

Structural and Normative Barriers in Girls' Education: A Case Study of District Bajaur, Pakistan

Abstract

This research relies on a qualitative approach examining various barriers to female education in the post-conflict tribal area of District Bajaur, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), a province of Pakistan. The study investigates how the structural barriers, such as lack of educational facilities, fewer employment opportunities, and lack of security, are coupled with normative elements based on sociocultural aspects, such as traditional customs of Pukhtunwali, gender roles, and early marriages, depicted in twenty semistructured interviews conducted with female students aged between fifteen and twentyfour. The findings reflected that such structural norms are interrelated, and these also contribute to a vicious cycle of systemic exclusion of girls in this marginalized region. The study finds that any approach that takes a "one-size-fits-all" or "one-policy-fitsall" strategy is ineffective, and calls for more comprehensive, culturally responsive strategies and sound security to bring about lasting improvements in girls' participation and learning in schools.

Keywords: *Girls' Education, Structural Barriers, Normative Barriers, Pukhtunwali, PostConflict Education.*

INTRODUCTION

Education is key to social mobility, personal development, and national development, yet millions of girls in the Global South face significant barriers to accessing formal education despite decades of international promises and national policy changes aimed at achieving universal education (UNESCO, 2023). Around the world, there are an estimated 129 million girls not in school, due to a complex mix of structural inequalities and entrenched gender norms that systematically exclude girls from the same educational opportunities as boys (UNICEF, 2023). Girls' education is especially undermined where poverty and rigid gender roles intersect in conflict and low-income countries, in which cultural and institutional barriers combine to devalue or often ignore girls' education. Globally, gender inequalities in education are a serious means of perpetuating gender inequalities in social inequality, particularly in South Asia. In rural and disadvantaged communities, girls are systematically excluded, and out-of-school girls are at greater risk of being out of school than boys in the richest households, by three or four times in the poorest (Unterhalter et al., 2022).

Amjad Ali

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Government College University, Lahore, Punjab

Dr Ayesha Farooq (Corresponding Author)

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Government College University, Lahore, Punjab,

E-mail: dr.ayeshafarooq@gcu.edu.pk

Conservatism in mobility norms, lack of gender-specific sanitation, and a lack of female teachers in rural settings further magnify this situation. This is especially a problem in Pakistan. The school-age gap in girls' enrollment is the result of long-standing social norms favoring boys' education, and the public education sector has long suffered from underfunding (Malik, 2022). An education budget of <2.5% of GDP is among the lowest in South Asia, reflecting state priorities that are misaligned with the educational needs of marginalized groups (UNDP, 2023). After the enactment of the 25th Constitutional Amendment in 2018, the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) became part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province and were brought into the regular legislative and policy frameworks. Pursuant to the 18th Amendment (2010), education was transferred to the provincial governments, and KP had a chance to change how education is planned in the newly merged districts. The post-merger policy initiatives include KP Elementary and Secondary Education Foundation (KP ESF), KP Education Sector Plan (2015 – 2019), and Newly Merged Districts Education Program (NMDEP) that have been taken up to address the historical institutional neglect of tribal areas (Government of KP, 2019; UNICEF, 2022). Regardless of these changes, there are significant implementation gaps in some districts, such as Bajaur, particularly in girls' schools, the number of women teachers, and community engagement. The District of Bajaur is a most revealing example. HRCP 2015 reports that during the period 2007-14, Taliban militants destroyed more than 460 schools, most of which are for girls and which they label as **“cultural and religious threats”**. This past of violence continues, still represented in school selections in this rather peaceful moment, where families have become sensitized to the hazards of girls being seen in public. In addition to the existing structural challenges and conservative norms, this postconflict situation places an additional burden on a few girls in Bajaur.

This study aims to fill the existing void in the scholarship regarding how structural barriers such as inadequate facilities, lack of female teachers, transportation issues, and economic factors combine with the normative barriers of tribal norms, rigid gender norms, early marriage, and community stigma to create systematic educational deprivation for girls in District Bajaur. Using mixed methods, the research relies on qualitative in-depth interviews with a sample of 20 female students aged 15–24 to bring to light the lived experiences of these intersecting barriers and to understand how these barriers are experienced at the levels of institutions, communities, and families.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into girls' education in the developing world has shown that a simplistic view of the issues around access and attainment, based solely on economic or infrastructural deficiencies, is inadequate, and that a more comprehensive approach takes into account the interplay between structural barriers and normative systems (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005). Rural and marginalized girls have consistently been found to be subject to multiple disadvantages in South Asian studies, especially in situations of conflict and low state capacity, coupled with conservative cultural norms. There are material and institutional barriers, such as a lack of qualified teachers (particularly female teachers), the absence of sanitation, a lack of transport, and inaccessible schools, that directly impede access to education. These gaps are especially

important for girls in settings where family values are associated with modesty, privacy, and protection of girls. The lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure – boundary walls, separate functioning toilets, and having female teachers – is known to be an important barrier to family decisions regarding the enrolment of daughters, especially during the adolescent years (Unterhalter et al., 2022; Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021).

Normative influences, rooted in cultural traditions, religious interpretations, and gendered expectations, significantly shape educational decision-making within the household. Research in traditional rural settings has shown that the traditional division of labor assigns girls the role of future wives and mothers and views formal education as unwarranted or even socially disruptive (Colclough et al., 2000). Such normative systems are reflected in early marriage, which disrupts education; domestic labor norms, which reduce the time spent on school; norms of mobility, which limit access to secondary and tertiary education; and social stigmatization of families that allow girls to attend secondary and tertiary education. This is further aimed at complicated in the Pakistani context, where national policies ensuring universal education face implementation challenges and entrenched norms that favor male education (Aslam & Kingdon, 2012). The fact that sons' education investment is given higher priority by resourceconstrained households also reflects broader cultural norms that define male education as a long-term investment with economic returns and female education as a short-term investment due to early marriage norms (Lloyd & Sathar, 2002).

Historical marginalization, institutional neglect, and militant conflict have combined in the FATA to create particularly high levels of educational exclusion for girls (Bibi, 2007). In the absence of gender-segregated schools and teachers, the Pukhtunwali tribal code, which emphasizes honor (ghairat) and honor (izzat), and the gender segregation of educational spaces have been interpreted as limiting female mobility and education (Ullah et al., 2019). In the case of education, Shinwari (2017) reports that tribal elders and religious leaders have disproportionate power in deciding whether or not people go to school, and that many people view formal learning as culturally inappropriate if it is not related to the Quran.

The process of militancy by the Taliban across FATA and neighboring KP districts has further aggravated the existing barriers by targeting the education infrastructure of the country with deliberate attacks, especially girls' schools (Khan and Naqvi, 2012). HRCP recorded the damage of more than 460 schools, which not only made access to education difficult but also caused psychological trauma that has been affecting the community-level decisions regarding the enrolment of girls (HRCP, 2015). District-specific studies in District Bajaur report very low literacy rates among females, a lack of educational facilities, a shortage of female teachers, and community-wide opposition to girls' education, particularly within cultural and religious interpretations (Zada, 2012; Hammad & Bibi, 2023). These research findings highlight the need to think more broadly about infrastructure, economic assistance, community norm change, and the regular enforcement of government policy as a package rather than individually. In

significantly marginalized educational contexts, girls exhibit resilience, agency, and aspirations; many of them set high goals for school and develop strategies to overcome difficulties, according to new findings (Unterhalter et al., 2022). These studies indicate that infrastructure investments, economic support, improved safety measures, and normative transformation through participation can significantly increase access and educational attainment in such constrained environments.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the experiences of girls in District Bajaur who face structural and normative barriers to accessing education, using a qualitative methodology. Because the context and complexity of the exclusion of young girls from formal education required in-depth descriptive narratives and an understanding of the traditional context that could not be gained through quantitative approaches, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. In-depth interviews were conducted as a data collection strategy. This enabled the collection of in-depth narratives and experiences, which are essential for understanding systemic educational deprivation.

Research Site and Context

This district was selected due to its position in Pakistan's historically independent tribal areas, the documented history of violent episodes and institutional negligence, and cultural norms that limit girls' educational possibilities (Ali et al., 2020). Given its location at the intersection of post-conflict recovery, tribal structural organization, and governmental role, the area provided an analytically fruitful setting for investigating how these dynamics interact and affect female education.

Research Instrument

An in-depth interview guide was designed, comprising 25 open-ended questions. Five key areas: socio-demographic background; normative obstacles related to cultural and religious aspects; structural barriers, such as infrastructure and resource constraints; aspirations and resistance techniques; and perspectives on possible interventions. The guide was pretested with a few participants to ensure its validity, sensitivity to cultural differences, and ability to provide in-depth qualitative data. The guide was modified afterward, resulting in the final research instrument.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select participants, who had to be female students from District Bajaur, literate, enrolled in or having previously attended educational institutions, and aged 15 to 24. To reach more eligible people through social networks, the purposive recruitment strategy was combined with snowball sampling. The final sample consisted of twenty female students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels, and community backgrounds within the district.

Data Collection Procedures

In December 2024, data was collected over seven days. To address delicate topics in a confidential and comfortable setting, interviews were conducted in participants' homes and schools. While preserving participant liberty and privacy, a local gatekeeper was employed to gain access to participants and cultural customs. To allow participants to express themselves in their Preferred language, interviews were conducted in both Urdu and Pashto. The interviewer used active listening, follow-up probing, and respectful engagement to elicit specific answers and be sensitive to the participants' emotional well-being. Interviews were performed at the participant's own pace.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and then back-translated to ensure accuracy and semantic integrity. To identify trends, themes, and key connections in the data, thematic analysis was used (Rafiuddin et al., 2023). Ten broad themes, including structural and normative barriers, the reinforcing nature of these barriers, institutional shortcomings, and participant agency, emerged from the initial open coding, which produced a long list of concepts and categories based on the accounts of the participants. This methodical interpretation was made possible while being true to the statements and experiences of the participants.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION Structural Dimensions of Educational Exclusion

Structural Aspects: Infrastructure, human resources, transportation, and economic factors are the fundamental obstacles to females' access to and persistence in school in District Bajaur. The lack of basic facilities like boundary walls, gender-segregated functional toilets, reliable electricity, and proper classroom furniture was repeatedly mentioned by the participants, even though most students in Pakistan's cities take these for granted. One participant summed up these deficits as follows:

“Our school has a broken boundary wall, no separate toilets for girls, so we do not attend school in case of any medical emergency or problem, as we feel very unsafe.” (Participant 20)

Such infrastructural deficits are particularly pronounced in cultures that emphasize modesty and the protection of women from the male gaze. The lack of physical barriers and separate facilities runs counter to families' concerns about daughters' safety and respectability. More than 60% of the schools in the district reportedly do not have female teachers, creating obstacles for families who are not comfortable with having a male teacher teach their daughters, especially during adolescence when gender segregation norms are stronger (Hammad & Bibi, 2023). Poor instruction and virtually no one-on-one academic help resulted from exceptionally high student-to-teacher ratios, with at least 3 students per instructor. One of the main structural obstacles was transportation, which combined safety concerns with financial limitations. Without school transportation, participants reported needing to walk up to five kilometers on

challenging terrain to get to school. 2014 saw the suspension of government transportation owing to security incidents, which left households without any reasonably priced options:

“It takes 45 minutes to an hour to get to the school from my house, and there is no special way for girls to get to their schools or colleges, which makes it very difficult to get there. As a result, girls frequently miss school.” (Participant 1)

Economic limitations made these access obstacles worse. Households already facing financial difficulties were significantly burdened by the cumulative cost of textbooks, uniforms, writing supplies, and test fees. In general, women's education was viewed as a short-term investment, whereas men's education was seen as an investment for the future. Those with limited finances made deliberate decisions to prioritize their sons' education:

“Yes, money problems are a problem; many of my friends had to leave because their families couldn't afford exam fees, books, or uniforms.” (Participant 4)

Normative Frameworks Constraining Educational Opportunities

In addition to these structural barriers, norms embedded in tribal practices, cultural traditions, and local religious interpretations affected girls' educational participation in various ways, through individual, family, and community norms and practices. The Pukhtunwali code, which organizes social relations around the concepts of honor (*ghairat*) and dignity (*izzat*) as they relate to women's behavior, movement, and social visibility, was a significant part of the participants' narratives (Ullah et al., 2019). The families repeatedly saw girls' education, especially after primary school or outside the family community, as a potential danger to family honor, either by contact with males or by behaviors that were seen as being incompatible with the family community:

“Our culture is playing a very crucial role in stopping women's education, under the name of ‘ghairat’, and ‘izzat’. They think that it is a threat to them that the girls will be exposed to Western cultural practices, and they can get out of control.” (Participant 11)

Girls were assigned the role of future wives and mothers, and formal education was seen as irrelevant or even counterproductive to their roles at home (Bibi 2007). There was a general sense that participants felt girls were expected to be doing housework (cooking, cleaning, childcare) while also going to school, which created time pressures and fatigue, which led to girls missing school and dropping out:

“So, they think that the only responsibility of any girl is to carry household responsibilities and not leave their homes because they think that household responsibilities are their responsibility.” (Participant 3)

One of the most significant normative obstacles was early marriage, which was found to be one of the most significant obstacles that systematically ended girls' educational journeys in

midadolescence. Participants shared how marriage commitments and expectations prevented them from continuing their education:

“When I was in 9th grade, I got married at the age of 16 years, and I had to drop out of school and take the responsibility of my home because it is not allowed for girls to continue their education after marriage.” (Participant 8)

It was clear that religious interpretation was ambivalent. Participants acknowledged that Islam emphasizes the need for education for all Muslims, yet local religious leaders frequently restricted girls' formal education to studying the Quran because they believed that other types of education were immoral or culturally improper for girls:

“In actuality, Islam does not forbid women from learning; rather, the religious authorities oppose it, claiming that reading the Quran is the only important thing and that girls should stay at home to pursue other forms of education.” (Participant 5)

A sense of normative perplexity and a religious justification for educational constraints that the participants themselves believed were at odds with Islamic ideals resulted from this discrepancy between the scriptural norm and the local religion's norm.

The Reinforcing Interaction of Structural and Normative Barriers

One of the study's main conclusions is that normative and structural barriers are mutually reinforcing processes that worsen educational exclusion rather than existing independently. In a normative system that promotes female modesty and Honor, the absence of boundary walls or female teachers becomes increasingly significant. Normative issues of girls' safety and respectability, on the other hand, become materially significant when structural issues (long distances, lack of transport, poor facilities) make these concerns real. This creates a vicious circle in which structural shortcomings justify normative limitations and normative rules diminish political pressure to address structural problems. The consequences of armed conflict illustrate this intersection. The Taliban's attacks on more than 460 schools, mostly girls' schools, from 2007 to 2014, have caused long-term psychological trauma and material damage that has affected educational decision-making (HRCP, 2015). Daughters' exposure and vulnerability were fears internalized by families, as expressed by one participant:

“Terrorism is a major factor that hinders women from education... the terrorists targeted the girls' school and, in this day and age, we are dealing with the trauma of the past.” (Participant 1)

This post-conflict legacy further reinforces pre-existing cultural norms and bias against the movement and exposure of women, with actual security concerns reinforcing and justifying pre-existing norms and restrictions.

Institutional and Governmental Inefficiencies

Participants reported that the system of institutional and governmental failures that marginalize girls from education was due to poor funding, weak policy implementation, lack of monitoring systems, and lack of gender-specific interventions. Although the constitution was amended in 2010 under the 18th Amendment and the governance structure was reformed after the merger of the districts under the KP Education Sector Plan and KP Newly Merged Districts Education Program (NMDEP), the participants noted that the policy intentions were not reflected in the actual improvement of the educational situation in Bajaur (Government of KP, 2019; UNICEF, 2022). One participant expressed a common feeling of state abandonment:

“In tribal areas, the government failed. There is no proper budget we get, there are very few schools in the area, also there are no scholarships for the students, no one is there from the government to have a check on what is going on in the educational sector.” (Participant 4)

A lack of scholarships and financial aid specifically for girls from poor families is a significant policy gap, which means that the education costs are being shouldered by the families in acute poverty. For instance, when school transportation was canceled in 2014 without providing a substitute mode of transportation, security-related administrative decisions may create additional obstacles to access for the most vulnerable. In addition to creating direct obstacles to girls' education, these institutional shortcomings also convey to the communities that the state does not prioritize girls' education, which strengthens preconceived notions about the value or unappealing nature of female education at the community level.

Resilience, Agency, and Educational Aspirations

Despite these stacked obstacles, participants showed high levels of resilience, agency, and educational aspiration, and they developed adaptive strategies to stay in school and expressed strong motivation for educational attainment. Many participants noted that a key goal for their professions was medicine, with an awareness of the importance of female health workers in communities where women are denied access to male health workers due to gender norms:

“In the future, I want to be a doctor because female doctors play an important role in my society. There is a soft corner for doctors in my society, and I can help my people as much as the boys do.” (Participant 1)

Adaptive coping strategies were negotiating with family members for permission to attend school, obtaining encouragement from supportive family members or teachers, establishing peer study groups to make up for poor instruction in school, and, in a few cases, continuing education at home after marriage:

“I didn't leave school because of marriage, but I continued my studies from my home, where I took my exams on exam days. There was a whole pressure of society, but I changed my way to a simpler one, so that I could at least complete my education.” (Participant 8)

However, in these cases of agency, it is clear that in the absence of significant enabling conditions, structural, financial, and normative, more girls in Bajaur would be able to successfully navigate educational pathways.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the problem of educational exclusion of girls in District Bajaur is not a single problem, but rather a complex and self-reinforcing system that is driven by structural gaps and normative constraints that work together to systematically exclude girls from meaningful access to and completion of formal education. Cultural preferences that value female modesty and honor are exacerbated by infrastructural limitations (no boundary walls), teacher shortages (particularly among females), and transportation issues. Economic pressures meet gender-based resource allocation patterns that prioritize investment in boys' education over girls. The impact of militant violence on education is ongoing, not only because of the destruction of educational facilities, but also because of the psychological trauma that confirms the perpetuation of gender-restrictive norms. More importantly, these barriers cannot be solved by a single-dimensional solution. Progress can only come from meeting the needs of infrastructure development, economic sustainability, community normative engagement, and government policy enforcement simultaneously. Girls' aspirations and adaptive strategies indicate their desire to learn and their readiness to take advantage of opportunities when they are available in Bajaur. There are several recommendations for action in the study. Gendersensitive physical design, boundary walls, gender-segregated sanitation, and safe transportation with female staff must be the first priority in infrastructure investment to meet the material and cultural prerequisites for girls' enrolment. Addressing gendered opportunity costs to drive girls out of school is critical and requires scholarships and conditional cash transfer programs for girls from poor households. Community engagement strategies should be accompanied by the involvement of respected community members, such as progressive religious leaders, who can help redefine girls' education in ways consistent with Islamic values and the Pashtun culture of dignity and family investment. Last but not least, the post-merger governance structure established by the 18th and 25th constitutional amendments offers an unfulfilled promise: KP and federal institutions must secure dedicated, accountable funding streams, transparent monitoring systems, and sustained policy implementation in Bajaur and other marginalized merged districts. The compound barriers identified in this study must be resolved over time, with political commitment and resource allocation. The participants' aspirations to become doctors, educators, and other professionals serving their communities are more than just personal objectives; they represent a shared potential that Pakistan cannot afford to leave unrealized.

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