

## BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY RURAL FEMALES IN ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study aimed to investigate the challenges girls had to face to get higher education. The study focused on the many cultural barriers and challenges females faced. A quantitative approach was adopted to know about the experiences of respondents in getting admission to universities. Females from rural areas (N=548) with intermediate degrees and no university admission were used as the study sample. This research used a logistic regression analysis to examine the factors influencing the decision to pursue higher education among females residing in rural areas. The findings of this study highlight the significant impact that financial constraints, cultural obstacles, and limited transportation options have on the educational ambitions of females residing in rural areas. Although the statistical significance of "Early marriage" is relatively low, with a p-value of 0.063, indicating a slight impact, the transformation may be ascribed to the creating of many institutions in prominent urban areas via the Higher Education Commission's (HEC) efforts. It has allowed women to pursue higher education at a university in their city or a neighboring one. The university's affordable tuition, availability of scholarships, convenient transit options, and favorable environment are factors that attract a significant number of female students. However, the march towards higher education institutions has been marked by a prolonged fight for women.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Educational Barriers, Cultural factors, Female Education

### Introduction

Pakistan is one of the most populous countries in the Muslim world. According to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2013-14, "The country's entire population is 188.02 million, with a prominent share of women." Women are significant in Pakistan's national development despite restricted chances and all forms of prejudice. However, they are not sufficiently fostered in Pakistan's male-dominated society. They suffer significantly in the conventional and informal employment markets and are financially weak and disadvantaged. In education, the employment ratio of women in Pakistan is considerable compared to the others. It continues to increase, but the employment relationship between women and their empowerment is considered harmful according to their population in the education sector. The universities in Pakistan have a female registration percentage of 2.5%. Pakistan's government focuses on women's professional, vocational, and technical education."(UNESCO, 2014)

In Pakistani culture, there is a tendency to provide more resources for the education and skill development of males than girls. There are other potential justifications for this gender-oriented standard of resource distribution. The desire for sons influences the distribution of family resources since they are seen to have a more productive role. In many societies, a prevailing

practice exists of providing male family members with superior education and equipping them with skills that enable them to effectively compete for resources in the external environment. In contrast, female family members are instructed in acquiring domestic skills, namely ineffective motherhood and spousal duties (Khan, 2007). Social roles are explicitly delineated, with the expectation that females would undertake domestic tasks. Due to the significantly lower skill development associated with these household tasks, girls may experience a reduced allocation of health, education, and food resources.

Moreover, males are seen as a means of ensuring old age stability. Hence, investing in them is a reliable strategy for securing future comforts in later years. There is a prevailing belief that individuals need to be equipped with sufficient wealth via investment in order to provide for their families and elderly parents effectively. In Pakistan, there was a noticeable disparity in gender enrollment rates in 1998-1999, with more significant percentages of female students compared to male students in the primary (8.0 percent female and 4.6 percent male), secondary (6.8 percent female and 1.2 percent male), and high school levels (8.3 percent female and 7.4 percent male). However, despite these enrollment patterns, the gender gap in literacy rates in Pakistan is expanding. Approximately 70 percent of those without access to fundamental educational opportunities are female. One significant impediment to women's education is the presence of financial limitations. Individuals situated among the lowest echelons of the social hierarchy have challenges when allocating resources toward educational pursuits, particularly for females. A family's household income significantly impacts parents' decision-making when prioritizing their children's education expenses." *The Future of Girl's Education in Pakistan*, observed that the presence of even a nominal tuition fee in schools, coupled with expenses related to uniforms, textbooks, and other materials, as well as the opportunity cost associated with sending daughters to school, act as limiting factors (Khalid and Mukhtar, 2002).

The opportunity costs associated with children rise as they mature and contribute more significantly to the family's economic and domestic endeavors. This phenomenon elucidates the elevated school attrition rates among adolescent females in grades four and five. As females go through adolescence, they often get betrothed within their households and are removed from educational institutions to assist with domestic responsibilities. The phenomenon of early marriages poses a significant obstacle to attaining female education. Females are socialized to avoid expressing dissent, adhere to modesty, and exhibit subservient behavior. The mobility of females is often limited, particularly as they mature, whereas guys are encouraged to exhibit assertiveness. Typically, individuals are given tasks that require them to work outside. The conduct in question may be causally attributed to the post-marital responsibilities that ladies are expected to undertake, including domestic chores and caring for their in-laws, husbands, and children. Individuals must get appropriate training to ensure a smooth transition into their marital life.

The marriage of daughters is often seen as the primary duty of parents. In Pakistani society, with weddings within the family, caste, and baradari being prevalent social customs. Parents may encounter challenges while attempting to challenge the practices of their baradari, mainly if there is a lack of emphasis on the need for female education within their caste or social group. The parents also shoulder the financial burden of providing the dowry for their daughters. These cultural practices drive parents to prioritize investing in their son's education. Parents tend to allocate a more significant portion of their resources towards their son's education because they believe their future financial stability in old life is linked to their sons' improved economic prospects. This rationale sufficiently supports the decision to allocate resources toward the

education of their male offspring. The safety and security concerns about females directly impact their ability to get an education. The act of undertaking extensive journeys to access educational institutions is often seen as a potential risk to the personal security of female individuals. The prevalence of sexual violence against girls and the significance placed on their safety heavily influence parents' choices to refrain from sending their daughters, particularly as they mature, to educational establishments that require lengthy commutes. The objectives of the study are to achieve the following targets

- To find out the problems rural females face in accessing higher education or university.
- To determine how social and cultural norms and beliefs have contributed to this issue.
- To find the best possible solution to reduce barriers to obtaining higher education.

### Literature of Review

Women's education is considered the most important for the betterment of the whole world. Educated women prove significant for their families and society too. In most countries, the dominant and superior subjects are studied by males, such as business, agriculture, politics, and engineering. Females study nursing, teaching, the arts, and designing, and subjects considered polite and unsuitable for males. These inequalities show that educational institutes focus more on the domestic work of females and give them fewer opportunities than men Licuanan (2004). The importance of education to the socioeconomic stability of any state cannot be denied. As much as higher education is important to a country in the 21st century, unfortunately, Pakistan has not paid deserving attention to the subject. According to the World Bank (2000), attaining education is necessary for developing countries to succeed in the modern era; otherwise, they are most likely to fall into the pit of socioeconomic problems and challenges.

Parents practice gendered inequality, which is influenced by culture and societal trends. Culturally, parents prefer their son to be educated rather than a girl if they have limited resources and old age security links are attached to the son's income. Parents invest in their son's education to secure their own better future. Furthermore, they invest in the girl's dowry for their marriage, which is considered an obligation of every parent. Therefore, the education of females is linked with marriages; in contrast to this, the upper class educates both their son and daughter because they understand the importance of both genders (Noureen & Awan, 2011).

Female education is linked with social status in our society. In rural areas, the patriarchal system holds firmly, and parents have limited resources with a combination of poverty, so females get fewer opportunities, specifically in getting an education. The comparison shows that in urban areas, where females belong to the upper class, they have greater access to education and more opportunities (Khan, 2007).

There are specific socio-economic challenges in the background of this issue, as explained by researchers from social science research journals:

The orthodox views of typical Pakistani society are also entirely opposing coeducation, and early marriage of girls is also a contributing factor to challenges women face in achieving higher education. As under discussion, females have no equal chance than males to get an education. The constraints to getting higher education begin from the lower level of education when a girl's education is stopped at the primary or secondary level. This research has focused on rural Jhang of Punjab province, where people focus more on their son's primary education and do not consider this important for their girls. With the approaching financial issues, girls constitute the most dropout rate in rural areas (Hashmi et al., 2021). There are many socio-cultural hurdles for females in Pakistan. Daughters are considered to do domestic work, and even when girls get a

chance to get higher education, the distance barrier confronts them i-e. Most higher education institutes are located in distant places, and most parents do not allow their daughters to travel alone or stay in hotels for education. In short, the man-dominated culture frequently discriminates against females in education (Shaukat & Pell, 2016).

Another research pointed out that females in Pakistan are considered inferior in our society. The ratio of female to get higher education is meager in our country, and the main reasons are the parent's concern about their daughter's safety and the environment that threaten them with sexual harassment cases, ultimately leading to parents' forceful decision to quit their daughter's higher education. There is also a common approach of outdated families in our society that the coeducation system is unsuitable for every girl. In Pakistan, there is a considerable ratio of people who consider males superior to females, and those who have this patriarchal thinking do not allow females to attain higher education; mainly belong to rural and tribal areas, and they prefer their boys to get an education over girls, hence neglecting females' education. (Sumara et al., 2017). In the case of rural areas of Pakistan, to study the barriers to female higher education from different perspectives, they found three main barriers. First is the lack of awareness and the high cost of education; second is the gender-based discrimination that females face from society overall; and third is the lack of access to higher education due to political, cultural, or social reasons (Hussain et al., 2020).

### Methodology

This descriptive study adopted a quantitative research method in the rural areas of Punjab, Pakistan. The study consisted of females (N=550) who did not enroll at university after intermediate. Simple random sampling was used to approach the respondents.

### Results

#### Table 01

#### Demographic profile of Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	
Age of the respondent	18 or blow	56	10.2 %
	19-21	271	49.5 %
	22-24	194	35.4 %
	25 or above	27	4.9 %
Marital Status	Married	202	36.8 %
	Single	327	59.6 %
	Divorced/Separated	21	3.8 %
Family System	Nuclear	216	39.4 %
	Joint	332	60.5
Income group	High income	92	16.8 %
	Medium income	270	49.3 %
	Low income	186	33.9 %

Table 01 shows the demographic of the respondent's age and income. The table showed that the highest rate (49.5%) of respondents belonged to ages between 19-21, and the lowest (4.9 %) age group of respondents belonged to 25 or above; (36.8 %) of the respondents were married, (59.6%) were Single only (3.8 %) of the respondents were Divorced and Separated. Some respondents (60.5%) have a joint family system, while (39.9%) belong to a nuclear family



system. The table also showed that most respondents (49.3%) were medium-income, and 33.9 % had low income. However, 16.9% of respondents have high incomes.

Table 02

*Analysis logistic Regression of Rural girls by Income, Cultural barriers, transportation, and gender discrimination*

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
financial constraint	-1.754	.224	61.540	1	.000	.173
Cultural barriers	-2.062	.379	29.558	1	.000	.127
Transportation	1.400	.421	11.076	1	.001	4.055
Early marriage	.869	.467	3.463	1	.063	2.385

Table 02 shows that it is evident that variables such as "financial constraint," "Cultural Barriers," and "Transportation" exhibit statistical significance as indicated by their relatively low p-values ( $p < 0.001$ ). This implies that these factors considerably influence the probability of individuals pursuing higher education. The statistical analysis reveals that the variable "Early marriage" has a marginal level of significance ( $p = 0.063$ ), suggesting that it may possess a minor degree of effect. The results of this table indicate that within the given environment, factors such as money, financial assistance, and transportation substantially influence rural girls to attend higher education. The impact of early marriage on this access seems to be relatively Significant.

## Discussion

The value of education to an individual's growth and development is widely acknowledged across the world. Equal benefits and expanded opportunities for boys and girls result from investing in their education. Investing adequately in education raises the probability of long-term success and helps attain most other development objectives. Empowerment of women can be strengthened via higher education. It encourages skilled women to be societal leaders and allows young girls to become role models. It also assists women in decision-making by influencing social, economic, and cultural development policy concerns or their engagement in family and community life (Shaukat & Siddiquah, 2014). Educated women are better able to regulate their life than uneducated women and have more control of resources within the household. They receive a social acknowledgment, which helps them gain insight into their current circumstances and understand what is undesired and unfavorable. The educated woman can see a better position and the chance to achieve it. She can understand how to improve her situation and what to do Mohan, (Nagadeepa & Sujit, 2020). This empowers and enhances the prestige and autonomy of educated women. You can benefit from this empowerment at the local, regional, national, and family/household level (Zafar and kausar, 2014). The sociocultural climate in Pakistan has meant that women face gender discrimination. There is significant variance in women's status across classes, regions, and rural/urban divisions because of their uneven social-economic growth and the influence of men's tribal, feudal, and religious subordination, as determined by patriarchal forces across classes, regions, and rural/urban divisions. Generally, the country is dominated by men, who usually take a negative stance against women (Sen, 2001). Continuous prejudice permeating the early school system in Pakistan leads to gender imbalance in higher education.

Girls were behind boys in education and access to available schooling (Tembon & Fort, 2008). This gender-based resource allocation criterion has many interpretations. Sons' preference relates to their main role in domestic life and production. Male family members are urged to have a strong education quality to compete for outside resources.

On the other hand, women are trained in housekeeping, teaching women how to be good mothers and women. Because of limited family incomes, parents do not prioritize education for children. The study indicated that financial constraints, textbooks, and other materials were the main reason for women's poor involvement in higher education. Girls must also fulfill their duties at home. The problem of early marriages arises at higher and higher degrees of schooling. Parents are burdened by monetary pressure on dowry in preparation for early marriage, which may lead to the demand for income from males in the family and preferential investments in male education (UNESCO, 2010). Where educational institutions cannot be found nearby, girls' travel is a huge hurdle. Traveling is viewed as a personal safety threat. The fact that institutions are likely to be relatively remote, and even if boarding facilities are offered, potential incidences of sexual harassment and sexual abuse may be considered. The authors note that once a breakthrough in a family occurs, it is simpler for other girls to follow. Establishing new universities in urban areas also addresses the limitations imposed by sociocultural standards, thereby easing travel issues. Now, female students and teachers confront various challenges that negatively impact their own psychological and professional development. The report underlines women's issues in higher education. It also discusses how the phenomena of the glass ceiling effect in our culture might be overcome and minimized. The study indicates the significant impact of sociocultural norms on the country's development. It will provide stakeholders and policymakers with suggestions on tackling women's difficulties in higher education institutions. The report highlights the necessity of women's education and re-evaluating the country's sociocultural direction to increase women's empowerment (Shaukat & Pell, 2015). Higher educational institutions in the industrialized world are considered to be the essential and potent source for rapid socio-economic and cultural development. "Good, highly developed institutions in higher education are models and pressures to build a civil society modern." Women's representation likewise remains far from satisfactory in employment and in registration at higher education institutions. There are extremely few colleges and universities, thus access to higher education is still a huge challenge in rural areas. Their position is more serious. "Women in Pakistan have relatively restricted access to higher education. The field of teaching is mainly taken by women in higher education institutions. They have a low ratio in fields of management. Women cannot participate in management roles by social and cultural constraints (Sajid & Shaheen, 2013).

## Conclusion

This research illuminates the significant difficulties and obstacles rural women face in Punjab, Pakistan, on their path to higher education. Financial restraints, cultural barriers, and a lack of accessible transportation are all contributing factors. Early marriage has minimal statistical significance; it nevertheless has to be addressed since it may significantly influence a woman's ability to further her education. The Higher Education Commission's (HEC) attempts to create Universities in metropolitan regions have also been crucial in making higher education possibilities available to women from rural areas. A rising number of women are enrolling in college because of lower tuition costs, financial aid, more accessible access to public

transportation, and a welcoming campus culture. However, it is critical to recognize that rural women's pursuit of higher education has been defined by tenacity and will. To guarantee that every young woman in rural Punjab has an equal chance to obtain higher education and pursue her academic objectives, it will be necessary to continue tackling these difficulties.

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