

School Dropout of Rural Girls in Pakistan: Exploring the Role of Gender Discrimination

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The current study was designed to explore if gender discrimination has any role in school dropout of rural female students in Pakistan. The sample of this qualitative study consisted of n=20 participants. Eight dropout girls with age range 10-18years, 8 mothers of dropout girls and 4 teachers were selected through Purposive sampling technique. Three separate interview schedules were designed in Urdu for conducting in-depth interviews. Analysis of these interviews was done using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results indicated that gender discrimination appeared to be the big reason for school dropout along with poverty and domestic or household responsibilities. It was apparent that most of the grandparents were against the girls' education but they are not against boys' education. It also appeared that if parents support girls they can continue education despite family opposition. Mothers seemed to have a supportive role in girls' education. Far off schools, teachers' harsh behaviour, lack of interest and failure also become hurdles in girls' education.

Keywords: *school dropout, rural girls, gender discrimination, parental attitude, family opposition*

Introduction

Education is a vital element of society and basis for all the development (Adams, 1998), as it is apparent that nations with sound education system make progress and development (Ball, 1990). The impact of education is not only limited to the development of nations but it is also important for development of a child's personality; that is why every child without differentiation of race, sex, region and religion has the right to education in constitution (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2007-08; Article 37-B, Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). Literacy is an important indicator of education because its improvement is likely to have an impact, in the long run, on other important indicators of welfare. Unfortunately, literacy rates in Pakistan are very low even though a lot of

emphases has been put on primary education. Government and other organizations (e.g. NGOs) are working hard in this regard, which has resulted in improvement in literacy and primary school enrolment rates. They are still low, however, when compared to the other countries. The population of ten years and older who attended schools but dropped out later is 60 percent in 2010-11 as compared to 59 percent in 2008-09. Much of this proportion comes from urban areas and men have outnumbered women in this regard. During the year 2011 – 2012 the literacy rate for this population (10 years and above) was 58 percent. Here again, men outnumbered women (Education, Bureau of statistics, 2012).

There are many reasons for this gender disparity in education ranging from primary enrollment through higher

education. In Pakistan, gender discrimination in education occurs amongst the poorest households but is non-existent amongst rich households. So far as enrollment in schools is concerned in recent years some progress has been made. In 1990-91, the female to male ratio (F/M ratio) of enrollment was 0.47 for primary level of education. It reached to 0.74 in 1999-2000, showing the F/M ratio has improved by 57.44% within the decade. For the middle level of education it was 0.42 at the start of the decade and increased to 0.68 by the end of the decade, so it has improved by almost 62%. In both cases, the gender disparity has decreased but relatively more rapidly at the middle level. The gender disparity in enrollment at the secondary level of education was 0.4 in 1990-91 and 0.67 in 1999-2000, showing that the disparity decreased by 67.5% in the decade. At the college level, it was 0.50 in 1990-91 and reached 0.81 in 1999-2000, showing that the disparity decreased by 64%. The gender disparity has decreased comparatively rapidly at secondary school (Tasnim & Ali, 2004). Yet only 18% of Pakistani women have received 10 years or more of schooling (Wilkins, 2012).

One of the main problems we are facing in Pakistan is a higher dropout rate in female students. Dropout is the main variable of our study. It can be defined as, "Person who leaves school/college before completing his/her education" (Free Dictionary and UNESCO glossary), whereas the Ministry of Education, Pakistan defines it as 'Withdrawal of children from school at any stage before completion of primary education grade V'. Despite this

definition proposed by the Ministry of Education Pakistan, for our study dropout is a person who leaves school in any class.

The second variable of our study is gender discrimination. The free dictionary (2014) defines gender discrimination as (1) "Discrimination based on gender, especially discrimination against women" (2) "Attitudes, conditions, or behaviours that promote stereotyping of social roles based on gender". In this regard, a UNESCO report (2000) on the state of the world's children points out that in the developing world about 130 million children are denied of their right to education through dropping out. Maton and Moore (2010) said that every member of society should be concerned about the problem of dropping out since it has negative consequences on both the individual and social levels. Thus not only is the dropout individual affected or impacted by the problem of dropout but the whole community is affected; as it has been noticed that certain dropouts get involved in crime (Jamil, Atta, Baloch, Rehman, Danish, Younis, & Siddiq, 2010).

Causes of Dropout

There is a general consensus that around the world problem of school dropout has reached epidemic proportions and the education industry is confronting this problem internationally (Patrick 2008; Wotherspoon 2004; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Oghuvbu, 2008). Studies in India (Rani, 2011) found the reasons as cited by adolescents for dropping out included financial difficulties; not interested in studies; parents not interested in studies; lack of education facilities in the nearby

village; lack of quality education; imposition of parents' choices upon adolescents; lack of privacy, and toilet facilities for girls in school and security. Chaurd and Mingat (1996) investigated Pakistani schools (in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and found that the drop out rate of students is lower in private schools than public schools; they further concluded that schools that offer double shifts have lower drop out rates. Ghafoor and Baloch (1990) found that the main problem, which does not permit children of poor families either to join or continue their education, is poverty. A study conducted in India identified reluctance of parents and participation in domestic activities as a cause of rural female dropout. The problem of financial constraint was another major reason (Kotwal & Rani, 2007). Nadia (2010) identified the following cultural and social barriers for girls to access education in Pakistan: 1. High illiteracy among parents who do not realize the importance of education for girls. 2. Parents' preference leads boys for schooling than girls due to poverty. 3. Women have low status in some tribal societies. They are regarded as less intelligent and responsible for housework and serving the menfolk of the family. 4. Early marriage is very common, therefore, girls are prepared for housekeeping rather than for school education. These barriers are deeply rooted in centuries-old customs and they must be changed to eliminate these barriers.

Holmes (2003) found that females receive less education than males. She argued that economic and social constraints hinder girls' education. Some other reasons

for girls' drop out are early marriages in rural areas (World Bank, 1989), mixed school and schools at distance (Alderman, Behrman, Khan, Ross, & Sabot, 1996). Further, Joubish and Khurram (2011) proposed that illiteracy, poverty, low level of motivation, lack of understanding, child labour, corporal punishment, teacher behaviour and the school environment are such factors that contribute to the dropout at primary level.

For identifying the women's perception on gender discrimination in education Adhikari (2008) conducted the research in Nepal. Results show that most of the women thought to be discriminated against in education. The conclusion was drawn that equal environment is not given to the female as given to a male member in the family. Their dissatisfaction was more concentrated on the parents as they believed that parents mostly discriminated against them in case of education. Women indicated that they are deprived of education facilities due to poor economic conditions and household workload. Psychological, economic and social consequences of such discrimination were pointed out by them. Another study for identifying the behaviour of parents in the education of their children was conducted by Bahlkani, (2009). Results show that gender discrimination imposes decisions about the educational matters on children, do not prefer tuitions system and do not respond to the call by the school are the attitudes adopted by the parents.

On a final note, there is a long list of factors causing drop out identified by the researchers across the world. Researchers used different methodologies, mostly survey

methods for reaching this conclusion. Our study is unique in this respect that we used a qualitative approach to have in-depth information from female students who dropped out, their mothers and their teachers as well. Thus it constitutes a whole picture of female stake-holders. The study is empirically significant because it presents a new dimension in the existing literature.

Method

The qualitative research design was used to explore the issue of drop out of female students. While there were 6 research questions in the study we report on only one in this article

Research Questions

What are the perceptions of girls who have dropped out, their mothers and their teachers about drop out phenomenon?

Sample and Research Instrument

Purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of our sample. A total of n=20 sample was selected. The sample consisted of n= 8 rural female students who dropped out of school in any class/grade in the age range of 10-18. Mothers of the female students n=8 were also included in this study as participants. For taking the opinion of teachers regarding this issue n=4 in-service teachers were included in the sample. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine the role of gender discrimination along with other factors in school dropout of rural girls.

Procedure

Three different type of interview schedules were designed for the participant students, their mothers/parents and teachers. Demographic information was also

collected. Interview schedules were designed in Urdu. After gaining informed consent from participants and assuring them of anonymity and confidentiality, interviews were conducted. All interviews were tape recorded. After conducting all the interviews audio recordings were transcribed and were subjected to further analysis.

Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the transcribed interviews. IPA was a most suitable technique for this type of data as it deals with lived experiences of participants (Smith, 2007).

Results

The transcribed data were used for the extraction of themes. The main themes extracted are as follows:

Reasons of dropout by the participants-- Eight main categories or themes emerged from the interviews with participants. These main categories were formed on the basis of sub-themes extracted from verbatim. The sub-themes were grouped together on the basis of commonalities to form major themes. The most emphasized reason among the girl students, mothers and teachers was ‘gender discrimination’. Most participants were of the opinion that sons are preferred over daughters and whenever a financial crisis is their girls have to leave the school rather than boys. One of the dropout students said:

“My family thinks that it is useless to give education to girls because they will go to some other home after marriage and all the money will go wasted”.

One of the mothers told:

“In our family girls are not allowed to get an education but boys can go to school. My father-in-law says that religious education is enough for girls”

Teachers also consider gender discrimination as a reason for school dropout. One of the teachers told that parents do not give attention to their daughters' education rather they keep their girls engaged in household chores and do not let them prepare for exams or complete their school work.

Second reason highlighted was 'poverty'. Participants said that parents cannot afford tuition fee and other expenses because of low income that is the reason for girls' school dropout. Dropout students do not agree that poverty is a reason behind their school dropout. They feel determined that they can manage it. One of the students said:

tuition fee, as a result, I failed in class 9th and I dropped out.”

Teachers were also of the opinion that poverty affects education and to earn the livelihood girls sometimes drop schools because they work as maids and baby sitters.

Third major theme extracted was 'household responsibilities and burden of care'. In rural areas, females have more household responsibilities and they are the ones who are supposed to take care of sick and elderly members of the house. So if the

mother is working in fields or outside the home the girls are supposed to take care of children, elderly and sick along with basic household chores. Two students described their responsibilities as follows:

“We have to drop out from school because of domestic responsibilities. One sister stays at home for household chores and the other sister goes with mother for cutting grass for cattle”. I was fond of getting an education but there was poverty in the home. My mother was paralyzed no one was there in the home for looking after her and for doing household chores, therefore, I had to drop out. Girls have to work with their mothers in fields because it is their livelihood and parents force girls to drop from school and join them in fields.”

Teachers also told that household responsibilities are a reason behind female students drop out.

The fourth major theme was 'Hindering attitude of fathers, grandparents and other relatives'. Unfortunately, the girls have to face pressure not just from their fathers and grandparents rather other members of the family also become a hurdle in the education of girls. Usually, mothers are in favour of girls' education and they are supportive but family pressure, work burden and financial issues do not let them support their daughters' education. One of the dropout participants told during the interview that:

My grandmother was against girls' education when I was in grade 7 my grandmother forced my father to terminate my education because she thought that girls

learn bad habits and behaviours at school. My paternal uncle was also against my education. He did not let her daughter get an education but his son was getting an education in school.

One of the mothers told:

“My father and brothers forced me not to educate my daughters and keep them in the home because there was no need of sending them outside the home.

Another mother told:

Sometimes if female students fail to come up to the expectations of fathers they are forced to leave schools. One of the mothers told that her husband asked her daughter to do some calculations and when she failed he forced her to leave the school because her education proved to be useless.

The fifth major theme was ‘Mothers’ attitude’. Most of the mothers were having a favourable attitude towards girls’ education. But one of the mothers said that she wants her daughter to get an education because people want educated girl for marriage. One of the mothers said:

“Getting an education for girls is important. When they will get married they can earn and support their husband financially if he is poor. I want my daughters to get an education and become teachers”

The sixth major theme was ‘Social norms’. According to the participants of our study early marriages, negative attitudes towards girls’ education and harassment are also the hindering factors in girls’ education. ‘Teachers’ attitude’ was a theme of the study described by students and their mothers. According to students and their

mothers, sometimes improper facilities at school, teachers’ harsh behaviour and consecutive failures lead towards the dropout. One of the students told that teachers are not highly qualified; they cannot teach students well that is the reason for failure and ultimately the reason of dropout. During interview, Mothers have given a different opinion regarding teachers’ role and teaching. One of the dropout girls’ mother mentioned during the interview about the unsatisfactory role of teachers. She told:

“Teachers did not teach students the respect of parents, etiquettes and manners and about religious education. It is the responsibility of the teacher. If the teacher did not teach them manners then what is the benefit of getting an education.

Students’ attitude and far off schools’ were two themes put forward by teachers. On contrary to mothers and students, teachers were of the opinion that it is basically students’ lack of interest, low intelligence and consecutive failures in one class which cause female students to drop from the schools. Sometimes schools are far away and parents cannot afford to pick and drop expenses that is why they prefer to keep the girls in homes. Teachers were of the opinion that only those students can get an education who are interested in and many girls drop school because neither their parents nor they themselves are interested in education.

“If a student is not much intelligent and she cannot cover the course with the rest of class, it will lead towards failure and when there is no strictness at home the student eventually drops out.”

Another teacher told:

“Teachers’ harsh behaviour is not a cause of school dropout. The government has strictly applied the policy of avoiding physical punishment and we adhere to that. Now teachers are adopting new teaching methods. In some far off areas there is the possibility of corporal punishment but at a primary level, just 2-3% of students leave the school because of teachers’ harsh behaviour.”

Another teacher was of the opinion:

“Long distances from school sometimes cause the girls to drop out. Parents have limited resources and it is not possible for them to arrange to pick and drop facilities for their daughters, so they prefer them to stay at home and do the household chores”.

If we try to combine all reasons as described by the participants of the study following figure will be a true depiction for that:

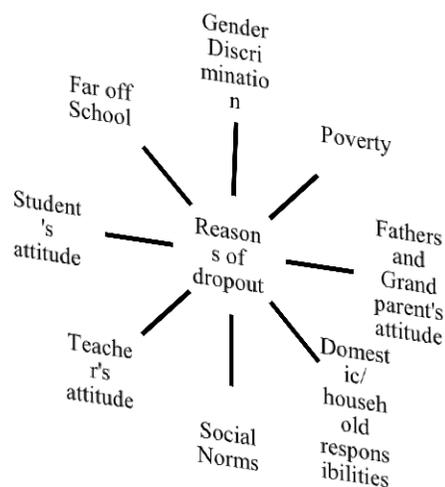


Figure Pictorial representation of reasons for school dropout

Discussion

The present study was conducted to assess if gender discrimination is a cause of dropout of rural female students. The results of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with participant students, their teachers and mothers resulted in eight major categories of reasons for drop out. Gender discrimination was one major reason (though participants did not use this term the subthemes indicated that). For example, participants discussed that most of the grandparents and extended family members were against girls’ education but not of boys’ education. Boys can get an education without any restriction but only those girls can continue their education whose parents resist family pressure. Dropout girls, mothers and teachers have same views on this issue. Whereas teachers further explain that illiterate parents discriminate between sons and daughters and prefer sons’ education. The results of our present study are supported by the findings of Adhikari (2008) who concluded that girls have to face discrimination either directly or indirectly at every stage: family, school, society or state. It was also supported by Bahlkani, (2009) who concluded that parents discriminate about the education of their children. Most of the parents prefer sons over daughters.

The next major theme of the study was poverty. All participants agreed that poverty is a big hindrance to girls’ education. This theme was also supported by Govindaraju and Venkatesan (2010) which suggested that due to poverty in family students terminate their education. The third theme was ‘household responsibilities and burden of care’. Kotwal

and Rani (2007) also supported the fact that participation in domestic activities is a cause of rural female students' dropout from school. The fourth major theme was 'Hindering attitude of fathers, grandparents and other relatives'. Participants of our study claimed that grandparents and other family members were not supportive towards girl education and considered that doing household work is girls' major responsibility. Relatives and grandparents interfere in case of girls' education and have a discouraging attitude. All respondents were agreed on this point. Results of Abbasi and Saeed (2012) who explained that there are social, cultural and family barriers which prevent girls from attending school supported our findings.

Next theme was 'Attitude of Mothers'. Dropout students and their mothers' opinions matched on this point that mothers have a supportive role and mothers tried that their daughters continue and complete their education, whereas some fathers were against their daughters' education. Teachers agree to it but they have a different opinion regarding mothers' attitude. They considered that mothers too do not have a supportive role. Due to which the number of dropouts is not decreasing. Our participants stated that fathers and grandparents do discriminate but mothers have a supportive role in daughters' education. This the attitude of mothers in our study is non-discriminatory and it is a new discovery so far as Pakistani culture is concerned.

Next theme was 'social norms'. All of the respondents agreed on the point that people thought that environment outside the

home is not safe for girls. They fear that girls may face harassment. Further, early marriage is also one of the reasons for dropout. So all this makes rural parents think that girls education is not a good thing. A report published by World Bank (1989) also considered early marriages a hindrance in girls' education.

All above themes were agreed upon by students, mothers and teachers but mothers and students considered teachers' behaviour as a reason for school dropout while teachers refused it. These findings were supported by Farooq (2013) who explained that 7.7% of students drop out due to the harsh attitude of the teacher.

Further teachers suggested two reasons for school dropout which were not mentioned by students and their mothers. The first reason was 'Student's attitude towards education'. This result was supported by Farooq (2013) who concluded that a student's decision to drop out of school is the result of cumulative effect of different causes. Dropouts reported that they left school due to difficulty in learning (12.5%), lack of interest in studies (11.62%), class repetition (9.61%) and lack of interest in school (10.56%). Results of the present study are also supported by the study of Khan, Azhar and Shah (2011) who explained the teacher's viewpoint that about 7% of girls drop out due to lack of interest in education, more than 10% due to fear of failure. Teachers also claimed school-related factors a cause of dropout. According to teachers far away schools can be a reason for girls' dropout who face transportation problem.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, there appear to be many reasons for the school dropout rate of female rural girls but gender discrimination, poverty and family's and social attitude were main reasons for that. Gender discrimination has several related dimensions. Discrimination in education is one of the important aspects which has a lifelong impact. Findings of the study showed that girls' education is not considered important. With the passage of time and because of the efforts of government, media and non-profitable organizations things are getting better. Teachers shared during interviews that government has taken some steps for the betterment of education for example Refresher courses for improvement in teaching methods, door to door surveys by teachers for increase in enrollment rate, compulsion at headmasters or mistresses for maintaining the 1:40 ratio for teacher to students and active involvement of district education officer in implication of all these rules. It brings hope that after some years there would be a better picture of student enrollment and sustenance. Moreover, the girls who were interviewed during this research project expressed feelings of sadness, regret and despair after dropout which gives hope that they will not let this happen with their own daughters.

Limitations and Future Suggestions

Some limitations were observed in course of this study. We only took a sample of rural female students only because urban girls could be included in the sample as

well. Secondly, only females' opinion was taken; males too could be included in the sample. Future researches can focus on quantitative methodology also to explore the attitude of people towards girls' education and dropout.

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