

Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Pakistan: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan faced a significant educational challenge. According to a report by Dawn, Pakistan had 71 million children aged 5-16 years, with an estimated 25.3 million children not attending school, representing 36%. Among these OOSCs, 53% were girls, and 47% were boys. On May 8, 2024, the Pakistani government declared a National Educational Emergency to address the challenge of OOSC. Another statistics showed that one-third of school-going children (79%) had never been enrolled. Numerous factors, including poverty, socioeconomic conditions, inadequate educational infrastructure, security concerns, policy implementation challenges, and cultural norms provoked this alarming situation. This research paper explored the reasons, challenges, and opportunities for out-of-school children and provided recommendations to overcome these shortcomings. The study was qualitative in nature and employed through secondary data analysis approach. It reviewed a wide range of secondary sources, including research articles, newspapers, government policy documents, and journal publications. Pakistan faced challenges such as socioeconomic barriers, security concerns, financial restraints, child labor, gender discrimination, and insufficient school facilities. Curriculum inappropriateness, lack of teachers' motivation, and socio-political instability further delayed educational access. However, there were opportunities linked to government initiatives that helped retain students in schools. These opportunities included scholarships, cash incentives, digital technology tools for learning, and non-formal platforms. Pakistan could tackle these challenges once a holistic approach and consensus were built at all levels. True implementation of crash programs targeted in National Educational Policies was required. This could also be driven by targeted financial assistance, public-private partnerships, such as incorporating the Pakistan Education Foundation, and policy reforms. The use of technology and making education beneficial for socioeconomic needs could also reduce the large number of OOSC.

Keywords: Out-of-school children, challenges, opportunities, suggestions, recommendations

INTRODUCTION

The importance of education is evident in both developing and developed countries, as it plays a pivotal role in shaping the people of a country. Pakistan faced many challenges in the education sector, with one alarming issue being out-of-school children (OOSC). A report titled "The Missing Third of Pakistan" by the Pak Alliance for Mathematics and Science (PAMS) revealed data on out-of-school children. This report provided valuable submissions for policymakers, educationists, and educational administrators to improve the quality of education. According to the report, out of the total 71 million children in Pakistan, 36% were out of school. Of these, 53% were girls, and 47% were boys. Relying on conventional strategies could not perpetuate educational targets alone.

The problem was particularly acute in rural and underdeveloped regions, where socio-economic barriers, gender discrimination, and infrastructural paucities prevented children from accessing quality education. The dropout rate at the primary level stood at approximately 33%, escalating to 73% at the secondary level (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2023-24). This study aimed to explore the root causes of school dropout, analyze policy gaps, and propose viable solutions to improve school retention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing on secondary data analysis. Secondary data was collected from a wide array of sources that provided both quantitative and qualitative insights into the issue of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan. The rationale behind selecting this approach was to synthesize existing research findings and secondary reports on the subject matter, which would provide a broad understanding of the factors contributing to the OOSC issue and the potential solutions.

DATA SOURCES AND COLLECTION

The primary data sources for this study included research articles, government reports, policy documents, and statistical data from reputable organizations. These secondary sources were selected based on their significance, reliability, and their contribution to understanding the various proportions of OOSC. The main sources of data included:

1. **Government Reports:** Official reports from the Ministry of Education Pakistan, the Pakistan Economic Survey (2023-24), and the Education Commission Report were analyzed to understand the national educational landscape, the scale of the OOSC problem, and the policies that have been implemented to address it. These reports offered statistical data and insights into current education programs.
2. **International Organization Reports:** The study reviewed reports from organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, which provided comparative insights and statistics regarding OOSC in Pakistan and globally. These sources were vital for understanding the broader context and evaluating the effectiveness of international interventions and frameworks.
3. **Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles:** Relevant peer-reviewed journals were explored to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the education system in Pakistan. These

articles provided evidence-based perspectives on the socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers to education and the effectiveness of government initiatives and policy involvements.

4. **Newspapers and Media Reports:** Articles from reputable national newspapers such as *Dawn* and *The News* provided up-to-date information on the latest trends, government initiatives, and public opinions on the matter. These sources were important for understanding the media's role in shaping public awareness and policy debates related to OOSC.
5. **Statistical Data:** Data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, as well as global reports from organizations like UNESCO, was analyzed to enumerate the extent of the OOSC problem and understand the demographic breakdown (e.g., rural vs. urban distribution, gender disparities, and geographical differences).

LIMITATIONS

Although secondary data analysis provided valuable insights, it had certain limitations. One limitation was the dependence on the availability and accessibility of data from official sources. Additionally, the study relied on the data published by external agencies, which may have been subject to different biases or interpretations. The absence of primary data collection, such as surveys or interviews with stakeholders, also meant that the study did not apprehend firsthand experiences or insights.

RESULTS

The issue of out-of-school children in the education sector and government could only be controlled if unconventional strategies and crash programs were launched. At that time, an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5-16 years were out of school, with girls unreasonably affected (AEPAM, 2018). According to the report from the Ministry of Education Pakistan (2023), Punjab had over 9.2 million OOSC, followed by Sindh (6.6 million), Balochistan (2.9 million), and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2.7 million). The highest number of OOSC was in rural areas, where basic amenities were scarce, along with inadequate school infrastructure and especially a shortage of female teachers (UNESCO, 2022). Security concerns, economic instability, and lack of parental awareness further exacerbated the situation (AEPAM, 2018). Pakistan had 71 million children aged 5-16 years, with 25.3 million or 36% being out-of-school (Dawn, 8 Sep 2024). The report further elaborated that approximately 18.8 million belonged to rural areas, and 6.5 million belonged to urban areas.

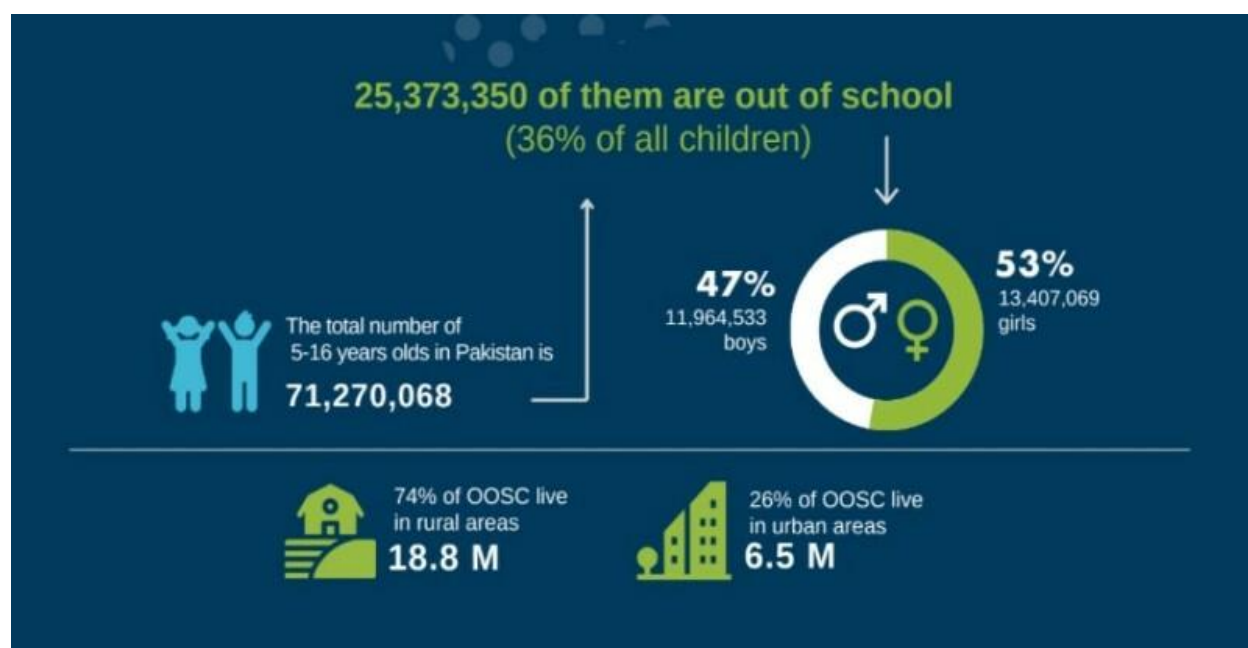


Figure 1. Showing total children out-of-school, along with further distribution to rural and urban (Daily Dawn 8 September 2024).

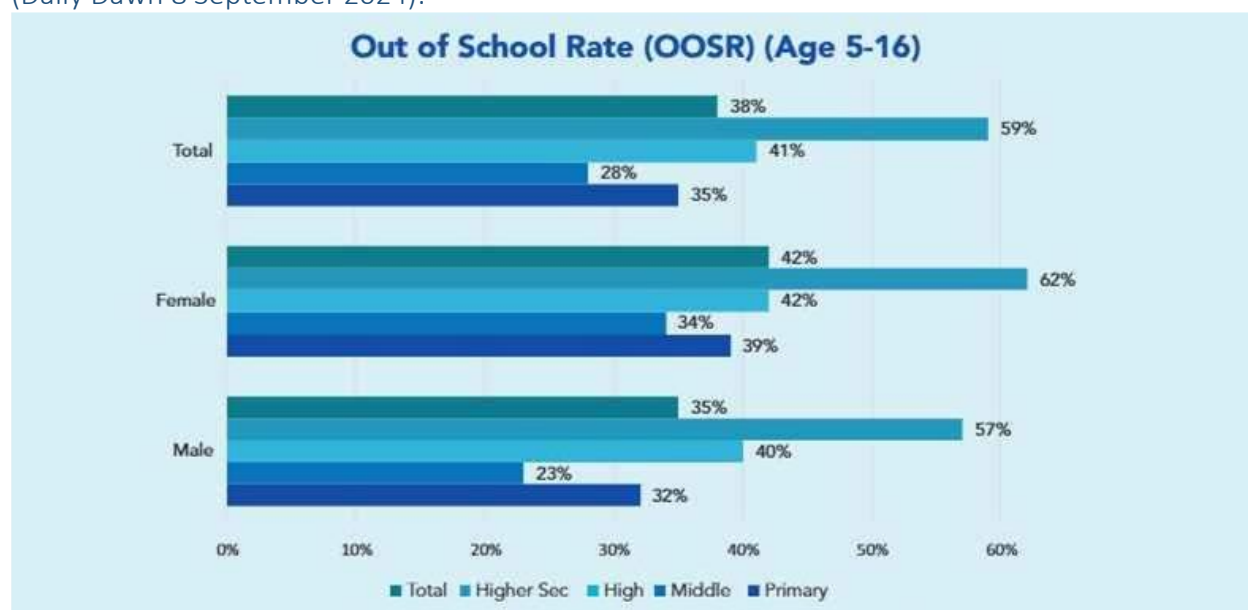


Figure 2: This figure displays the Out of School Rate (OOSR) for children aged 5-16 in Pakistan, broken down by gender and educational level. It shows the total percentage of out-of-school children, with the highest rates observed in the female population (62%), particularly in higher secondary education. The male out-of-school rate is lower overall, with the highest percentage in primary education (57%). The chart also compares the OOSC across various educational levels: primary, middle, and high. (Pakistan Education Statistics (2023-24), Ministry of Education, Pakistan).

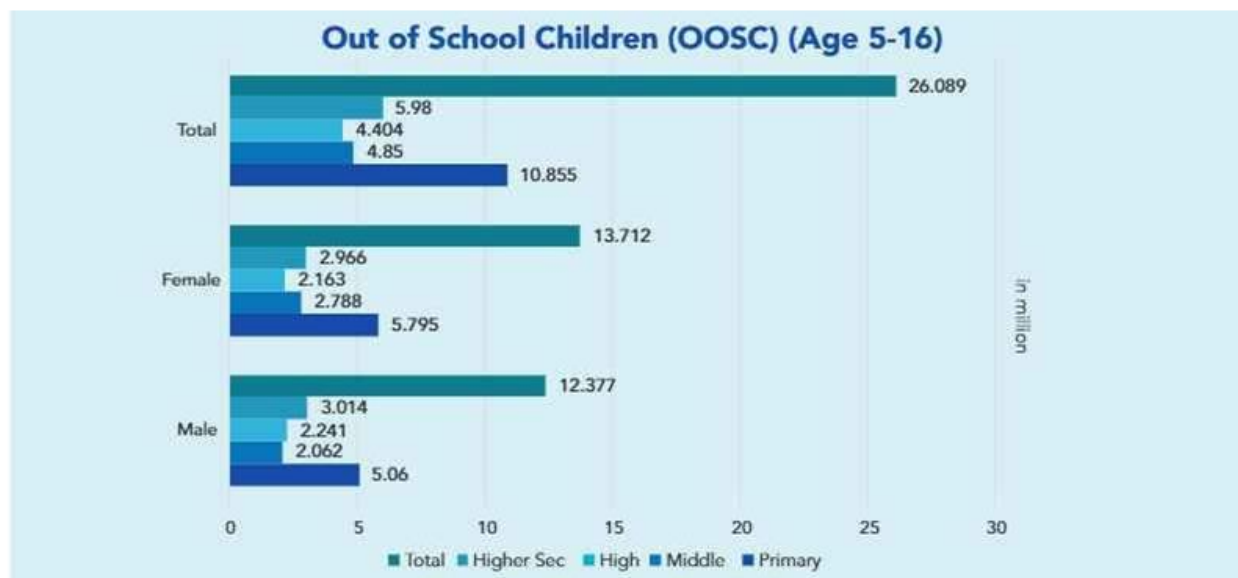


Figure 3: This figure illustrates the total number of out-of-School Children (OOSC) aged 5-16 in Pakistan, broken down by gender and educational level. The total number of OOSC is 26.089 million, with a significant proportion (13.712 million) being female children. Male children account for 12.377 million OOSC. The data is further divided into educational levels, showing that the largest number of out-of-school children falls under the primary level across both genders. (Pakistan Education Statistics (2023-24), Ministry of Education, Pakistan).

Challenges

Socio-Economic Barriers

A number of challenges contributed to the increase in the toll of OOSC across Pakistan, such as financial uncertainty. Pakistan spent only 1.7% of its GDP on education in the previous year. Other factors included socio-economic barriers, institutional and structural barriers, policy and governance issues, and mismanagement. One of the primary reasons for children not attending school in Pakistan was poverty. Families in rural and disadvantaged urban areas often struggled to meet basic needs, and education was usually viewed as a secondary concern. According to a World Bank report (2018), about 22% of Pakistan's population lived below the poverty line, making it difficult for many families to afford school-related expenses, such as uniforms, books, and transportation. Additionally, in many areas, children were expected to contribute to the family income, discouraging school attendance (Siddiqi & Pasha, 2018).

Cultural and Gender Barriers

Cultural norms and gender biases played a significant role in limiting educational opportunities. In many rural and conservative communities, girls were less likely to be enrolled in school due to

traditional views that prioritized domestic roles for women. A study by the Pakistan Education Task Force (2019) revealed that the gender gap in education was particularly wide in rural regions, where girls were often kept out of school to help with household chores or due to early marriages. This resulted in lower enrollment and higher dropout rates for girls (Khan, 2020).

Inadequate Infrastructure and Poor Quality of Education

The lack of adequate school infrastructure and resources was another critical challenge. Many schools in Pakistan, especially in rural areas, were overcrowded, underfunded, and lacked basic facilities such as clean drinking water, electricity, and sanitation (UNESCO, 2018). Additionally, the quality of education remained a major concern, with outdated curricula, poorly trained teachers, and insufficient teaching materials contributing to high dropout rates. According to a study by the Asian Development Bank (2017), these factors not only discouraged enrollment but also delayed retention in schools.

Conflict and Displacement

Conflict, especially in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan regions, led to displacement and disruption in educational services. Children in conflict zones often faced the risk of being out of school due to safety concerns and the destruction of school infrastructure (UNICEF, 2020). According to the UNHCR (2019), many children from internally displaced families (IDPs) in these areas were not attending school, further aggravating the OOSC crisis.

Opportunities for Addressing the OOSC Issue

Government Initiatives

The government of Pakistan made efforts to improve access to education. The launch of the Ehsaas Education Stipend Program in 2020 aimed to reduce financial barriers to education by providing stipends to families for sending their children to school (Ministry of Education, 2020). Additionally, the federal and provincial governments introduced various schemes, such as the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) and the Balochistan Education Support Program, to promote school enrollment in disadvantaged areas (Raza & Ali, 2018).

Technological Interventions

Technology had the potential to bridge the educational gap for OOSC in Pakistan. The rise of online learning platforms and mobile-based educational tools opened new avenues for remote learning, especially in areas with limited access to physical schools. According to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA, 2020), the country had seen a significant increase in mobile internet usage, providing an opportunity to expand educational content and virtual learning to children who could not attend school.

Public-Private Partnerships

Collaboration between the public and private sectors offered a encouraging opportunity to increase educational access. Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private enterprises made extensive contributions to education in Pakistan. For example, the Indus Resource Centre (IRC)

and The Citizens Foundation (TCF) were influential in providing education to children in remote and underserved areas. The expansion of these partnerships could significantly reduce the number of OOSC (Memon, 2017).

DISCUSSION

The study highlighted a complex web of socio-economic, institutional, and policy-related factors that contributed to high dropout rates. While the government had introduced various initiatives to improve school retention, insufficient implementation remained a major challenge. Strategic investments in education infrastructure, community engagement, and policy reforms were critical to tackling the crisis. Gender-sensitive policies, such as increasing female teachers and providing safe school environments, were also necessary to address disparities in education access.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the issue of out-of-school children in Pakistan required a multifaceted approach involving government intervention, community participation, technological solutions, and the engagement of the private sector. Despite the challenges, numerous opportunities existed to improve educational access for children in Pakistan. By investing in education, addressing sociocultural barriers, and providing incentives for school attendance, Pakistan could reduce the number of OOSCs and move closer to achieving universal primary education.

Recommendations for Reducing OOSC in Pakistan

Increasing Investment in Education

The Pakistani government needed to increase its budget allocation for education. According to the Education Commission Report (2019), Pakistan's education expenditure was one of the lowest in the world, at around 2.3% of its GDP. Increased investment in education was critical to improving infrastructure, teacher training, and providing necessary learning materials.

Strengthening the Role of Local Communities

Local communities had to play a more active role in advocating for children's education. Community-based school management committees could help raise awareness about the importance of education and ensure that schools were more responsive to local needs (Hussain, 2020). Additionally, community mobilization could help challenge embedded cultural norms that prevented girls and marginalized groups from attending school.

Incentivizing School Attendance for Vulnerable Groups

Conditional cash transfers (CCTs) and scholarships could be expanded to incentivize vulnerable families to send their children to school. These programs had been successful in other countries, such as Bangladesh's Food for Education Program, where families received financial assistance contingent on their children's school attendance (World Bank, 2019). Expanding such programs in Pakistan could significantly reduce the OOSC rate.

Addressing Gender Inequality

Gender-specific involvements, such as building girls' schools in remote areas, providing female teachers, and reducing the cost of education, could help bridge the gender gap. Pakistan had to

prioritize the inclusion of girls in education by implementing policies that encouraged female enrollment and retention, including scholarship programs and community-based education initiatives (Khan, 2020).

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