

Gender, education in Pakistan – the shifting dynamics across ethnic groups

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A lot has been written on gender and access to education in Pakistan mostly discussing the stark gender inequalities with regard to education. This very brief article aims to look at the ethnic differentiation with regard to attitudes to girls' education and challenge the established wisdom that poorer families prefer to educate boys rather than girls. The article argues that ethnic differentiations are important when looking at traditional perceptions of girls accessing and participating in education. The article also argues that attitudes change primarily when educational facilities can be accessed and where the power of education is witnessed by the families on a first hand basis.

In Pakistan female enrolment and literacy rates are much lower and drop out rates are much higher than that of boys.² To this day national literacy data not only shows that literacy is very low (55%) but that literacy is substantially higher for men (67%) than for women (42%).³ In schools the Gender Parity Index (GPI) was 0.63 for 2006-7, with lower enrolment of girls across all provinces.⁴ The millennium development goals (MDG), which Pakistan has signed up to, aim to eliminate gender disparity in education by 2015. The current government medium term development framework includes specific gender concerns, but previous government policies trying to tackle gender disparities have come to very little. This has contributed to the belief that parents living in a traditional Muslim society will prefer to educate boys rather than girls.

Barriers which contribute to gender inequality have been classified by the World Bank as falling into three categories: equity, access and quality.⁵ Practically this refers to family attitudes allowing girls to study equally with boys, having schools close enough to homes or safe enough for the girls to walk to, schools having a reasonably decent infrastructure (boundary wall, basic toilet facilities, drinking water), access to textbooks and enough well trained female teachers, so that parents don't object to sending their girls to what is seen as a male dominated environment. Despite numerous plans, policies and internationally funded projects, Pakistan's investment in education has declined over the years to 1,7% of GDP. On the ground this is reflected in very poor physical infrastructure. Pakistan's Economic Survey 2007-8 states that only 51,6% of the buildings of all institutions are in satisfactory condition and 5,7% of the buildings are in fact in a dangerous condition.

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² Qureshi, S. (2003) Pakistan: Education and Gender Policy; Girl's education: a lifeline to development, Centre for Policy Studies, Central European University, Budapest

<http://www.policy.hu/qureshi/Respaper.pdf>, p. 14 and 47-48.

³ Education, Chapter 10, Pakistan Economic Survey 2007-8, p.169

⁴ Education, Chapter 10, Pakistan Economic Survey 2007-8, p.170

⁵ World Bank (2002) Opening doors: education and the World Bank,
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/OpenDoors.pdf>

‘Out of total institutions, 12,737 (almost all in the public sector) have been reported as non-functional. [...] About 37,8% schools in public sector are without boundary wall, 32,3% without drinking water, 56,4% without electricity, 40,5% without latrine and 6.8% without building.’ (Pakistan Economic Survey 07/08, p.176)

The lack of physical infrastructure is a particular barrier for girls’ accessing education as families feel that schools without a boundary wall are unsafe, and schools without toilets are simply not an option. Government schools are often overcrowded and very far away for children to walk to.⁶ This again is a particular problem for girls whose parents will not let them walk long distances alone. Besides these particular barriers for girls, Pakistan also suffers from a lack of well trained teachers and many students do not have access to textbooks. Many parents therefore are sceptical of the value of low quality education.

With regard to equity, the general argument prevails - that especially poor parents both in rural and urban areas, trend to favour educating boys more than girls since Pakistan is a traditional, patriarchal and largely Muslim society.⁷ This is clearly reflected in the GPI mentioned above. One argument is that rates of return are better for boys⁸ or that families are too poor to send both boys and girls to school. There is a feeling that unless there are profound structural changes across society that the Pakistani government education policies will have tried in vain to alter the gender disparity.

This article argues however that some of these structural changes across society have already taken place and that when families are given access to quality education, gender disparity is no longer the issue it was a couple of decades ago. In fact some families profess they prefer to skip a meal rather than have any of their children – girl or boy not go to school. Interestingly this differs across ethnic lines with some ethnic groups being more positively inclined towards educating girls than others.

Consequently this article argues that instead of looking at Pakistan in a homogenous way when it comes to gender and education, the provincial and ethnic differences have to be taken into account.

The changing reality across the ethnicities and the provinces⁹

⁶ For more on barriers to access to education for girls in Pakistan please see Qureshi, R. (2007) Gender and Education in Pakistan, OUP, Oxford, Khalid, H.S. and Mujahid-Mukhtar, E. (2002) The future of Girls’ education in Pakistan: A study on policy measures and other factors determining girls’ education. UNESCO, Islamabad; as well as Sabina Qureshi’s report cited above.

⁷ Qureshi, S. (2003) Pakistan: Education and Gender Policy; Girl’s education: a lifeline to development, Centre for Policy Studies, Central European University, Budapest and <http://www.policy.hu/qureshi/Respaper.pdf>, p. 14 and 52-53. And Khalid, H.S. and Mujahid-Mukhtar, E. (2002) The future of Girls’ education in Pakistan: A study on policy measures and other factors determining girls’ education. UNESCO, Islamabad, p. 30-31.

⁸ Aslam, M. (2007), Rates of return to Education, by gender in Pakistan, RECOUP working paper number 1, RECOUP, <http://recoup.educ.cam.ac.uk/publications/WP1-MAs.pdf>

⁹ Data collected in NWFP is not included as the schools visited were located in an army compound and only few lower middle class parents came. Data collected in one of eth Karachi schools is not included either as the area was very ethnically diverse and it was impossible to establish the ethnicity of the parents.

Literacy rates across the four provinces are 58% in the Punjab, 55% in Sindh, 47% in NWFP and 42% in Balochistan.¹⁰ The GPI for the provinces were 0.72 for the Punjab, 0.63 for Sindh, 0.42 for NWFP and 0.38 for Balochistan.¹¹ This differs again between urban and rural areas, with rural areas showing an even lower enrolment of girls.¹² The general perception emanating from these figures is that poor families, often living in remote areas or urban slums will not send their girls to school. The tribal areas of NWFP and Balochistan tend to have fewest girls in schools.

The fieldwork however threw up some interesting data with regard to gender and education, starting with who would come to the school – mothers, fathers or both. The interviews revealed that once families had experienced quality education, they became committed to send all their children to school – boys and girls. Mothers in particular spoke of the choices they hoped their daughters would have – choices they had often been denied on the basis of being uneducated and often illiterate. Fathers too were committed to girls' education and spoke about the changing demands of a more modern world. While most families saw education as a means to an economic end, many also spoke about how education would make their children better people – no matter if they managed to improve their economic and social situation.

The data detailed here was collected during a three week field trip across all four Pakistani provinces, visiting 11 TCF¹³ schools and interviewing 89 parents/caregivers¹⁴ of five different ethnic groups who had 449 children amongst them. In most cases parents were poor and families survived from manual labour (vegetable vendors, occasional workers, electricians, guards, labourers, rickshaw drivers, car drivers, fishermen working on other peoples' boats, welders in shipyards, donkey cart drivers and masons) Some parents were from lower middle class backgrounds (small shop owners, lower government servants, small farmers owning their own land or teachers in government primary schools). Most women were housewives, with the notable exception of the Bengali mothers in the Karachi slum, who all worked in the shrimp cleaning industry. Some mothers had to do manual labour (working as maids or taking stitching home) to support unemployed or sick husbands. Apart from the few families from a lower middle class background all parents interviewed had received no more than a few years of basic schooling. The mothers were generally illiterate.¹⁵

1. Rural Punjab (Minhala and Musaffarghar) - Punjabis

Schools in two areas were visited – in the rural areas around Lahore and in the deep rural area around Multan several hours drive from the nearest town. In both areas both fathers and mothers were present and all were Punjabis.

¹⁰ Education, Chapter 10, Pakistan Economic Survey 2007-8, p.169

¹¹ Education, Chapter 10, Pakistan Economic Survey 2007-8, p.171

¹² Lynd, D. (2007) The Education system in Pakistan, Assessment of the National Education Census, UNESCO, Islamabad, p. 25-26.

¹³ TCF (The Citizens' foundation) is a philanthropic organisation which provides mixed gender quality schools in the poorest urban slums and remotest rural regions across all 4 Pakistani provinces. See Lall, M. (2008) Creating agents of positive change – the Citizen's foundation in Pakistan.

¹⁴ This includes adult aged siblings and grandparents.

¹⁵ TCF has allowed an adult literacy programme to be set up across some of its schools to allow parents to learn basic literacy skills.

In Minhala five fathers, six mothers, one grandmother and one grandfather came to the focus group. They were interviewed together and there was no issue of gender segregation. They had 42 children (not counting the children of the grandparents who are grown up) (17 girls and 25 boys) between them as well as one grandson and one granddaughter. In the rural area outside of Muzafargarh 11 fathers, one brother, 10 mothers, three aunts and one sister attended the focus group. Between them they had 105 children (52 girls and 53 boys). The women and the men were interviewed separately.

In both areas there was a strong culture of girl inclusion. The mothers in particular spoke of choices their daughters would have. The fathers also professed to support girls education, not wanting to discriminate between their daughters and sons. This seems to be a recent phenomenon as local graduate girls who were also interviewed explained how local attitudes had changed with regard to girls' education. Even in remote areas in the Punjab the importance of girls' education seems now to be accepted. All parents had high hopes for their children to become doctors. They asked for more schools to be opened vowing that all would be filled.

2. Balochistan - Balochis

Two schools were visited in Gwader. As the port is being developed the local fishermen communities have been displaced and relocated to new areas, around 3-4 km from the nearest government schools, much too far for small children to walk. One father and 10 mothers took part in the focus group – all of them were Balochis. They had 76 children all together (41 girls and 35 boys). The focus group was held with both the mothers and the father together despite the mothers wearing the burqua outside of the school buildings. Gender segregation did not seem to be an issue.

Balochistan is considered the least developed province with the starker discrepancies between boys and girls accessing education. Despite this there was a strong culture of girl inclusion with regard to education and it seemed clear that the mothers were the ones primarily responsible overseeing the children's education. All of them spoke about how important they felt girls' education was and all of them made sure that all their daughters received an education.

3. Rural Sindh – Sindhis

The school visited in rural Sindh was in Keti Bander at the southern coast edge in an area which has suffered more recently from further impoverishment. Due to over-fishing in the area, the local fishermen no longer bring home enough for families to survive. The area is also very short of water. Rural Sindh still operates on a caste based social system (which is not the case in the other provinces of Pakistan) and the inequalities are generally starker than anywhere else in the country. Villages are made up of huts in reed and straw and there is hardly any brick or mud housing. The villages visited did not have either running water or electricity.

Two fathers, one grandfather and two brothers came to the focus group and all were Sindhis. The principal explained that mothers never left the house and she had never seen one at the school. Between them they had 31 children (12 girls and 19 boys). The men present appreciated the fact that educating girls was as important as educating

boys, but they also pointed out that this particular school was blessed to have 25% girls, as most schools did not have that many girls in attendance. This area showed the biggest gender disparity and clearly the traditional attitudes with regard to educating boys over girls was still obvious.

4. Karachi – urban slum – Pathans and Bengalis

The locality of the two primary schools was in a slum located close to the coast, partly on reclaimed land. Although the housing in the slum is largely of brick and mud with some metal roofing, the prime issue is overcrowding. Most families live in one or two rooms, with three generations living under one roof. The average number of children of the parents interviewed was six, which means that in general ten people or more share the limited space. The slum is ethnically diverse with Pathan, Katchi and Bengali¹⁶ families accessing the schools. Most families work in the fish and shrimp industry, with Bengali families having men, women and children at work, whilst Pathan families often only have fathers and children working, mothers staying at home. The wider colony also has a community of drivers, mainly of Pathan origins.

In the first school five fathers, four mothers and one sister were interviewed. Most of them were Pathans or Afghanis from NWFP, and one father from Waziristan. Their families had 61 children between them (27 girls and 29 boys). The men and the women were interviewed separately. In the second school ten Bengali mothers attended the focus group and had 60 children between them (34 girls and 26 boys).

It was interesting to note that both Pathan fathers and mothers and only Bengali mothers came to the school. Both Pathan fathers and mothers were quite keen to see girls educated. Only one father seemed to prefer to see his daughters at home. The culture of girl inclusion in education was surprising since Pathans are a very traditional community. This was surpassed by the Bengali mothers who had a very strong culture of girl inclusion and who saw that education was the way out of manual labour for their daughters .

Shifting perspectives across ethnic lines

In most schools visited girls made up around 40% of the school population. A notable exception was the rural school in Sindh, where despite the availability of a good school, only 25% of the school was made up of girls. Whilst the national literacy figures put Sindh in second place, this is due to the large urban population in Sindh, many of whom are non Sindhi.¹⁷ The traditional attitude of rural Sindhi families with regard to girls' education is something which has been of provincial concern.¹⁸

Whilst in Sindh the bleak figures are a reflection of how slowly local attitudes are changing, the national figures do not reflect the shifting dynamics with regard to the other main ethnic groups' attitude to girls' education. Across all other schools and provinces, parents, principals and graduates alike spoke of changing attitudes with

¹⁶ Pakistan is still home to a large Bengali community who did not return East after the secession of Bangladesh.

¹⁷ Karachi has a very large population of Mohajirs (Muslims who migrated from India) and a large migrant community from NWFP.

¹⁸ Interview at the Sindh Textbook board, April 2007.

regard to girls' education. It was not only the mothers who spoke vehemently about the choices their daughters would have through education, but also the fathers who were equally proud of their girls and boys. The schools seem in no small measure to be a driving force in this culture of change. Young graduates in the Punjab who are now studying spoke of how the attitudes in the whole area surrounding the school had changed. 'Now there are hundreds of girls going to school.'

So while gender disparities in education in Pakistan remain a grave problem, it is essential to understand the differing ethnic attitudes which are shifting as time moves on. This article argues that the ethnic cultural heritage is no longer the constraint to change it was previously. Good schools are the centre piece in changing attitudes, even in the most traditional, poorest areas of Pakistan as the power of education transforms not only the children but their families and their communities.