

Socio-Cultural and Economic Constrains in Women Higher Education

Mehwish Iqbal

imehwish6@gmail.com

M.Phil. Education, Visiting Lecturer, University of Layyah, Pakistan

Ahmad Ali

PhD Scholar, Department of Sociology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan Pakistan, Visiting Lecturer,
Department of Sociology, University of Layyah, Pakistan

Shumaila Afzal

MS Clinical Psychology, Riphah International University, Lahore, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: * Mehwish Iqbal imehwish6@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the sociocultural and economic barriers to women's access to higher education in District Layyah, Pakistan. The study investigated social, cultural, and economic barriers to women's educational attainment and made recommendations for policy improvements based on the research data. A quantitative research design was used, employing the descriptive survey method. The target population was 485 higher education students, and 150 female students were selected in a purposive sampling from the stratified sample. Data were collected by means of a structured Likert-scale questionnaire and were analyzed using SPSS with descriptive statistics, t-tests, and ANOVA. With respect to women's participation in higher education, participants reported that parental education and family income-level, rural residency, and cultural practices such as early marriage and limited access to educational provision was significant barrier. Gendered societal expectations, and a lack of institutional support, also complicated women's access higher education participation. The study indicated the need for an evidence-based policy response including financial support, community awareness raising, and teacher training policies. The study findings provide an evidence base for decision-maker, practitioner's and development partner's engagement with policy processes aimed at supporting women's access to higher education.

Keywords: sociocultural and economic barriers, higher education for women, Layyah

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly acknowledged that higher education can create or enhance socio-economic progress and social change. Higher education can develop human capital by providing individuals with the knowledge, skills, and critical thinking needed for creativity and leadership (Haider, 2008). In this respect, women's education has transformative potential since educating a single woman empowers not only herself but also her family and community. Women's education positions women to participate in the labor market, make informed decisions, and contribute to the country's development (Pell & Winter, 2015).

However, despite the benefits of education for women, women's access to higher education in Pakistan remains constrained by a variety of socio-cultural and economic factors. Patriarchal norms and gender discrimination constrain women's access to educational opportunities, especially in rural and semi-urban areas of Pakistan (Hashmi, 2008; Sathar & Haque, 2000). Families privilege males for educational investment due to expectations of future economic benefits, and females are generally assigned domestic responsibilities or married off at early ages (UNESCO, 2010; Maqsood et al., 2012). Moreover, cultural

conservatism, misinterpretation of religion, and parents' concerns related to female safety, can also inhibit to access education for women, especially in coeducational or existing distant educational institutions (Naz et al., 2011).

Economic constraints are a vital barrier to women's access to higher education. Many families face financial challenges in covering education costs, transportation costs, and associated learning materials, especially for females. Due to many families seeing education costs as an extra expense for their girls, and this is often driven by the belief that females aren't expected to participate in the labor market and are second to being a homemaker (Chani, 2011). In addition, feudalism and economic inequality in places like South Punjab make access to education even larger barriers (Razzaq, 2016). This is even though community-level government interventions and international initiatives endorse gender equity in education. The World Bank finds that female education in Pakistan is affected by two confrontation sets of barriers: (1) demand-side constraints, such as attitudes, income, and social norms; (2) supply-side constraints, such as education policies and the delivery of female-friendly infrastructure (World Bank, 2018).

These structural and cultural barriers continue to limit women's access and success in postsecondary education and often reinforce the cycle of gender inequality. Women in Pakistan remain far behind their neighbors in literacy rates and even fewer female enrollments in universities (UNESCO, 2014). All of this points to a pressing need to explore the specific socio-cultural and economic barriers women face in accessing higher education, especially in less served districts like Layyah.

This research, therefore, aims to: (1) explore social factors that impact women's access to higher education; (2) investigate the cultural factors that shape educational participation; and (3) understand the economic factors impacting women's educational access. Through an empirical analysis of these factors, this research aims to inform education policy and suggest intervention(s) that will establish a more equitable and inclusive system of higher education for women in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-Cultural Constrains in Women's Higher Education

Socio-cultural norms have been identified for years as another critical challenge to women's educational pursuits at the tertiary level in South Asia. In Pakistan, societal expectations dictate that a woman's role is limited to domestic responsibilities, placing little regard on the educational and career aspirations of women (Naz et al., 2011). Parental reservations about family honour, social stigma and misinterpretation of religion often discourage girls from onward education, especially in rural communities (Sathar & Haque, 2000). Moreover, girls constrained by mobility, co-education and safety limitations further marginalize themselves from enrolling and remaining in tertiary institutions (Qureshi & Rarieya, 2007). Further, traditional gender roles lend to the perception that the educational investment in girls does little in benefit to the women or families, since women are expected to marry early and occupy the role of caregiver rather than career contributor (Chanana, 2000). This cultural thinking is often entrenched in social practices in many rural communities and maintained through generations (Naz et al., 2011; Malik & Courtney, 2011).

Economic Barriers of Female Education System

Economic constraints are still among the most regularly referenced barriers to women's post-secondary education in Pakistan. Families of lower income levels typically invest in their sons, as they will be to become future breadwinners, while daughters are temporary members of the family as viable wives (UNESCO, 2010; Maqsood et al., 2012). The costs associated with tuition, transportation, and study expenses become considerable burdens for economically disadvantaged households (World Bank, 2018).

Studies further reveal that there are not enough financial aid, scholarships, or subsidized hostel accommodation for women in rural areas (Razzaq, 2016). The economic constraints for women are compounded by the feudal and class system in Punjab, where poverty and selling children into education are intimately related (Haider, 2008).

Gender Disparities and Institutional Factor

The patriarchal education system in Pakistan often overlooks the unique needs of female students. Many conservative communities discourage co-educational arrangements, which prevents female enrollment due to the unavailability of women's institutions (Naz et al., 2011). Qureshi and Rarieya (2007) determined that female students feel removed from the curriculum and classroom environment, which is often geared towards males and reflects gender bias. Radical and Islamic feminist theorists argue that patriarchal cultural interpretations, not Islam itself, have been the reason for denying women equitable access to education (Contractor, 2010). The theorists suggested that scholars, educators, and Islamic leaders must be encouraged to reinterpret religious texts as they apply to women's access to education, gender mobility, and self-determinism. The lack of female influences and role models in higher education and positions of authority perpetuates the notion that academics and related achievements are male-inflected (Thomas, 1990; Francis, 2000). When women have access to higher education, they are often placed into traditionally "feminine" fields of study (David, 2009) such as nursing and teaching, which limits women's opportunities to be economically empowered or assume positions of leadership.

Global Perspectives and Comparison

International literature gives insight into some of the structural barriers girls and women experience globally. In Bangladesh and India, for example, extreme poverty and conservative family practices similarly limit a girl's education beyond secondary levels (Brock & Cammish, 1999; Singh, 2007). In the Arab world, despite relatively high enrollment rates within higher education, women's participation in the labor force is significantly low due to cultural taboos and gender expectations (Majcher-Teleon & Slimene, 2009; Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013). In the Western setting, studies have revealed that even in co-educational programs women are often subjected to institutional discrimination and growing gender expectations rooted in their careers (Renold, 2005; Reay, 2012). With these examples, it is suggested that gender equality in education is a global phenomenon, however, the situating of girls' education will differ according to local socio-economic, religious, and political context.

Research Gap

Although there have been many policy interventions and global development agendas, gender inequality in higher education has been and continues to be under-researched at the regional level in Pakistan. Most of the studies conducted in Pakistan focus on gender imbalance in education in primary or secondary settings or the urban center. There is little by way of research regarding the challenges women face in rural areas such as District Layyah. There is a need for empirical research that not only identifies the barriers, but also recommendations that are context specific and drawn from the lived experience of women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

For present research the researcher used the quantitative research method and questionnaire was constructed. In this research the schools were selected by using stratified sampling technique. This study was a quantitative research and design of the study was descriptive. The study was surveyed based quantitative in nature.

Population of the Study

In this study the researcher has taken all female students enrolled in postgraduate programs in District Layyah as population of study. Total 150 female students were studying under post graduate level.

Table 1: Population of Study

Disciplines	Male students	Female students	Total
MA	164	92	256
MSc	119	54	173
M.Phil	9	2	11
Others	10	2	12
Grand Total	335	150	485

From Table 1, it was found that there were different female students studying in higher education in class level of MA, MSc, MPhil and PhD. It was also found that 164 male and 92 female students having class level MA, 119 male and 54 female students having MSc class level, 9 male and 2 female students having MPhil class level. While students having PhD or were as 10 male and 2 female students. It was concluded that 335 male and 150 female students were studying in District Layyah in different institutions having post graduate classes.

Sample of the Study

Random sampling was employed to select a diverse group of female students from various backgrounds.

Table 2: Sample of Study

Disciplines	Male Students	Female Students	Total
MA	0	92	92
MSc	0	54	54
M.Phil	0	2	2
Others	0	2	2
Grand Total	0	150	150

From Table 2, it was found that there were different female students studying in higher education in class level of MA, MSc, MPhil and PhD. It was also found that 92 female students having class level MA, 54 female students having MSc class level, 2 female students having MPhil class level. While students having PhD or were as 2 female students. It was concluded that 150 female students were studying in District Layyah in different institutions having post graduate classes and these 150 female students were selected as a final sample for study.

Development of Research Tool

Likert-type attitude scale questionnaire was constructed and used as an instrument for data collection. The questionnaires were prepared of the researcher after studying the relevant materials available in internet, library and doing discussions with the supervisor of this research. The questionnaires of five-point rating scale were prepared for getting the information and views about the guidance and counselling services in higher educational institutes of District Layyah having female and the questionnaires were given to the participants for data collection. The research tool about measuring the behavior of female students for socio- cultural and economic constrains in women higher education was developed by adopting questionnaires. Overall, thirty items were selected with five major theme as perception about the educational attitude in women at higher education with four items as given in section B-I, perception about the family support for higher education having eight items as in section B-II, in section B-III for perception

about the self-efficacy at higher educational level having five items, while in section C-I for perception of students about socio-cultural situation having six items and perception of students about economic supports having seven items was summed up in section C-II. Finally, all thirty items of questionnaires were arranged according to the factors affecting on women higher education. The Likert's Scale having options as Strongly Disagree (SDA), Disagree (DA), Neutral (N), Agree (A) and Strongly Agree (SA).

Validity and Reliability of Instrument

Questionnaire was developed for students of Higher Education level which contained 30 items and used five (5) Likert scale to assess the role of socio-cultural and economic constraints for women in higher education. For checking the validity of research questionnaires or tool, the 50 students were selected from the different institutions, and they were guided to read out the items of tool carefully and gave feedback about the nature of items and difficulty if they were facing during their feedback. After taking their precious feedback, all amendments were made as per need of participants and finalized shape of tool was developed. The reliability of the research tool was calculated by SPSS and the value of Cronbach Alpha was 0.7.

Data Collection

Researcher firstly presents the permission letter to principal of the institution and justify her purpose of visit. After getting permission from principal researcher firstly interview the principal; at that time communication was developed between principal and researcher after getting permission from principal researcher visits classroom to collect data from students. In classroom researcher firstly introduces herself and about visit to classroom. Researcher gives the guidance regarding questionnaire both to students and give the questionnaire to sample students to read questionnaires for their response. For the convenient or better understanding of the students the researcher transformed the English questionnaire into simple language to get the accurate opinion of the students. The data were collected by the researcher from the students at the post graduate colleges and different institutions having female students in higher education and for data collection the researcher, teachers helped the researcher for data collection from the students. To obtain accurate data from the students the rating scale was given to students. The respondents took keen interest and filled scale freely. After that the data was entered to excel sheet for analysis.

Statistical Data Analysis

For data analysis SPSS was used. Percentage and mean score were calculated. The descriptive statistical data analysis was calculated and frequency, percentage and mean score were calculated. Similarly, for inferential statistical analysis, Independent T-test was found, and ANOVA test was conducted to find out the effect of different factors on women higher education.

RESULTS

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondent (N=150)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Residency	Urban	57	38.0
	Rural	93	62.0
Age Group	18–22 years	89	59.3
	23–26 years	44	29.3
	27 years and above	17	11.4
Current Class Level	Undergraduate	97	64.7
	Postgraduate	53	35.3
Monthly Family Income	< PKR 30,000	73	48.7
	PKR 30,000–50,000	49	32.7

Parents' Qualification	> PKR 50,000	28	18.6
	Primary or below	65	43.3
	Secondary/Intermediate	52	34.7
	Graduate or above	33	22.0

A demographic analysis was conducted on the demographic profile of the 150 female respondents. There were 62% female respondents from rural areas compared to 38% of the respondents which belonged to urban areas. Many of the respondents (59.3%) were 18–22 years of age, 29.3% of the sample were between 23–26 years old and 11.4% were above 27 years old. With respect to the education levels of female respondents, approximately, two-thirds (64.7%) of respondents were enrolled in undergraduate programs and 35.3% of respondents were enrolled in post graduate programs. For the family income status of respondents, it was found that approximately half (48.7%) of the female respondents claimed family income of less than PKR 30,000 per month, 32.7% claimed between PKR 30,000 to PKR 50,000 income per month, and only 18.6% claimed more than PKR 50,000 income monthly. Regarding parental education it was found that 43.3% of respondents' parents had primary education or lower, 34.7% of respondents' parents had secondary/intermediate education and only 22% had a graduate or higher level of education.

Table 4: Mean Perception of Respondent Regarding Strain in Women Higher Education

Domain	N	M	SD
Educational Attitudes	150	3.62	0.78
Family Support	150	3.45	0.82
Self-Efficacy	150	3.28	0.74
Socio-Cultural Barriers	150	3.81	0.69
Economic Constraints	150	3.76	0.71

The analysis of students' perceptions indicated that socio-cultural barriers ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.69$) and economic barriers ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.71$) were the most influential factors impacting women's access to higher education. Educational attitudes ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.78$) and family support ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.82$) were rated in the moderate range while self-efficacy ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.74$) was rated the lowest in the mean scores based on evidence. The figures in Figure 1 suggest that socio-cultural barriers and economic barriers were the two factors that respondents express the highest tendencies of agreement. These findings suggest that community norms and traditions of the culture and finance are strong determinants impacting opportunities for women's education.

Figure 1

Perceptions of Socio-Cultural and Economic Constraints in Women's Higher Education

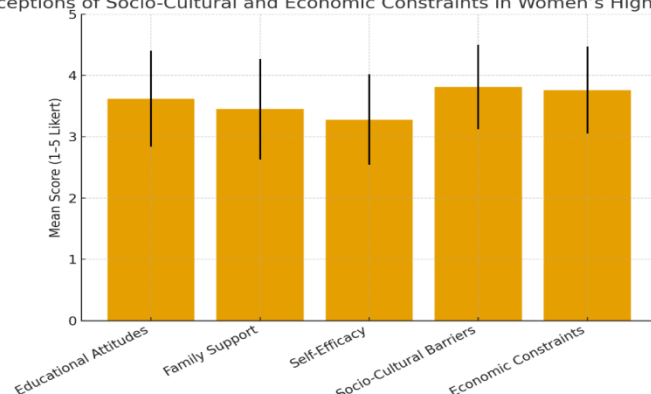


Table 5: T-test results Comparing Urban and Rural Respondents

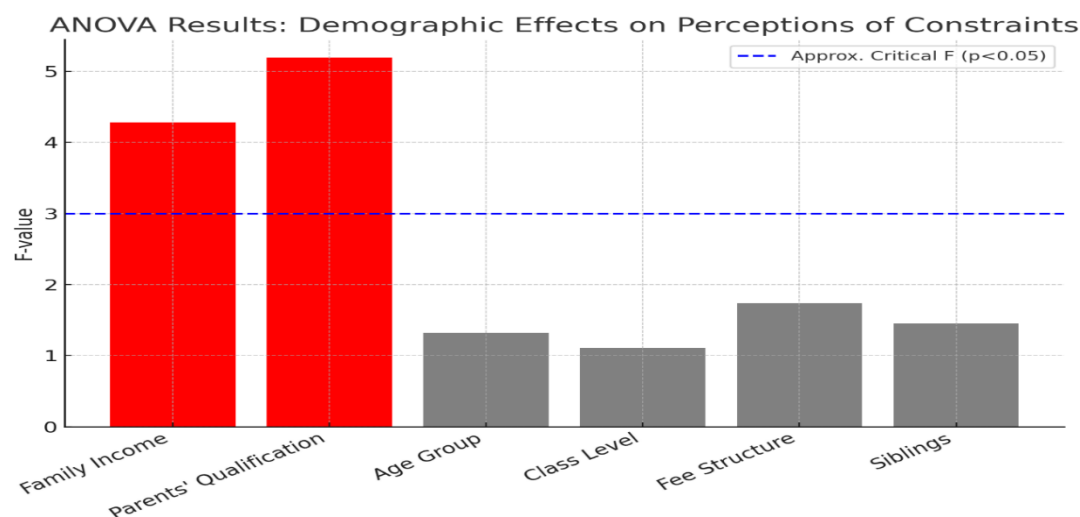
Domain	t	df	P	Interpretation
Educational Attitudes	2.41	148	.017	Significant (Rural higher)
Family Support	2.89	148	.004	Significant (Rural lower)
Self-Efficacy	1.76	148	.081	Not significant
Socio-Cultural Barriers	3.12	148	.002	Significant (Rural higher)
Economic Constraints	2.67	148	.008	Significant (Rural higher)

We found between-group differences in urban and rural students' perceptions through independent sample t-tests. Rural students consistently reported greater socio-cultural and economic barriers compared to urban students. For example, rural students perceived more limitation in educational attitudes as well as in family support with traditional gender expectations and limited resources effecting women more than men in rural communities.

Table 6: ANOVA results for Selected Demographics Variables

Variable	F	Df	p	Significant Differences (Post Hoc)
Age Group	1.32	2,147	.269	ns
Class Level	1.11	1,148	.293	ns
Fee Structure	1.74	2,147	.179	ns
Family Income	4.28	2,147	.016	< 30,000 vs. > 50,000
Parents' Qualification	5.19	2,147	.007	Primary vs. Graduate+
Siblings	1.45	2,147	.236	ns

Figure 2



ANOVA results indicated that the most demographic characteristics (e.g., age group, class level, fee structure, number of siblings) did not have a statistically significant effect on respondents' experiences of constraints. However, two variables, the family income ($F = 4.28$, $p = .016$) and parents' level of qualification ($F = 5.19$, $p = .007$) were statistically significant. In Figure 2, we note these variables had the strongest impact, students from lower-income households and with lower-educated parents, experienced more pronounced socio-cultural and economic barriers in accessing higher education. This suggests an intergenerational transfer of disadvantage, where financial hardship and parental level of qualification directly impacts women's educational opportunities.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the social, cultural, and economic barriers preventing women's access to higher education in District Layyah. The results showed that social, cultural, and economic barriers still constitute the most significant factors inhibiting women's access to education, confirming earlier studies done in Pakistan and other developing societies (Naz et al., 2011; Sathar & Haque, 2000). In this study, respondents all identified cultural traditions, financial support, and limited support from family members to be the most formidable barriers, particularly for rural students, which confirms the notion that geographical and social context influences women's access to education.

One key finding was that rural students faced more barriers compared to urban students, which is consistent with previous research that indicates rural areas impose more restrictions on women's education based on limited infrastructure, conservative values, and a lack of institutional facilities (Qureshi & Rarieya, 2007). These barriers have to do with limited transportation options and safety, which discourage rural families from sending their daughters to schools or colleges that are far from home (UNESCO, 2010). Urban students, on the other hand, are comparatively better positioned since they have higher exposure and access to institutions, as well as more progressive attitudes on female education, while still facing challenges.

Another notable finding from the research was the influence of family income and parental education level. Students from low-income households, and those whose parents had low levels of education, recognized significantly stronger socio-cultural and economic barriers. This is in agreement with Haider (2008) and Maqsood et al. (2012), which maintain financial difficulty and low levels of parental literacy are strong predictors of educational inequity. Poor families often view the education of their girls to be an unaffordable expense, especially when factoring in cultural obligations to marry and dowry (UNESCO, 2014). It should be noted that uneducated parents may undervalue higher education for their daughters, thereby creating a cycle of limited opportunity across generations. Conversely, families with higher levels of income and education tended to invest more equitably in sons and daughters, which is consistent with trends globally for income and gender and education equity (Brock & Cammish, 1999).

The findings also demonstrate that the enduring presence of traditional gender roles and cultural conservatism serve as barriers to women's higher education. Families provided moderate levels of support; however, this support was relegated to be conditional and limited, particularly when women's higher education conflicted with cultural norms regarding women and the home. This has been noted in previous research that many families prefer protecting their daughters' honor and reputation by not allowing their daughters to engage in the experience of a higher education program, co-ed institutions, or institutions that are in a different location (Naz et al., 2011; Razzaq, 2016). Thus, even with the availability of financial resources, cultural barriers may remain overwhelming barriers to women's opportunities.

Notably, age and class level were not strong predictors of perceived barriers: they suggest that socio-cultural and economic impediments are ubiquitous and entrenched in the social context for women of various ages and stages of schooling. Women experience systemic impediments at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level over and above individual effort or scholarly characteristics. This supports the argument made by Malik and Courtney (2011) that structural inequalities - not individual effort - are the predominant factors leading to disparities associated with gender in post-secondary education.

IMPLICATIONS

From a policy perspective, these findings have several noteworthy repercussions. First, targeted supports for female students from rural areas must be implemented, including setting up more local institutions,

providing safe transportation, and developing separate campuses where culturally necessary. Financial supports (scholarships, stipends), and subsidized hostel accommodations are also necessary to assure that the burden on low-income families is relieved. Parental education programs are also necessary to help change the ways of traditional thinking by emphasizing familial and societal benefits of female education in the long term. Finally, teacher training and institutional reforms should include gender sensitivity and make sure that women are nurtured in higher education socially and academically.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate the socio-cultural and economic barriers to women's access to higher education in District Layyah, Pakistan. Overall, cultural practices, gendered obligations, and economic barriers were the most significant obstacles to women's access to higher education. However, compared to students enrolled in urban institutions, rural students experienced more challenges due to limited infrastructure, restrictions on mobility, and conservative community attitudes. Parents' income and education as the basis of educational attainment were found to be two critical pieces of information; poorer students and students from less-educated families reported stronger barriers than other students. The study demonstrated that barriers to women's access to higher education are not just a problem of individual choice but were rather ingrained systemically. Compounded challenges posed by socio-cultural norms and economic hardship together restricted academic opportunities for women and perpetuated cycles of gender inequity. Overcoming these barriers requires significant measures, including economic support, sensitization programs for parents, improved institutional infrastructure in rural areas, and gender-responsive educational policies. To conclude, eliminating barriers for women's access to higher education is an important first step towards inclusiveness in higher education and achieving parity for women's participation in social and economic development. Ultimately, creating an enabling environment to empower women to study will allow Pakistan an opportunity for inclusive growth and sustainable progress.

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