

Women's Education in Pakistan: Cultural Constraints & Social Challenges

ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is a long awaited goal in Pakistan which cannot be accomplished without quality education. Women comprise more than half of the population in Pakistan. Ignoring their education not only deprives them of their basic right but also paralyzes the already staggering economy by increasing the number of dependent people. Nonetheless, the education policies given by different governments in different periods had potential to produce good results but they could hardly deliver. One of the major reasons for this failure was the social set-up that proved to be a serious challenge to attain a gender egalitarian society. This study highlights those social-economic and cultural challenges which the Pakistani women have been confronting for the last sixty-five years since independence. It concludes that the prime challenges to women's education are our cultural values having stronghold especially in rural areas of Pakistan, misinterpretation of Islam, women's extensive role in the agricultural activities, strong feudal system, traditional family system and the security concerns of parents regarding their daughters which deprive them of formal education. It further finds that an incremental change in the men's attitude regarding their rigid behavior towards women's education is visible now. It may be due to the rapid urbanization which has brought new trends and ideas, the rising economic challenges coupled with the awareness created by positive and influential role of media which compelled the society to readjust its perceptions regarding women's education.

Key Words: Women's education, literacy, human resource, education policy, culture, religion.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a key to development of human capital therefore it must be relevant to the demands of a society and job market. It must be available for all the segments of

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society without discrimination. But in Pakistan, the public spending on social sectors remained awfully dismal in all the annual national budgets. The reason for low public spending is the lack of political commitment for social sector and not recognising education as a national priority. Pakistani Governments could not touch the heart of the problem that “there is no industrialised society today with an adult literacy rate of less than eighty per cent” (Tharoor 2007: 162).

Women’s education is particularly important because it is their right as an individual and helps them in self development process. It is also inevitable to bring up a better educated and healthier family which is the basis of a good society. It enables them to bring more income into the family and contribute in national economy. According to the census of 1998, the women’s literacy rate in Pakistan was only 32.6 per cent (Census-Data 1998) but it is a much exaggerated figure because it counts all those who manage to sign only. The rural and urban gap in literacy rate is also alarming. It is 7.3 percent for rural women, which is five times lower than that for urban women (37.3 percent) (Mittra and Kumar 2004: 270). The reason might be the cultural constraints which do not slacken off their grip on women. Very few serious efforts were made to educate women, which faced a strong resistance from the male dominated society. The reason for this resistance is often claimed to be the orthodox Muslim society. But scholarly inquiries reveals (Rody 2003: 666-669) that this apathy is basically due to the cultural restrictions which prevail in most of the developing societies that do not allow female especially in rural areas to go for formal education, leaving behind their traditional role in the household.ⁱThe situation is slightly better in other countries of Asia but many of the cultural constraints are common at least in South Asia.

METHODS

It is an argumentative study based on empirical evidences, observation and personal interaction of the researcher with various sections of women from different classes and background. The focus groups are the middle and the lower middle classes. Ironically they are the carrier of the values and resistant to any threat or change to the existing fabric of the traditions but at the same time they become instrumental in the process of development of the society once they are enlightened and motivated.

The study is supported by secondary sources based on valuable researches conducted by various national and international agencies and researchers. Many structured and unstructured informal interviews provided researcher a motivation to make analysis of confronting forces which directly affect personal development of women in the society, in turn their education, a key to personal development. In this process it is found that among other factors, the culture and religion are the major factors that can facilitate or restrict women’s education in a particular society. Culture is a more dominating force and religion exists inside it. Although religion has lot of impact on

ideas, practices and morality of a society but somehow it is adjusted to the culture of its followers keeping its certain distinctive features alive. This study built its analysis on different studies, personal observation, experiences and concluded that male dominant society uses religion in order to maintain status quo and block women's education with the fear that the personal development of women will be a challenge for the existing values system and can breach the century's old fabric of the society.

Government Efforts and Reasons for Failure

The various programmes launched by each five year plan in Pakistan could achieve marginal success due to various factors including low allocations for education sector, lack of sufficient planning and coordination among various agencies and institutions, rapid population growth, and low level of self-motivation among the citizens to equip them with education etc. The most important reason was the social set up which reduces women to a service item or a commodity and not taking them as a person, a full fledged citizen of the society. The religious bonds are quoted as a main hurdle in women's education and their role in economic activities outside home, whereas Islam, the religion of overwhelming majority of this land, empowers women in all fields of life. Women are given all human rights at par with men.ⁱⁱ

Women are given share in family inheritance. They are allowed to have full control over their income that means the religion gives them economic empowerment which automatically leads to the social empowerment. Although the Pakistani society claims itself to be a Muslim society, women are denied of most of the rights given by Islam under the cultural norms to sustain the centuries old social structure of this land. The male dominant society considers any action for women empowerment as a threat to the existing order. Since the education is the most effective mode of bringing empowerment, thereby women have been denied of it to save the existing social fabric of the society. A large scale enlightenment of the society is required to meet the social challenges to the women empowerment generally and women's education particularly. An affirmative action at governmental level can initiate the process but complete change is not possible without that enlightenment which can be brought through education in men and women both.

Cultural Constraints and Challenges

The first and foremost hurdle in the way of the women's education in Pakistan especially in the rural areas is the conservative value system. Unfortunately, women are trapped in an invisible web of norms where they are the symbol of the respect of the family. It is believed that a family can be respectful if its women are respectable no matter how corrupt and bad character their male members are. The word 'respectable' means that women should follow the family norms unquestionably without asking for any right. They should be content to the decisions taken by the head of the family. Most of the people consciously or unconsciously are reluctant to

send their daughters to schools. They believe that giving the right of education to a girl may divert her attention from her household responsibilities.ⁱⁱⁱ

Moreover the access to education is not considered to be a basic human right rather it is taken as a luxury, extravagance and a mere wastage of money. The parents (who are the ones who have to make the investments) perceive the ‘costs’ of education to be high and the benefits would be accrued by the others. It is crucial to spend money on girls’ education due to the scarce resources at the disposal of parents. On the cost side, parents not only have to pay for books, uniforms and fees for girls’ education but they also have to pay for transport.

Nonetheless poverty is one of the major hurdles and parents have to make choice either to spend on male heirs who will carry the economy of the family or the daughters who have to leave home after marriage. A cultural practice of dowry also restricts parents to spend more on education of their daughters. Instead they prefer to save money for dowry, much larger than their real capacity, to save their daughters from disgrace before in-laws family after marriage.^{iv} Despite legislation against the practice of dowry, this cultural tradition has become a curse in Pakistani society and some other South Asian states. Middle and lower middle classes suffer this curse but poor classes have different practice.

They take money for the marriage of their daughters and sale them as a commodity without consulting them. Another hurdle in women’s education is the attitude of the mothers. Since school going girls add to the burden of the household women and they have to work alone therefore more mothers discourage their daughters to continue their schooling.^v A background paper by UNESCO reveals with reference to a study by Lloyd, Mete & Grant (2009) that “in rural Pakistan, girls whose mothers have some sort of formal schooling are less likely to drop out from school” (UNESCO 2011: 14). But those whose mothers have never attended the school face hurdles in continuing their schooling because their mothers do not realize the value of formal education. Marriage at young age and disregard of women’s reproductive choices is another major roadblock in girls’ education. When young mothers are overburdened with repeated pregnancies, little daughters act as little mothers to their siblings. Therefore, to increase girls’ enrollment in schools, their mothers have to be educated by introducing some adult education programmed.

The education is associated with the professional capacity building since the men are supposed to earn for their dependents. On the basis of this correlation, majority of the males opine that there is no need for the women’s education as they don’t have to earn for their families. Traditionally a large section of the rural based landed class and middle and lower middle class in urban areas considers it highly immoral for a girl to go for a job. Earning and feeding the family is a responsibility attributed to

men only. Although the female education institutions^{vi} have brought effective changes and now a good number of families seem prepared to accept the jobs of their daughters in such institutions but still a large section of society does not dare to adopt it because their relatives condemn this practice. The dependence on the earning of the daughters is considered to be a disgrace to the family under the existing norms of the society.

Another threat to women's education in the rural areas is that of the clerics. The uneducated clerics issue verdicts against the women's education by declaring it an un-Islamic practice (Miller 2000:279-80).^{vii} A study in India reveals that the average Muslims cannot dare to defy the local Imams in rural areas. They are not free to send their daughters for modern education because of the fear of fatwa. This power of local Imams is further strengthened due to the silence of Muslim intellectuals. (Upadhyay 2004:990). In rural areas such verdicts are often issued to please powerful landlords and effective families who openly oppose women's education to sustain status quo for the survival of their declining system. As a result in many areas government schools are there but only few parents are daring enough to send their children against the pressure of the landlords. These landlords follow the double standards in this regard as their own daughters are usually educated from the prestigious institutions of the country and abroad but they deprive common people of this facility.^{viii} In fact the boarding schools like Queen Mary College, Lahore, Convent in Murree and Lahore are meant for this purpose.^{ix}

Landed elite fear that the emergence of an educated and well aware class of the people may challenge their domination and would start struggle for their rights which have been ignored for centuries. Women of the tenant class are meant for the service of the feudal and land owners. If they would be educated how would they accept the unjustified behaviour of their masters? Since the politics has been an exclusive domain of the feudal and elites who have been ruling over the country since the dawn of independence. The ignorant and illiterate masses, unaware of their basic rights, would be more likely to blindly vote for the feudal lords. Both civil and military governments could not seriously undertake the challenge of the women's education because of their alliance with the landed class for their survival and governance. The status quo is essential for their ages old strong position in the society therefore they exploit women in the name of culture and traditions. The business class has also joined politics which seems following the traditional trends.

The most problematic issue is the misinterpretation of Islam. The extremist interpretation of Islam is different. They think that Islam is against women empowerment and restricts women's education (Women in Islam 2008). Many times, the cultural values dominate the religious principles. Islam in its core teachings

declares education essential for both men and women and does not impose any restriction on the women's education and their intellectual development (Muslim Women's right in Islam 2012). In fact the first Revelation said, *Iqra* which mean read and the first one to become a believer on this Revelation was Hazrat Khadija, the wife of Holy prophet (PBUH). Holy prophet (PBUH) declared, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim." (Ibn Maajah: 220) Here Muslim means men and women both. But education is not a priority area in rural areas of any part of Pakistan. People have to move to nearest towns even for the education of boys or send them to hostels. The reason is the unfriendly environment prevailing there that detracts the student from studies. The use of drugs, poverty, quarrels resulting from rivalries within and among baradaris and absence of proper training and guidance are the elements of this unfriendly environment. A very few self-motivated students are able to get through this environment successfully and get education but they are very small fraction of the rural population.^x In these circumstances when boys face difficulties in getting education women are less likely to cross these hurdles.

This challenge becomes multi-fold in the tribal areas of Pakistan where the obscurantist male interpret Islam in their own way and present an anti-women interpretation of Islam. They confine women to their homes only and persecute all those girls who want to go to school, burn schools and set on fire the homes of such families who support girl's education. Such interpretations are damaging the real image of Islam. Taliban are challenging writ of the government in not only tribal areas but also in settled areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Whatever their political motives are, first they mount their entire wrath on women living under their areas of control.^{xi} The government of KPK is trying to recover from early shocks but still could not fully establish its control over the affected areas of Swat and surroundings (Zafer 2012: 6). The administration in FATA also seems failed to protect its own system despite long military actions conducted against terrorists time and again (Aziz 2008).

Irony of this rural cultural system is that women are deprived of education. They cannot go out of home but at the same time they have to play a strong role in agriculture outside the home. This role is more open in small land holders and tenant classes where women are part of labour force at the time of sowing seeds and cutting crops. By providing these and other related services they earn staple food and grain for the whole year as their wages. Therefore, most of the small farming families and farm labour do not even think about enrolling their daughters in the schools (Asia's Women in Agriculture 2009). In case of middle and big land owners the women's role is confined to cleaning, sharing and storing crops, when it is reached at home.

Around 65.9 per cent of the Pakistani population lives in the rural areas (Pakistan Economic Survey 2009:17). Most of them own a small piece of land (or even are

landless) and are facing poverty. Such people are only concerned with the food and shelter. Traditionally, these people had been satiated with what they had. Social mobility associated with education is a strong incentive to procure economic benefits but the traditional contentment hardly allows them to get rid of this lethargy. The women's role in agriculture sector cannot be denied but most of them are unpaid workers in their family farms.

The culture that children are the gift of God especially in rural areas and bigger the family size would be, more workers for the family would be available, has created a big challenge of population explosion for the country and added to already alarming poverty in Pakistan. At family level it has created shortage of resources and the axe fall on education. Children are sent to work instead of school and are compelled to support their family (Latif 2011). Females are good choice for services as a maid servant. In the poor classes more children are blessings because they add up to the income of the family.

A report by Catherine Hill & Holly Kearl reveals that sexual harassment of girls students from age 7-12 at primary and middle school cause absence from the school in United States (2011:16). Major reason for this is the lack of female teachers. Female students are more comfortable in the presence of female teachers in education institutions. A study by Min Bahadur Bista in Nepal reveals that increasing the number of female teachers is directly propositional to the number of girl students with a few exceptions (2006: 65-66). In Pakistani villages mostly schools have single teacher more often a male one which bars even willing families to send their daughters to school.

Another hurdle in terms of cultural norms is marriages of the girls within clan and baradaris. Even those who have accepted importance of women's education are compelled to block higher education for their daughters because they think that their marriage would become a problem in the absence of highly educated match in their *baradari*. The reason is that traditionally boys are less interested in education and if a girl gets higher education, parents fear that she will not marry to a less educated cousin while her parents would not be able to revolt from cultural norms. Marrying daughters in other castes is still an abominable phenomenon.

Apart from that the crime rate in Pakistan is increasing day by day, the violence against women, kidnapping, physical and verbal harassment at public places make people reluctant to send their daughters to schools. Since a girl cannot go out of home alone, it becomes a responsibility of either her brother or father to escort her even if the school is at the walking distance. This is also effusive as the roads and streets are filled with the hooligan at the opening and closing time of the female educational institutions which poses a serious threat to the respect of female students and in turn

that of their families.^{xii} This practice also shatters the confidence of a girl that she is unable to survive without the male support in this environment. Police can be deployed in cities but such arrangements are neither available nor practicable for the female students in the rural areas. Other major factors include the lack of economical and safe means of transportation and distant location of schools and colleges not only in remote areas but also in urban areas. Because of these reasons majority girls remain deprived of formal education. The only option open for them is the distant learning but it starts from higher secondary level, therefore it is of no use for the girls living in rural areas who are deprived of basic education.

Corruption in all walks of society has become a part of culture. Education department is no exception. Many schools are traced out which have students but teachers don't come to teach. They either have political influence or bargaining with the local District/Tehsil Education Officer. Corruption also facilitates smooth running of schools on papers but actually they exist for withdrawal of salaries only without providing services to the people. The visit of the local (Tehsil and district) officers is conveyed secretly to ensure the presence of all the teachers while in normal situation they don't come to the schools.^{xiii} The dominant families use their political leverage to patronise such corruption which ultimately keeps not only girls but even boys deprived of basic education. It has been observed that mostly the local teachers belong to the less privileged castes or *Kammi*^{xiv} families therefore, it is difficult for them under the cultural practices to resist the pressure from Chaudhrys, Sardars, Khans, Maliks^{xv} or other dominant families of the village.

One of the most important challenges for women's education is to deal with dropout ratio. Lack of text books, adequate study material coupled with untrained teacher and medium of instructions are the reasons which can be resolved by institutional mechanism with the help of community. Apart from studies lack of adequate facilities, like building, toilets, drinking water etc. cause dropouts from the school after primary level. A study by Rangachar Govinda reveals with reference to the interviews of village girls students in South Asia that many girls leave school after primary school because their menstruation period starts and there is no proper arrangement of toilets in schools (UNGEI 2009 :24). Another reason for female drop out from schools is sexual harassment on the way to and from school. Discrimination on the bases of ethnic identification, cast, religion, economic group and disabilities are the other reasons for drop-outs. According to a report only 20 percent girls students enrolled in primary school continue their education at the secondary level in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In Nepal and Burma this ratio is 40 percent while in India it is fifty per cent (Corporal 2008). There is a need to address these issues to retain those who at least join school.

Women's Response

Pakistani society particularly the urban society is rapidly changing due to the advancement of communication technologies. The old structures are breaking down and new ideas and values are coming up. The discourse on the status of women is also changing. Women are now responding to the call of time. They think that they should perform their role in the development of the society and country by getting more education and earning hand status to support their families. According to the statistics provided by the Population Association of Pakistan, the urbanization rate in Pakistan has exceeded to 32.5 per cent in 1998 which was only 17.8 in 1951 (Bahawar 2008:173). With the rapid urbanization, the needs and demands of the society have changed. People want to live in a modern way. The media has also played a vital role in this regard, presenting women as a civilized and groomed individual of the society. It has compelled men to change their mindsets and adopt liberal standards. Now the standards for a wife have been transformed to an educated and well groomed lady, which were previously limited only to her caste, family and financial status. But these developments are feature of urban middle class population only.

In rural areas the rate of change is relatively slow. Although the open access to media helped them to think in terms of their own rights and various NGOs are also working there to create consciousness but the low education standards, less economic activity, more cultural bonds, strong hold of *baradari* system and clerics pose strong resistance to the process of change. One of the major reasons is weak women response. The usual indifference towards change in rural areas is also visible in women's attitude. But slowly they are responding first through change in life style and adopting fashion trends learned from media. Nonetheless the natural pace of change is inevitable and people who have been resisting their sisters' education are now facilitating their daughters to go for it.

Why do the new emerging social standards focus and emphasise the importance of women's education despite the fact that the male literacy rate is also dismal. A very simple answer to this question is that the feedback and response from the women not only in education but in every field of life is positive. Girls are more likely to get educated and bring fruitful results for their family with the support of their male members. People have started realising that the women's education is not only beneficial for her but also for her family.

CONCLUSION

Gender bias is one of the harsh realities in all traditional societies and Pakistan is no exception. Although Pakistan is a signatory of various international protocols but the society does not visualize women as potential contributing partners in the social life. The cultural constraints and the religious bonds pose a major resistance to implement

the policies for the uplift of the women. These road blocks are more prevalent in the rural areas though not completely absent in cities.

The status of the women in the Pakistani society is a matter of endless debate and deep concern. Some people strongly believe that the presence of more women in the workplace as heads of institutions is merely symbolic. Still the cultural norms are nominally changed where the women are perceived as a subject with little freedom and strapping traditions pressing them ever downwards. But the empirical evidence gives an optimist view that the picture is not that much gloomy. On the basis of emerging trends in society like change in the value systems, flagging grip of feudal culture, the awareness regarding the need of women's education through media and desire for a competitive growth in society, it can be predicted that the prospects of women's education are bright. The marvellous performance of women in different fields of life, the decreasing rate of dropouts of girls from schools, (Burki 2011)^{xvi} affirmative action of government through reservation of seats for women in professional colleges and universities, role of Higher Education Commission for advancement of opportunities for higher education, the struggle of women organizations for their rights, these all transformations show that the change is coming and women are competing in terms of quantity and quality.

A fundamental change in social attitudes toward women can support these positive signs particularly in the rural areas. That can be brought by educating the society as a whole. If men would be educated they would certainly realise the need for women's education sooner or later. Awareness, cultural liberalisation and education are interdependent variables and support each others' promotion. It is crucial to create awareness to foster cultural liberalisation in the society. That liberalisation would help society to identify the need of an active role of both men and women for sustainable development in social and economic terms. Nonetheless that awareness can be created through education in order to achieve an egalitarian society.

End Notes:

ⁱWomen are traditionally not allowed to go out of homes alone, in South Asia. It is a common tradition in all the communities of sub-continent regardless of the religion.

ⁱⁱThe first business woman in Islam was Hazrat Khadija-tul-Kubra, the dearest wife of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Hazrat Khadija (R A). She was running her business independently before the advent of Islam.

ⁱⁱⁱField survey conducted in various villages of the provinces of Pakistan: Punjab and NWFP by the researcher in 2008, from September to December. Women from age group of 20 to 60 and girls from age group of 10 to 20 were targeted from lower and lower middle income groups. The data was collected through informal interviews with the target groups.

^{iv}This practice is more common in Punjab and Sindh. Balochistan and KPK are away from this curse. In these provinces bride groom pay for all expenses of marriage.

^v Mothers are over burdened by the social system where the husbands are supposed to work outside only and if they contribute to the household duties of their wives, it earns bad name for them as ‘servant of wife.’

^{vi}Girls Schools, Women Colleges and women universities like Fatima Jinnah Women University and Lahore College Women University are source of higher education and jobs for women.

^{vii}A vast majority of uneducated Muslims totally depend upon the local Imams for their day to day worldly problems and accept the Fatwa as an Islamic verdict and not simply an advice. Fatawa provides guidance by which Muslim community can deal with new issues as and when they arise.

^{viii}Hina Rabbani Khar, Foreign Minister of Pakistan belongs to Muzzafer Gharh that is still in the list of backward areas of Pakistan where school for both boys and girls are situated at long distances. District Jhang of Punjab is a poor region with low literacy especially in women folk but Mrs. Abida Hussain daughter of a local feudal did her A Level and have been controlling the politics of her area for a long time. She has served as member parliament many times. Mrs. Zubaida Jalal served as Federal Minister during Musharraf administration. She belongs to Lasbella district of Balochistan where women literacy was one of the lowest in Pakistan. As the daughter of a Tribal Chief she was a privileged to receive higher education. Later she did a lot for women’s education in her area. See also “c

^{ix}Traditionally feudal used to send their boys to Aitcheson College, Lahore or Lawrence College Murree and girls in Queen Mary College, Lahore, Convent of Jessie’s and Merry Lahore from pre-partition period.

^xIn the past this ratio was better but now crimes and drug addiction have deteriorated the environment and it has become more difficult to survive.

^{xi}“About 700 schools were damaged by miscreants in the last five years in KPK and FATA. Despite the girls have got top 15 positions in the secondary school certificate (SSC) examination.” It also states that Malakand faced “destruction of some 181 schools from 2007 to 2009, among them 118 schools were girls’ schools.” See Ashfaq Yousafzai, “Schoolgirls Beat Taliban,” <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/07/schollgirl-beat-taliban>, 28 July 2012.

^{xii}Many times, police is deployed at the opening and closing time but there is no way-out to deal with this problem for the girls of the rural areas.

^{xiii}The Ghost schools emerged as a great scandal in the Punjab Education Department, when army investigation teams found that most of the schools exist only on papers and all the staff regularly got pays without doing any duty due to the acute corruption in the department in collaboration with the elites of the area.

^{xiv}The landless working classes of the rural set up who provide manual services to the land owning classes.

^{xv}These are the strong leaders in rural society having hold over major resources of the area and also on the decision making process in the rural society.

^{xvi}“Pakistan does well in one critical area — the drop-out rate in tertiary education. Those who complete tertiary education in Pakistan account for a larger proportion of persons who enter school at this level. The proportion is much higher for girls, another surprising finding for Pakistan. With a

considerably lower drop-out rate at the tertiary level, it is not surprising that the number of years students spend in school in Pakistan (5.6 years) is higher than that in India (5.1 years) but a bit lower than that for Bangladesh (5.8 years). It is in the last two decades that the real brake occurred in Pakistan. The proportion of the 15-plus age group receiving tertiary education in Pakistan increased from only 2.4 per cent in 1990 to 5.5 per cent in 2010. The proportion of students completing tertiary education in Pakistan is 41 per cent higher than that for India. Better performance, when measured in terms of the proportion of the population receiving tertiary education, matters a great deal for the economic future.” See Shahid Javed Burki. (22 August, 2011). Preparing the population for a modern economy. *The Expressed Tribune*, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/236961/preparing-the-population-for-a-modern-economy/>, retrieved on 15/09/12.

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