

A STUDY INTO FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH LOW PARTICIPATION LEVEL IN EDUCATION OF RURAL FEMALES

Aesha Randhawa, Razia Sultana & Syeda Khizra Aslam

*Faculty of Agri. Economics & Rural Sociology,
University of Agriculture, Faisalabad*

Pakistan's record in spreading literacy among masses has not been very envious. According to some recent estimates, UNESCO put literacy rate in Pakistan at a mere 35%. A reference to the 5th, 6th and 7th Five Year Plans of Pakistan shows that universalizing access to primary education in the country has been a focal point of these plans. But we see that despite allocation of resources worth billions of rupees, setting plausible targets, pious resolves and untiring claims, we still have accusing fingers pointed at us at our continuous failure in achieving the desired literacy rate in Pakistan. This is particularly true of rural areas with special reference to female education. This paper takes a close look at the status of female education in three rural communities of Faisalabad district. It examines the level of participation in education of rural females and identifies the major constraints in their way for a better and fuller participation. The paper recommends that in a society like Pakistan where segregation is the norm, it is necessary not only to establish many more educational institutions for rural females but also to remove socio-cultural constraints which discourage a spirit of independence and creativity in women.

INTRODUCTION

The observance of the International Literacy Day on the 8th of September, 1990 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of UNESCO's global effort to promote the cause of literacy and education. Being also the International Literacy Year, UNESCO has been gearing up to use the occasion for creating awareness of the importance of education for human development and fundamental freedoms. Practically, however, there appears little understanding of the urgent need of wiping out illiteracy in a global context, since education has not been the priority of large number of governments, specially in the Third World, for it is here

that the great bulk of over one billion illiterates are concentrated (UNESCO, 1990).

Pakistan's record in the field of spreading literacy has been equally dismal. As per estimates of the 1981 Population Census, only 26.2% of the population in Pakistan was literate. UNESCO estimates put it at 35% today. The accurate position should be known next year after the 1991 Population Census. At any rate, both the figures are much lower than the averages for the whole world, the developing countries and the South Asian region. Whether the government is to blame or the socio-cultural outlook of the people has been the principal

impeding factor, the fact is that the country is suffering because of the lapse in the education sector.

The available estimates show that of the total literate (26.2%) population, male literates constitute 35.1% and female 16.0%. The literacy levels in the rural areas are still more disappointing. The overall literacy level is put at 17.3%, of which male literacy is 26.2% and that of females 7.3%. Here a look at the efforts of the Government of Pakistan at mobilising resources and improving quality of education should perhaps be in order. The budgetary allocations in the education sector, though inadequate, marginally increased during the last three years from 2.89% of G.N.P. in 1987-88 to 3.19% in 1988-89 and to 3.55% in 1989-90 (Govt. of Pakistan, 1990).

The 7th Five Year Plan (1988-93) of Pakistan with its major thrust at universalizing access to primary education in the country envisages to raise overall literacy rate to 40% by 1992-93. Primary education has thus been adopted as the main instrument for achieving mass literacy. It is planned to provide primary education facilities to all children in the age groups of 5 to 9 years. Efforts will also be made to reduce disparity in the availability of school facilities for boys and girls in both rural and urban areas (Govt. of Pakistan, 1988).

A reference to the 5th (1978-83) and 6th Five Year Plans (1983-88) of Pakistan would also reveal that despite allocation of resources worth billions of rupees, setting of plausible targets, pious resolves and untiring claims, we still have accusing fingers pointed at us at our continuous failure in achieving the desired literacy rate in Pakistan. This is particularly true of our rural areas with special reference to female education. In fact,

the crisis in our education in the rural areas today is the crisis of female education. Another major impeding factor in female education in our rural set-up has been the socio-cultural out-look of the rural families. Although, female education is now universally recognized to be an element of pivotal importance in the total scheme of uplift of a society, yet we have not so far been able to break out of our fossilized social customs, family attitudes, values and beliefs regarding female education.

For an effective mobilization of the available resources and improvement in the quality of education, the problematic situation of female education in the rural areas warranted a close look. Accordingly, a research study on the status of female education in some selected rural communities of Faisalabad district was conducted. The major objective of this study has been to ascertain the level of participation in education of females and to determine the major constraints in the way of better and fuller participation by rural females.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in three randomly selected government girls schools (i.e. one high, one middle and one primary school) situated in three different villages of Faisalabad District. A sample of 150 females of school going age (5-20) years) was randomly drawn. The sample included girls who were either going to school, had already completed their studies or had never gone to school. Age grouping of the respondent females was as follows:

- i) Primary age group: 5-12 years
- ii) Matric age group: 12.1-18 years
- iii) College age group: 18.1-20 years

Since economic status plays an important role in the level of participation of children in education, the sampled female respondents were further grouped by the economic status of their families in the respective villages as follows:

- i) Respondents belonging to landless families,
- ii) Respondents belonging to large farm holders i.e., those operating 25 acres and above,
- iii) Respondents belonging to medium farm holders i.e., those operating 12.5 acres to under 25 acres, and
- iv) Respondents belonging to small farm holders i.e., those operating less than 12.5 acres.

Relevant information on various aspects of the study was collected with the help of a well designed and pre-tested interviewing schedule through personal interviews with the female respondents. The data thus collected were subsequently analysed by using appropriate techniques of analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic characteristics of respondents: Distribution of respondents into primary (5-12 years), secondary (12.1-18 years) and college (18.1-20 years) age groups showed that over 90% of them were in 10-15 years of age and almost 60% of these fell between 7-12 years which made up the primary age group. It showed that induction of rural female children into school came about relatively late. Siddique (1988) also found that rural children generally got admission in schools at an advanced age.

Categorized by economic status, 31% of the sampled respondents belonged to landless families, while respondents belonging to land-owning families accounted for 69% of the sample. Of these, 2, 25 and 42% came of large, medium and small landholders respectively. Further, majority of respondents (60%) lived in nuclear type families, which meant that joint family system was fast losing its grasp even in rural areas. Although, family structure and its impact on children education has not been researched here in this study, yet some other studies have explored these relationships (Parveen, 1979). A reference to the education of respondents' parents revealed that about 75% of the fathers of respondents were literate but with only a nominal literacy level. In exact contrast, 75% of the mothers of female respondents were illiterate. Of the remaining 25% literate mothers, as many as 21% also had only nominal schooling up to primary level. Illiteracy was more pronounced in the landless families for both fathers and mothers of the respondents.

Participation level of respondents in education: The National Education Policy and Implementation Programme, as far back as 1979, noted that participation level in education of children and consequently the literacy level did not register any significant improvement during the past several years (Govt. of Pakistan, 1979). However, despite appreciable increase in enrollment at different stages of schooling in the country, over 50% of the children of school going age do not go to school. This is particularly true in the case of rural areas. This study revealed that the participation level in education of potentially eligible rural females was only 50, 38 and 26% at the primary, high school and college level respectively. Further, classification by economic status of respondents' families showed that participation in educa-

tion of the respondents belonging to landless families was much less than those of the land owning families. It was found to be 32, 21 and 10% for the landless and 57, 42 and 30% for the landed class in the above order respectively. Economic status of parents was found to have a significant effect on the level of participation of females in education. It was decidedly higher in respondents belonging to the land owning class. However, relationship between parents educational level and level of participation of girl students in education was found to be statistically non-significant. These findings were in agreement with those of Parveen (1979) but differed from those of Hashmi (1980).

A relatively low participation level of rural females in education is attributable to a number of factors. However, low enrollment rate among rural females owes much to family values and attitudes towards female education. Because of their conservative attitudes and also because of their ignorance about the importance of female education, most of the parents of the sampled respondents in this study believed that since their girls would perform only household duties in the future, any formal schooling was of little use for them. Among specific reasons for not enrolling or for dropping out at primary, secondary and the college level, 36, 47 and 60% of the 103 female respondents of farm families respectively said, that they had no interest in studies.

As for the landless families, 20, 27 and 30% of the 47 respondents gave the same reply in the above order. Financial constraints, according to 16, 31 and 30% of the respondents at the primary, secondary and the college level respectively were said to be a major handicap for the land owning families. Whereas among respondents of landless class, 50, 63 and 60% were constrained by

poverty to continue studies at the primary, secondary and college level respectively. Failure in promotional examinations, domestic/farm work, marriage, etc. were some of the other reasons for dropping out of females in the rural areas. Khan (1971) and Cheema (1980) have also made similar conclusions. It will be seen from above that "lack of interest in studies" among respondents of farm families and "financial constraints" among respondents of landless families were the two major reasons for low participation level in education of rural females.

The school factor: Apart from family values, attitudes, limitations and other community factors which have had an adverse effect on participation level in education of rural females, school environment and student-teacher relationship were also found to be such that worked against students' interests.

Responding to various questions on school environment and student-teacher relationship, 100% students complained of poor conditions of school buildings and lack of furniture; another 59% complained of lack of space in schools and still another 62% told that text books were costly. According to 67% of the respondents, their teachers were duly qualified. The students were, however, not satisfied with their performance. All of them complained of lack of teachers' attention to the class room and excessive corporal punishment to students. When questioned about coverage of courses, 53% said that teachers did not completely cover the prescribed courses during the year. According to 67% of the students their teachers come from a distance; they therefore, generally came to school late and also left early. Still another group of students complained that teachers generally taught more than one class and they also took personal work from the students (33%).

It will be concluded from the above that when a female child is in the school, especially in rural area, conducive school environment and enlightened student-teacher understanding and relationship can significantly improve participation level in education of rural female children.

Students' perceptions of the impact of education: Girl respondents were asked about the role of education in their own personal advancement and self-fulfillment and in the advancement of their economic productivity. All of them were convinced and believed that education was a determining factor in promoting their prestige, status and honour in the society. Over 70% of the students were positive that education brought awareness among women about their rights and obligations. According to them, educated women realized their goals in life more clearly and were better able to fight social prejudices against females. When questioned about the impact of girls' education on family and household activities, 100% of the respondents said that educated girls neither shirked domestic work nor strayed from religion. Educated females, in their opinion, became rather an asset in the household life, since they developed a better understanding of their responsibilities. Further, 22% of them believed that educated girls got good proposals, whereas 31% of them thought that they also made good mothers. As regards economic impacts of education, 44% of the girl students opined that educated females could help share economic burdens of the family, for which they should do jobs and fully participate in economic activities.

Female students' educational aspirations: Educational aspiration, we may say, is the desire to attain formal education at schools and later in colleges and universities. Edu-

cational aspirations differ from person to person and from community to community depending upon the socio-cultural scenarios and economic status of families and households in the social set-up.

A fairly large majority of female respondents (69%) in the rural areas wanted to pursue studies beyond elementary and secondary levels. However, very few among them (10%) were in favour of low level professional training like P.T.C., Nursing, etc. As many as 51% of them rather wanted to become teachers either at the high school or the college level. Another 8% preferred to join either the medical or the engineering degree programmes. A reasonable number (31%) of the female respondents did not show any interest in studies beyond the elementary level, partly because of their low expectation, levels and mainly because of family circumstances. Some other studies have also made similar conclusions (Azmat, 1979; Chatha, 1987).

Policy implications: Low level of participation in education of rural females as evidenced in this study very vividly brings forth one conclusion, that socio-cultural prejudices, family inhibitions and ignorance and not just financial constraints have played a key role in depriving our women folk in the rural areas of their right to receive education. Is not it regrettable that while people in the developed world are preparing to face up to the challenges of the 21st century in all walks of life, we here in Pakistan still need to plead the case of women education?

Nevertheless, it may be reiterated here that the empirical evidence in the context of international experience has clearly shown that investment in women education has positive implications for the mental, physical and spiritual development of the future gen-

erations. Why should we then in Pakistan still be at the stage of trying to convince people both in and outside the government that women also have a rightful claim to education for their personal advancement and for the advancement of their economic productivity?

The problem, in our opinion, has to be tackled on two fronts. First, given the appallingly low rate of female literacy, especially in the rural areas, there is an urgent need to create adequate facilities for female education. Further, in the rural areas it is not just the low literacy rate among women which is a cause of concern; their educational attainment is also highly unsatisfactory. Thus, of the total population which completed its school-level education in 1989, less than a quarter were women (Govt. of Pakistan, 1990). At present the institutions established for girls are less than half of those for boys. Therefore, in a society like Pakistan, where segregation is the norm, it is necessary to establish many more girls schools in the villages.

Second issue is that of facilitating the schooling of girls in general and those of rural females in particular. This is possible only if a campaign is launched on war footing. One cannot disregard the factors which inhibit female education in rural areas. These include poverty, the home-makers' role of women from an early age, and social constraints which discourage a spirit of independence and creativity in women. These hurdles can be overcome if the government and leaders of opinion decide to work for the up-lift of women. Women education is now a problem which needs an urgent attention at the national level.

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