



Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 04, Issue 02, 2025

Web link: <https://sss.org.pk/index.php/sss>



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Breaking Barriers: The Impact of Gender Norms on Girls' Access to High School Education

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Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received 2025-03-24

Accepted 2025-05-27

Citation (APA):

Ali, N., Younas, Z & Butt, I, H. (2025). Breaking barriers: The impact of gender norms on girls' access to high school education. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 4(2), 487-497. <https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.04.02.286>

Abstract

This research examines the socio-cultural and gender-based barriers that obstruct girls' access to high school education in Pakistan. In conducting this research, the investigators employed a qualitative method, conducting semi-structured interviews along with focus group discussions in the Multan District. This report provides a window into the lives of the young women who are forced to drop out of school before graduation. Barriers are often reinforced by parents, teachers, and community leaders who conditionally and unconsciously shape a girl's fate. Despite progress toward gender parity, women remain underrepresented in academic and professional fields. Progress is further stalled when schools aren't available or when they lack the necessary female infrastructure and role models to motivate a girl to achieve her dreams. The study uncovered instances of nascent resistance among girls and some supportive parents who are fighting for their right to an education and a future that includes the possibility of a profession. It found that achieving gender parity in education requires community-wide strategies that emphasize educational access for girls as well as supportive school environments where role models help pave the way toward female academic achievement.

Keywords: Girls' education, Gender Norms, Socio-cultural Barriers, High School Access, Pakistan.



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Introduction

A fundamental human right, education is the main lever for the social and economic development of individuals and nations. For girls, education undoubtedly elevates their living conditions and creates opportunities that lead to a more inclusive society, healthier families, and more viable communities (Chan, 2022). Investing in a girl's education is one of the best ways to reduce poverty; it pays off in better health for mothers and their children, and it gets us closer to gender equality. Still, despite the all-but-universal recognition of the importance of education for girls, about half the world's population still faces a considerable number of barriers that keep them from enjoying the full benefits of that right (Lindsey, 2020).

On a global scale, the gender gap in education has lessened in recent decades, with the most progress made at the primary level. This is largely the result of international campaigns and policy efforts. However, the narrowing has not continued at the same pace in secondary education, where we still see significant disparities (Alam, 2022). And these are most pronounced in developing countries. A multitude of reasons causes many girls to fail to finish high school. They include poverty, early marriage, and domestic duties within the family. Negative attitudes from the community toward girls' education. From a progress standpoint, enrollment has improved a lot. However, when comparing girls and boys, the sticking point is that girls fall further behind not only in retention but also in the completion rates of those who do get retained (Bullough et al., 2022).

Girls' education is an urgent problem in developing countries like Pakistan. Although the enrollment situation has improved in primary schools, there are still significant structural and cultural barriers that keep girls from obtaining a high school education (Bullough et al., 2022). Often, these barriers take root in longstanding social norms and age-old beliefs that define the roles and expectations of women and girls. No amount of policy reform or awareness campaign seems to be able to penetrate these superficial layers of common sense. As a result, a large number of adolescent girls are either unable to enroll or are withdrawn from school before they reach the level of education that boys do (Azad et al., 2020).

As per Abbas et al. (2020) in Pakistan, the phase of high school education for girls is a vital area for bringing about change in their lives, yet it is still out of reach for far too many young women. High school education cannot exactly be called a fully inaccessible sphere for girls in Pakistan anymore. It is much more available than it was in bygone decades, when scarcity characterized the whole gender equation in access to any form of education. Yet, despite being on the margin of availability, high school education in Pakistan is not a space where girls can work with any measure of ease or fully express themselves. In the countryside and in conservative places, the trials faced by girls trying to get an education are intensified by strict gender norms and the expectations of the community. These norms and expectations push girls towards domestic life and the kinds of responsibilities that are traditionally seen as their lot, and they push boys towards paths that lead to the kinds of achievements that are traditionally seen as their lot. These kinds of achievements can include going to high school, and this is where many girls' education fails (Saeed et al., 2021).

The education system in Pakistan has moved, albeit slowly, toward increased gender parity. Yet the enhancements it has made have been neither broad nor deep. The step forward is essentially a step for some girls, in some places, at some times (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). In Pakistan, it is a troubling reality that Stratifications of gender, geography, and class can cumulatively define the conditions of access to education for females. In addition, family structures that are patriarchal tend to bolster

the idea that the only place for girls and women is at home. This reinforces the rationale for not investing much in their education. Even in families that have resources, decisions about spending on a daughter's education can be influenced by the perception that a girl's role is not outside the home (Omer et al., 2021).

One of the biggest things holding female education back in many societies is different kinds of beliefs and ways of thinking. These way of thinking are called socio-cultural barriers. These include anything from shifting society to make it more comfortable to allowing girls and women to go out of the home and get an education (Ali et al., 2022). In numerous instances, families dread social censure or a blow to their honor if their daughters come off as too self-sufficient or as having been educated above a certain level. As a result, the choices that are made about girls' education are swayed more by cultural forces and less by the girls' apparent academic potential, thereby restricting their chances of attaining advanced degrees (Awan & Malik, 2020).

For a long time, one of the stubb*Ramaisa Gul Nazir¹, Mahmood Rehmani*¹, Fatima Abrar¹, Muhammad Osaïd Rabie¹, Naveed Anwer*ornest barriers to female education at the high school level has been the social construction of gender roles. In many communities, girls are raised to believe that their primary responsibilities lie not in the academic realm but in the home, where they are expected to tend to a range of household chores and prepare for life as a fulfilled wife and mother (Jehan et al., 2021). The cycle of keeping girls out of classrooms is one that spans generations and pins hopes of an education in society's narrow vision of a girl's future. Even when parents think education would really benefit their daughters, they're often pushed by society to conform. And what society wants, in many parts of the world, is for girls to stop being educated and start being wives and mothers (Inam et al., 2020).

Cultural identities are often formed around a set of traditions, but in some cases, these traditions can morph into obstacles when they enforce inflexible gender roles. Some communities maintain the tradition that high school is not a suitable place for girls (Zakar et al., 2020). These communities may see it as unnecessary or even hazardous to send a daughter to high school, for fear that it might expose her to contemporary ideas or too much interaction with the male sex. Parents may limit their daughters' education because of community backlash or social standing. This fear is frequently coupled with concerns about maintaining family honor, which is closely tied to the behavior and visibility of women in public spaces (Anwar et al., 2022).

Religious and cultural misunderstandings also have a considerable hand in restricting the educational chances of girls. Although no prominent religion strictly prohibits the schooling of females, some practices and local understandings of religious writings are employed to defend the male-female divide and to keep girls out of conventional educational settings. Parental choices, particularly in conservative regions where religious authority wields more influence, can be profoundly affected by these interpretations. And often these interpretations are backed by local elders or religious leaders (Rasheed & Nosheen, 2024).

The educational outcomes of girls are profoundly affected by their families and communities. In many societies with traditional roots, the process of making decisions is a family affair in which the input of many people is taken into account. But when it comes to calling the shots, the opinions of educated elders, especially the male heads of households, carry the greatest weight. When a household or community holds the prevailing view that girls should not go to school past a certain age, it is very tough for individual parents or for the girls themselves to go against that norm. Many, then, are dissuaded from seeking anything beyond a primary education. But even when parents are on board, there are still some significant hurdles to clear (Khan et al., 2021).

The gap that exists in how much fathers and mothers value education can have a profound effect on a girl's educational aspirations. In households dominated by male authority, some mothers might lack the power to insist on higher education for their daughters, even if they wish otherwise. Fathers might regard girls' education as a poor investment since, in many cultures, women are not expected to work outside the home. These kinds of family dynamics could lead to limited enthusiasm, in both parents, for a daughter's continued education (Mohsin & Syed, 2020).

Community leaders, from the ranks of the religious scholar, the tribal elder, and the local influencer, are in a position to either encourage or discourage within their communities the movement to educate girls. In many areas, these leaders hold more sway than does any formal institution, and their attitude toward female education can influence an entire village or neighborhood. If they endorse access to education for girls, whole communities can transform in the direction of that support. When they throw up resistance, however, the direction of change can be significantly slowed, despite the good offices of the government or NGOs (Kpodo et al., 2022).

For many years, governments and groups have tried to tackle the problem of education for women and girls. They have done this through a range of policies and programs, of which a few notable ones are implemented in Pakistan. They include stipends for girls, community schools and awareness campaigns. While these different measures have shown promise, the success they do have is often localized and limited. Moreover, it is these local ingrained communities that must change before female educational attainment can achieve anywhere close to parity with male educational attainment (Naveed & Butt, 2020).

We need to look closely at the policies that govern education and change them to reflect the way things are in our communities. Simply letting people into schools doesn't change the lack of respect for girls that keeps them from even wanting an education. Families, communities, especially mothers, need to be convinced that female education is a path to something better and that the old ways of keeping girls from getting an education are not only wrong but also harmful in the long run (Jafree, 2020).

This research seeks to understand the complex mix of cultural and social obstacles, gender biases, and long-held beliefs that keep girls from getting a high school education. Its aim is to bring out into the open the trying experiences of girls and their families, to make us understand better the very real pressures they are up against, and to help us identify places where it might be possible to effect real change. By focusing on these oft-ignored issues, the research hopes to contribute to developing more effective, on-the-ground solutions that lead to gender equality in education.

Even though there is now widespread global recognition of the need for gender equality, the education of girls, especially in high school, remains a pressing and serious problem in many parts of the world. In those regions where day-to-day life is dominated by strongly held socio-cultural norms and traditional practices, girls are often denied the chance—even the very idea—that they might obtain an education beyond the level of primary school. Such denial is founded on long-held beliefs that strongly favor the education of boys and perceive the education of girls as something that is not only unnecessary but also risky. These inequalities do not stem just from poverty or poor infrastructure but are also deeply rooted in cultural expectations, gender roles, and community values that steer parenting decisions and influence social behavior. In many communities, girls are pushed into traditional roles that revolve around housework and forced premature marriage, leaving no room for the kind of scholarly ambitions that could lead them to a high school diploma, let alone a college degree. Even when there is some sort of educational facilities available, the social resistance that girls face—forceful objection that both parents and

the community can make—can be a much stronger deterrent than any academic reason for not attending school.

Objectives of the Study

Following were the objectives of the study;

1. To investigate the primary socio-cultural influences that hinder female students from accessing and continuing high school education.
2. To critically examine how prevailing gender norms and traditional practices affect girls' educational opportunities at the secondary level.
3. To explore the perspectives of key stakeholders—including parents, educators, and community leaders—regarding female participation in high school education.
4. To propose evidence-based strategies and recommendations aimed at enhancing female enrollment and retention in secondary education.

This study is important because it attempts to look at the socio-cultural barriers impeding girls from succeeding in high school. It goes beyond recent efforts to target policies and practices that have been too broadly aimed and, as a result, not effective enough in promoting gender equality in education. The research doesn't just point the finger at education systems; it helps us understand the contexts within which systems and stakeholders operate. In doing so, it offers clearer pathways toward more effective community engagement and policymaking that supports more girls becoming more educated.

Literature Review

Significantly and negatively influences girls' access to high school education, particularly in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan, where the leading cultural expectation is to prioritize education for males. Gender norms defined as the societal beliefs about the appropriate roles for men and women shape educational practices and determine access to resources around such practices as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and restricted mobility. Pakistan has a higher rate of girls in universities (63.8%) than in secondary education (12%). There are also significantly more boys than girls completing secondary education. Partly as a result, figures for graduation from high schools (i.e., grades 9 and 10) are not available, but girls are known to be completing these levels too unequally at a fraction of the rate of boys.

Girls' education is restricted by a prominent gender norm that insists on early marriage, a practice common in many cultures. In Pakistan, for example, 28% of girls aged 15-19 are already married, a number that is much higher in rural areas. There, traditional expectations about gender roles and who should marry when really hold back girls and young women from achieving their educational goals—and often from achieving anything at all—because early marriage takes up so much of their time and mental energy. Stromquist (2015) mentions that: Early marriage reinforces the perception that girls are primarily destined for family life. Low-income households, in particular, seem to embrace early marriage and also pull their daughters out of school so that the daughters can perform inside roles. Malik and Courtney (2011) report that to fulfill marital roles, 43% of girls are taken out of school.

In Pakistan, it is an average of 5.5 hours a day that girls spend on household chores. That is a daily dedication that cuts into the time for things like education—mind you, this is not a chore-induced time sacrifice that boys are making. Our male counterparts have, on average, 1.8 hours a day to dedicate to the work of the home. Conversely, they can put in that time not only because they're

not doing our work but because the societal expectation is that they're not prioritizing it. Their prioritization is academic, and it's not because we're dumb—they think we're too smart to have our heads in the clouds. It's because of these cultural contextual factors that we also really need to consider when we're looking at our numbers.

Mobility constrained by norms calling for female modesty limits girls' access to education at the high school level. In Pakistan, cultural practices like purdah restrict girls' travel to schools, especially in areas where only 22 percent of girls attend secondary institutions (Andrabi et al., 2008). Safety concerns and a lack of female-only schools further exacerbate the problem (Herz & Sperling, 2004). This situation is reflected in parental attitudes: 34 percent of parents cite distance as a barrier to girls' school attendance. Despite this setback, community-based schools offer promise for reversing this trend. Targeted programs have increased girls' enrollment by 15 percent in areas where this is very much needed. However, scaling up this promising practice remains a challenge (UNESCO, 2019).

Financial limitations work in tandem with cultural gender expectations to worsen the educational imbalance between boys and girls. Many families, when short of cash, pay for the sons' schooling but not for the daughters'. This is the case in 56% of families in Pakistan, according to a 2009 study by Aslam. The 2009 study was based on interviews with 156 respondents. Following the lead of the World Bank (2012), I cite this study because it highlights a relevant educational problem. According to the study, families rationalize this discriminatory practice because they see boy's education as an investment with a much greater return. Nussbaum, in her standard-setting book, *Women's Capabilities and Social Justice*, has a different interpretation. She argues that families act this way because they see boys as more valuable and perceive girls as economically burdensome.

Ultimately, it is the gender norms that create serious obstacles for girls in Pakistan regarding their access to high schools. These norms are embedded in the culture and manifest in several ways; early marriage, domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, economic prioritization. At the same time, we note that even well-meaning programs aimed at increasing access like scholarships—have only a limited effect. That's partly because they don't get at the root of the problem, and the problem is that gender norms are bad for girls.

Data Collection

To attain the research objectives, a qualitative research design was used, centering on an in-depth understanding gained through purposive sampling. The data was gathered via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with high school girls, their parents, teachers, and local community leaders in both urban and rural settings at Multan District. The interviews were conducted in the participants' native languages and recorded with their consent. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the recurring patterns, beliefs, and narratives. All responses were transcribed, and needed translations were done, coding was done manually, and the results were cross-checked for both consistency and accuracy.

Thematic Analysis

1. Patriarchal Norms and Gender Roles

"My father says that girls are meant to look after the home, not to study too much." This quote reveals how patriarchal beliefs assign domestic roles to girls, discouraging them from pursuing education beyond primary school. Education is perceived as unnecessary for fulfilling traditional gender roles, leading to early dropouts.

2. Safety and Mobility Concerns

"The school is far, and it is not safe for girls to travel alone every day."
The lack of safe transportation and distant school locations emerged as significant barriers. Families often fear harassment or social dishonor, reinforcing the notion that girls should stay within the home's confines.

3. Early Marriages and Cultural Pressures

"She is already 15; we have to think about her marriage now."
This reflects how early marriage is prioritized over education. In many cases, education is seen as a threat to traditional family structures, with the belief that educated girls may defy norms or become "less obedient."

4. Economic Constraints and Resource Allocation

"We can only afford to send one child to school, and we chose our son."
Gender bias in financial decisions is evident, where families, due to limited resources, prioritize boys' education over girls', seeing a higher return on investment for males in future income or employment.

5. Religious and Cultural Interpretations

"Our elders say that too much education for girls goes against our culture."
Misinterpretations of religious or cultural norms are used to justify restricting girls from education. These beliefs are deeply embedded and often perpetuated by influential community figures.

6. Lack of Female Teachers and Role Models

"If there were more lady teachers, maybe our parents would let us go."
Parents and students both expressed that the absence of female staff contributes to discomfort and mistrust. Female role models are essential in creating a safe and aspirational environment for girls.

7. Changing Attitudes and Aspirations

"I want to become a doctor, but everyone laughs when I say that."
Despite challenges, some girls exhibit strong aspirations. However, their ambitions are often dismissed by peers or family, which can diminish their confidence and persistence in education.

Discussion

The findings highlight the entrenched norms of gender that profoundly influence the access of girls to an education. Patriarchal expectations reduce girls' educational opportunities by ensuring their exclusion from even the limited number of non-domestic roles in an economy that heavily relies on them. For too many girls, the only other option is to marry, after which they must focus on keeping house and obeying their husbands (who are rightly deemed as in charge) and their male relatives. Meanwhile, in conservative societies, the linkage between a family's honor and a girl's mobility means that safety concerns and basic infrastructure issues (such as the lack of separate toilets) keep not only the girls but also their families at home. Interestingly, the study also highlighted emerging resistance to traditional views.

The undertone of these findings is that entrenched norms of gender, like barely concealed structures of a besieged fortress, heavily influence whether or not a girl gets the chance to study. They push her, like some form of educational low-tech disco, back to the classic Land of domesticity. And who pushes her? Community leaders, elders, and sometimes even educational institutions themselves—all socially reinforcing this retro genius of gender (in its patently irresponsible and probate forms).

Curiously, the study also brought to light the budding resistance to traditional beliefs. More girls, along with some parents, now aspire to continued education, even if the support systems around them are inadequate. These not-so-simple desires hint at an opportunity for change—a moment we can seize to intervene in a way that respects the myriad cultural sensitivities around us while pushing hard for gender equity in education. And speaking of cultural sensitivities: The allies in this situation are far more important than the adversaries. Who are the allies? For one, we're told, teachers. But even they often feel powerless when community pressure weighs in on the side of keeping girls at home. On the other hand, do parents help? Some do; some don't. Parents often find themselves in a nasty vice between defending a traditional cultural position and a modern, aspirational one that demands girls make their way to school and stay there.

Lastly, we didn't hear about much in the way of government and policy-level interventions that affect the daily realities of these communities. Participants seldom cited anything resembling consistent support from public institutions. This appears to be a gap between the formulation of policies and their implementation. To close this divide, we need grassroots engagement, strong mechanisms for monitoring how well policies are working, and local champions who can make the policies work in their communities.

Conclusion

To conclude, gender norms are still a barrier to girls' education in high school. While there are some issues related to the economy and infrastructure, they play a very small part. The real problem lies with socio-cultural attitudes that favor boys, limit the freedom of movement for girls, and push them into early marriages. The good news is that things can change, particularly if we work in a community-driven way to include all potential voices in the conversation.

Recommendations

- ✓ Involve in dialogue religious leaders, elders, and parents to challenge gender stereotypes that are harmful through educational campaigns that are culturally respectful.
- ✓ Build an infrastructure that is friendly to girls. This means, first and foremost, making sure that secure transport options are available. Where are these needed? Most crucially, in rural areas. Because far more girls than boys drop out of school when the journey to and from becomes unsafe. Second, what else has to be in place for such an infrastructure to exist? Facilities of a kind that are suitable for girls and women, many of which, even in urban centers, seem not to have existed for a long time.
- ✓ Offer scholarships and stipends that are directed specifically toward female students, so that the financial burden on families is alleviated.
- ✓ Hire and instruct additional women in the teaching profession and create guidance programs that inspire girls to aim for post-secondary schooling.

Infuse national and provincial education plans with strategies that are sensitive to gender. Ensure they are taken seriously and stuck to over the long haul.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

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