

Challenges of Female Education in Rural Punjab' Voices of out of School Girls

Amina Ramzan

aminaramzan321@gmail.com

M.Phil Education, Institute of Education and Research University of the Punjab Lahore Pakistan

Dr. Misbah Malik

misbah.ier@pu.edu.pk

Assistant Professor, Institute of Education and Research University of the Punjab Lahore Pakistan

Ashfaq Gill

ashfaq.gill@pef.edu.pk

Director Punjab School Reorganization Program, Punjab Education Foundation, Lahore, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Amina Ramzan aminaramzan321@gmail.com

Received: 11-01-2026

Revised: 26-01-2026

Accepted: 10-02-2026

Published: 25-02-2026

ABSTRACT

This research examined the issues of girls' education in rural Punjab, it is based on the perspectives and life stories of out-of-school girls in regions where Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) partner schools are working. Although PEF has made a number of efforts to enhance the education of girls based on the public-private collaborations, a considerable number of girls is still out of school. This is showed by the fact that in Pakistan, about 13.4 million girls are out of school, about 5.24 million of them in Punjab alone which reflects the intention of undertaking the problem. A qualitative research design was used to conduct the study. The qualitative data was collected in the form of five focus group discussions with out of school girls using semi structured and probing questions to obtain in depth information of experiences of the out of school girls. The selection of participants was done through purposive sampling. The thematic analysis was used on the qualitative data through the NVivo software by transcribing and analyzing the data in order to determine the key patterns and emerging themes. The results showed that education of girls in rural Punjab is limited by inter-related economic, socio-cultural, institutional and personal factors such as poverty, domesticity, security issues and limited mobility. Despite these challenges, girls demonstrated a strong desire for education and view it as a pathway to empowerment and improved life opportunities. It is recommended that financial and transportation support be enhanced, income-generating opportunities be introduced, community awareness initiatives be strengthened, and school safety measures be improved to facilitate girls' enrollment, retention, and completion of education.

Keywords: Barriers, Female Education, Rural Areas

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right and an essential tool for social and economic development, yet in rural Punjab a large number of girls remain out of school despite various policy interventions. The population is 61% rural, and most of the people who live in rural areas are poor and don't have their basic needs met. There are 22.84 million children are not in school, and 60 of them are girls, making it the second highest in the world (PBS, 2020). The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) has started a number of large-scale projects to make it easier for people to get an education, especially for girls and people who live in rural areas. PEF works through creative public-private partnerships to help low-cost private schools give free education to poor kids all over Punjab. Its primary program, Foundation Assisted Schools (FAS) program,

serves over 1.6 million students in over 3,000 partner schools, most of which are in rural and underserved schools.

Education Voucher Scheme (EVS) is also used to assist poor families in affording the education of their children, particularly girls, and allows them to send children to the private schools close to their houses. Another program, the New School Program (NSP) assists in the issues of access by constructing schools in remote locations where few or no schools are located (Punjab Education Foundation [PEF], 2023). In Pakistan, especially in the rural regions, there are still prevalent gender differences in education where girls are more disadvantaged than boys as a result of poverty, cultural beliefs, and gender discrimination. The education of boys is usually given priority as compared to girls who are expected to do household chores or become married at tender age. This scenario is an indication of entrenched socio-cultural systems that deprive girls of an education and confine them to their homes.

Economic deprivation and resource deprivation are even worse in rural Punjab. There are a lot of families that cannot afford to just survive and therefore education becomes secondary especially to girls. In the instances where education opportunities exist in form of schemes like public- private partnerships, a considerable portion of girls are still out of school. This brings out a disparity between policy enforcement and realities on the ground whereby the structural and cultural hiccups remain to affect the efficacy of such programs. Rural setting has its own set of problems that include poor infrastructure, poor school facilities, and distances to educational institutions which scares away enrollment and enhances the dropouts among girls. Safety and security is another crucial aspect of the problem.

In the rural areas, parents are usually reluctant to send their female children to schooling institutions far away since they are afraid of being harassed and the conditions of the roads. The girls are also not allowed to move freely due to cultural norms and thus they find it hard to proceed further with their education past the primary school. Meanwhile, schools have no female teachers and gender-sensitive facilities, which also prevents parents who have daughters to take them to school. With these obstacles, a number of girls report that they are very keen on education and better future, which shows that the issue is more in the access and opportunity than the willingness. Women education in rural Punjab is thus a multidimensional issue as it entails socio-cultural, economical and institutional issue that is interwoven.

To comprehend these obstacles, it is necessary to pay attention to the voices of out-of-school girls because their stories can be discussed as valuable sources of information about the obstacles they have to overcome. The proposed research will delve deeper into these issues by working out the views of girls, parents, and other interested parties in the rural areas. According to recent research, the socio-cultural barriers are one of the most important determinants of education of girls in rural Pakistan. Gender discrimination, patriarchal beliefs, and traditional beliefs do not allow girls to obtain an education as they have household chores and are deprived of movement. The literature has reported most of the challenges that hinder girls to further their education, including early marriages, and favoring male education (Tareen and Muhammad, 2021; Alam, 2017).

Such cultural requirements are entrenched in the rural cultures, where female education is not a priority in most cases. Another significant obstacle that has been found out in recent studies is economic constraints. Poverty compels families to make tough choices when it comes to distribution of resource and in most cases, girls are left out of school. Research shows that indirect expenses like uniforms, books and transportation even when tuition is free make it a financial burden to families and thus, they opt not to send their daughters to school (SAGE Open, 2022). Malik and Zahra (2023) also note that not only does poverty result in access to education, but it also contributes to intergenerational inequality because, being

uneducated, girls are more likely to be economically dependent in their lives. It is also noted in research that the barriers of institutions contribute to the extent to which girls are restricted to education.

Inadequate school infrastructure, insufficiency in the number of female teachers and facilities are some of the factors that make the environment not favorable to learning in girls. Schools can be located too far away in the rural areas where there is no transportation or the transportation is too dangerous hence, they do not attend school. Parents and girls often complain about safety issues such as harassment and insecurity as the reasons they do not attend school (Hussain, Fatima, and Karim, 2025). These results show that to improve the access to education, both physical and social barriers should be addressed. Moreover, recent researches point out that these problems are interrelated and cross-support one another. As an illustration, poverty and cultural norms come into play to curb education of the girls, and there are also the issues of inadequate infrastructure and security.

According to Rizwana, Afzal, Safdar, and Hasan (2023), patriarchal control, poverty, and traditional beliefs are the most crucial obstacles of girl’s education in Punjab, which means that the solution to this issue needs to be comprehensive and integrated. Equally, Rafiuddin, Waqar, and Ghafoor (2023) have also found that cultural norms, safety concerns, and unavailability of facilities are the most common obstacles in rural settings, and the combination of these factors together affects the educational attendance of girls. Nonetheless, according to some studies there is gradual change in attitude to the education of girls. Shah and Qureshi (2023) discovered that a good number of girls in rural areas want to further their education and elevate their socio-economic condition despite cultural limitations. This implies that change can be done in case the right support systems and policies are put in place. Nonetheless, these dreams can never be converted into educational participation without dealing with the socio-cultural and economic challenges at the root.

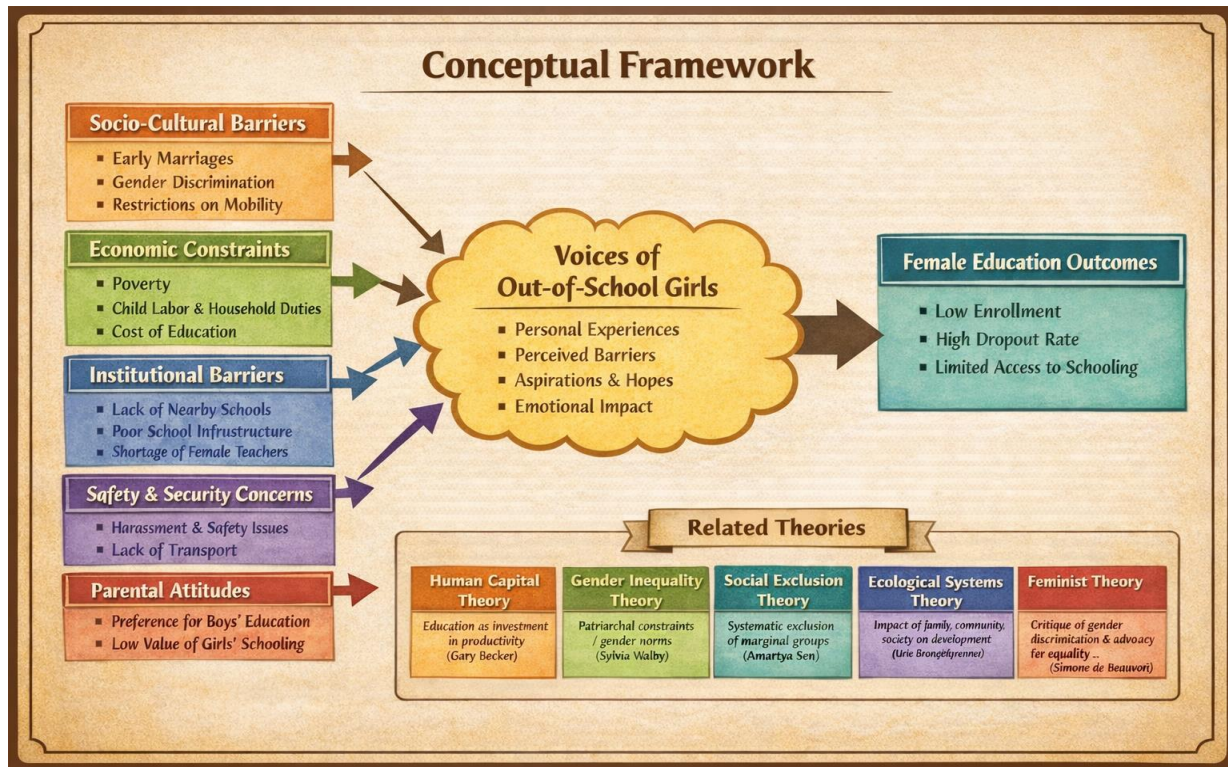


Diagram 1. conceptual framework

In general, the literature suggests that the issue of female education in rural Punjab is complicated and entrenched in the social, economic, and institutional background. Such studies bring out the need to know the thoughts of the out-of-school girls and deal with the various obstacles they encounter to help them get better results in education.

Research Objectives

The study was based on the following objectives:

- To explore the factors influencing girls' enrollment and retention in school.
- To examine how community attitudes, financial constraints, and school environment affect girls' decisions to continue or leave school.
- To investigate how traditional gender roles and domestic responsibilities impact girls' access to and participation in education.
- To explore girls' aspirations regarding education, career, and personal development.

Research Questions

The following were the research question of the study:

1. What factors influence girls' enrollment and retention in school?
2. How do community attitudes, financial constraints, and the school environment affect girls' decisions to continue or leave school?
3. How do traditional gender roles and domestic responsibilities impact girls' access to and participation in education?
4. What are girls' aspirations regarding education, career, and personal development?

Limitations and Delimitations

The study is limited to Focus-Group-Discussion (FGD) of out of school girls within the premises of PEF partner's school and specific in rural places in Lahore in the province of the Punjab Pakistan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study aims to explore the challenges that prevent girls from accessing education by focusing on the lived experiences of out-of-school girls living near PEF-affiliated schools in rural Punjab. A qualitative research design is adopted using a descriptive case study approach to gain in-depth understanding of the issues that prevent girls' education. The population consists of five out-of-school girls from communities surrounding selected PEF partner schools in Lahore, and purposive sampling is used to select participants who have direct experience of educational elimination.

Data are collected through focus group discussions using semi-structured, open-ended questions to explore socio-cultural, economic, school accessibility, and personal barriers. Probing techniques are used to gain

deeper insights into sensitive issues such as early marriage, poverty, and safety concerns. The instrument was reviewed and pilot-tested to ensure clarity and validity through experts.

Interviews were conducted in comfortable settings within the selected communities and were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure accurate transcription. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were coded and organized into themes with the support of NVivo software. Ethical principles, including confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw, were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This applies thematic analysis in order to examine the information gathered by the participants. In short, thematic analysis is a method for identifying themes and patterns in qualitative data. Finding themes that is, significant and fascinating patterns in the data and using them to answer the research question in the aim of thematic analysis.

Theme 1: Girls' Education and Dropout Reasons

This theme examines the various factors that influence girls' access to education, continued attendance, and reasons for dropping out in rural areas, with a focus on the PEF partner school context. Girls' education in these communities is shaped by a complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors that affect whether girls can enroll in school, attend regularly, and complete their education



Sub-theme 1: Financial and Institutional Constraints

This sub-theme refers to the economic and structural barriers that limit girls' access to education in rural areas. Financial constraints include the inability of families to afford school-related expenses such as tuition (where applicable), uniforms, books, stationery, and transportation. Many low-income households, especially those headed by single mothers, struggle to meet these costs, which often forces girls to drop out or remain out of school. Institutional constraints encompass issues within the educational system that hinder access or quality of education

These are the responses of participant:

G1 said that: *The school is also far from our house. I don't feel afraid to go out.*

G2 said that: *I don't even feel afraid when I go out. Now my father feels that the environment outside is not good.*

G3 said that: *I'm scared to leave the house. My parents forbid me from leaving the house.*

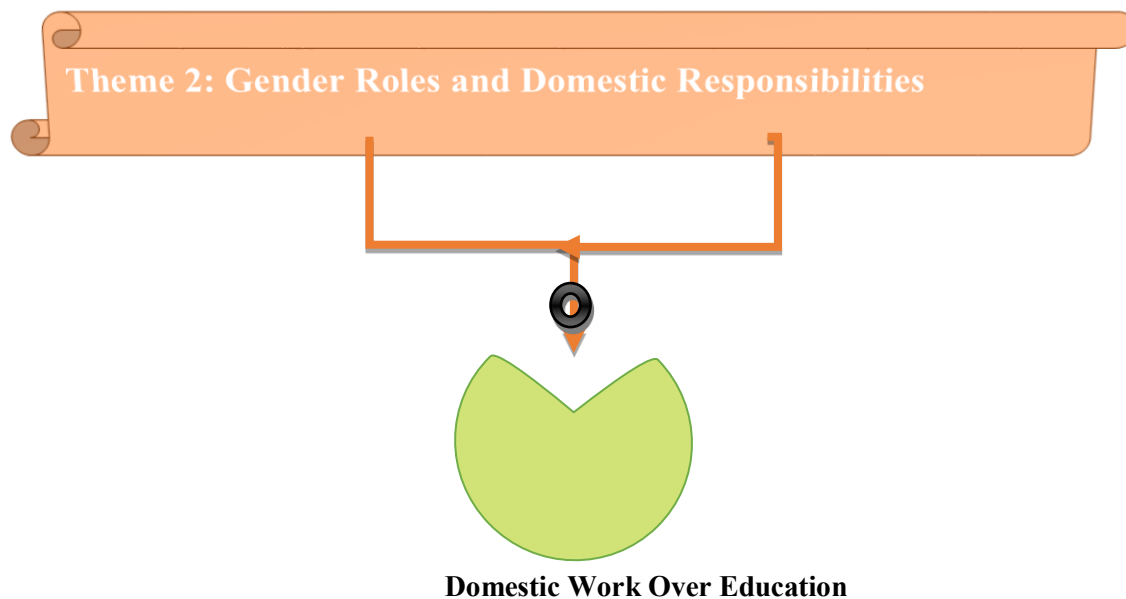
G4 said that: *The schools are far away but NSP school is nearby. My father doesn't like me going out. He talks about my character. Even the elders in our house don't let us go out. They think that if we go out, we will become bad company.*

G5 said that: *The NSP school is close by, whereas the government school is far distant. Going out is also not prohibited. I'm not even scared.*

The girls' comments indicated that they were dropping out of school because of financial difficulties. Some mentioned that their families couldn't afford basic education expenses like fees and uniforms. According to one comment, her parents didn't send her because of her poor academic performance and the expense of high school. In general, the predominant causes of dropping out were poverty and a family that did not support the student.

Theme 2: Gender Roles and Domestic Responsibilities

This theme deals with the effect of traditional gender roles and housework on female enrollment in education and leads to school dropout. The girls are usually supposed to do the household duties like cooking, cleaning, washing, getting water and taking care of younger siblings whereas the boys are supposed to concentrate on education or activities that can earn them income.



Sub-theme 1: Domestic Work Over Education

It is within this sub-theme that we are examining the manner in which the roles of the housewife prevail over schooling to the majority of girls, and hence they skip classes regularly or drop out of school altogether. Domestic work over education is a scenario whereby girls are supposed to play a major role in housework and childcare works like cooking, washing, bringing water, taking care of younger children, or assisting their parents in family sustenance rather than attending schools on a regular basis.

These are the responses of participant:

G1 said that: *I do housework happily. I take care of my younger siblings at home.*

G2 said that: *I also do housework and take care of my siblings. I help my mother in the work. I do thread cutting.*

G3 said that: *At home, I sew clothing. I live in a challenging home where the parents are always fighting; the father abuses me and challenges morality for wanting me to go out.*

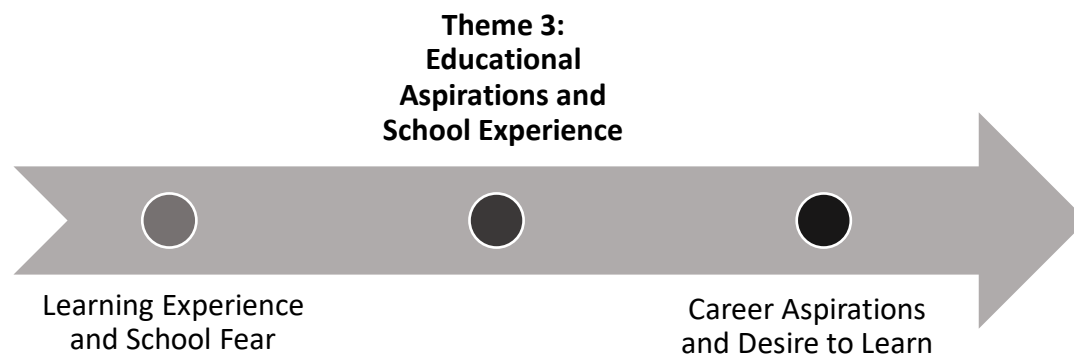
G4 said that: *At home, I help my mother with the work and sew clothes. Completely restricted from going out. Afraid of the outside. No uniform. Wishes to study but sews at home.*

G5 said that: *At home, I help my mother with work and also cut threads. We are allowed to work in our house. And my father has left the family. Despite proximity of NSP school and fewer restrictions on mobility, finances prevent her from getting a uniform and attending school.*

According to the girls' responses the girls are engaged in household chores like sewing, thread cutting, and caring for siblings, often to support their families. Most face restrictions on mobility, with some living in abusive or unstable home environments.

Theme 3: Educational Aspirations and School Experience

This theme focuses on the complex interaction between the educational goals of students and their experiences in school and how the two factors interact to determine the attitude of learners, their motivation and academic achievement. It is by comprehending this relationship that one can gain a critical understanding of how the environment and experiences that the students undergo during schooling years affect their goals as to what they wish to accomplish in the future with regards to their education.



Sub-theme 1: Career Aspirations and Desire to Learn

This sub-theme focuses on how career goals and the willingness of students to learn are connected to each other, which explains how future aspirations can affect the motivation and participation in the learning process. The career aspirations are the plans or objectives that the students want to accomplish in future. These dreams tend to be strong driving forces that determine the attitude of students towards studying and their readiness to spend time and efforts on learning.

These are the responses of participant:

G1, G2 said that: *I like to study, housework, staying at home and going to school.*

G3 said that: *I am a good student. I would like to read and become a doctor.*

G4 said that: *I would prefer to study to be able to change the situation at home after studying.*

G5 said that: *I very much like studying. I would like to learn and be a soldier in the process of going out. I like both studying and working.*

Career Aspirations and Desire to Learn show that there was a high and stable interest in education among the participants as they all indicated the need to learn and follow meaningful careers of becoming a doctor or soldier. Their ambitions lie well beyond their own self-interests and are based on some sense of duty to either better their own home or better the society.

Sub-theme 2: Learning Experience and School Fear

This sub theme will involve personal experiences of the participants with learning and their emotional reactions to the school setting, in particular, to any fear or anxiety. This theme exposes the experiences that students have towards their education process as either being pleasant or frustrating or scary and which influences that make the experience either negative or positive.

The responses of participant are these:

G1 said that: *I am scared of being punished by the teacher. I do not remember lessons fast. Balances between work and school; likes both but fears punishment and has problems remembering. The school is far.*

G2 said that: *her father limits her because of environmental concerns even though she is good at studies and wants to become a doctor. She complements education with reading the books of her siblings and working at home.*

Learning Experience and School Fear underline the emotional barriers and difficulties of the participants on their way to education. The fear of punishment by the teachers, inability to remember things as well as the necessity to combine housework with school work are some of the reasons that make one feel inferior, anxiety and pressure. There are also external factors like parental constraints and the fear of the school environment which further complicates access to learning and this is more so to the girls.

DISCUSSION

The results of this paper show that there are several issues that still curtail female education in rural Punjab despite the assistance of Punjab Education Foundation (PEF). Financial limitations, socio-cultural limitations, safety issues, and household duties are among the barriers as pointed out by the voices of out-of-school girls. Such findings are also aligned with the previous research that indicated that educational exclusion is highly dependent on structural disparities and cultural conventions (Rizwana, Afzal, Safdar, and Hasan, 2023). According to the respondents, traditional beliefs, patriarchal attitudes, and community pressures limit access to education by girls. Noureens and Awan (2010) identified similar barriers as barriers, which they referred to as hidden fences (Faheem, Gulab, & Ahmad, 2025).

Financial difficulties also restrict access to education since families cannot afford to send children to school and in many cases, their focus is on boys (Malik and Zahra, 2023; SAGE Open, 2022). Safety issues, such as harassment and travel distance are also deterrents to school attendance, which confirms the conclusions of Hussain, Fatima, and Karim (2025). Also, home chores decrease the capability of the girls to pursue further education (Noureen and Awan, 2010; Rizwana et al., 2023; Ahmad, Sewani, & Channa, 2025). In spite of these obstacles, the voices of out-of-school girls are full of hopes of education, independence and improved future.

This aligns with the results of Qureshi (2023) who observed that rural girls are becoming more aware of education as the means of empowerment and social progress. Nevertheless, the institutional constraints like the absence of female educators and insufficient school equipment still support the parental anxieties (Jabeen, Ali, & Ahmad, 2023). The other researchers have also highlighted that safe and favorable school conditions play an important role in the participation of the girls (Noureen and Awan, 2010; Hussain et al., 2025; Haider, Ahmad, & Ali, 2024). These enlightenments indicate that financial assistance is critical, but it should be followed by social, cultural, and infrastructural enhancements so that the girls can have a meaningful access to education.

CONCLUSION

The research is a good contribution to understanding the barriers to girls accessing education in rural Punjab on the basis of the first-hand experience of out-of-school girls. The results have shown that poverty, family issues, security issues, and socio-cultural beliefs are interrelated factors that limit educational involvement among girls considerably. These are not only barriers to access, but also influence retention and continuation in education.

Simultaneously, the research also points to favorable attitudes of girls to education. A great number of the people interviewed mentioned that they wanted to learn, gain independence, and advance their future. This means that there is a possibility of improvement should there be provision of proper support systems. To mitigate these issues, there is a need to have an all-encompassing strategy that should involve providing financial aid, enhancing school security, decreasing household load, and raising more community awareness. These initiatives will improve enrollment and retention, improve gender equality, and lead to social and economic development in rural Punjab in the long-term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the results of the study following recommendations are devised:

- Provide financial support such as scholarships, stipends, free uniforms, books, and transport facilities to reduce dropout rates caused by poverty.
- Introduce skill-based programs in schools (e.g., tailoring, handicrafts, digital skills, agriculture) to support girls' economic empowerment.
- Schools should introduce income-generating skills programs to support students financially.
- Make schools safer and more accessible by providing safe environments, routes, and transport facilities where they are needed.
- Parents must be allowed between six months to fill the birth certificate and other documents that the child requires so that they have sufficient time to handle the process comfortably.
- Facilitate the process of obtaining birth certificates by arranging NADRA services to reduce enrollment barriers.
- Enhance safety in schools by providing secure school environments, safe routes and transportation facilities to the girls.
- Provide the flexible learning options to girls with domestic obligations like modified schedules or home-based learning.
- Increase female teachers and create mentorship initiatives to create parental trust and motivate girls towards education.

REFERENCE

- Ahmad, N., Sewani, R., & Channa, N. (2025). Teachers Professional Development and its Effect on their Innovative Teaching Strategies. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 9(3), 141–156. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2025\(9-III\)12](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2025(9-III)12)
- Alam, A. (2017). *Girls' education in rural Pakistan: Barriers and challenges*. Lahore: University of the Punjab Press.
- Faheem, M., Gulab, F., & Ahmad, N. (2025). Teacher Educators' Perceptions and Practices for Keeping Mental Health in this Digital Era. *Journal of Management & Social Science*, 2(5), 92-107.

- Haider, K., Ahmad, N., & Ali, Z. (2024). Problems and challenges faced by non-Muslim students in achieving higher education at universities of Pakistan: An evaluative study. *Spry Contemporary Educational Practices*, 3(1), 265–290. <https://doi.org/10.62681/sprypublishers.scep/3/1/15>
- Hussain, S., Fatima, N., & Karim, A. (2025). Barriers to girls' education in rural Pakistan: A study of safety and accessibility. *Journal of Rural Education Research*, 15(2), 45–60.
- Jabeen, M., Ali, Z., & Ahmad, N. (2023). Factor Effecting on Quality Teaching Learning at Public Sector Schools in Karachi Pakistan. *Journal of Educational Research and Social Sciences Review (JERSSR)*, 3(1), 92–98.
- Malik, S., & Zahra, T. (2023). Poverty and gender inequality: Impacts on female education in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(1), 112–125.
- Noureen, G., & Awan, R. (2010). Women's education in Pakistan: Hidden fences on the way. *Asian Social Science*, 6(11), 160–165.
- Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Pakistan social and living standards measurement survey (PSLM)*. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan.
- Punjab Education Foundation. (2023). *Annual report 2022–2023*. Lahore: Government of Punjab.
- Rafiuddin, M., Waqar, A., & Ghafoor, S. (2023). Socio-cultural and institutional barriers to girls' education in rural areas of Pakistan. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 92, 102–118.
- Rizwana, K., Afzal, M., Safdar, S., & Hasan, R. (2023). Determinants of girls' education in Punjab: A socio-cultural perspective. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 32(4), 389–405.
- SAGE Open. (2022). *Access to education of rural girls in Pakistan*. SAGE Open, 12(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/xxxx>
- Shah, D., & Qureshi, F. (2023). Aspirations and challenges: Rural girls' perspectives on education in Pakistan. *Journal of Educational Research*, 26(1), 55–70.
- Tareen, H., & Muhammad, N. (2021). Cultural barriers to girls' education in Balochistan. *Global Social Sciences Review*, 6(2), 200–210.