond primary level. This cultural preference is well accounted for and public schools in rural areas don't have co-educational facilities but because of this, two public schools, i.e. one for boys and for girls, cannot be established in each village and hence, there are villages where there is no school for girls and they have to travel to a nearby bigger village for school. Due to this limitation, a lot of parents find it difficult to pick and drop their children and this ultimately leads to an increased dropout ratio of girls from the school.

From female teachers' viewpoint as well, there is lower preference to be employed in far off villages. Government jobs are a safe employment option and there have been continuous efforts by the government to increase the openings of female government teachers' jobs at a decent salary range, but due to huge travel distances and safety concerns, teachers prefer to settle down in urban areas. This situation becomes more complex for the teachers who are married and have children to look after. For teachers who do not have much support to look after their children at home and due to limited financial resources, they cannot opt for day care, it becomes even more difficult to travel to schools at longer distances from their homes. Due to the non-availability of

teachers in these far-off areas because of lower preference, there are lesser schools for girls in these areas. This also leads to a major impediment in access to education for girls.

The availability of female teachers is also linked to the idea of comfort level of mothers to visit schools to understand how they can further support their daughters. Due to socio-cultural norms, if there are male teachers and administrative members in schools, mothers would be hesitant to visit schools and discuss in detail the academic trajectory of their daughters. In rural context, daughters are more comfortable in discussing the issues with their mothers rather than sharing these with their fathers. For this reason as well, it is absolutely essential for mothers to be involved in the education process of their daughters. An increased parental involvement and regular updates can have a significant positive impact on the learning outcomes of the children.

In rural Punjab areas, specifically where there is lesser population, schools are situated at longer distances. For this, students have to walk longer distances or rely on other modes of transportation every day to reach schools. Parents are hesitant to send their children to school, especially girls, in scenarios where they have to walk longer distances. This is primarily because of safety concerns and lack of autonomy when it comes to mobility for girls. Cultural norms dominate when it comes to decision making in this process. This also has a linkage with the idea of potential drawbacks of spending on girls' education. This has an overlap with societal norms of early marriages as well. Parents are of the view that when they have to marry off their daughters, it might not be a sustainable idea to spend on the education of girls. Some parents also believe that by sending their girls to schools which are far off can also put the reputation of their families at stake as they might have to travel these distances on their own, and people from conservative mindset might form different perceptions about them.

Given the financial constraint, it becomes extremely difficult for families to afford the pick and drop on a daily basis. This also has to do with the availability of only one common vehicle, usually a motorbike, used commonly by the whole household and utilization of this vehicle for pick up and drop off can delay the day-to-day activities.

This also has to do with the network of public transportation. Considering the societal norms, it is easier for boys to use public transport, whereas it is a less common practice for girls of these areas to use public transportation to reach schools. In some cases, rickshaws or school vans are the safest option in which there are five to six or more girls travelling in the same vehicle to school, but the cost of using these means of transportation becomes expensive for lower income households.

The primary reason for lack of schools in these areas is linked to unequal distribution of resources when it comes to urban and rural divide of education. This is also linked to the previous idea of lack of female teachers in these areas. Unavailability of teachers leads to lesser schools in these areas. In circumstances of lesser availability of staff, it becomes economically unproductive for the government to construct schools in these areas. And for families, it becomes extremely difficult to have someone to chaperon girls to schools on a daily basis.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

According to article 25-A of the constitution of Pakistan, there should be free and compulsory education for all, but the reality is different from this. There are millions of girls who are out of school, and these numbers are largely observed in rural and less developed areas. This chapter analyzes the existing literature on gender-based barriers to girls' education, linked to the socio-cultural aspects prevalent in the country.

Enrollment and Retention of Girls in Punjab

Despite being the largest province of Pakistan population wise, existing literature also depicts huge disparities when it comes to gender-based comparison of access to education. Though there are high enrollment rates seen at specific levels, looking at the overall statistics, 50% of the school age girls in Punjab have never attended school and 26% dropped out in primary school (Mazoor et.al 2022). Across literature, enrollment into schools and retention beyond primary levels are shown as two important factors in determining long term access to education. While in certain cases, it could be that there is initial access to schools but that doesn't translate into a long-term impact in terms of retention in schools.

This is also deeply linked with the budget allocation for the education of boys and girls. During the fiscal year 2016-2017, the primary budget allocated for the education of girls was 19%, as compared to the 25% budget allocation for education of boys (Manzoor et.al 2022). This is also directly linked to the maintenance of schools for girls and boys. When there is less budget allocation for girls' schools, less is spent on the upkeep and maintenance of these schools, which in itself becomes a major barrier in access to education, as these schools have lesser facilities and poorer infrastructure. This is also reflected in the gender specific analysis of budget allocation,

which can help increase enrollment and retention. For the same fiscal year, statistics show that even less than 1% of the budget is allocated to be spent on integral component of safe transportation means for girls to reach school (Manzoor et.al 2022). This also has a clear linkage with the retention of girls in schools while transitioning from primary to secondary schools. While a lot of villages still have primary schools, but these numbers decrease when it comes to secondary school in each village (Manzoor et.al 2022). If there were improved transportation means, the retention rates would have been better.

The access to education for girls is also directly linked to the concept of mother's education and household income. The chance of a girl receiving education increases by 2.84% if the mother in that household is educated, and the chance of a girl receiving education increases by 14.2% if there is an increase in the monthly income of the household (Ali, Khan and Ali 2024). The access of education is negatively related with household size. The chance of girls receiving education in a household decreases by 3.24% if the size of the household increases (Ali, Khan and Ali 2024).

Integration of Curriculum with Socio-Cultural Constructs

The curriculum is heavily influenced by the gender norms which are prejudiced by how a society operates. The textbooks depict women involved in household responsibilities and looking after their children, being limited to lesser professions, while men are depicted as the ones having greater autonomy when it comes to mobility, and women being dependent on men while travelling from one place to another (Mursaleen and Taimur 2023). This is also closely intertwined with how textbooks are inspiring younger girls. Across different subjects, only 7.7% of the total role model out of 251 personalities, were female role models (Mursaleen and Taimur 2023). The also leads to women taking up only certain subjects, which according to the society are the only options suitable for women. The concept of gender hierarchy is reinforced through

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these textbooks (Mursaleen and Taimur 2003), which again proliferates into the society, with the younger generations being exposed to these concepts at schools.

This is contrary to the religious teachings as Islam equally promotes the education for females and males. But due to the pre-conceived notions stemming from cultural ideologies, there is misinterpretation of religion. Female students aren't encouraged to opt for subjects which can lead to diverse career options. The two professions which are considered as a popular choice for women are teaching and being a doctor (Mursaleen and Taimur 2023). There is also a concept of safety associated with these two professions. Parents from a conservative background have a perception that if their daughters want to continue a professional career, it is safer to opt for either of these two professions.

Responsibility of Teachers

Teachers being the primary actors in the process, have a huge role to play in mitigating the impact of what female students take away from schools as part of daily learning process. To begin with, adequate female teachers in public schools in rural areas have an impact on the enrollment of girls in schools. More female teachers mean more parents would be willing to send their girls to schools whereas lesser female teachers mean lesser girls would be enrolled in school. But from teachers' point of view, it is essential to understand what factors can increase teachers' motivation to teach at these schools. Better salaries and better transportation mechanisms to these schools in rural areas could remove two of the biggest barriers in hiring qualified teachers in schools in rural areas. It is often observed that teachers prefer to take up jobs in urban areas because of the lack of support services they could rely on in these rural areas (Jamal 2014). From a gender specific perspective, it is also essential to hire qualified female

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teachers. For this, lack of female accommodation facilities in this area is also a deterrent (Jamal 2014).

Some parallels could be drawn from other provinces as well. A few rural areas in Punjab and some areas in KPK have overlaps in terms of cultural ideologies, when it comes to involving locals in decision making or when gearing towards initiating a shift in ideologies. Inclusion of local community members is essential to mitigate the barriers of access to education (Jamal 2014). Exclusion of local community members while bringing about any change to mitigate these barriers can rather intensify the impediments.

Poverty as a Barrier

In lower income households, if the household is lying below the poverty line, this has almost the same impact for education attainment for boys and girls. But if the household income increases, though the chances for access to education for boys and girls increase, but if we look at it comparatively, the chances of getting access to education for boys are more than the chances for girls. The increase in household income has a positive relation with education attainment for girls and boys (Pasha 2023). This positive relation is impacted by social and cultural factors. In cases of increase in household income, the social factors propagate the idea of investment in education of boys. This is entangled with the concept of boys financially supporting their parents when they grow, as girls get married and move to another household. It is a common perception that the return of educating boys is more as compared to the return of education to girls (Pasha 2023), as they become part of another family after getting married.

Impact of Natural Disasters on Girls' Education

Literature supports that natural calamities have a gendered impact on access to education. These calamities impact girls' education attainment and retention more than boys' attainment and retention. Though observed in the province of KPK, an interesting study shows that lesser number of girls returned to schools after 2022 floods, as they had to earn for the family or stay back at home while their mothers worked (Gul, Khalil and Hidayat 2024). In these situations, it is less likely due to social norms that boys stay back at home and girls continue their education. Since the concept of bearing the financial burden of the family lies with the male member of the society, girls are expected to give up on certain things or make and compromise in these situations. It is also observed that after these natural disasters, the probability of child marriage of girls increases (Gul, Khalil and Hidayat 2024). This creates further problems for girls as it becomes extremely difficult for girls to resume their educational journey after marriage and kids.

Gendered Expectations

Even in households which fall in the upper income bracket, the expectations of education outcomes are gendered. From boys, it is expected that they would eventually bear the financial responsibility of the family in the future. In many other cases, the expectation is for them to gain maximum out this experience, establish contacts by having a good career placement eventually. From girls, there is a different expectation. To pursue a job or not, depends on the household circumstances. The major goal is to prepare boys for taking up a professional role later in life and being the financial support of the family (Hinduja, Siddiqui and Kamran 2024). The expectations from females are contrary to this. They aren't considered as bread winners, and hence, education is an option for them and not a compulsory component. Due to this, even if the economic situation of the household is extremely dire, the society would still want this financial

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dependency of women on men for the sustenance of power dynamics (Hinduja, Siddiqui, and Kamran 2024). This is also depicted by observing absence of male members from households, which leads to increase in expenditure on women. "Results suggest that in households from which men migrate for periods longer than six months, the share of education expenditures spent on girls is up to 31 percent higher than that of the average household in the sample" (Saleemi 2023). This shows that in circumstances where there is absence of men for a certain time frame, the mainstream expectations are also challenged and there is more expenditure on girls, challenging the usual spending pattern in a household.

Power Dynamics

For situations where power dynamics prevail, it is considered as a threat if girls of a household are equally educated as boys. Some men assert power on women through various measures, out of which the most recurrent and relevant one is education. If girls were educated, they would raise more questions and eventually, they would question the status quo. These patterns create gender disparity which is deeply rooted in the core and suggest more stereotypical role adoption for both girls and boys. Education for girls can lead to strong bargaining power and girls then can have more autonomy. In a society which operates on the core ideology of favoring the stronger gender, it becomes extremely difficult for these power dynamics to shift, but education can serve as a key factor to shift these patterns (Sameer 2024). Over the period, if these patterns which have existed over years, are challenged more rigorously, it could lead to better education access opportunities, education attainment and retention levels for girls. All these factors together can improve the overall condition of the education status for girls in the country.

Chapter Three – Methodology

This thesis explores the research question "how are the gender-based barriers impacting access to education for girls in rural Punjab, Pakistan, and why is it an issue of socio-cultural constructs?". For this, case study analysis of rural Punjab was done through existing literature, interviewing three experts from the education sector in Pakistan, and for policy recommendations, exploring the relevant model of TCF which incorporates culturally sensitive approaches to tackle the barriers to girls' education, and speaking to a focal person at the organization. Each interview with the expert lasted for almost forty-five minutes to an hour.

Rationale of Case Selection

This specific case of observing how gender-based barriers impact access to education for girls in rural Punjab, and why is it an issue of socio-cultural constructs, is selected based on the significant disparity that exists between girls and boys when it comes to access to education in rural Punjab, Pakistan. It would also be interesting to note how deeply embedded socio-cultural factors influence the household level decision of choosing between a girl child and a boy child when it comes to education. This case was of particular interest to me to observe how these patterns might have changed over time (or why they are still the same), and what policy reforms or educational models might have worked.

Operationalization of Core Concepts

The operationalization of core concepts is done through observing gender-based barriers such as patriarchy, household income and spending, mobility for girls, early marriage, co-education school system, dowry, and impact of socio-cultural factors such as respect of families being

linked to factors like girls staying inside the house, stereotypical role adoption within the premises of home such as cooking and cleaning, and girls seen as economic burden or a less popular choice when it comes to parents' decision to either spend on their male child or female child.

Type of Data Utilized

This research utilized qualitative data involving literature review, conducting semi-structured interviews with education experts (who are familiar with the education landscape of Pakistan), interviewing focal person from The Citizens Foundation (TCF), to understand this educational model and how this unit is tackling various barriers when it comes to access to education for girls.

Data Collection/ Selection/ Interpretation

The interviews conducted with leading experts were primarily semi-structured interviews, designed to avoid suggestive yes or no responses, rather to cover the broader themes in detail. This format led the experts to share their views with a broader perspective, rather than focusing on one main theme, and sharing experiences of their field observations. Thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the patterns in the transcribed text and identifying the underlying themes and then using coding for responses, to analyze the pattern. For instance, some of the themes linked to the questions were patriarchal norms, access and infrastructure, economic disparities, cultural discernments, government policies and gaps, and positive change drivers. For the interpretation process, the transcripts were referred to multiple times to ensure that there is no bias while noting the findings, and to ensure the accuracy of context. The themes were further refined by cross comparison between interviews and triangulation with findings of the

literature review. By analyzing the interviews through this approach, the research focused on the

intersection of various inter-related contributory factors, such as culture, social structure,

economics, household dynamics, and analyzing views of those who have been working in the

field from a considerable amount of time and have an in-depth knowledge about the matter. The

findings from interviews were included in the wider perspective of the research, proving to be

consistent with the findings extracted through existing literature.

By generating themes and creating categories for these barriers, it was easier to identify the

patterns that have existed over years, and how these inequalities are either a product of the socio-

cultural norms or are closely tied with the socio-cultural practices. The approach of thematic

analysis was consistent with the overall objective of the research to identify the gender-based

barriers to girls' education in rural Punjab and how socio-cultural factors define these barriers.

For reference, the following table includes the question templates:

Table 1 Interview Questions

What in your opinion are the major gender-based barriers to girls' education in Pakistan and more specifically in rural Punjab?
What in your opinion are the social and cultural factors which lead to these gender-based barriers?
What are some areas in which boys have advantages over girls in terms of access to education? Are these economic barriers or socio-cultural barriers, or both?
Are other provinces different in terms of access to education for girls?
Are there any changing trends?
If yes, what is the major driving force (s) for these changing trends?
If there is no evident change in trends, what could be the major reasons?
In your opinion, are there any gender based governmental interventions which are effective?
What significant steps could be taken to make the situation better?
Any relevant reports/ databases which can provide further information?
Additional insights/ themes that could be pertinent for the thesis research

Table 2 Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes
Patriarchal Norms	Early Marriage, Gender Roles, Honor
Access and Infrastructure	School Distance, Lack of Female Teachers, Lack of Transportation Modes
Economic Disparities	Cost of Schooling, Poverty, Preference to Boys
Cultural Discernments	Lesser Returns, Taboo
Government Policies and Gaps	Implementation Effectiveness
Positive Change Drivers	Women Role Models, More Female Teachers, Sensitization of boys

In depth analytical purpose and themes from these interviews are given in appendix section.

The main aim of these questions was to identify the multi-dimensionality of the barriers to girls' education and why it has an overlap with the socio-cultural factors. The experts reflected on whether these challenges were structural or not, or both, and how other factors, such as economic decisions of the households are also dominated by the socio-cultural factors. The questions were designed in a way to observe whether there was an overlap of patriarchy and poverty, where even if the economic situation of the household improves, the factor of patriarchy would overshadow the decisions taken. For instance, if the income of the household increased, cultural norms and societal expectations of giving priority to boys over girls have a strong impact on how decisions are taken.

Limitations

The major limitation in this regard was speaking to teachers. Establishment of access to teachers was a multi-layered process and hence wasn't possible given the sensitivity of the study. The second factor links to the generalizability of the study. Since this is a qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalized to all rural settings of Pakistan. The impact of factors like lack of female teachers and longer travelling distances would have varying impacts on different areas of

rural segments of the province as it is also linked to changing trends and patterns. The rural areas of Punjab which are closer to the urban centers have a probability of being more progressive when it comes to factoring in these points whereas the areas which are far away from the urban centers might be more conservative when it comes to sending girls to schools with lack of female teachers and situated at longer distances. Thirdly, though the topic is well researched, it could also be that due to the stigmatization, it is underreported in certain areas and the impacts cannot be truly revealed through the existing literature. The idea of respect and repute has prime significance when it comes to families living in rural areas. Looking at it from a cultural viewpoint, the families living in rural areas, to preserve the privacy of their families, do not prefer disclosure of information. They also have reservations on how the data would be projected. In scenarios where this data can go against the repute of the village, they would have apprehensions to share it. Access to rural households is another relevant factor in the underreporting of pertinent cases. Some male household heads do not like the notion of field researchers entering their homes and collecting data, even if the researchers are female members. And in cases where there is no hurdle in access to these households, it could be that the families are not willing to share information based on the nature of the subject. For girls to talk about factors like how male teachers at school could be a problem and how early marriages can be deterrent for them to enter schools, could be extremely difficult. This again connects back to girls having a certain demeanor to be socially acceptable. All these factors together play an important role in underreporting such cases in some rural areas of the country. Furthermore, including the model of TCF is no way an impact evaluation of the model, it provides details about the model and how it caters to the culturally sensitive needs when it comes to access to education for girls.

Chapter Four - Empirical Studies and Findings

Using Annual Statistics of Education Report (ASER) 2023, Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) Annual Report 2022 and World Bank Report 2024, this chapter analyzes the empirical findings in terms of socio-cultural contexts of barriers to girls' education. These reports are from credible sources and hence served as a reliable source to extract relevant information. ASER is a credible source for district wise data for learning indicators and disparities associated with gender, making it an extremely relevant source for contextualizing the findings. PEF highlights the provincial data and localized barriers with area specific details. The World Bank report reflects on the global and national context, and then establishing a link with the provincial context, in the broader education landscape of the country. Together, these reports play a critical role in providing empirics and triangulating data when it comes to understanding the barriers and defining a way forward in terms of policy interventions with an informed localized context.

Section A is structured around vital themes and how these are affected by societal norms. These vital themes were selected based on review of literature, information shared by the education experts and most importantly the recurrence of these themes across literature and interviews, which highlighted their pertinence and significance. Their relevance led to the establishment of a structured empirical analysis based on these themes for further insights.

Section B focuses on findings of interviews conducted in this regard.

Section A

In context of socio-cultural constructs and gender norms, "social beliefs around gender roles and expectations" are identified as a major challenge to girls' education (Baron et.al 2024). In rural Punjab, these norms are deeply rooted in day-to-day life, strengthening the concept of

domesticity, early marriage and compliance over maximizing access to education for girls and ensuring academic access.

This has to do with the patriarchal ideology as part of which, female education is an option rather than a compulsory element as thought for boys. The male heads of the family consider this as a potential threat, because of which it is perceived that girls would be more financially independent, a term which is considered to be a taboo.

It is a prevalent perception in rural segments to condition girls in a way to make them discordant with the education system and train them in a way which is consistent with the patriarchal norms of society. The idea is to make them ready for managing the household responsibility and eventually giving all their time and attention to their children and husbands. This leads to a lower enrolment and higher dropout rate at secondary and higher secondary levels. For most of the girls, it is nearly impossible to resume their studies once they have dropped out.

Among children of age 5-16, 18% of rural girls remain out of school as compared to the 14% boys who are out of school in the same setting (ASER 2023). This becomes even more problematic when we consider the element of income. 54% of out of school children in Pakistan are girls (Baron et.al 2024). This disparity is starkly visible in rural areas where inadequacy of funds, poor infrastructure, lesser number of female teaching staff, and all other relevant factors have a gendered impact. These factors have a more negative impact on access for girls as compared to access for boys. For instance, if there is poor infrastructure of road networks, parents would be hesitant to send their daughters to schools, but this wouldn't have a significant impact on boys. Similarly lack of female teachers has a significant negative impact on girls as compared to boys.

Economic factors also confine girls' access to education. Private tuition is primarily unaffordable by the poorer families and only 6% of the children in the poorest bracket avail tuition, as compared to the 14% of the children from the higher income households (ASER 2023). When it comes to education for girls, particularly when household income is low, parents cannot afford to bear the expenses of textbooks, uniforms, transportation, and hence sending girls to schools becomes even more difficult.

The national government of Pakistan spends 2.3% of its GDP on education and out of this, 70% is spent on salaries, leaving lesser funds for interventions for females (Baron et.al 2024). This increases the dropout rate for girls, impacting the overall education indicators. Though this doesn't suggest salary cuts for teachers as the problem lies with the overall minimal percentage of GDP being spent on education. This suggests a need for more budget allocation for education, because the current amount majorly goes into paying for salaries, as the amount allocated for education is not significant and just goes into covering for salaries of teachers, rather than being spent on interventions.

When we factor in the distance to school as a determinant of access to education, the highest dropout rate is observed after Grade 5, due to the unavailability of middle schools in nearby areas (ASER 2023). Travelling to longer distances is not considered safe when it comes to factoring in the cultural narrative. 50% of the union councils in Punjab have a middle school for girls as opposed to the 76% schools for boys. In this situation, families prefer not to send their daughters to school rather than making them travel long distances which according to their perception increases vulnerability (Baron et.al 2024). This again reinforces the already existing inequalities in society, leading to marginalization of girls when it comes to access to education.

Looking at the status of female teachers in rural Punjab, only 33% of teachers in rural Punjab are female, which is a main deterrent when it comes to parents deciding whether to enroll their daughters in schools (ASER 2023). The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) 2022 mentions that schools in rural areas of Pakistan struggle to employ qualified female teachers because of longer commutes, lower salaries and unavailability of accommodation for these teachers (PEF 2022). Lack of female teachers is one of the major barriers to girls' education (Baron et.al 2024). Because of the lack of female staff, many parents aren't confident in sending their daughters to school with male teaching staff as they find this interaction to be against cultural norms. They also have the fear of harassment in this situation.

While analyzing the impact of natural disasters, statistics show that 20% of the rural households report that their children's schooling was adversely impacted due to natural disasters (ASER 2023). During these crises, the probability of girls being withdrawn from the course is far more as compared to the boys. The primary reason for this is the reallocation of resources and prioritization of high need areas for expenditure, and the education of girls comes far down in the list. Girls are expected to help in the household chores, which eventually limits their chances of enrolling again.

Section B

The interviews with education experts revealed the complexity of the deeply rooted barriers to girls' education in rural Punjab. These interviews focused on how these inequalities were linked with the societal fabric and reinforced limitation of access to education for girls. As explained in the methodology section, these interviews highlighted some major themes which were then coded and analyzed across interviews and triangulated through literature.

Table 3 In depth Interview Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes
Class based inequality	Landlord control, power dynamics, preference for son, economic dependence
Patriarchy	Limited female autonomy, status quo, male dominance
Early Marriage	Limited investment in girls, economic survival
Gender Vulnerability	Societal expectations, marriageability
Teachers Reinforcing Gender Norms	Gender Bias in Class, Behavioral Stereotyping
Gendered Curriculum	Limited aspirations
Temporal Barriers	Role Conflict due to time constraint
Sensitization of Boys	Early education and training on gender equity

One of the experts rightly pointed out by saying:

"*We try to resolve the systems but not the root cause*"

This statement is an impactful narrative in the specific case. Over years, there has been an effort to increase access to education for girls, but this access hasn't been effective because the root cause of various societal and cultural norms which influence perceptions of people still prevails.

During these interviews, class emerged as a huge barrier and one of the most relevant themes; affluent families do what's best for them. In rural areas, there are one to two powerful families in

each village. In these areas, there are blocks called chak (settlement area in the form of a village). As one of the experts pointed out,

"People associate villages with landlords and call it the landlord's allaqa (their area/something which they own). This power is directly associated to the land that these families own".

This implies that the more land, the more power these families have. These families have power assertion mechanisms, out of which one is to limit access to education for the underprivileged communities living in these villages. Education is considered as a tool for upward social mobility and because of this, education of these underprivileged communities is considered as a threat to the powerful segments of society. To limit this upward social mobility and eventually pose a threat to the power dynamics of the ruling class, access to education is made limited. Given these patterns, it becomes even more difficult to increase access of education for girls. In this scenario, if parents had a chance of sending any of their children for education purposes to a family member living in urban areas, they would choose their sons. These patterns are deeply engrained in society, and it becomes extremely challenging to reverse these patterns, given that these underprivileged communities rely heavily for their income on the ruling class, as in most cases they work on the farms of these powerful families. In cases where they don't work on their farms, they have taken hefty amounts to arrange from the ruling class to either marry off their children or in cases of medical emergencies. Economic violence exercised by the powerful in society strengthens this class system even further.

The theme of patriarchy had a strong linkage with educational disparities in terms of gendered access. As pointed out in all interviews, this defines a lot of patterns in rural societies of Pakistan. Common questions of why girls have limited access to education, health and other resources, are heavily linked with patriarchy. Areas which are under the high influence of patriarchy show more

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restraint in giving equal access to girls in leading domain. This mindset is more prevalent in rural areas because of the lack of education in earlier generations as well. This is also intertwined with maintaining the status quo. As one of the experts pointed out:

"Educating girls poses a direct threat to patriarchy and would eventually raise more questions and make it unsustainable for the people who use it as a mechanism to assert power."

Experts pointed out that early marriages have a direct linkage with the economic benefits that the families gain in terms of less expenditure by marrying off girls at young age. In rural areas, the concept of early marriages is more prevalent. As one of the experts rightly points out:

"The goal of the parents is to make the girls marriageable, and this idea propagates these inequalities even further."

Early marriages primarily mean less mouths to feed. The average age at which a girl gets married in rural areas is around 18-20 years. In this context, when parents already know that they would marry off their daughters at this age, they wouldn't be willing to spend as much on the education of their daughters as much they would be spending on the education of their sons. One expert stated:

"Education is seen as a tool to engage with market, so parents need to see a trajectory."

This implies that since this trajectory is often blurred in the case of girls, the motivation to spend on daughters' education is dampened due to lower returns.

Gender Vulnerability

One pertinent theme highlighted in these interviews was gender vulnerability. Gender vulnerability in this context is a matter of social stigma. Parents in rural areas often think that if their daughters are educated beyond a certain level, it will reduce the chances of good marriages

because they would exceed the socially acceptable age of marriage. In rural areas, a good match for girls is considered to be the ultimate goal and success. This gender vulnerability is also considered to be knotted with the idea of being a good wife. People in rural areas are of the view that if girls are educated, they would be opinionated, and this would negatively impact their obedience to husbands – which is an important trait as categorized by people of rural areas.

Education experts also pointed out that teachers are also a force of change in society. Teachers have a powerful role to play in this and in certain cases, teachers reinforce these barriers. The association of certain qualities with girls plays a significant role in this. Girls are expected to be not too dogmatic and conduct themselves in a certain manner. The trait of being assertive is considered synonymous with being misbehaving, being too loud, or outspoken. Girls are taught to speak and act in a certain way which is consistent with the societal image of the genders. In classroom settings, there is also gender stereotyping such as creating bias when it comes to subject selection. Girls are generally associated with arts subjects, whereas subjects of mathematics and science are associated with boys. This is also evident with the sports selection. In many cases, girls are chosen for participation in board games whereas sports like cricket, hockey, football, and basketball are frequently associated with boys. In cases where sports teachers encourage girls to participate in other sports, these patterns are challenged and hence proves that teachers play a pivotal role in this. There is a high need for teachers to be given gender sensitive training and creating awareness regarding the gender sensitive approaches.

Curriculum plays a significant role in terms of either propagating gender equality or reinforcing inequalities. Textbooks reinforce stereotypes by showing girls doing particular household chores and boys being shown managing tasks outside the home. This is also seen in the form of lesser representation of women in certain fields depicted through textbooks, such as girls would mostly

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be seen as being in the medical profession or in the field of arts and boys as pilots and engineers, though this trend is changing now, and there is more depiction of women in different roles such as pilots, engineers, and there is more depiction of women in the field of science and mathematics and in leadership roles. This imbalance stems from the societal norms, but it is also the agent of strengthening these inequalities even further. At early ages, girls draw inspiration from these textbooks to choose their profession, and by depicting a few of these professions as popular choice for girls, this accentuates these inequalities even further.

Barriers related to time impose an impediment in overall access of education for girls. There is always a tradeoff in spending this time on either education or in household chores. These barriers gain strength after factors like marriage. After marriage and children, it becomes even more difficult for girls to take out time for their studies. This poses a huge challenge in effective and smooth process of educating girls.

Across interviews, an important point being discussed was the sensitization of boys towards gender equality and how the importance of this concept is often ignored by stakeholders. As one of the experts raised the point:

"They exclude girls because that is what they have learnt from their environment"

Being raised in an environment with gender stereotypes and exposure to other forms of gender imbalance in day-to-day life, boys are desensitized towards the idea of maintaining gender balance. Since these patterns are being repeated over decades, the heads of households who are males, have been part of the same social fabric and have the same thought process. Because of this, the environment is based on these ideas which have been nourished for years and it becomes extremely important to make boys aware so that they don't follow the same pattern in future. To

make the environment more conducive for girls in terms of access to education, making the boys

sensitized towards these concepts from a very young age is extremely important.

Chapter Five – Discussion

In light of the gender-based barriers to girls' education discussed in this study, in relevance to policy recommendations, an important model is of The Citizens Foundation (TCF). It has been working in the education sector of Pakistan for the past 30 years, providing culturally sensitive solutions to the existing problems. The following section looks at its relevance regarding the barriers that have been mentioned earlier in the study.

The TCF Model

The Citizens Foundation (TCF)[1], established in 1995, is a non-profit organization, with the aim to create positive impact in the educational landscape. There are 2033 school units with 301,000 students. The model is based on the vision of catering to the needy, embedding schools in the hearts of urban slums and rural communities, with an all-female faculty and a 50% female student gender ratio. After conducting an interview with the focal person at TCF, it was noted that out of the 2033 school units, 824 (41%) are in Punjab, 1015 (50%) in Sindh, 91 (5%) in Balochistan, 88 (5%) in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa, and 15 (1%) in AJK. As highlighted by the focal person, by building these schools in underprivileged areas, the model ensures that access to education is increased for both girls and boys. This specifically creates a more positive impact for girls as having a school close by reduces the transportation costs. In those cases where the only deterrent in sending girls to schools is the reason that schools are situated at longer distances, and parents don't want to send their daughters to schools because of the incurred transportation costs, this initiative has made a significant impact in mitigating this concern. As

[1] Link to TCF's website: Home - The Citizens Foundation (TCF)

stated by the focal person, this initiative deals with the safety related apprehensions of parents and encourages them to send their daughters to schools.

The school also has an all-female teachers recruitment model. The focal person also pointed out that in rural areas, parents are reluctant to send their daughters to schools which has male faculty members. This concern is generally less prevalent in urban areas. To tackle this cultural aspect, as mentioned by the focal person, TCF has an all-female faculty policy. The focal person highlighted that having female teachers makes female students more comfortable and has a positive impact on their learning process as female students are more confident in asking questions about the concepts they don't understand. This initiative of having all female faculty denotes significance when it comes to dealing with socio-cultural constructs. This mitigates the major barrier related to parents' concern of not sending their daughters to schools due to male faculty members. This initiative is one of its kind in providing remedy to a deeply embedded socio-cultural construct. This also tackles the aspect of gender stereotyping. When young female students see their female teachers as someone in position of authority, they look up to them and aspire to do well in their academics and adopt a career of their own choice later on. TCF also hires teachers who have been part of the student body at the organization, which creates a clear projection of career pathway, which helps both students and their parents, in terms of having security when it comes to career trajectory. Not only this, but TCF also has a program aimed at making the students digitally literate. This is also one of the extremely important techniques in making the students market ready for jobs and increasing their chances of employability. This is particularly beneficial for girls, since parents are more willing to send their daughters to school if they see a clear employability path, just as they aspire for their sons.

TCF also has a 50% female student gender ratio, which tackles the exclusion of girls from the education system. Having an all-female faculty, along with a 50% female student gender ratio, is a targeted strategy to increase inclusivity for girls in the system, which leads to an increased mitigation of gender marginalization in the society. The organization also creates positive spillover impact for the community. Training programs are conducted for the women who are living in nearby areas of these schools. Till now, in eleven districts of the country, almost 3700 women have been trained through these programs.

TCF Alumni are a source of inspiration for the students studying at these school units. Some of the girls who studied at TCF are now placed at reputable organizations and bringing change in the society. This creates a ripple effect in generating more impact in the society. The model also ensures financial inclusion of students from lower income households by providing scholarships. This tackles the tradeoff that parents have to face while factoring in the opportunity cost of sending their daughters to schools. When there is no fee associated to it, parents don't have to make a financial decision and this makes the process of enrolling their daughters in schools comparatively easier.

Other Actions to be Taken by the State

The first step should be more recruitment of female teachers in schools of rural areas. As discussed in the empirical studies section, while it is extremely important to work on increasing the access, it is more important to work on resolving the barriers that arise due to socio-cultural factors and in return, access would automatically be enhanced. One of the major policy areas could be designing lucrative job positions for teachers, which motivate more female professionals to take up these jobs. As discussed earlier, the major reason for not taking up jobs in rural areas is lack of facilities in these areas. A few important domains to be worked upon are

increasing salaries, infrastructure improvement, and provision of accommodation facilities for female teachers in these rural areas. When these teachers have equal chances of getting a job in urban areas, they would prefer to opt for the teaching jobs in urban centers, rather than taking up jobs in these rural areas, where they have no accommodation facilities and other facilities are also minimalistic. Due to poor infrastructure, they face the difficulty of extra commute time, and this becomes a huge trade off for them. By increasing salaries of teachers working in rural areas, this would increase the chances of female teachers applying for these jobs. This would help lessen the socio-cultural reservations that the families in these rural areas have when it comes to sending their daughters to schools with female teachers. In these rural settings, it is also less likely for girls to have a role model from the same gender, who can aspire them to pursue and complete their studies. By increasing well qualified female teachers, the chances of girls aspiring to complete their studies increase.

There should also be a training program for sensitizing teachers towards avoiding the concept of gender stereotyping. Classroom setting plays an important role in shaping the mindset of students and if female students are exposed to identification of gender stereotyping and how to act against it, it can have a significant positive impact on their confidence levels. But for this, teachers need to be appropriately trained to impart this concept to female students. There should also be a revision of the textbooks, to make sure that there is no gender stereotyping. Moreover, girls should be shown in authoritative positions and roles of leadership, to inspire female students.

After doing need analysis in specific rural segments, government can also plan to build hostel facilities for female students. Daily commute for female students who live far from their schools becomes extremely difficulty, and in cases where the primary concern of parents is the safety concern of their daughters, having female hostels as accommodation facility near schools, can

help resolve parental concern in this aspect and increase access to education. This could also be one of the ways to enhance the probability of girls learning computer skills or other vocational skills after school hours. These accommodation facilities can include centers for training for these girls. These training centers can increase the motivation of parents to enroll their daughters in schools as this would eventually increase their chances of employability and their ability to financially support their households.

Though this might be a long-term initiative, sensitizing boys towards the concept of avoiding gender biases and gender stereotypes is extremely important as well. There could be interactive awareness campaigns in boys' schools to make them familiar with the concept, specifically in rural segments of the country, The male students belonging to these regional segments aren't fully aware of the concepts and might be involved in gender stereotyping without even knowing. There should be in-depth counselling sessions and focal groups to make them aware as eventually these boys would be heading households in future and to increase access for girls, the household heads need to be fully involved in the process to increase the impact of the initiatives done in this regard.

Conclusion

The thesis aimed to examine the gender-based barriers to girls' education in rural Punjab, Pakistan and to establish how these barriers are linked to prevalent social and cultural factors. The thesis identifies that these barriers are not just connected to economic factors, rather they are deeply connected to how gendered the norms and traditions are. Though education is considered as an empowering tool and is essential for one's progress in the society, but these perceptions are also gendered when it comes to comparison of access to education for girls and boys. Patriarchy, lack of female teachers, infrastructure lags, lack of transportation facilities, gendered curriculum, role of teachers, classroom settings, lack of training for teachers to flag and avoid gender stereotypes, gendered attribution of household chores, household economics, preference to boys over girls, marriage at an early age, lower return to education for girls, are considered as eminent factors which are an impediment in access to education for girls.

It is highlighted that the barriers in access to education for girls cannot be mitigated unless the underlying socio-cultural factors are dealt with. The way forward should be to identify these socio-cultural factors, acknowledge these, identify their starting point, and devise a way to resolve the concerns where they are stemming from. The concept of stigma related to socio-cultural factors also plays a central role. It is extremely important to alleviate the factors linked to stigma such as interaction with male teachers or travelling longer distances amid safety concerns. While economic factors also take pivotal role, it has been observed through this study that these economic factors are at play due to the underlying socio-cultural factors.

There is also a need to look at models of change already existing in the society and replicating the good practices on a larger scale. The effects of these would be far reaching and would be

beneficial for generations to come. It is important to understand that if access to education for girls is increased and if the retention is improved upon, it is not only going to be beneficial for a particular segment for the society, rather it is going to have far reaching positive impact for the entire society. While there is dire need to focus on economic marginalization when it comes to access to education, it is also equally important to look at aspects of gender marginalization and tackle this with culturally sensitive approaches.

The thesis is an effort towards continuing the discussion on problems in access to education for girls, and more than being a goal related to national development, it is closely tied with the idea of generational development because it has impacts which trickle down across multiple generations. This has a spillover effect across multiple generations as educating one generation paves way for the coming generations to complete their education. This stands particularly true for girls. Having a female family member who has completed her education can also serve as a role model and becomes a motivation for the parents to send their daughters to schools and consider education as a source of personal and professional development. There is a need for transformative reforms to ensure that just like girls in urban areas, the girls in rural areas of Pakistan excel in their academic and professional careers and are resilient enough to defeat any problem that comes their way. This transformation is only possible by working on the root cause of the situation. For this, the first step would be to deal with the socio-cultural barriers and define a way forward from there.

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Appendix

Interview Questions, Analytical Purpose, Themes

Interview Questions	Analytical Purpose	Theme/Learnings
What in your opinion are the major gender-based barriers to girls' education in Pakistan and more specifically in rural Punjab?	To identify structural barriers and social barriers	Exclusion Based on Class, Gender Norms, Early Marriage, Patriarchy
What in your opinion are the social and cultural factors which lead to these gender-based barriers?	Looking at causes rooted in culture	Gendered Division of Labor, Class Structure, Gendered Security Issues
What are some areas in which boys have advantages over girls in terms of access to education? Are these economic barriers or socio-cultural barriers, or both?	Identifying gendered access and opportunities	Gender Expectations, Economic Preference, Ease in Mobility
Are these economic barriers or socio-cultural barriers, or both?	Overlap of poverty and gender	Standardized Rules, Gendered Economics of Household
Are other provinces different in terms of access to education for girls?	Contextualizing the situation in Punjab	Variation in regional factors and policies
Are there any changing trends?	Change over time	Transition in Perspectives
If yes, what is the major driving force (s) for these changing trends?	Progress Enablers	Female Role Models, Awareness
If there is no evident change in trends, what could be the major reasons?	Factors opposing change	Deeply rooted cultures and traditions
In your opinion, are there any gender based governmental interventions which are effective?	Policy success and limitations	Quotas, Cash Transfers
What significant steps could be taken to make the situation better?	Evidence based ways forward, policy suggestions	Changes in Curriculum and teachers' mindset and teaching style
Any relevant reports/ databases which can provide further information?	To enhance evidence-based approach	UN / World Bank Report

Additional insights/ themes that could be pertinent for the thesis research	Capturing outliers	Vulnerability associated with genders