Issues of gender in education in Pakistan

Fareeha Zafar

Pakistan, with an area of 803,940 square kilometres, borders India in the east and southeast, Iran in the southwest, Afghanistan in the north and northwest, and the Arabian Sea in the south. The country is made up of three territories (Islamabad Capital Territory, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and the Federally Administered Northern Areas) and four provinces (Balochistan, North-West Frontier Province, Punjab, and Sindh). The most populous of these provinces is Punjab, which is home to roughly half the country’s total population of 148.4 million (2003). Women constitute a little under half the population.

According to the Constitution of Pakistan, the state shall: ‘remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory secondary education within minimum possible period’ (Article 37-B, Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). In addition, Article 25 of the Constitution states: ‘All citizens are equal before the law and entitled to protection of law, and that nothing in the article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the protection of women and children.’ The Constitution thus supports efforts towards ensuring gender equality and equity in education.

That government is thus conscious of its commitment to ensuring implementation of international and national agreements can be judged from the range of policies, programmes and strategies introduced in more recent years. The National Educational Policy of which 0.9 million are girls. At the policy level, legally enforcing compulsory primary education and coeducation; education. These will be carried out through curriculum reform; urban–rural gender imbalance, and improving the quality of

In line with the international community, national poverty reduction and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been put together to provide a framework for addressing poverty with solid, time-bound targets. The Pakistan Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP 2004) identifies two main challenges in the education sector: a lack of infrastructure and facilities; and a shortage of qualified and trained teachers. Other issues recognised in the PRSP include teacher absenteeism, high dropout rates and gender inequalities. The MDGs provide a common vision of a much better world by 2015: where severe poverty is cut in half; child mortality is greatly decreased; gender differences in primary and secondary education are removed; and women are greatly empowered. Gender issues are seen as being highly relevant to achieving all the MDGs, however in the case of Pakistan, at the present rate of progress none of the goals are likely to be achieved.

The issue of gender has also been addressed in the National Policy and Action Plan 2001 to combat child labour. The officially acknowledged number of child labourers in the country is 3.3 million of which 0.9 million are girls. At the policy level, education is clearly seen as a key strategy for addressing the issue of child labour. The gender content of the plan is reflected in the short-term strategies, which include among others: ‘withdrawal of children (especially girls because they are vulnerable and their work is often hidden, they are denied access to education and suffer from detrimental socio-cultural practices) from exploitative labour and special protection’.

A stated goal of the Pakistan National Plan of Action for Women (1998) is: ‘to achieve gender equality and equity in education by 2013’. The Plan has taken the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) articles 3, 10 a-h, and 14.2.d – which address the right of women to education and training – as a reference point; and includes ‘Education and Training Opportunities for Women’ and the ‘Girl-Child’ among its key areas of concern. The issues highlighted in these sections address, in particular, the political, economic, social, cultural and legal impediments to providing access to quality education and relevant training opportunities for girls and women; the strategies needed for bringing about change; and specific activities that need to be implemented to ensure the empowerment of women. The need for formal and informal approaches to educating girls is recommended. In addition to this the plan highlights the importance of education in the context of strategies proposed to reduce poverty, with specific programs for female-headed households.

Although CEDAW was ratified by the government in 1996 and a National Plan of Action for Women’s Development launched in 1998, few steps have been taken to make either effective. Likewise the National Commission on the Status of Women, set up as a permanent body in 2000, lacks the powers and resources
to make it an effective body for monitoring gender inequality. The circumstantial scope for reducing gender inequalities goes beyond numerical change. Addressing limitations to reducing the gender gap in access to social services has come in for more attention in the Gender Reform Action Plan (2003). In the context of the educational status of women, the plan stresses a need for policy interventions vis-à-vis: positive advertising for posts, estimates of education and health expenditures, disaggregated socio-economic indicators (gender-wise), and data on violence against women. These are essential for moving the agenda forward on the empowerment of women, which hinges on changes in their personal liberty and autonomy.

Notwithstanding constitutional guarantees and official pronouncements, enforcing the writ of the State in a country where diverse socio-political systems continue to be prevalent becomes contentious. In this context, authority and control have found different expressions. The dominant power structures being feudal, tribal and patriarchal; patronage, kinship and constituency concerns are paramount. Class divisions are reflected in the systems of education: public, private, non-formal and madrassah. It has been politically expedient to provide less and low-quality education to rural areas, the poor, women, and minorities. The levels of enrolment in all types of educational institutions show that the majority of children still go to a public school; although the trend towards private schooling is increasing rapidly, especially at the primary level, in urban areas and in Punjab. Private schools have opened up more opportunities for girls (see Table 1).

In Pakistan as in many countries, traditional customs and practices accord a subordinate status to women thereby denying girls equal access to education. Social and religious strictures often quoted out of context further undervalue the need for educating girls, so that religious education or a few years of schooling is considered as being sufficient for them. Thus, in many communities, girls can be taken out of school at any time, including during the primary cycle. The age at which girls enter school is crucial, as adolescence is likely to be the cut-off stage for allowing girls to remain in school in rural and remote communities. This is also a reason for the lower participation of girls in coeducational schools. Restrictions on the mobility of girls is the most common means of tackling the issue of sexual security, critical in a society which places a high premium on ‘honour’. The preference for schools near the homes of the girl students is thus directly related to safety issues and hence the acceptance of informal institutions of learning.

Cutting across social, class and other formations, poverty promotes the most virulent forms of patriarchal control. With more than a third of the population living below the poverty line and mostly in rural areas, the aspirations, achievements and performance of women/girls are usually responsive to the stereotyped expectation of their families and social cultural settings. These factors contribute to the higher out-of-school and lower retention rate among girls. Moreover, girls are seen as a burden, a liability, whose education is not likely to be of immediate benefit to the family. In poor resource areas, low participation, poor school attendance, and a high dropout of girls is more evident. The deteriorating environment in several areas is resulting in increased migration, which is having a negative impact on the enrolment of both girls and boys in school. In the case of rural–urban migration, this has led to an increase in child beggars, a large number of whom are girls.

Economic constraints direct parental choices to favour sending their sons to school rather than their daughters. Even if there is a minimal tuition fee charged in schools, expenditures on uniform, textbooks, school funds and other materials, in addition to the opportunity cost of sending daughters to school, serve as constraints. Opportunity costs increase when children grow up

### Table 1 | Gross enrolment (I–V) for the year 1999–2000 (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Public schools</th>
<th>Private schools</th>
<th>Deeni Madaris</th>
<th>Rest*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>56.74</td>
<td>35.31</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sindh</td>
<td>63.24</td>
<td>29.70</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWFP**</td>
<td>69.13</td>
<td>21.26</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balochistan</td>
<td>67.69</td>
<td>12.22</td>
<td>17.58</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FATA**</td>
<td>60.47</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>16.33</td>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FANA**</td>
<td>60.77</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td>23.84</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT**</td>
<td>57.65</td>
<td>25.53</td>
<td>10.81</td>
<td>6.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Pakistan</strong></td>
<td><strong>60.73</strong></td>
<td><strong>30.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.89</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.18</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Female enrolment as a percentage of category  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public schools</th>
<th>Private schools</th>
<th>Deeni Madaris</th>
<th>Rest*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* PLC, Education Foundation, Cantt. & Garrison Schools  
** Abbreviations used: Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT); Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA); Federally Administered Northern Areas (FANA); and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

and become more useful in the family's income-earning or domestic activities. In Pakistan, children in poor and even low-income families contribute substantially to the household income, directly through working with their parents in the fields – common to both boys and girls – and as domestic labour. In addition, girls, in particular, help their mothers with household chores and in looking after their siblings and the extended family. The large family size contributes to the need for the labour of girls. This also helps to explain the higher school dropout rates among adolescent girls. It has also been observed that, where mothers go out of the house to work, older girls lose out on education beyond the primary level.

A key aspect of patriarchal structures is the social assigning of men as the heads of families. In the absence of other support systems, parents prefer to invest more on a son's education as they are considered most likely to provide some return on their investment. Discrimination starts at birth. There is a greater likelihood of a girl's birth not being registered compared to a boy's, as the birth of a girl is considered to be a stigma in many communities and families. This often creates a problem when the child has to enter school as a birth certificate is a requirement for public and private school entry and for some public and private examinations. It is required by law to register births and deaths; however no data is currently available on this, except for some relating to the major urban areas.

The socialisation process is itself discriminatory, with the notion of different entitlements communicated from an early age. Given the low literacy level in the country, many girls who attend school are the first in their families to do so. Inequality pervades their entire educational experience. Girls are expected to take on their mother's responsibilities even if this requires frequent absence from school. This may lead to their early withdrawal from education or even prevent them from attending school altogether. Early marriage is another area of concern, particularly in relation to the dropout rate for girls in primary school, in rural and tribal areas especially. Both at home and in school, the behaviour of girls is closely monitored. They are taught not to disagree, behave modestly and be submissive; their movement is usually restricted, especially in adolescence. Boys, in contrast, are encouraged to be assertive and are usually given outdoor duties and tasks. This in later life limits the control women have over resources, personal autonomy and decision-making; and makes for a low-level of awareness of their civil rights. There is minimal questioning of the role of the family, community, society, school, education department, and other institutions, in promoting and sustaining stereotyped roles and images of girls and women.

Since the father is the sole decision-maker in most homes, and with four out of five women in rural areas having no education, the real challenge is how to strengthen the voice of women on the subject of education. If their mother can influence the decision, girls are twice as likely to enrol in school, thus the low literacy levels of women have a direct influence on the number of girls attending school in Pakistan. The most marginalised group deprived of education is that of rural girls from poor and illiterate families.

A recent report (see Table 2) has found that, of all the primary school-aged children in 2001–02, only 58 per cent of the boys and 46 per cent of the girls were enrolled in primary school.
Increasing access and the right to quality education

Table 2  Net school enrolment rate, 2001–02

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary (6–10)</th>
<th>Secondary (Middle and High School) (11–16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male Female</td>
<td>Male Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>66.8 64.6</td>
<td>45.3 49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>55.1 39.3</td>
<td>34.8 17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>57.9 45.5</td>
<td>37.8 27.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


gap worsens substantially for girls who are 12 and older. Moreover, the rural–urban divide is striking. The gender gap is largely a rural phenomenon. In rural areas, girls are less likely to have ever enrolled in school and if they do enrol they are much more likely to drop out. The gender gap seems to arise from both lower initial enrolment and a higher dropout rate for girls. At every age, a higher percentage of girls in rural regions have never attended school. For boys, the percentage never enrolled in school declines from 60 per cent at age five to 20 per cent by age eleven, suggesting that boys continue to enter school at older ages. For rural girls, the percentage never enrolled declines from age five to age nine, but remains stagnant at about 50 per cent after age nine, implying that girls tend to enter school up to – but not after – age nine. The dropout rate for girls is particularly high in rural areas. It is also high for older children and tends to accelerate after age 12, when girls drop out of school at a much higher rate than boys do. This is the age at which children are typically in middle school (classes 6–8).

The practice of restricted female mobility plays a large role in perpetuating gender gaps in school enrolments. School attendance of girls is very sensitive to school proximity. Girls are much less likely to attend school unless there is one available within the settlement they reside in. This sensitivity to school proximity worsens as girls grow into adolescence. Qualitative studies suggest that concerns over safety and norms of female seclusion are the primary factors behind the precipitous drop in enrolment beyond age 12. This concern is also evident in the rising expenditure on transportation to school reported for older girls.

In addition to the feudal customs of karō-kari and exchange marriage, the issue of safety and security is of prime concern to families under a feudal culture where girls become victims of feudal-based and ethnic conflicts. Furthermore, sectarianism and fundamentalism impact on the enrolment of girls, functioning of schools, availability of female teachers, and education in general. Schoolgirls also become targets of kidnapping, acid throwing and other acts of violence, as frequently reported in the press. Many forms of violence against women, including ‘honour killings’, are associated with the community or family’s demand for sexual chastity and virginity. The perpetrators of these crimes are mostly males and family members of the murdered women, who go unpunished or receive a reduced sentence. Violence against women is the most powerful mechanism used by the family, society and state to silence the voices of resistance to the existing gender-related social relations of production and reproduction, and their subordination. Such crimes, more often than not, are committed against women/girls from the lower and poorer classes, and mostly in rural areas. Thus, security is cited as an important consideration in the decision to send girls to schools, especially to middle and high schools outside the community.

Since large parts of rural Pakistan are either underserved or not served by schools for girls, school construction does continue to be important for decreasing the physical cost of attending school for girls. However, a more nuanced approach to addressing the needs of scattered rural population is also required. Another important constraint is that there are simply not enough educated women in many Pakistani villages to staff a school for girls. Government schools (and most private schools) for girls require female teachers, but significant barriers to female mobility prevent educated women from relocating or commuting to localities with teaching jobs. Hiring and retaining female teachers will thus continue to be a problem, and will be at its worst in precisely those areas that are poorly served at present.

Paradoxically, the construction of a middle or high school is not likely to be warranted in every community; however, the absence of such schools sufficiently close by will hinder the development of public primary schools, and thereby discourage private primary schools. Breaking this unfortunate cycle requires innovative interventions to ensure girls gain access to middle and high schools without having to construct a middle or high school in every village. While cultural constraints on female mobility are not likely to disappear in the short-term, the creation of a cohort of educated women in every village may be a viable policy intervention. Marriage, residence, and migration patterns suggest that educated girls frequently remain in the villages they come from so this constitutes a potential pool of future teachers for the next generation.

Several initiatives, such as the middle school stipend program and the school meal program (Tawana Pakistan), are already underway. Such schemes rely on the idea that low enrolment numbers are primarily due to financial constraints. Without doubt such constraints are likely to be quite important for many rural households. Even where households are concerned about the safety of young girls, a stipend could allow them to purchase private secure transportation to and from school. Safety concerns are not likely to be addressed completely by reliance on the existing means of transportation available in most villages.

In addition to access, the quality of education has become a critical issue in ensuring the continued participation of girls in schools. Less than half the girls enrolled in public primary schools complete the primary cycle; and even in the most developed
province, according to a recent survey, the few children who complete the primary cycle learned only about a third of the required content of the curriculum. The knowledge considered valuable and appropriate to be taught in schools, the teaching approaches, teaching and learning materials, evaluation and assessment procedures all have gender dimensions. In addition, the ‘hidden curriculum’, which is the ethos of a school, and the social practices outside formal lessons, affect commitments made to gender equality.

Among these limitations are perspectives that continue to perpetuate gender stereotyping, ethnic/religious conflict, and a disregard for human rights beyond an extremely moralistic religious dimension. Studies show that parents are more willing to send children to school if they know it will in fact help their children cope in the future, raise their living standards, and improve their quality of life. As long as the curriculum is only able to provide basic reading, writing and numeracy skills, the pressure on parents to allow their girls to complete primary school will not be there.

In the context of Pakistan, the interlinkage of militarisation and masculinisation is reflected in textbooks at primary, elementary and secondary levels. The curricula reinforce and encourage the existing socially gendered division of labour, promote dependent roles of girls and women, and help to create the ‘identity’ of an ideal female in the Pakistani context from a male perspective (Saigol 1995). The poor quality of government textbooks, together with teaching approaches, does not make learning an interesting process, and dissuades children from reading. It also discourages the enrolment of girls, particularly in government schools which only rely on government-prescribed textbooks.

Deficiencies in textbooks are augmented by the limited exposure of female teachers to the world beyond the household, community or village. This does not imply that men are better teachers simply because they may be more informed. Unless otherwise instructed, teachers carry their gendered upbringing and prejudices to the classroom. This is equally true in the case of male and female teachers who are in fact the role models for their students. Almost all documentation on teacher education, and most definitely on teacher training, shows that female teachers participate more effectively in activity-based and child-friendly learning programmes. The exercise of authority and repetition of what is taught is more evident among male teachers.

The challenge of ensuring access and quality of education so that girls enter school and remain there till, at the least, completion of elementary education goes beyond infrastructure, it requires a rethinking of education goals.

Endnotes

i World Bank (2004c).
ii The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1949
iii The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992
viii Ibid.
xiii Effectiveness of In-Service Teacher Education Programmes Offered by the University of Education, Lahore. March 2004.