



## Breaking Barriers: Gender Inequality in Pakistan's Education System—Causes, Consequences, and Policy Solutions

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### ABSTRACT

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Gender disparity remains one of the most persistent barriers to achieving inclusive and equitable quality education in Pakistan. It affects educational opportunities, social mobility, and national development objectives. This article aims to analyse the phenomenon of gender inequality, its causes, consequences, and to propose policy solutions to address this challenge. It provides insights from recent statistics to highlight the ongoing gender inequality across various educational levels in Pakistan. Major contributors to this disparity include socioeconomic constraints, cultural barriers, early marriages, and gender bias. The article also examines legislative and policy frameworks designed to promote gender equality. Finally, it advocates for evidence-based policies and practical solutions to improve girls' access, retention, and participation in education. By addressing all key factors, this article offers a comprehensive plan to advance the ongoing debate on promoting inclusive, equitable, and quality education in Pakistan.

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### Introduction

Gender inequality is deemed to be the treatment that is unjust and unequal to either of the genders. But when taking to this term in specific, it is mostly referred towards the unjust treatment that is being to women. Though, it is a worldwide problem but the situation in Pakistan, in particular, is not very much worth mentioning. This issue in Pakistan is wide spread in all walks of life economic imbalance, social injustice, health care sector, legal and human right but the most worst is the inequality being implied in education, especially at secondary level. There are many social, political, economic, cultural as well as mental set up barriers behind this worse situation. It is a common belief among people specifically in rural areas that investment on girls is a wastage of money. This form of inequality takes even wider form in poorer families (Zarar et al. 2017). Bukhari et al. (2018) highlighted the key factors behind this disparity or inequality being carried out against women in education in Pakistan. To them, socio-economic state is the prime reason or factor behind it.

Criticism and harassment being imposed on the part of male segment of the society is so frequent and fervent that mostly girls or their parents abstain in sending their daughters to school. Lack of support from the families is yet another prime factor behind this situation. Lack of transport and other facilitates are also equally responsible behind this. Narrow-mindedness of society is also a contributing factor behind this situation. Iqbal et al. (2012) elaborated the fact that though Pakistani women are more than half of the total population, but they are discriminately treated in the society. Domestic violence, honour killing and unjust opportunities for education and undue treatment at work is a matter of routine in

Pakistani context with respect to women. Sadruddin (2013) deemed that biases being carried out against women at societal and domestic level is a dominating factor, such a disparity being prevailed at educational inequality on the part of women in Pakistan either to get education or to work at working place. To them, this resulted in low productivity and less development activities.

### **Theories of Gender Studies**

Although there are numerous theories which act as theoretical model for gender studies highlighting diverse layers of gender based studies which illustrate manifold layers of gender disparity but here we are concerned with Toxic masculinity theory, Judith Butler theory of performativity with regard to gender norms and roles, Foucault's theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and gender inequality. Toxic masculinity as the name suggests is related with the elaboration of males' role in the society. In masculine societies men are deemed as active, alert, aggressive, passionate, daring and tough to take the responsibilities of the family and society. As a theory it is meant to point out the drawback of this aspect of masculinity as it results in violence, hostility and sexual harassment of women on the part of masculine force which resulted in unrest and disparity based society.

It is toxic due to two reasons. One, it is bad for women as it creates inequality and unjust treatment for them. Two, it is also bad for men mental and physical health along with its bad effects on male female relation which is bad for the emotional health of the partners as well as children. Then there is a Judith Butler theory of performativity which is with regard to gender norms and roles in which she claimed that "identity is performativity constituted." Her theory is a postmodern notion of gender which is contrary to the conventional notion regarding gender. To her, genders are fixed categories as she defined gender in terms of the social roles performed by either gender, and it is endorsed by the society. And the meaning of gender is heavily reliant on the cultural framework in which a social role has been enacted. She viewed gender as shifting, provincial and performed rather than their stable identities and meanings.

Foucault's theory of feminism has excited women interest as it is meant to highlight the relation between body, power and sexuality. To him, body and sexuality are culture specific phenomena rather than natural. Feminists take keen interest in Foucault's theory of feminism because they are of the view that it provides them an outlet to give political and social autonomy to women and to discard off gender based disparity in the society. Last but not the least is Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, which was mainly meant to unearth the existence of class hierarchy of western modern societies but is also taken into account as a vocalization of the women subordinate position in the society. In true sense, it was meant to highlight the economic inequality based on class or social class to be precise and women disparity came under the subject women have also a prominent social role to perform in the society especially in western modern society.

### **Statistics About Gender Inequality in Pakistan**

Pakistani typical culture has a considerable amount of impact on Pakistani female, especially with respect to their education. Gender difference is so widened that women here find it very difficult to get education. In terms of quality of education, Pakistan is among the lowest performing country in South Asia and the situation with regard to gender inequality is even worse, and it was declared as "the second-worst country in the world in terms of gender equality" in 2017. Although, in terms of law of country there is no barrier for women to go to schools and get education, yet on practical ground the situation is different. The article of 37 of Pakistani constitution grants the right to every citizen to get education irrespective of gender difference "remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory secondary education within minimum possible period" (Article 37-B, Constitution of Pakistan, 1973) but on ground there is much wider gulf exists in terms of gender disparities.

It is supported by the statistics provided by the United Nations Development Program's Pakistan is rated at 120 out of 146 countries with regard to "Gender-related Development Index" (GDI) and it was 92 out of 94 countries in terms of "Gender Empowerment Measurement" (Human Development Report 2010). And it was due to the fact that only 2.7% of country GDP is spent on secondary education in the country (Human Development Report 2011) along with others hurdles. Statistics from other sources have also confirmed such a worse gender inequality in terms of education in Pakistan. Human Rights Watch (2018) is of the view that more than a third of Pakistani women do not even obtain a primary education and by the 9th grade there are only 13% women or girls who are at school in its report published with the title "Shall I Feed My Daughter or Educate Her?" According to UNICEF report, boys have as much as 20% higher literary rate in the country as compare to girls (Pakistan Annual Report 2020). Another shadow picture is perhaps one of prime reasons behind not sending girls to school, and it is that 21% of Pakistani girls get married even before the age of 18.

### **Reasons behind this Gender Inequality**

Firstly, there are socio-economic hurdles in educating girls in the country. By norm, women have to work on unpaid work as mothers, wives and daughters at home and domestically while men are entrusted with paid tasks. This resulted in low investment on women on the part of family, society and country and education is deemed irrelevant for girls. Secondly, societal biases and cultural norms are also a hurdle in making girls attend schools. There is a discrimination that is being maintained at the mobility of girls and boys outside home which has adverse effects on girls' education especially at secondary level of education where girls schools are at far furlong and at a great distance. Thirdly, girls schools are less than compare to boys because education at secondary level is segregated and not co education as in most of the modern countries. So, segregated educational system at secondary level and fewer numbers of girls schools and that too at a huge distance make very difficult for the girls to attend schools.

It is due to socio-economic and cultural barriers. Fourthly, religious factor is also a key barrier for girls, especially in KPK and northern areas where Taliban are against girls education and are involved in killing girls and destroying schools. Malala Yousafzai was shot by such element in 2012 and according to Dawn, 710 schools in KPK and 401 schools in Swat were demolished since 2012 by militant Taliban. Fifthly, the difference in rural and urban areas is also a key barrier behind this gender inequality in secondary education. In the views of Pakistan's Ministry of Education's source in 2005-2006, literary rate in urban area was 58.3% while in rural area it was mere 28.3% and girls ration in rural area was mere 12% (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2006). So, parents in urban areas are more receptive towards girls education as compare to girls in rural areas of Pakistan.

Sixth, due to backward mind set of parents preferring male to female also has a discouraging impact over girls. They deem themselves as extra and useless and hence becomes disappointed with life and education, especially in the rural areas of the country (Noureen 2015). Seventh, according to Shahzad et al. (2011) pointed out that in orthodox families the education of girls especially going to secondary schools which are at distance from homes as a matter of dishonour for the family. Culturally and socially, honour of the family is typically associated with women, and it is deemed as most essential than education. Eighth, all the above-mentioned factors have disheartening effects on girls who become hopeless and helpless and do not gather courage to break these barriers and remain constantly under social, cultural, political, ethical, economic and honour related hurdles (Khan et al. 2010).

Ninth, mostly girls are trained as how to maintain and run a house at the very tender age, and they find little time, interest and motivation towards attaining education as they are conditioned to think that education is useless activity in their life. Lastly, another major issue is the ratio of low female teachers in secondary schools in rural areas. In villages, most of the parents want their daughters to be taught by female teachers, but dare shortage of female teachers make those parents and girls away from the basic right of education. Moreover, if female teachers are there in schools, their attendance is low due to other household duties at one hand and the tribal and culture pressure on the other. Lack of moral support, transport issue and far away schools from homes have adverse effects on both girls enrolment and teachers retention in schools which has further aggravated the situation of gender disparity at schools especially at secondary level.

### **Consequences of Gender Inequality**

There are numerous impacts, effects and consequences when there is a wider gender based inequality in education. And Pakistan which is the 4th worst in terms of gender disparities and 144 out of 156 has a deplorable situation as there is 13% of gender disparity in educational enrolment. Only 46.5% of women are literate and only 34.2% attained high school education (Global Gender Gap Report 2021). So, the first impact is that it has affected the socio-economic position of the family as girls or women are unable to support their family due to lack of education and soft skills which are requirements of current time. Second impact is on the economic growth of the country as a vast majority of the women are unable to contribute any capital income which is a major hurdle as far as the country economic growth is concerned. Third impact is on the family health and the upbringings of the children.

An illiterate mother is unable to take care of child nutrition, as she herself is unaware of it. It has also resulted in low fertility rate. The moral and sound upbringing of the child are also affected if the women are not educated. Fourth impact is only not letting hand in reducing poverty as most of the women can only do domestic chores due to lack of education. Hence, human development which is directly linked to economic growth suffers badly. Fifth impact is personal as when women are not educated they will be unaware of their rights in the society. They will live a suffered life as she is culturally being dominated by men. She will not be able to cultivate her personality grooming and etiquette of life. Sixth, due to gender disparity women remain uneducated and that results in low fertility, high mortality rate of children and under nourishment birth of children as mothers are unaware how to deal such sensitive issue.

Seventh, women when remain away from education are unable to develop courtesy, passion and the necessary skills how to handle stress and un to do situation and that often results in collapse or violence base marriage. This has further bad effects on children as they are brought up in uncongenial environ. Eight, due to inequality in education women are not able to socialize better and not able to bring positive values of life to their children. Ninth, uneducated women can not be an agent of positive change in the society as she is expected to do as is mentioned in a common saying "If you educate a man, you educate an individual. But if you educate a woman, you educate a nation". Lastly, due to lack of education, the dream to mobilize women and inculcate them in the main stream through women empowerment can never be realized. And women can never be able to attain their rights without equipping themselves with education.

### **Legislation and Policy on Gender Equality**

Federal and provincial governments in Pakistan showed great commitment to reduce gender inequality and disparity at all level in especially with regard to education during "Gender Reform Action Plan" (GRAP) in 2005. It was streamlined that through political engagement, employment opportunities, enrolment encouragement, restructuring of institutions, allocating budget and capacity building programs gender mainstreaming will be ensured under the umbrella of GRAP. In addition, legislation is made and programs are enacted which are meant to remove gender inequality and to empower women. National plans of action and the "National Policy for Women's Development and Empowerment" were meant to empower women and let them have access to all services in the country without any disparity or discrimination. "The National Educational Policy 1998-2010" has also highlighted to increase the enrolment, reduce urban rural and gender based imbalance and to enhance the quality of education.

"Education Sector Reforms Action Plan 2001-2004" has also inculcated gender sensitive curriculum and inclusion of women in school council to remove gender unjust and imbalances. "The National Education for All (EFA) Plan" 2000-2015 has set gender based target in which universal primary education target for the boys will be achieved in 2010 and for girls in 2015. Moreover, "Pakistan National Plan of Action for Women" (1998) was meant "to achieve gender equality and equity in education by 2013." Last but not the least, "Gender Reform Action Plan" (2003) has also impacted for the above-mentioned purpose to eliminate the gender based disparity and inequality and to empower women in all walks of life, especially in education sector. It is committed in the action plan to bridge the gender gap and to enhance the social services to attain the targeted objectives.

### **Practical Suggestions to Eliminate Gender Inequality**

Keeping in view the situation of gender disparity in all walks of life and in education sector in particular, factors contributing to this worse situation and the consequences it has brought about in the society, some practical suggestions are being put forth for the policymakers to amend the situation to avert further damage. First of all, it is the need of hour to implement the gender equality act enforce and women should be given due legal assistance to protect their right and especially their right to learn. Public and private institutes be made bound and legally answerable to ensure women protection at all level. Laws and legislation is there only need is to implement it in true letter and spirit. Productive and impactful jobs opportunities should be created for women so that such women showcase themselves as a modal for the other women to come forward to contribute. Free education, stipend to poor girls and increase in female schools within the location of population can be an effective strategy to persuade girls and their parents towards schooling. NGOs and institutes like Shirkat Gah, Aurat Foundation, Women Rights Association Pakistani Women's Human Rights Organization and Women Industrial & Social Educational Society (WISES) should be given more courage and motivation to work for the cause of women in the country to eliminate women disparity, empower women and make a progressive country. Gender awareness campaign through social media may be launched to be aware and educate the soft image and role of women for the national identity and growth in those areas where women are not allowed to get education and where girls schools are being demolished and girls are being killed or attacked. Lastly, curriculum should be designed so that girls skills are so polished that their role becomes prominent to persuade others as well.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up the discussion, there is no denying the fact that gender inequality is a worldwide phenomenon, and it has a worse form in Pakistan especially in secondary level of education due to numerous political, social, cultural, economic and domestic reasons. It has far-reaching influence on the overall account of the country like low economic growth, poverty, unhealthy families, high mortality rate, low fertility rate and unsound upbringings of the child. That is why it is imperative to take step to eliminate the menace of inequality and disparity based on gender in all walks of life, more specifically in education so that tension and rift being existed among genders may be reduced at one hand and make the country on the track of social, economic and cultural progress and advancement.

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