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Dealing with Gender Disparity in Educational Setting: A Case of Primary Schools in a Karachi's Town

Sultan Muhammad*, Nimra Sharif**

Abstract

The significant factors for the increased gender disparity within Pakistan are the parental unequal treatment towards the different genders of their children, girls, and boys under normal routine. Furthermore, societal aspirations can also be stated as the leading cause of gender disparity. This study aimed to focus on addressing the area of gender disparity in primary school education in the country. Employing an in-depth analysis method, semi-structured interviews were conducted from the parents living in Landhi Town, having two or more male and female children aged between five and ten years. Several themes and sub-themes, supposed to be the leading factors for gender disparity in the country, emerged in the result of data analysis gathered via the interviews. The most significant identified factors include poverty, school proximity, security issues, social issues and perception of parents regarding the importance of girls' education. Therefore, policy makers and educationists are recommended to pay attention to parental awareness programs and the social issues associated with gender disparity in primary education.

Keywords: *Gender disparity, poverty, primary education, security, social issues*

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, the literacy rate of Pakistan at primary level educational institutes has increased from 42 to 52 per cent (Choudhry, 2006). Despite this increase in the literacy rate, certain disparities in the educational setting including gender disparity that prevents the students to gain the education. According to Chaudhry and Rahman (2009), "Pakistan exhibits considerable gender inequality in education. Strong gender disparities exist in rural and urban areas and among the provinces. Pakistan is a patriarchal society where women suffer all sorts of discrimination, resulting in low social, economic and political status in the society" (p. 175). Only 22 percents of girls, compared to 47 per cent boys, completed primary schooling. In the rural areas of the country, the condition is even worse. The increased notion of gender inequality

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within the educational setting is reducing the economic growth and development of the country. According to Baluch and Shahid (2009), one of the significant factors for the increased gender disparity within the country is the parental unequal treatment towards the different genders of their children, girls and boys under normal routine (Sarwar, 2016). Furthermore, societal aspirations can also be stated as the leading cause of gender disparity. From this perspective, Baluch and Shahid (2009) propose that gender inequality in education has a direct impact on economic growth by lowering the average quality of human capital. The objective of the present study is to address the gender disparity in primary school education to answer the following questions:

- How parents perceive the importance of education based on the different genders of their children?
- How parents perceive the importance of female education?
- What are the factors influencing female education with special reference to facilities and barriers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term “Equality of Educational Opportunity” refers to the concept that educational services ought to be accessible to every child regardless of their abilities, genders, and interests. According to Sahin (2013), subsequent to the significant struggle in the forms of ‘inequity between the sexes’ and ‘fight for women’s rights’ the increased ratio of gender disparity in education setting has reduced its prevalence; nevertheless, it still exists in various countries. Defining the term “Gender Equity,” Sahin (2013) argues that gender equity is “males and females have equal opportunities in terms of economic, social, cultural, and political developments. If gender equity is exactly achieved this will contribute to future of girls and boys more than approaches men-centred, and girls will get benefits from public and domestic life as much as boys” (p. 60). Dube (2015) argues that the existence of gender disparity within the educational setting arises various questioned on both civil societies and governments, as there may be multiple factors contributing to the gender gap in the educational setting.

Gender Disparity in Pakistan

Conducted study on the existence of gender disparity within the educational setting in Pakistan, Afzal, Butt, Akbar, and Roshi (2013) found that “Gender disparity in Pakistan has defined as the gap indicated by preferences of males over females in any field of life” (p. 114). Furthermore, one of the identified factors causing gender disparity in Pakistan is the male-dominated culture family structure that supports priority to boys in general over girls. This is evidence that females are believed inferior to males. Some of the traditional parents do not want to send their daughters to school, particularly when they reach 11, because they do not want them to interact with boys. Consequently, such parents do not consider it worthy to send their daughters to schools for education. According to Moheyuddin (2005), most of the parents in Pakistan want to send their daughters to schools but because of financial crises, they prefer to send their sons over their daughters paying a focus of the potential return might be brought by their boys, which is likely impossible via sending girls to the schools. The findings of the study conducted by Moheyuddin (2005) reveal that parents in Pakistan see no return in sending their girls to schools. It also explored that majority of the parents do not give importance to the girls’

education believing that girls have little role in the society compared to the boys.

Rahman, Hayat, Habib, and Iqbal (2011) found that “Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has always been at the forefront when it comes to gender inequality. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa females have been lagging behind in every dimension of life. Gender inequality is also found to exist in the Educational landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa” (p. 480). The study shows that the literacy rate in the province is around 52 per cent for males and 21 per cent for females in primary education. This gender discrimination is due to the socio-cultural restriction in the area. However, in urban areas of the province, the literacy rate is much better. The socio-economic status of girls has considerable restrictions on their continuing education. Girl’s particular socio-economic birthright may have a direct effect on their educational attainment. The cultural and social context of the society in Pakistan is predominantly patriarchic in which male and female are divided into two separate domains, known as masculine and feminine (ArabNaz, Mughal, Alam, Khan & Hussain, 2012).

The study conducted by Khan and Ali (2003), covering the cases of two cities of Punjab, Jhang and Faisalabad, reveals that one in a tenth of the family head believes that the female education is not worthwhile. On the other hand, 44.5% of parents were interested in the female education, twenty per cent of the per cent in favour of both educations. Fifty-eight per cent of the parents were in favour of education their sons only. Twenty-one per cent of the girls left school before completing their primary level education. This high dropout of girls from school at the initial level was found due to the poor performance unit of observation or lack of interest of the head of the family. The overall result showed that if the girl’s enrollment took place in a later age, it might increase the chances of dropout of the female because of reaching the puberty age very soon, so the parent’s interest ultimately increases for their marriages. This will affect female primary level education attainment. The study conducted by Naimatullah, Zafar, Asghar and Saira (2009), covering two districts of Pakistan, Pakpattan and Faisalabad, found that gender disparity exists among the families for primary level education. For example, in the urban areas, the ratio of enrollment from male to female is 69.64 per cent and in a rural area, the ratio is around 54.37 per cent. The reason for this disparity between girls and boys is the education of parents. It has a greater effect on a boy’s schooling, which is preferred over the girl’s schooling.

While conducting a study on the gender dimensions of the dropped out students in basic education in Pakistan, Khan, Tahir, and Shah, (2011) found that the discrimination against girls starts as children grow up. Initially, the discrimination starts in the form of nutrition and food later in the form of basic primary education as compared to males, a socio-cultural and economic condition also play an important role in drop out in the early stage of primary education. The drop out a ration of Punjab is even more than Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit Baltistan. On the other hand, Muhammad and Askar (2009), while conducting a study on a rural area of Charsadda district regarding gender disparity, found that more than eighty-three per cent boys are enrolled and only thirty-three per cent girls are enrolled in the school. This is a great difference between the enrolments of boys and girls in primary education.

According to Toor and Parveen (2004), there are several reasons for the low levels of female enrolment in Pakistan, such as the high level of poverty. One-third of the population is estimated to be living below the poverty line. Although school attendance is subsidized, the

costs of books, uniforms, and transportation to school can be too much to bear for poor families. Poor families are also more likely to keep girls at home to care for younger siblings or to work in family endeavours. If a family has to choose between educating a son or a daughter, because of financial restrictions, typically the son will be chosen. Negative parental attitudes toward educating daughters can also be a barrier to a girl's education. Many parents view educating sons as an investment because the sons will be responsible for caring for ageing parents. On the other hand, parents may see the education of daughters as a waste of money because daughters will eventually live with their husbands' families, and the parents will not benefit directly from their education.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology using in-depth analysis was used to conduct this study to identify the parent's perception regarding gender disparity at primary level education among the low socio-economic population living in the selected areas of Landhi, Karachi. The study was conducted in Future Colony Landhi Town Karachi Pakistan. The people of living population in this area were Sindhi, Punjabi, Balochi, Muhajir (Urdu Speaking Community) and Pathan. They had a low socioeconomic status, and most of them were working on daily wages. The participants were parents living in Landhi Town, having two or more male and female children aged five to ten years. A brief explanation was given to the parents about the research prior to conducting the interviews. The interview guide was translated into the native language of the participants. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant.

Purposive sampling technique was used to identify the research participants that enabled the researcher to select the participants (n=10) able to fulfil the study's requirements. It was made sure that the participants were parents having two or more male and female children aged between 05 and 10 years with a monthly income between 15,000 rupees and 20,000 rupees. However, the invited parents who refused to sign the consent forms were not made the participants of this study. In order to collect data from the participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted via a self-developed questionnaire, containing open-ended questions. A brief explanation was given to the participants to make it easy to understand the questions. Transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were generated with care to preserve the core content of the dialogue. The transcript was later translated from the native language of the participants to the English language. After the completion of the verbatim transcript, the participants were made to listen to the transcription to create the trustworthiness in the data. The gathered data was analyzed via content analysis method which involves summarizing and classifying data within a thematic framework. At the first step, the researcher read the transcripts of each interview many times in order to be familiarized with the central issues that enabled the researcher to identify the key themes and sub-themes emerging from the data.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

No.	Name	Gender	Education	Language	Profession	Monthly Income
1	Faiz M*	M	Primary	Hindko	Daily Wages	15000/PKR
2	Naseeb K*	M	Primary	Pashto	Domestic Business	20000/PKR
3	A. Qadir*	M	Matric	Punjabi	Shop keeper	20000/PKR
4	Saleem K*	M	Primary	Pashto	Driver	15000/PKR
5	Rozi Khan*	M	Matric	Pashto	Labor	15000/PKR
6	Ali Bahadur*	M	Middle	Punjabi	Cleric	20000/PKR
7	Hamza Ali*	M	Matric	Punjabi	Domestic business	20000/PKR
8	M. Younis*	M	Master	Hindko	School teacher	20000/PKR
9	AnwerZeb*	M	Primary	Pashto	Shopkeeper	15000/PKR
10	Aslam Khan*	M	Illiterate	Pashto	Domestic business	15000/PKR

* Pseudonyms were used for each participant

Table 1 provides the background information of participants. All of the participants were males and had at least one child of school going age. Fifty per cent of the participants had basic education, primary level while there was the only participant who completed graduation. Participants were from different ethnic backgrounds; however, Pashto speakers had a predominant representation. Almost all participants belonged to low and middle-income strata and their monthly income ranged from 15000 to 20000.

Section 2

This section organizes the different themes and sub-themes emerged in the result of analyzing the transcriptions. From this perspective, figure 1 displays the identified themes including poverty, school proximity, security factors, societal factors, unavailability of facilities, willingness to educate, advantages of boys education, girls’ supporting their parents, and importance of girls.



Figure 1: Themes

Poverty

Children are more likely to receive an education if their parents could afford. If parents could afford educational and transport related expenses, they opt for female education without any discrimination. Otherwise, according to some respondents they would give priority to their sons if the choice would be made between son and daughter. One of the respondents mentioned, “Daughters also have the right to be educated; however, we cannot afford their education in limited salary.”

School Proximity

Unavailability of safe transport options and inaccessibility to schools due to large distances created another important hurdle in the education of females. Some of the participants mentioned that public schools are located very far from their homes having no transport facility. Public transport is usually overcrowded and private transport is unaffordable. Secondly, it is perceived that boys may harass girls on the way to school as one of the participants narrated, “It is very difficult for a girl to go to the school which is very far from her house. There are hundreds of problems, and there might be some hooting boys in the way of the school to harass our girls. As a result, a girl cannot go and she has to leave school.”

Security Factors

Another important factor emphasized by participants was security. Due to recent attacks in teaching institutions and rising events of kidnapping, parents are reluctant to send their girls to schools. Furthermore, few participants also mentioned that in their area, the environment was generally not safe for girls and they were fearful of vulgar boys bullying and harassing girls on streets corners. As stated by one of the participants, “in this area where we live, there are certain security issues, and the girl is not safe. They are teased, hooted and irritated by vulgar boys; as a result, we keep our daughters at home.”

Societal Factors

In the theme ‘Societal Factors,’ some of the sub-themes emerged (See Figure 2). The sub-themes include boys are heirs, co-education, disadvantages of school education, hijab, girls are household carers, low literacy rate, narrow-mindedness, and specific domains for girls

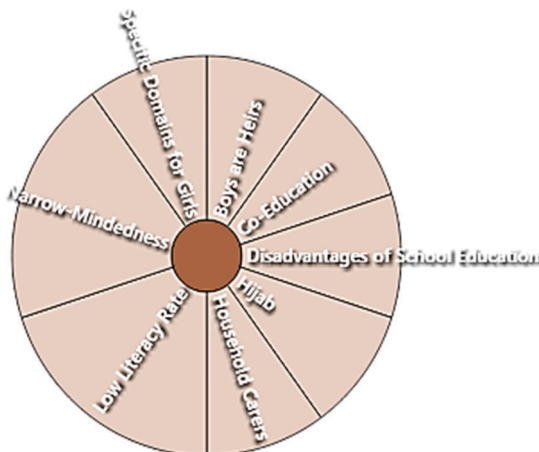


Figure 2:

Participants reported a number of factors impeding access to education, particularly to females. A large number of socio-cultural factors result in the gender disparity while choosing between educating a male and female child. Furthermore, co-education is considered as a deterrent to female education as it violates the cultural norms of “Parda” (veil). In conformity with religious beliefs and cultural norms, the mingling of females with males is perceived to be ‘not allowed’ as it leads to close interaction of both genders and development of physical discourse. Few participants expressed their fear of girls’ elopement with boys due to co-education. One of the participants stated, “Due to the co-education, it is very problematic for parents to provide their daughters with education. It is not allowed in Islam that males and females get education together, as water and fire cannot live together.” Similarly, few participants were of the view that girls are responsible for household chores while earning is the responsibility of man. Girls start contributing to routine household chores from an early age while boys can attain either education or start earning by doing some job.

Unavailability of Facilities

Non-availability of quality education in public schools is also an important deterrent for parents to get their female children educated. It is perceived that teaching standards and methods in public schools are not optimum and private schools are not affordable. “In our area, there is no government school, if there is one, no proper system is there, and teachers do not come to the school. Furthermore, we cannot afford the fee of private schools” (a respondent).

Willingness to Educate

Majority of the respondents had the viewpoint that if they were provided with relevant resources and satisfactory security they would educate their daughters by sending them to the schools. They recognized the importance of female education. Their willingness could be identified by the following responses:

- If we had resources, we were most likely to provide education to our daughters
- Everyone wants to educate their girls; however, our pocket does not allow us to continue their education

Advantages of Boys’ Education

Male children’s education is preferred as it is believed that they stay with their parents even after marriage and will be a breadwinner for them in later part of their lives. On the other hand, daughters are supposed to leave for their after-marriage homes. As one of the participants mentioned, “Our people think that daughters are to go to the others houses and we cannot take any benefits from the education of our daughters. On the other hand, by educating our boys, we can get them recruited in the army and rangers, so they will earn for us and support us.”

Girls Can Also Support Their Parents

Some of the respondents viewed that not only boys but also girls could also be a source of future support for their parents. “Yes, females may be a good help to their parents after they have become educated. Being doctors, they can serve their own families as well as their parents” (a respondent).

Importance of Female Education

While most of the respondents preferred male education, few respondents had different

opinions and linked female education with an opportunity to create access to a future generation to better educational opportunities. They were also of the view that many tribes had had long fighting duration with each other due to lack of education, and educated girls can help in overcoming these issues. One of the respondents mentioned, “Females’ education is important because in future they are to become mothers. If mothers are educated, she will pay attention to her children’s studies; on the other hand, fathers are busy in their work and cannot focus on the study of their children.” Few participants considered female education as a vital contributor to the progress of a country and were of the view that educating a female child is equivalent to educating the whole family. One of the respondents stated, “In my opinion, if we start educating females, our country Pakistan will get progress leap and bounds. As it is said that teaching a male is equal to teach only a male, on the other hand, teaching a female is equal to teach a whole family.”

Furthermore, few participants perceived that if girls received higher education, they could benefit society significantly. They were firm believers of the proverb “if you educate a man, you educate one person. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation.” Nevertheless, due to cultural restrictions in certain areas, women can avail services from female providers only. As one of the respondents mentioned, “Yes. If girls get a high education, they can serve the country. If there are female doctors, pilots, health workers, then more other females of Islamic society can be served without any hesitation.”

DISCUSSION

The themes and sub-themes found in the result of interviews analysis seem to be consistent with the findings found in the reviewed literature. For instance, the emerged theme ‘poverty’ can be found in the finding of the study conducted by Toor and Parveen (2004) that reveals several reasons for the low levels of female enrolment in Pakistan, among them a high level of poverty is dominant. Furthermore, the theme ‘Importance of Female Education’ can be seen in the finding of the study conducted by Moheyuddin (2005) figuring out that parents in Pakistan see no return in sending their girls to schools. In other words, the majority of the parents do not give importance to the girls’ education believing that girls have little role in society compared to the boys. Advantages of Boys’ Education is the theme that is very much associated with the male-dominated culture family structure that is recognized by the study conducted by Afzal, Butt, Akbar, and Roshi (2013). In this study, the authors reveal that one of the identified factors causing gender disparity in Pakistan is the male-dominated culture family structure that supports priority to boys in general over girls.

This is evidence that females are believed inferior to males. This finding of the present study is also consistent with the study conducted by Afzal, Butt, Akbar, and Roshi (2013) with aspect to the security factor as some of the traditional parents do not want to send their daughters to school, particularly when they reach to 11, because they do not want them to interact with boys. Consequently, such parents do not consider it worthy to send their daughters to schools for education. Some of the sub-themes found in the present study can be stated consistently with the study conducted by Khan, Tahir, and Shah, (2011) who found that the discrimination against girls starts as children grow up. Initially, the discrimination starts in the form of nutrition and food later in the form of basic primary education as compared to males, a socio-cultural and economic condition also play an important role in drop out in the early stage of primary

education.

CONCLUSION

The finding of this qualitative research study indicated that the respondents considered the education of both male and female as equally important; however, they have social issues lead them towards the gender disparity in the educational setting. For example, one of the respondents had a firm belief that female education is important because in future they will become mothers. If mothers are educated, they will pay attention to their children's studies. On the other hand, most of the fathers in the country usually stay outside of their homes for bread earning. It would not be wrong to state that in the country a few facilities are available for equal education compared to the barriers. Education of parent is an important determinant for their children to get an equal education. Female children are more likely to receive an education if their parents are educated. Based on the findings of this study, policy makers and educationists are recommended to pay attention to parental awareness programs and the social issues associated with gender disparity in primary education.

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