

**The Nexus between Son Preference and Gendered Access to Education in the Tribal Areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Gender inequality in schooling and the lack of opportunities available to girls, particularly in tribal areas, significantly contribute to a tide of inequality that is difficult to reverse. The state of girls' education even deteriorates where communities managed to withstand both militancy and tribal culture. This study was conducted to investigate the sociological barriers that deter girls from pursuing education in District Bajaur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. To decipher the study's objectives, a comprehensive and descriptive literature review was conducted to employ a conceptual framework that examined the independent variable, "Son preference," against the dependent variable, "access to education." A quantitative approach was employed, covering 384 household heads (with girls of school-going age) as the sample for the present study, using a stratified random sampling technique. A comprehensive interview schedule was employed to gather primary data. The study employed various statistical tests, including multivariate and binary logistic regression, as well as univariate and bivariate cross-tabulation tests, and simple frequency analysis, to verify its objectives. The study concluded that social factors have hurt girls' education, with significant effects not only on their educational outcomes but also on their development and the overall community. To achieve more just and developed communities (as envisioned in the SDGs), access to education is a vital responsibility shared by parents, the community, and the state. Analyses of the data yielded formulation of macro and micro set of recommendations; conducting survey of district bajaur and similar tribal areas and developing projects for negotiating with donor agencies for promotion of girls' education on long term basis; designing high level advocacy/ awareness campaign engaging all stakeholders and evolving financial incentives for students, teachers and parents for completion of education ladder.*

**Keywords:** Access to education, Son Preference, Tribal identity, Girls' education, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

**INTRODUCTION**

Gender inequality in education has garnered significant attention worldwide, particularly in developing countries such as Pakistan (Russell, 2016; Klasen & Minasyan, 2017). Gender-balanced education is essential for the development of any nation (Lindberg & Jutting, 2016). Considering the importance of education, especially female education, the United Nations designated the period 2005-2014 as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNICEF, 2003). It has been greatly acknowledged that education is essential for sustained progress (Adcock, 2013; UNICEF, 2003). To ensure sustainable development, gender equality in education is a foremost concern for developing nations in particular (Aleixo et al., 2018). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) brought attention to eradicating gender-based inequalities in the educational sector and stipulated additional resources for girls' education (Loewe, 2012). After the MDGs expired in 2015, the development debate converted to the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which represent a broader framework of commitment to ensure access to free and just education, including a mandate of quality primary and secondary education for both genders alike by 2030 (Campbell et al., 2017). More precisely, Goal 4.5 of the SDGs strongly recommends that the international community address gender equality in education to empower girls and women (Sachs, 2012). Validating the background, in Pakistan, strategies are desperately needed to address gender inequality in general and gender discrimination in education in particular. The education of girls is considered a fundamental step not only for female empowerment but also for a nation's overall progress (Stam et al., 2014). However, in most developing countries, issues related to gender equality have received little attention at all levels of education. Girls seem to be treated inappropriately in terms of access and conservation, especially at post-primary levels of education (Stromquist, 2007). Such trends restrict the progress of developing countries like Pakistan (Grown et al., 2016; Fredman et al., 2018). Over the past several decades, many other developing countries, such as Pakistan, have also struggled to achieve gender equality in education (Chaudhry & Saeed, 2009; Bano et al., 2018). Educating a girl is linked to numerous advantages, not only for the girl herself, but also for those surrounding her. By reducing gender bias in education, a sense of gender equality in society is promoted, ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals regardless of their gender (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998; McDonnell, 2017). Additionally, a gender-balanced education represents a valid response to the asymmetric power in society, encompassing both men and women in various socio-economic activities. Several studies advocate for the education of girls as a panacea for achieving equitable and just socio-economic development worldwide (Beneria et al., 2015; Huggins & Thompson, 2015; Jones & Ramchand, 2016). Over the years, Pakistan's educational productivity, particularly girls' education, has presented a depressing situation.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Sons are expected to be the family's future breadwinners, and daughters are expected to marry off to other families. Investments are made in sons' education. Most parents see spending on boys' education as an investment, while funding girls' education is a waste. The in-laws' families will benefit from girls' education (Ullah, 2013; Purewal & Hashmi, 2015; Ullah & Ali, 2018). Similarly, Parents consider their daughters' education as a waste of money (Amadi, 2013). Parents' educational preferences play an important role (Jeynes, 2014). In Pakistan, gender discrimination is a common practice in education (Yasin & Aslam, 2018). Due to socio-cultural restrictions, such as a lack of female teaching staff, parents are not willing to invest in their daughters' education compared to their sons (Lloyd, 2009). Parents' opinions on the education of females in six districts of the Punjab province revealed that they placed a higher value on professional education for boys than for girls (Farah, 2007). Girls have fewer opportunities to receive an education because illiterate parents see daughters as a liability and sons as a lucky sign for the family (Jamaluddin et al., 2022). When examining the female literacy rate, boys are often prioritized over girls (Skalli, 2001). Similarly, Sunita (2014) stated that parents' aspirations play a crucial role in providing children with equal educational opportunities at a higher level. In this context, females were heavily discriminated for many years in the Chinese rural culture because boys were deemed superior and girl's inferior (Lin, 2015). Similarly, gender inequality is deeply ingrained in society, contributing to the low literacy rate of girls' education beyond the primary level (Purewal & Hashmi, 2015; Parvez et al., 2017; Onoyase, 2018). Most rural parents discriminate against their daughters in terms of education (Chingtham & Guite, 2017). Due to financial constraints in rural areas, parents often struggle to afford education expenses, including books, bags, school fees, transportation, and school uniforms. They prioritize their children's education, while social and cultural constraints deprive girls of educational opportunities (Sen & Batliwala, 2000).

Parents believe that their daughter's education is a waste of money because their daughter will ultimately live with their husband's family and her education will not immediately help their parents (Dreze & Sen,

2003; Khan et al., 2014). Parents' perceptions about education differ for boys and girls because investing in females' education is believed to have little or no return on investment. Hence, girls' education is often considered less valuable than sons' education within the family (Herz et al., 2006).

Many families in rural areas are poor, and poverty is a significant barrier to women's education. Most families are unable to send their daughters to school because it is too expensive, and they often prefer to send their sons instead (Ahmad et al., 2007). If the family's financial resources are insufficient, they may struggle to afford all the expenses related to the children's education, and boys are often given preference over girls (UNICEF, 2003; Hatlebakk, 2016). In traditional societies, the birth of a son is celebrated, but if a woman gives birth to a daughter, she is not welcomed. The mother is respected only after the birth of the son. It is evident from this that society does not like the birth of a girl child, so how can society provide funds for girls' education (Nirmala, 2017)? Child labor is a widespread practice that prevents children, especially girls, from going to school (Kenya, 2003). Poverty can lead to child labor, where parents compel their children to work instead of studying (Ray, 2013). Due to a lack of education, women may be forced into early marriage and child labour (Male & Wodon, 2016).

Narrow-minded parents are unwilling to spend money on their daughters' education because of the old-fashioned thinking that men should only play leading roles in both professional and social life. They argue that girls are solely interested in home activities (Colclough et al., 2000). Parents believe that spending money on a daughter's education is a waste of money, as the daughter will eventually live with her in-laws' family and her education will not benefit them (Dreze & Sen, 1995; Khan et al., 2014). Most parents consider funding girls' education a waste of money, while boys' education is considered an investment. They do not consider girls as the primary breadwinners of the family (Ullah, 2013; Purewal & Hashmi, 2015; Ullah & Ali, 2018). In the rural areas of Asia, parents make decisions about their children's education based not just on what will benefit their children but also on what will maximize their families' future earnings (Mahmud & Amin, 2006).

To secure their retirement, parents would spend more money on their son's education than on their daughter's. Sons are expected to be the family's future breadwinners, and daughters are expected to marry off to other families. Investments are made in sons' education (Jan et al., 2018). When examining the female literacy rate, boys are often prioritized over girls (Skalli, 2001). Due to male domination, most people in the poorest countries are still illiterate (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2016).

Many people do not educate their daughters because they lack the financial means to afford the cost of education (Yadav & Chattopadhyay, 2023). In Pakistan, mainly in Pashtun rural areas, there is a preference for boys over girls. The son's birth is celebrated. Girls, from birth to death, face many difficulties, including gender discrimination in education (Purewal & Hashmi, 2015; Caniglia et al., 2017; Mehmood et al., 2018; Kaur & Kaur, 2020). Most parents believe that boys should be favored over girls in education. Parents prefer to invest in their sons' education because they believe their sons will provide social security for them, whereas females will primarily serve their husbands and families (Logan, 1996). As a result, families often prioritize educational opportunities for their sons over those for their daughters (Hadden, 1996). In most traditional communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a girl's honor is tied to that of her family, and she is not allowed to leave the home without the consent of the family head (Saeedi et al., 2019). Unequal treatment of females in pursuing higher education is mainly caused by a combination of both socio-cultural and domestic factors (Erulkar, 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Over the past 60 years, the importance of human capital theory has increased in modern economics. Two influential theorists, Gary Baker (1930) and Theodore Schultz (1902–98), are generally considered the founders of human capital theory. Education is widely regarded as human capital because it enables

people to develop their hidden talents and contribute to the betterment of society. The current study aligns with the human capital theory approach. The idea of the "knowledge economy", which has gained popularity over the past 15 years, has also gained greater importance due to the close links between economic development and education and training. The importance of education for the economy seems even more important as economic activities shift towards knowledge-based, intellectual rather than physical labor. Therefore, human capital theory places great emphasis on education, which brings material benefits to individuals and contributes to the overall economic development (Gillies, 2011). In short, we can say that the more educated people are, the greater their financial returns will be, and the more prosperous the country's economy will be. Thus, human capital theory posits that education is a key factor in accelerating economic growth. The more money people invest in their education, the better off they and the economy will be. However, there are some drawbacks to this high level. Education will likely be reduced to economic objectives, with its broader goals and objectives forgotten, and people will be seen as nothing more than "human capital" to be utilized for financial gain rather than as living beings. Various literatures have highlighted that women's education is a fundamental means of accumulating human capital. In many situations, female education is a key factor in determining economic development (Schultz, 1993; Strauss & Thomas, 1995). Women's education is valued in the human capital approach because it is a powerful tool for achieving empowerment (Behrman, 1997; Montgomery et al., 2000). Human capital theory highlighted the relationship between income and educational experience. Becker's Human Capital Theory (1976) suggests that families invest in education based on their expectations of the economic returns that education will yield. Human capital theory views education as an investment in human capital, regarding the result as a form of capital (Schultz, 1960). Families view investing in education and training as a long-term investment that will yield greater income in the future. As a result, education was viewed as an investment rather than a "consumption" (Blaug, 1976). In patriarchal societies, sons are considered to be better off financially, which leads to discrimination in educational investment against girls. The preference for sons is deeply rooted in tribal communities, where investment in boys' education is prioritized over that of girls (Hussain, 2020). Similarly, researchers working in the context of South Asia have demonstrated that early marriage often leads to the discontinuation of education. Their findings suggest that this is particularly true for girls, who are often expected to assume domestic roles after marriage and subsequently drop out of school (Malhotra & Mather, 1997). In many countries, girls are "married off," join the husband's family, and no longer live with him or her, so families may choose to pay for the costs of boys' education because the return would be better than providing them with labor market opportunities (Basu & Tzannatos, 2003).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The current study was conducted in District Bajaur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with the primary purpose of identifying the various barriers that females face in accessing secondary school education. Briefly, District Bajaur is in the Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It was an agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas until 2018. It became a district after the merger of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. District Bajaur comprises 7 Tehsils, 120 village councils, and 7 neighborhood councils (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2023). There was a total of 121,487 households. The total population of District Bajaur is 10,93,684. Females are 49.056% and males are 50.943% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). There are 653 schools (423 for boys and 230 for girls) in the district. At the primary school level, the total net enrolment ratio is 58%. The net enrollment ratio for girls and boys is 32% and 83% respectively. At the secondary level, the enrollment ratio is 18% (5% girls and 13% boys) (Annual Statistical Report, 2018). The current study was limited to the above-mentioned district due to the high rate of illiteracy among females in the area. A cross-sectional research approach was chosen because it allows for data collection from a larger population. A sample size of 384 out of 121,487 households was selected according to the sample size selection criteria outlined by Krejcie & Morgan (1970) and Sekaran (2003). A stratified random sampling technique, a type of probability sampling, was

employed in the study, where District Bajaur was considered as a stratum. The targeted population of every tehsil contains similar socio-demographic characteristics; therefore, every tehsil was treated as an independent stratum of the study population. To get relevant information from respondents about the topic at hand, a well-structured interview schedule was created that included all study factors, including the basis and theme. Every head of the household was a potential respondent, characterized as being from a rural background and serving as the head of the family. A structured interview schedule was initially composed in the English language. Then it was translated into the Pashto language (local language) because most of the respondents were not highly educated. As Pashto is their mother tongue, they were comfortable with this medium of instruction. For additional analysis, all data gathered from primary sources were taken into consideration and coded into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program (version 21). Various statistical tests were employed, including binary logistic regression, multiple logistic regression, cross-tabulation, and simple frequency tests. A simple frequency test was performed on the Likert scale information to determine whether the collected data is usually distributed. The normal distribution of the data is determined by the mean, median, and mode values; if the values are close to each other, it means that the data is usually distributed. P values less than 0.05 ( $p < 0.05$ ) were considered statistically significant for all statistical analyses (Bryman, 1994). Moreover, the statistical association in bivariate analysis was measured by the P value, odds ratio, and confidence interval value. The adjusted odds ratio and confidence interval values were used to measure the statistical association in the multivariate analysis. As a study outcome variable, female access to education was measured using dichotomous categories: No influence and Influence.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion section is a crucial part of a research study. It presents the study's findings. The researcher employed binary logistic regression and cross-tabulation tests as part of the bivariate analysis to determine the relationship between the study variables. The researcher employed multiple logistic regression tests to determine the collective effects of Pashtunwali on access to education, following bivariate analysis. Furthermore, the statistical association, as measured by multivariate analysis, was assessed using the adjusted odds ratio and confidence interval values. Only variables with a significance level at bivariate analysis were entered into the multivariable logistic regression analysis.

### Bivariate & Multivariate Statistical Association

The lists of tables below indicate the statistical association between son preference and girls' access to education.

**Table 1: Association of son preference over girls with access to education**

Son Preference	Female Access to Education			
	No Influence	Influence	OR, 95% CI. I	P. Value
	Frequency, %	Frequency, %		
A son is preferred over a daughter in terms of education.				
Agree	16 (47.1%)	217 (62%)	4.069 (1.790-9.247)	0.001
Neutral	06 (17.6%)	93 (26.6%)	4.650(1.631-13.258)	0.004
Disagree	12 (35.3%)	40 (11.4%)	1.00	

**The desire for a male child in the Pashtun cultural setup leads to a high number of child births at an early age, which ultimately limits girls' education.**

<b>Agree</b>	13 (38.2%)	216 (61.7%)	4.494 (2.184-11.217)	0.000
<b>Neutral</b>	07 (20.6%)	87 (24.9%)	3.702 (1.398-9.807)	0.008
<b>Disagree</b>	14 (41.2%)	47 (13.4%)	1.00	

**Females are deprived of education due to the discriminatory attitudes of their parents.**

<b>Agree</b>	18 (52.9%).	192 (54.9%)	2.400(1.006-5.727)	0.048
<b>Neutral</b>	07 (20.6%)	118 (33.7%)	3.793(1.326-10.847)	0.013
<b>Disagree</b>	09 (26.5%)	40 (11.4%)	1.00	

**Parents perceive boys' education as a means to generate future income for the family.**

<b>Agree</b>	17 (50%)	.172 (49.1%)	1.084(.464-2.534)	0.852
<b>Neutral</b>	08 (23.5%)	94 (26.9%)	1.259(.465-3.411)	0.651
<b>Disagree</b>	09 (26.5%)	84 (24%)	1.00	

**Female education is considered meaningless and a waste of resources in Pashtun families.**

<b>Agree</b>	16 (47.1%).	217 (62%)	3.970 (1.749-9.008)	0.001
<b>Neutral</b>	06 (17.6%)	92 (26.3%)	4.488 (1.575-12.784)	0.005
<b>Disagree</b>	12 (35.3%)	41 (11.7%)	1.00	

Abbreviations: OR, Odds Ratio; CI, Confidence Interval; 1.00, Reference Category.

Association of son preference over girls with access to education: The majority, 217 (62%) of the respondents, agreed that there is an influence, whereas 16 (47.1%) of the respondents disagreed with no influence. The odds ratio for influence on access to education is 04 times greater than respondents who disagreed. The preference for a son over a daughter in receiving education is statistically significant, as indicated by the dependent variable. The result shows a significant confidence interval value at (1.790-9.247). Moreover, after adjusting for key terms, the patriarchal structure of Pashtun society, family honor (ghairat) rooted in Pashtunwali, the Strict code of the Purdah system (veil), and the preference for sons over daughters in education are found to be statistically significant, with an adjusted odds ratio of 3.446 and a confidence interval value of (1.064-11.155).

Among the household heads, majority, 216 (61.4%) respondents of them agreed with influence of desire for male child in pashtun cultural set up leads to high number of child birth in early age which ultimately limit girl's education, while 13(38.2%) of the respondents were agree with no influence over access to education. The agreed respondents' odds ratio is 4 times greater than those who disagreed. The desire for a male child in the Pashtun cultural setup leads to a high number of child births at an early age, which ultimately limits girls' education, and is statistically significant in accessing education. The value of the confidence interval is (2.184-11.217), indicating a significant association. Moreover, after adjustment of key terms patriarchal structure of pashtun society, family honor (*ghairat*) rooted in Pashtunwali and strict

code of *Purdah* system (Veil), Desire for male child in pashtun cultural setup is found statistically significant having adjusted odd ratio as (adjusted OR, 95% CI. 3.306 (1.083-10.091)).

Out of the total sample size, the Majority, 192 (54.9%) respondents agreed with influence, whereas 18 (52.9%) respondents did not agree. The odds ratio for influence on access to education is twice that of respondents who disagreed. Hence, females are deprived of education due to the discriminatory attitude of parents, which is statistically significant with the dependent variable. The result shows a significant confidence interval value at (1.006-5.727). Furthermore, after adjustment of key impediments patriarchal structure of pashtun society, family honor (*ghairat*) rooted in Pashtunwali and strict code of *purdah* system (veil), Female are deprived of education due to discriminatory attitude of parents is found statistically significant having adjusted odd ratio as (adjusted OR, 95% CI. 3.459 (1.084-11.031)).

Furthermore, 172 (49.1%) of the respondents agreed on influence, whereas the remaining 17 (50%) respondents did not agree. The odds ratio for the influence of agreed responses is 1.08 times higher than for disagreed responses. Parents perceive a boy's education as a source of future income for the family, which is statistically insignificant to the dependent variable. The value of the confidence interval is (- - 2.534 to 0.464). Moreover, 217 (62%) respondents agreed that there was influence, whereas 16 (47.1%) respondents agreed that there was no influence. The odds ratio for influence on access to education is 03 times higher than for respondents who disagreed. Female education is considered meaningless and a waste of resources, which is statistically significant in terms of access to education. The result shows a significant confidence interval value at (1.749-9.008). Moreover, after adjustment of key impediments, the patriarchal structure of Pashtun society, family honor (*ghairat*) rooted in Pashtunwali and the Strict code of the *purdah* system (veil), female education is considered meaningless. Waste of resources is found to be statistically significant, with an adjusted odds ratio of (adjusted OR, 95% CI, 9.45, 3.646 (1.127-11.794)).

After adjustment of all the key impediments (Pashtunwali) at the last model, various barriers were found statistical significant to access to education, son is preferred over daughter in getting education (adjusted OR, 95% CI. 3.446 (1.064-11.155)), Desire for male child in pashtun cultural set up (adjusted OR, 95% CI. 3.306 (1.083-10.091 females are deprived of education due to the discriminatory attitude of parents (adjusted OR, 95% CI, 3.459 (1.084-11.031)), and female education is considered meaningless and a waste of resources in Pashtun families (adjusted OR, 95% CI. 9.45, 3.646 (1.127-11.794)). In contrast, the other variables showed no statistical significance in the outcome.

**Table 2: Multivariate analysis of Pashtunwali, son preference, and access to education**

Son Preference	M1 AOR, 95% CI	M2 AOR, 95% CI	M3 AOR, 95% CI	M 4 AOR, 95% CI	M 5 AOR, 95% CI	M 6 AOR, 95% CI
Patriarchal structure of Pashtun society Agree	4.254 (1.551- 11.671)	2.99 (0.983- 9.14)	2.549 (0.774- 8.39)	3.909 (1.324- 11.538)	5.210 (1.830- 14.835)	2.963 (.977- 8.985)
Family honor ( <i>ghairat</i> ) rooted in Pashtunwali Agree	12.00 (2.596- 55.472)	10.90 (2.30- 51.254)	9.913 (2.119- 56.41)	13.291 (2.831- 62.136)	12.700 (2.738- 58.918)	11.275 (2.412- 52.702)
Strict code of the Purdah system (gender segregation Agree	2.942 (1.073- 8.068)	3.397 (1.253- 9.212)	3.423 (1.264- 9.265)	3.247 (1.222- 8.777)	2.901 (1.099- 7.663)	3.505 (1.285- 9.561)

A son is preferred over a daughter in terms of education. Agree	3.446 (1.064-11.1.55)	
There is a desire for a male child in the Pashtun cultural setup. Agree	3.306 (1.083-10.091)	
Females are deprived of education due to the discriminatory attitude of parents. Agree	3.459 (1.084-.11.031)	
Parents perceive boys' education to generate future income for the family. Agree	1.804 (.609.-5.346)	
Female education is considered meaningless and a waste of resources in Pashtun families. Agree		3.646 (1.127-11.794)

Abbreviations: AOR, Adjusted Odds Ratio; CI, Confidence Interval; 1, Reference Category

## CONCLUSION

The current study was conducted in District Bajaur to highlight the sociological factors in access to education. Son preference, desire for male child in the Pashtun cultural setup, discriminatory attitude of parents, and female education are considered meaningless and a waste of resources in Pashtun families, which were found statistically significant. Human capital theory informed this study from various perspectives regarding gender inequality in education access. The current study aligns with human capital theory, examining how researchers in this field have explored the underrepresentation of females in education. As education is considered a form of human capital, families invest in education based on their expectations of the economic returns. Long-established gender roles dictate that men earn money while women take care of the home. In tribal patriarchal societies, sons are expected to be the family's future breadwinners, and daughters are expected to marry off to other families. Investments are made in sons' education, while girls are discriminated against. This further promotes the practice of early marriage, which in turn leads to the discontinuation of girls' education and strengthens patriarchy. The preference for sons is deeply rooted in tribal communities, where investment in boys' education is prioritized over girls.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis of the data, followed by an intensive discussion of comparable studies and the drawing of conclusions, yields a formulation of recommendations.

- 1) Design a high-level advocacy and awareness campaign to highlight the value of girls' education in addressing socio-cultural barriers.
- 2) Alongside the academic category of schools, establish a parallel vocational institution to break down socio-cultural barriers faced by parents and address the felt needs of people, particularly marginalized groups, to combat poverty.

- 3) The government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa may concurrently initiate a medium-based project with donor organizations (UNICEF, USAID) to provide financial and technical assistance to “drop-out girls” to continue their academic studies and integrate them into the mainstream.

#### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

#### **Data Availability Statement**

This study utilizes primary data collected from the tribal areas of KPK, Pakistan.

#### **Ethical statement**

This research work was not previously published or submitted in any form.

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