



Gender Barriers and Their Impact on Women's Participation in Higher Education in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The entry of women in higher education in Pakistan is still characterized by enormous challenges that are based on sociocultural, economic, and institutional factors. There was still a significant difference in the number of women who were enrolled despite the significant increase in the enrollment rates because of the existing gender roles, family pressures, inadequate access to resources and the social attitudes towards educating women. This paper is a discussion on the complex gender barriers that prevent access of higher education among women in Pakistan, specifically a district in Punjab. Data were gathered with the help of convenient sample to gather information about female students in both public and private universities and how they experience and perceive educational opportunities. The results show that social expectations, economic and institutional restrictions indeed influence the participation of women, which leads to limited academic and professional development. The only way to deal with these obstacles is to have a multifaceted policy response, community involvement and institutional changes in order to develop an inclusive and equal learning space among women.

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Introduction

It is not a new fact that education is a key determinant of social and economic development, and higher education especially is instrumental in empowering the people, especially women, to contribute positively in the society. The question of women in higher education in Pakistan is still a complex phenomenon depending on the complex of cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Nevertheless, the number of women joining universities has increased, however, there are still structural and social challenges that women face that restrict their access to education (Aslam & Kingdon, 2019). Gender differences in higher education cannot be seen as isolated phenomena because they reveal the state of inequalities in the Pakistani

society, in which traditional values tend to give more support to the education of men than women and impose limitations on their mobility and career expectations (Khan et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2024).

The history of the gender inequality in education in Pakistan has shown that access to higher education has been affected over a long period of cultural and social expectations by the women. Most families in the country (especially in rural and semi-urban regions of Punjab) typically focus on domestic roles of women meaning that the value of higher education among women is underrated (Naeem and Bilal, 2021; Malik et al., 2025). The expectations of the society towards marriage, family and gender roles are also other obstacles to it and women have difficulty in pursuing long term academic objectives. Female students are discouraged by families and communities even in instances where they have access to educational opportunities, which means their enrolment and retention levels in institutions of higher education are lower (Jabeen et al., 2022; Taqi et al., 2021; Sahu et al., 2025).

The economic variables are also a critical fact in the determination of accessibility to high education by women. Financial constraints in most family setups also require the need to invest more in some of the boys, as they are seen as the breadwinners (Malik and Sattar, 2019). The tuition fees, transport, and boarding costs make the situation worse to the female students, especially in areas where the universities are located around urban centers. As a result, significant numbers of good female students either postpone or end up with higher education entirely because of financial factors and this highlights the combination of economic barriers and gender-based barriers to restrict the participation in education (Rana et al., 2020).

Gender gaps are also caused by institutional factors in the field of higher education. Pakistan universities do not have gender sensitive policies and support mechanisms that can accommodate female involvement. Women feel not taking part in the academic activities fully due to safety concerns, insufficient transport facilities, and inaccessibility to female faculty or mentors (Hussain and Ahmed, 2018). Further, the gender biases in the curricula and classroom settings can often marginalise female students, further promoting stereotypes in society and lowering their academic confidence. The lack of institutional provisions to cater to the specific requirements of the female students is also an additional constraint on their capacity to succeed in higher educational institutions (Shah and Farooq, 2021).

The other influential aspect of women in higher education is the sociocultural understanding of the female education. Women, particularly in most communities, are considered to be educated second after their family and domestic chores. Patriarchal values are deeply based on this perception and are also reflected in the family decisions and practices instilled by the institutions (Khan & Ali, 2022). Girls are normally pressured by the society to adhere to the traditional gender roles, which makes them have little movements and engagement in extracurricular and academic activities. Such a sociocultural situation not only suppresses the academic growth of women but also affects their self-efficacy and career goals (Saeed et al., 2019).

Policy interventions and programs have attempted to deal with gender differences in higher education in the recent years. Scholarships among female students, awareness programs, and community engagement initiatives are some of the efforts that strive to foster educational access and equity (UNESCO, 2021). Nevertheless, the whole process is still facing challenges especially within the district level in Punjab as the cultural norms and limited resources still hinder women involvement in education. The studies show that special efforts, such as gender-sensitive policies, mentorship initiatives, and financial assistance

mechanisms, are very helpful in enhancing the enrolment and retention of women in higher education (Farooq and Tariq, 2020).

The combination of these barriers is also an important factor to understand in order to create effective interventions. This paper is based on the women of one of the chosen districts in Punjab, where convenient sampling was applied to collect information in the form of female students in the university. Investigating their experiences and perceptions, the study supposedly contributes the idea of the particular sociocultural, economic and institutional reasons, which prevent women from engaging in higher education. The results are likely to be used in policymaking processes, institutional changes and community based programmes that can help in creating a more inclusive and equitable higher education environment that women in Pakistan can enjoy.

All in all, the gender barriers in the sphere of higher education demand implementation of the multidimensional approach, involving policy, community involvement, and institutional changes. The increased participation of females does not only lead to the creation of equity in education but also the elicitation of other societal-wide growth by increasing the ability to engage actively in both social, economic, and political arenas (Mahmood and Qureshi, 2019). To make sure that women are not inhibited in the access to higher education is not only a social justice issue but a strategic investment in human capital and development trajectory in the country.

Literature Review

Gender barriers in higher education have been well discussed both on international and local levels. Women encounter multidimensional barriers in their access to higher education both worldwide and across cultures, including institutional failures, and cultural expectations (UNESCO, 2021). It is not only the ability of an individual that causes gender inequality in education but also strongly tied to the norms and structural limitations of society. Such obstacles are compounded in the environment of developing nations such as Pakistan because of the patriarchal culture, economic constraints, and geographical inequalities (Aslam and Kingdon, 2019).

A number of studies have cited sociocultural factors as the major determinants that limit the involvement of women in higher education. As pointed out by Khan and Ali (2022), a deeply-rooted patriarchal culture usually dictates that women have their main role in the family when it comes to housework and thus families do not prioritize education of women. Equally, Jabeen et al. (2022) discovered that female students in rural and semi-urban Punjab face the problem of resistance by family members who do not regard higher education as important to women and promotes the traditionally gender-role roles. The perceived role of education as secondary to women in society has continued to delay not only the enrollment process but also the retention and completion of the education process in higher institutions (Saeed et al., 2019).

The issue of economic factors also contributes to the attenuation of the educational opportunities of women. According to Malik and Sattar (2019), in families with low income, parents are likely to provide education to boys more than to girls because they are considered to earn more in the future as parents expect them to play a bigger role in supporting the family. This was supported by Farooq and Tariq (2020), who demonstrated that the tuition fee, travelling expenses, and unavailability of scholarships or other financial support are one of the reasons why female students in Punjab tend to drop out of school. These economic

barriers are also more enhanced in women of remote areas where they find it hard to travel to university in urban areas to provide an extra barrier.

There are also institutional and infrastructural constraints in higher education as highlighted in the literature. Hussain and Ahmed (2018) have indicated that Pakistani universities often do not have gender-sensitive policies and support services including safe transportation, women hostels, and women mentorship initiatives, which play a vital role in retaining women in universities. Shah and Farooq (2021) have suggested that the lack of female faculties in some fields combined with inadequate and non-inclusive courses is also a cause of a poor learning atmosphere. These institutional loopholes do not only decrease academic involvement but also influence self-efficacy and motivation of the female students.

Studies that specifically consider Punjab have indicated that the disparity on the district level also affects the access to higher education by women. The authors of Naeem and Bilal (2021) reported the survey conducted in one district of Punjab and noted that the local cultural norms had a strong impact on the enrollment of females. Geographical and social contexts converge in producing a significant impact on the outcome of education in that families in these districts tend to view sending daughters to faraway universities as a danger, or an inappropriateness of the practice. Rana et al. (2020) also mentioned that in urban centers, the participation of females is higher, but semi-urban and rural districts are lagging behind because of the social conservativeness and the lack of institutional infrastructure.

A number of researchers have analyzed policies interventions and community based programs that can address the issue of gender barriers. UNESCO (2021) underscored the fact that scholarship schemes among women, awareness campaigns, as well as community outreach efforts, have been encouraging towards the growth of female enrollment. Nonetheless, Mahmood and Qureshi (2019) emphasized that policy measures cannot effectively work without changing the sociocultural attitudes. It has been found that programs that incorporate both family and community sensitization and institutional reforms are more effective in ensuring that women continue to participate in higher education.

The psychological and social aspect in terms of gender barriers is also highlighted in the literature. Female students in higher education frequently have to deal with the pressure to follow the conventional norms, which can be seen in form of less involvement in classroom conversations, unwillingness to become a leader, or lack of involvement in extracurricular activities (Khan et al., 2020). These psychological barriers, together with structural limitations, which were proposed by Aslam and Kingdon (2019), produce a compound effect that prevents women in exploiting educational opportunities. Furthermore, social networks and peer support can help to reduce such difficulties, and female students say that they feel more motivated and more resilient when supportive communities become involved (Saeed et al., 2019).

Overall, as per the literature, the involvement of women in higher education in Pakistan can be influenced by the confluence of sociocultural, economical, institutional, and psychological forces. Although some progress has been achieved at the national levels in terms of policies and scholarship programs, much still needs to be done at the district level, especially in Punjab where cultural norms and scarcity of resources still prevail to restrict the level of education that female population attains. The results of the previous studies have highlighted the significance of taking a multidimensional approach in which the attitude of the society, economic support, and institutional reconstructions are integrated to establish an enabling environment among women in tertiary education. The convenience sampling studies, especially in individual districts, have shown to be good in capturing the local nuances and

finding out specific barriers that influence the participation of women. The method will enable researchers to come up with viable insights that could be used in policy-making and community-based interventions to realize gender equity in education.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design is quantitative because this study aims at investigating how gender barriers affect women in higher education. The use of quantitative research allows one to gather the measurable data and analyze it statistically to determine the relationship between gender barriers and educational participation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The cross-sectional survey design was considered whereby the data were collected at only one point in time with the sampled being female students pursuing higher learning institutions in a selected district in Punjab. The design is suitable in the investigations of the perceptions and experiences of women in the sociocultural, economic, and institutional barriers.

Population and Sample

The sample of this research includes female students in the public and private universities of one district in Punjab. The adoption of convenient sampling to make the study practical and feasible enabled the researchers to sample conveniently and select those who were conveniently available and willing to further participate (Etikan et al., 2016). Two hundred female students were contacted, who belonged to different spheres of study, age categories, socioeconomic statuses. The convenience sampling was selected because of the time and resources limitation and the interest in the district-level insights. Although such an approach does not allow generalization, it offers valuable information on local gender-based obstacles that inhibit women to enroll in higher education.

Instrument Development

A structured questionnaire that was created specifically to be used in this research was used in collecting the data. There were three sections of the questionnaire. The demographic data (age, program of study, socioeconomic status, and parental education) were collected in the first section. The second segment involved sociocultural barriers, including family expectations, gender roles, and perception of society towards female education. The third section was a study of economic and institutional impediments such as finances, transport and accommodation, security threats, and access to academic resources. The measurements were on a 5-point Likert scale of 1 to 5 (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) with some possibility to quantify the perceptions and experiences (Bryman, 2016).

Validity and Reliability

Two academic professionals in gender studies and higher education reviewed the questionnaire to ensure that the content is valid. Clarity, understanding and reliability of the instrument were tested by the piloting of the instrument on 20 female students. To measure internal consistency, the Cronbachs alpha coefficient was obtained and it gave a high score of over 0.80 in all subscales, therefore it shows a high level of reliability (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). Using the results of the pilot study, minor modifications were made to ensure that the language and selection of items were better.

Data Collection Procedure

The information was collected through in face-to-face interviews within four weeks in university campuses. Informed consent was obtained in writing by informing the participants

of the objective of the study and promising them of privacy. The questionnaires were to be distributed in, the classroom, the libraries and other areas where there is a large number of individuals. Follow-up reminders were also issued to those participants who declined to participate in the first instance to ensure high response rate.

Data Analysis

The data gathered were analyzed with Statistical Package of the social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. To describe demographic features and the extent of gender barriers, descriptive statistics were calculated which consist of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the interdependence between sociocultural, economic and institutional obstacles and the women participation in higher education. Cronbachs alpha was reported in each of the subscales to ensure reliability of the findings and data were verified to be normally distributed, outliers, and missing data prior to the analysis (Field, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

The university ethics committee gave the ethical approval before data were collected. The participants were made aware of their right to abandon the process anywhere along the way without incurring a penalty. To preserve the privacy of the participants, the data were anonymized, and identifiers were eliminated. The research was conducted in the same line with the ethical principles, such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and non-maleficence, following common principles of research (Resnik, 2020).

Data Analysis & Findings

A study was done on 200 female students of a chosen district of Punjab with the objective of reviewing the effects of gender inhibitions in enrollment to higher education. The descriptive statistics were used as the starting point of the analysis to learn about the demographic features of the study participants and the commonness of the sociocultural, economic, and institutional impediments. The age of the majority of the respondents fell within 18- 24 years (78%), 15% fell within 25- 30 years, and 7% fell above 30 years. This age is a sign that the majority of the respondents were undergraduate or early postgraduate learners. Regarding program enrollment, 60% had joined social sciences, 25% natural sciences and 15% business or other subjects. The analysis of socioeconomic status showed that 52 percent of students were children of middle-income families, 30 percent of children of lower-income families, and 18 percent of children of upper-middle-income families, which demonstrates that there is a variety of socioeconomic groups.

Gender barriers analysis showed that sociocultural factors were a significant problem among female students. Table 1 presents the summary of the mean scores and standard deviation of sociocultural, economic and institutional barriers. The sociocultural barriers mean was 4.12 (SD= 0.68), which showed that the respondents strongly agreed that their access to education was hindered by family expectations, traditional gender roles and social perceptions. The economic factors such as tuition fees, transport expenses, and financial assistance were a mean of 3.85 (SD = 0.74) indicating moderate to high financial barriers. The issues related to institutional barriers (safety concerns, absence of female faculty, and the absence of sufficient academic resources) had a mean score of 3.72 (SD = 0.81), which indicates a significant level of structural constraints in universities.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Gender Barriers (N = 200)

| Barrier Type | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
|---------------------|-------------|---------------------------|

| | | |
|------------------------|------|------|
| Sociocultural Barriers | 4.12 | 0.68 |
| Economic Barriers | 3.85 | 0.74 |
| Institutional Barriers | 3.72 | 0.81 |

Correlation analysis was used to establish how gender barriers relate to women participation in higher education. Table 2 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients of the sociocultural, economic, and institutional barriers and the educational participation level. The findings showed that there is significant negative relationship between sociocultural barriers and educational participation ($r = -0.61, p < 0.01$), which implies that the more the sociocultural barriers a woman has the less the participation she has. Economic barriers were also negatively correlated with the participation ($r = -0.53, p < 0.01$), which puts a particular emphasis on the restrictive effect of finances on access to education. The negative correlation also existed between institutional barriers ($r = -0.48, p < 0.01$), which means that institutional barriers in universities negatively affect the involvement of female students. All these findings are indicative of the fact that all three categories of gender barriers negatively influence the participation of women in higher education.

Table 2. Gender Barriers to Educational Participation and Educational Participation Correlation Matrix.

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---|
| 1. Sociocultural Barriers | 1 | | | |
| 2. Economic Barriers | 0.46** | 1 | | |
| 3. Institutional Barriers | 0.42** | 0.38** | 1 | |
| 4. Educational Participation | -0.61** | -0.53** | -0.48** | 1 |

Note. $p < 0.01$.

Reliability was done to determine the internal consistency of questionnaire. The value of alpha of the sub scales was obtained. Sociocultural barriers had an alpha of 0.84, economic barriers 0.81 and institutional barriers 0.79. The general scale showed a Cronbachs of 0.86 which indicated that the scale was very reliable and items have always measured the constructs which were intended (Gliem and Gliem, 2003).

The additional examination of individual items showed that the most common sociocultural barrier mentioned was family expectations, and 72% of the respondents strongly believed that parents attitudes influenced their educational choices. In the same way, 65 percent of the study respondents claimed that financial aspects were a direct cause of their inability to join university or take part in their learning activities fully. The 58% of the participants noted safety issues and poor infrastructure in the universities as key institutional barriers. The results of this paper highlight the idea that despite the fact that the higher education of women has been promoted to certain degrees, there are still major challenges, especially in the districts where conservative cultural beliefs and the lack of institutionalized support exist.

Interactions between variables in the study were also studied in order to learn the compounded impact of the effect of multiple barriers. Students with high sociocultural and economic restraint levels were associated with the lowest rates of participation, and thus it is possible that a combination of factors determines the impact of a negative effect on educational engagement. The qualitative remarks that were obtained in the survey also showed that women were generally under pressure to juggle both home life and school thus limiting them in attending extracurricular activities, conducting research and even taking part time jobs. Such a multidimensional approach supports the necessity of the policies and

programs that consider the barriers as a comprehensive concept rather than a disaggregated one.

On the whole, the data analysis proves that the sociocultural, economic, and institutional barriers have a strong impact on women enrolling in higher education in Punjab. Descriptive and correlation analyses are sound evidence that both the societal and institutional level of intervention is required. The negative effect of these barriers could be alleviated by scholarship programs, awareness, mentorship, and enhancement of infrastructure. The study also demonstrates how convenient sampling can help in achieving the aim of capturing insights on a district level and the significance of localized research to inform the policy and practice.

Discussion

The results of this paper indicate that gender barriers play an important role in determining the participation of women in higher education in one of the districts in Punjab. The most affecting factors that curtailed the involvement of women in education were seen through the structuring of sociocultural barriers such as; family expectations, traditional gender roles and the way the society treats them. It is consistent with the previous studies, which show that patriarchal beliefs still dictate the access of women to education in Pakistan (Khan and Ali, 2022; Jabeen et al., 2022). This negative relationship between sociocultural hindrances and education attendance confirms further that the more women are under the influence of the society, the less probable it is that they enroll and attain higher education. Such findings imply that even with the policy initiatives that seek to enhance parity between the genders, there are strong cultural beliefs that are deeply rooted, a factor that poses a big challenge.

There was also economic limitations that contributed significantly to the restriction of the female participation. The paper revealed that tuition, transportation and inability to get financial assistance had a detrimental effect on the accessibility of higher education among women. This result supports the existing research on the topic that stresses the interaction between economic constraints and gendered socialization, and the idea that families tend to pursue male education in families with limited resources (Malik and Sattar, 2019; Farooq and Tariq, 2020). The interactive nature of sociocultural and economic barriers implies that a solution to female enrollment and retention should consider factors on both planes; combined efforts are required to enhance the situation.

Barriers at the institutional level, such as the absence of female faculty, the absence of mentoring opportunities, and safety issues were also identified to be a major problem. These institutional restrictions increase the social and financial barriers of female students. According to Hussain and Ahmed (2018) and Shah and Farooq (2021), the ability of universities to foster an inclusive environment in which the unique needs of female students can be considered is often lacking, which can decrease their self-confidence and limit their participation in academic and other extracurricular activities. The results of the study underline the idea that the institutional reforms are the key to the effective involvement of women in the higher education, as well as sociocultural and financial interventions.

The interplay of these three types of barriers emphasizes the idea of the multidimensionality of challenges that women have to address. Individuals with elevated degrees of sociocultural and economic hindrances mentioned the least levels of educational engagement, and it can be assumed that conjunction of these challenges enhances the adverse effect of female students on academic engagement. This result coincides with the theoretical model of gendered disadvantage in education, which states that many barriers typically work in mutual

influence, to produce a compounded effect on participation (Saeed et al., 2019; Mahmood and Qureshi, 2019). On the whole, the research proves that to eliminate gender inequality in higher education, one has to take a comprehensive look at the matter that will incorporate the cultural, economic, and institutional aspects in the same breath.

Conclusion

This work concludes that the involvement of women in higher education in Punjab is greatly determined by the sociocultural, economic, and institutional factors. The most widespread barriers are still sociocultural expectations, such as family needs and social attitudes, and financial and institutional barriers also limit the access to education of women. The results indicate that despite having educational infrastructures, other social and economic variables still hinder a complete participation. Moreover, the multiplicative effect of various obstacles depicts how the participation of women in higher education cannot be successfully promoted by the use of single interventions. Gender equity in higher education entails a co-ordinated action to be taken at family, community and institutional levels. The convenience sampling employed in the study to focus on a specific district offers local information, and it is important to note that research on a district level can be used to inform policy and practice.

Recommendations

Resting on the results and discussion, it is possible to suggest a list of recommendations that should be implemented to increase the role of women in higher education in Punjab. To start with, the community awareness programs are required to fight the patriarchal norms and accentuate the importance of female education. With the involvement of parents, religious leaders and other people with influence in the locality, the perceptions of the society can be changed so that the families are willing to support the women in their academic activities.

Second, financial assistance systems, including scholarship, tuition free and subsidized transportation, need to be increased to limit financial obstacles. Student access and retention can be enhanced using specific interventions to students in low- and middle-income households. Flexible fee structures or installments can also be adopted by Universities to meet financial limitations.

Third, reforms at the institution are essential. To achieve this, universities ought to improve their security protocols, gender-specific facilities, as well as get more women into faculty to establish an accommodating and supportive academic atmosphere. Women students should also be empowered through mentorship programs, career counseling, and leadership opportunities that will make them more engaged in activities in higher education.

Finally, there is a recommendation that a holistic approach should be adopted to incorporate sociocultural, economic and institutional interventions. These barriers should not be met separately in the policies and programs, but a coordinated approach that includes government agencies, universities as well as civil society should be provided to facilitate meaningful participation. Future studies need to be extended to various districts, adopt a mixed-method design, and investigate interventions in the context of longitudinal impacts to give a more comprehensive picture of the female involvement in education in Pakistan.

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