

Exploring Gender Disparities in Parental Support for Education of Children at Tertiary Level: A Case Study of University of Swat

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ABSTRACT

Gender disparities causes educational inequalities. The study explored gender disparities in parental support for education of children at the tertiary level. Study's objectives were to; explore gender disparities in support of parents for higher education of children, identify causes of gender disparities and recommend strategies for equal parental support of parents for higher education of male and female children. Study's design was qualitative case study. Twelve undergraduate students, six males and six female students were purposively selected participants of the study. Semi-structured interview was prepared, validated and used for collecting data with individual interviews. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) procedure data were thematically analyzed. The study explored gender disparities in financial, academic and socio-emotional support of parents for children education at the tertiary level, identified socio-cultural values and economic factors for gender disparities in education of children and recommended equal financial, academic and socio-emotional support of parents for the education male and female children at the tertiary level.

Key words: Gender Disparities, Parental Support, Education of Children, Tertiary Level, University of Swat

INTRODUCTION

Disparities in support of parents for the education of male and female children in higher education is an issue that represents the inequalities on the basis of gender and determines the educational access and outcomes for students getting education in tertiary educational institutions. The education of universities, colleges and professional institutions is termed as tertiary or higher education that demands the financial and emotional support of guidance and hence having implications for the successful completion of children education and entry into future career paths (Cabrera et al., 2021). Though there is international focus of gender equality in terms of education for children but still there persist inequalities due to cultural, economic and social situations across different societies of the world. These differences affect students' access, quality of education, leads to inequalities and also having implications for the job market. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the underlying causes of these differences and overcome challenges posed by these disparities (Buchmann & Hannum, 2023).

Gender disparities in parental support for children education significantly affect the successful transition and journey into the higher education of graduates. Parental support includes the financial support, emotional warmth, guidance for making academic decision and the availability of healthy environment for the academic success of children (Jeynes, 2007). Research studies have identified that parental support plays a significant role in determining the aspirations of children that ultimately shape their academic achievement but the role of gender and socio-cultural expectations establish different nature of support for male and female children in higher education on the part of parents (Hill & Tyson, 2009). In terms of gender disparities in higher education generally male children are more supported as on the basis of social norms and economic considerations they generate more income to families (Kabeer, 2005; Baker & Milligan, 2016). Female children are only supported equally in contexts where there is gender equality and females may produce equal income like that of males (Rao & Kaul, 2018).

In the context of Pakistan, socio-cultural and economic factors determine parental support for the higher education of male and female children and significant disparities are found in enrollment rates and educational outcomes for males and females (Qureshi & Rarieya, 2008). Keeping in view the dynamic roles of males and restricted roles of females, parents provide full support to the education of males and little support to the education of females (Khan & Khan, 2020). Cultural values and socio-economic factors determine the resources for the higher education of men and women (Malik & Courtney, 2011). The socio-cultural factors are more friendly for the higher education of males as compared to females (Rana & Munir, 2016). However, international and national obligations demand equal parental support for male and female children in pursuit of higher education (UNESCO, 2018).

Parental support in higher education includes bearing finances for the education, giving moral support and provision of guidance for getting education or adopting careers (Tembon et al., 2021). Parents provide this support on the basis of their attitude for different genders and consequently the prefer one gender over the other this is the result of cultural influences. As males are regarded as earning hands in certain societies, therefore; their education and skills' development is prioritized over females due to limited scope in economic sphere of the family (Sainz et al., 2022). Females are therefore, mostly provided with support to develop their skills in the domestic affairs of the families that creates challenges in the way of higher education for the females. These mindsets for the education of female gender is shaped by the patriarchy, economy and sociocultural gender stereotype beliefs of society (UNESCO, 2024).

The level of gender difference in parental support is very different in diverse global contexts, influenced by economic, cultural, and policy contexts. Gender inequality may be subtler, but still exist in high income countries where equality policies run deeper with inequalities as they find ways out - through implicit biases or expectations that differ when it comes to careers. As an example, a parent might push a daughter to a certain profession that is regarded a feminine one, such as the ones in the education or healthcare sector, and encourage a son towards STEM-related disciplines, which have an allegedly high degree of earning power (OECD, 2023). Conversely, gender inequality is usually worsened by poor economic conditions that exist in low-income countries and middle-income countries. The lack of household resources can also place the emphasis on providing education to sons because education is a more reliable source of investment and daughters will either attend household chores or get married at an early age. Such choices are usually obstructed by institutional constraints, e.g. there are restricted amenities to schools or women regarding financing girls, especially in the countryside (World Bank, 2024).

The dynamics of parental support is further complicated by intersectional factors because, as it can be seen, the socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographic location also matter. As an example, families with a low income might be more susceptible to focusing on the education of a particular child at the

expense of others, which most of the time, happens to be sons because of the cultural or economic reasons (Buchmann & Hannum, 2023). On the same note, there may be some special difficulties or issues of ethnic or racial minorities where, due to differences in cultural values, the interaction with gender norms may affect parental support patterns. As an example, in one society, gender hierarchies can be entrenched through adherence to traditional values, whereas in another, progressive mindsets can encourage both genders to invest equally in the educational process of their children. Even geographical differences come to play as rural families unfavorable economic and logistic constraints support higher education especially to daughters, than the urban families that enjoy better access to resources and institutions (Tembon et al., 2021).

The consequences of parental support differences by gender are serious and not only at the individual student level, but also at the larger societal level. Such disparities in support result in uneven enrollment and graduation rates of a particular gender which is mainly female contributing recurrent cycles of economic and social disadvantage (Cabrera et al., 2021). As an example, less parentally supported women are less inclined to getting high degrees or entering well-paid spheres, continuing to create gender wage gaps (UNESCO, 2024). Besides, these differences can perpetrate stereotypes about gender roles, restricting men and women to undertake various careers without setting constraints imposed by society on careers associated with each gender. It is thus important to address these imbalances with an aim of ensuring access to higher education and inclusive growth (World Bank, 2024).

Generally, in our context, it is observed that male children are provided with the needed support for education while female children are provided with minimal support for education on the part of parents for getting higher education due to socio-economic and cultural factors that determines the entry of male children into the broad fields of higher education and restricted entry for females to narrow fields of higher education and ultimate career choice decisions. Therefore, the study explored gender disparities in parental support for education of children at the tertiary level and develop strategies for the provision of equal support to the higher education of children both for male and female children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender disparity in parental contributions toward higher education of children has been one of the areas of educational research, especially relating to attainment of sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) set by the United Nations. These inequalities indicate reaction of culture, economic, and social forces that determine education and learning prospects. This review of literature will combine previous studies and integrate the knowledge in SDG-related theories to find out the variation of the parental support based on gender, the reasons behind those differences, and what their impact can have the academic success of students and the fairness of the society. This review gives an in-depth insight into gender disparities in parental support at tertiary level experience by over-viewing international and regional thinking, intersectional forces, policy responses, and an understanding of gender disparities in parental support at the tertiary level. Parental assistance in tertiary education involves investment (such as economic aid; tuition fee and cost of living), emotional reassurance (i.e., motivation and resilience building), and outright participation (i.e. advising career-related and academic choices). These aids have implications on the enrollment, persistence, and completion of the students in universities (Cabrera et al., 2021). The SDGs center on equal access to quality education (SDG 4) and the eradication of gender-based discrimination (SDG 5), which necessitates the decision that should be taken to overcome the differences in the support provided to children by their parents in order to receive inclusive educational opportunities (United Nations, 2015).

Findings of researches are always consistent towards the idea that parental support to tertiary education depends on gender and the nature of society as well as economic orientation. Parents in most situations value the education of their sons because they anticipate a greater economic investment or a culture that places men as the main providers (Sainz et al., 2022). An example is the case of South Asia, where the family made sacrifices to spend a smaller amount of resources on the higher education of sons and viewed this decision as an investment in the future, and the daughters generally were led to early marriage or cheaper courses (UNESCO, 2024). This corresponds to SDG 5 as it aims to ensure that the practice of discriminating against women and girls does not occur since such inequalities limit access to higher education and contributes to gender inequality (United Nations, 2015). Gender gaps in high-income nations are not as obvious as they are in low-income states but continue to exist in subtle prejudices. The parental pressure might also come as parents might train daughters to be feminine learners meaning that they learn things that are stereotypically feminine such as education or healthcare (OECD, 2023). Anyway, parents might direct sons at STEM direction that implies the ability to earn more (OECD, 2023). Parental expectations towards daughters majoring in STEM have been lower compared to that towards sons, even in cases when both daughters and sons perform equally, reducing the possibility of being enrolled in competitive programs (Sainz et al., 2022). This hidden discrimination rebuts the objective of inclusive educational pathways and equitable education (SDG 4) and the target of empowering women and girls in all areas (SDG 5), which are listed in the guidelines of SDGs 2015 (United Nations, 2015).

The loss of parental support among the genders is influenced by multiple aspects such as cultural beliefs, the lack of finances, and policy loopholes. The male education is given priority in cultural norms especially in patriarchal societies because the males are expected to play an economic and social role. Parents in some South Asian and Middle Eastern countries practice cultural beliefs of spending more on boys because they will take care of the family and girls are only regarded as a temporary member (UNESCO, 2024). The given practice contradicts directly to the message in SDG 5, which states that there is a need to reduce gender-based discrimination and grant equal opportunities (United Nations, 2015). These inequalities are enhanced by economic factors particularly in low income and middle income countries. Small budgets of the household make families prefer to invest in the education of sons as they deem it more secure (Tembon et al., 2021). In India, a study revealed that multi-child families were more probable to invest in sons' tertiary education whereas all daughters spent their time on vocational education or joining the labor market at a young age (Kumar & Choudhury, 2023). This economic priority is counterproductive of the SDG 4 which seeks to give inclusive and quality education to all regardless of gender (United Nations, 2015). Policies on education are also very important. In the states where gender equality policy is especially strong, e.g., Scandinavia, the disparities are mitigated with the help of subsidies and scholarships encouraging equal spending on education (OECD, 2023). Nevertheless, there are still gender gaps in the areas that have few policy interventions. According to World Bank (2025), the lack of targeted financial support to female learners in sub-Saharan Africa limits motivation towards the support of tertiary education by parents, which does not allow achieving SDG 4 and SDG 5.

Intersectionality is a major determinant of gender differences regarding parental support. Gender is mixed between other classes such as socioeconomic, ethnicity, and geographical location to make inequalities more complex. Families with low income are under more pressure to give importance to the educational process of one of the children and prefer sons because of cultural or financial reasons (Buchmann & Hannum, 2023). Hispanic families in the United States can focus on the education of sons as it is their cultural value being based on the male responsibility, whereas women are expected to take care not only of themselves but also of the others (Cabrerera et al., 2021). The rural-urban differences also contribute to the worsening inequality since the rural family causes the logistical and financial social challenges more likely to influence daughters (Tembon et al., 2021). The intersections issues underline the necessity of

specific interventions to pursue the SDG 4 objective of inclusiveness in education and the SDG 5 focus on gender (United Nations, 2015).

Gender inequality in parental support has serious consequences on society and students, compromising SDG 4 and SDG 5. The disadvantaged support creates low rates of female student enrollment and completion rates, and access to high-paying occupations, as part of the continuous gender wage gap (UNESCO, 2024). Less-supported females tend not to achieve high degrees or the study of fields such as engineering or technology where the lack of knowledge on possible educational paths further contradicts the goals of SDG 5 supporting women participation in leadership and decision-making (United Nations, 2015). Such inequalities also promote stereotypes in society that limits both sexes to career choices. The lack of equal education opportunities at the societal level is not sustainable because the female talent remains underutilized, and this decreases innovation and economic growth (World Bank, 2025). This is a direct conflict with goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) due to its focus on inclusive economic growth (United Nations, 2015). Also, inequality will create poverty traps where poor-educated women will have fewer chances to reach economic well-being, negating SDG 1 (No Poverty). Gender disparities have also been observed to ease with policy interventions that are in conjunction with the SDGs. Female scholarships and financial aid encourage parents to value investing in education of their female children (OECD, 2023). SDG 5 has seen the development of community-based projects in India and Bangladesh that have elevated female enrolment by informing people on the economic advantages of educating girls (Kumar & Choudhury, 2023). Nevertheless, affective and aspirational support is an under-reported form, even though such topics are more difficult to measure and focus on in the policy (Cabrera et al., 2021).

The successful transition of male and female children to higher education is significantly influenced by the support of parent. Gender disparities in the support of parents for the higher education of children lead to unequal opportunities and success of higher education among males and females in a society. Studies have identified the role of socio-economic and socio-cultural factors in determining the opportunities of higher education for children. Therefore, disparities in parental support for higher education of children are found in the regions of Middle east, Africa and Asia (Kabeer, 2005; Lloyd & Mensch, 2008). Malik and Courtney (2011) highlighted that in Pakistan, cultural expectations determine the role of gender and lead parents to fully support the education of male children. On the other hand, in the regions where there are progressive societies have better gender equality and positive support for the education of female children (Baker & Milligan, 2016; UNESCO, 2018). Parents with good socio-economic status have higher support for the education of female children (Hill & Tyson, 2009). The efforts at the global level, like the Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have forwarded recommendations for the promotion of gender equality in education (UNESCO, 2015). However, there are disparities in the success of these policies in different regions of the world (Baker & Milligan, 2016). The difference in support of parents for the education of children education in general and specifically higher education is a major challenge in the way of females for getting higher education in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Though policies of the nation and those of provinces recommends for the equality in opportunities of higher education for both males and females but practically there arises disparities due to bureaucratic and socio-cultural factors. In this scenario, the strong support of parents only remains the major source for the provision of higher educational opportunities for female students (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

In the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the society observes the dominance of male children and opportunities of education and employment for females are less due to socio-cultural constraints (Khattak, 2021). Parents and families consider it difficult to send female children for higher education as this may result in the dishonor of the family and therefore, parents prefer to arrange the marriages of their female children instead of sending them for higher education (Amin et al., 2023). Parents considers the

expenditure on female education for higher studies as futile as females have to get marry and go into the house of other families and earn for them instead for their parents, therefore; they hardly discourage the education of females. This makes them unfriendly for the education of females as compared to males (Ullah et al., 2024). The economic perspectives also influence the education of females as the society provides more employment opportunities to males as compared to females therefore, higher education for females is considered to be useless more specifically in the rural regions (Zahid, 2020). The government in Pakistan is encouraging female education through various scholarship programs but these results in the increase of female entry into higher educational institutions instead of making the attitude of parents friendly for female education at the higher level (Tajammal et al., 2024). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, majority of parents are either illiterate or have less educational qualification which makes it hard for such parents to have proper understanding of the higher education and its significance for female children (Amin, 2020). The literature review highlighted the socio-cultural, economic and policy guidelines as different factors determining the support of parents for male and female children in higher education. Therefore, the study explored gender disparities in parental support for education of children in the context of University of Swat.

METHODOLOGY

The design of the study was qualitative case study and twelve undergraduate students, six males and six females were purposively selected for data collection. A semi-structured interview guide was prepared, validated and used for the collection of data with individual interviews. Data were collected till data saturation and the collected data were analyzed thematically with following the procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analyzed data were validated using members' checking, audit trial and triangulation.

RESULTS

The collected data were transcribed from the data sheets, thoroughly read for the identification of codes, development of initial themes, refinement of themes, finalizing of themes and finally the write up of the report. The major themes emerged in the analyses of the data in connection to gender disparities in parental support for education of children at tertiary level as: socio-cultural values, economic factors and emotional support. These themes were presented and elaborated under separate headings.

Theme 1: Disparities in financial and academic support due to socio-cultural values

There were disparities in financial and academic support of parents due to socio-cultural values and in view of graduate male and female students, parents regarded the higher education of sons to be more important as they would become the future supporters of the family and daughters have to marry with sons from other families. In this regard one of the female students (MS3) replied:

“Parents always regard the higher education of both sons and daughters equally but it is the demand of the society and our traditions that compel parents to support more the higher education of male children”.

In the similar way another female student (FS5) replied:

“My parents were not ready to send me to university as they were more concerned about my safety and character than my education”.

Likewise, a female student (FS3) told:

“At our home my mother and father both love the education of mine and my brothers but our relatives tell our father and mother not to spend too much on the education of daughters as they are meant for the

home of other people and therefore, there is no need of their higher education. This sometimes, disturb our parents”

Theme 2: Disparities in financial and academic support due to economic factors

There were disparities in financial and academic support of parents due to economic factors and in view of graduates economic factors were also responsible for gender disparity in parental support for higher education of children as the education of male guarantee more financial gains and females have restricted employment opportunities after higher education. In this regard one of the female students (FS2) replied:

“My father sold a piece of land for my brother who has got admission in a private medical college though his marks in the intermediate were less than my marks in the same class but they sent me to do my B.S in Zoology and sent him to become a doctor.”

In the similar way, another female student (FS4) replied:

“Me and my brother got the intermediate education from the same school and we both passed with good marks but as my brother was able to go to city of Peshawar, therefore; my father sent him for nursing on self-finance basis and I was sent to do my BS in education. Though it was also my desire to go there and do nursing but my parents told you are a girl and we cannot send you away from home and we also cannot afford the expenses of your study.”

Theme 3: Disparities in emotional support for tertiary education of children

Parents encouraged the higher education of their sons and through provision of educational guidance, showing concern for their future employment and expectations for their future role in support of the family. In this regard a male student (MS1) replied:

“My parents show love for my education and the education of my sister but as I am their son and I have to support them in future, therefore, naturally, they show more support for my education as compared to the education of my sisters”.

In the similar fashion a female student (FS5) replied:

“Though our parents prefer our brother in higher education and provide them more support to them but it is natural for them as our brothers have more responsibilities to shoulder in future and we have less as compared to them”.

Another female student (FS3) told:

“We are living in a joint family system and our grandfather makes all the decisions. Though our parents, I mean my father and mother encourage my education but my grandfather objects all the time on my higher education and says that it is like the cutting of our nose.”

DISCUSSIONS

The study found that under the influence of socio-cultural values, parents regarded the higher education of male children as more important due to their expected support for family in future and provided little or no support to the education of female children at the higher level. This was due to the socio-cultural beliefs of parents. The support of parents was further influenced by the economic factors and there were found disparities due rich employment opportunities for males and less employment opportunities for females. Parents encouraged the higher education of their sons and through provision of educational guidance, showing concern for their future employment and expectations for their future role in support of

the family. The findings of the study are in conformity with the findings of the study by Khattak (2021) who found that in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the society observes the dominance of male children and opportunities of education and employment for females are less due to socio-cultural constraints. Similar findings were also reported by the study of Amin et al. (2023), who identified that parents and families consider it difficult to send female children for higher education as this may result in the dishonor of the family and therefore, parents prefer to arrange the marriages of their female children instead of sending them for higher education. In a similar vein, Ullah et al. (2024) found that parents consider the expenditure on female education for higher studies as futile as females have to get marry and go into the house of other families and earn for them instead for their parents, therefore; they hardly discourage the education of females. This makes them unfriendly for the education of females as compared to males. The findings of the study are also like the findings of Zahid (2020), who highlighted that the economic perspectives also influence the education of females as the society provides more employment opportunities to males as compared to females therefore, higher education for females is considered to be useless more specifically in the rural regions. Similarly, Amin (2020), also found that in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, majority of parents are either illiterate or have less educational qualification which makes it hard for such parents to have proper understanding of the higher education and its significance for female children. These findings of the study have significance theoretical and practical implications for the parity in parental support for the higher education of both male and female children.

CONCLUSION

The objectives of the study were to; explore gender disparities in support of parents for education of children at the tertiary level, identify causes of gender disparities in parental support for education of children and recommend strategies of equal parental support for education of both male and female children at the tertiary level and the study found that under the influence of socio-cultural values, parents regarded the higher education of male children as more important due to their expected support for family in future and provided little or no support to the education of female children at the higher level. This was due to the socio-cultural beliefs of parents. The support of parents was further influenced by the economic factors and there were found disparities due rich employment opportunities for males and less employment opportunities for females. Parents encouraged the higher education of their sons and through provision of educational guidance, showing concern for their future employment and expectations for their future role in support of the family. Therefore, there is the need of positive interventions through policy making coupled with awareness campaigns by electronic and print media for achieving equal support for the higher education of children on the part of parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There may be awareness sessions for the parents in media and in society for highlighting the significance of equally responsible role of parents for the higher education of both male and female children.
2. The parents may provide equal financial, academic and socio-emotional support for the education of both male and female children at the tertiary level.
3. The government need to make it obligatory for the parents to have equal focus on the education of both male and female at the higher level.
4. The education of mothers need to be focused as majority of mothers in the context of the study are either illiterate or have less qualification, therefore; there may be special awareness programs through social media for making them aware about the higher education of both male and female children.

5. Future studies may be conducted on the disparities in parental support for secondary education of male and female students.

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