



Challenges and Opportunities of Higher Education for the Girls of Balochistan

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges and opportunities of higher education for the females of Balochistan studying in South Punjab with a focus on economic, social, and cultural factors. It was a descriptive and exploratory study and therefore, qualitative research methodology was used for data collection. The population of the study consisted of all the female students of Balochistan studying in universities of the South Punjab. A purposeful sample strategy was used; and thirty (30) students agreed to participate in the study. The participants were briefed for qualitative interviews. This study used a semi-structured interview protocol for data collection. The interview protocol was prepared according to the objectives of the study. After finalizing the interview protocol, the researchers individually contacted the students and conducted their interviews. A total thirty (30) participants were interviewed. Besides, the researchers also elaborated their personal experiences and observations which have been described in the relevant section(s). Thematic analysis was used to uncover common themes in the interview data. The study demonstrated that the Balochistani girls face significant challenges in pursuing their higher education at South Punjab universities. The social and language difficulties not only hinder their mixing with local students; but also create challenges for them to be confident and participate in curricular as well as co-curricular activities. Despite of these challenges, there are considerable opportunities and benefits like access to higher education, learning life skills, earning degree(s) and exposure to varied cultural backgrounds are considerable. However, these prospects may only be fully realized if suitable support structures are in place to assist the students to overcome the socio-cultural and economic barriers.

Keywords: *Higher Education, Curricular Activities, Language Difficulties, Cultural Barriers, Female Education*



Introduction

With its geographical spread, Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan having less population than other provinces. It has enormous potential in terms of natural resources but having long-standing issues at the same time. It covers 44% of the country's area with just 5% of the population. It has socio-economic and developmental challenges distinguishing it from other provinces of the country. It has the lowest literacy rate(s) due to geographically separated communities and scarce communication facilities. Low primary school enrolment hinders the access to secondary education; and the situation of female education is quite challenging and it calls for an appropriate strategic action plan (Understanding Pakistan, 2014).

The status and situation of female(s) in rural areas of Balochistan is quite alarming in terms of education, health facilities, social life and life style(s). Traditionally, here women are engaged in certain tasks such as cooking, housework, parenting, and caring for family members. Such and alike domestic activities restrict their educational prospects. However, gradually the people of Balochistan are becoming aware of the benefits of educating females in rural areas (Naz, 2003). It would result in overall development of the province.

Importance of Education

Education is a fundamental human right that is essential for a society's progress. Individuals who are educated and have acquired the knowledge and values of their communities become significant assets not just to themselves but also to society as a whole. National and international legislation, as well as Islamic values, state that education is a fundamental right for all people, regardless of their place of origin, socio-economic position, language, race, ethnicity, or gender. As a result, states are responsible for providing equitable educational opportunities to all citizens. Unfortunately, many nations continue to face gender discrimination in access to educational opportunities, impeding growth and maintaining inequality (Barrech & Din, 2022).

Female Education in Baluchistan

Balochistan faces significant challenges in providing education, particularly at the primary level. A large proportion of children, particularly in rural regions, are not in school, with 56% of children aged 6 to 11 not attending primary school. Limited access, particularly for females, correlates to poor enrollment, survival, and transition rates. While metropolitan regions provide slightly more educational possibilities, overall participation remains low. Balochistan still has



one of Pakistan's lowest literacy rates, with a low primary enrollment, limited access to secondary education, and a school scarcity, particularly for female education (Grare,2013).

Economic, Social, and Cultural Challenges to Female Education

In landlocked Baluchistan, female education is significantly obstructed by cultural, social, and economic barriers. Culturally, traditional attitudes sometimes limit women to household tasks, contributing to high illiteracy rates among rural women. Socially, females' access to education is limited by poor educational infrastructure, such as a shortage of schools, skilled instructors, and dependable transportation. Economically, many families endure extreme financial challenges, causing parents to prioritize immediate income above their daughters' education, resulting in high dropout rates. Although some parents may aspire to equip their daughters with a better education, the prices are prohibitively exorbitant. To address these difficulties, the government must improve educational facilities and launch awareness campaigns emphasizing the necessity of educating females for the benefit of Balochistan's families and communities (Adolph,2016).

Role of Scholarships in Empowering Balochistan Females

Scholarships empower Balochistan females by eliminating financial barriers and allowing women to pursue higher education in a male-dominated society. They encourage families to emphasize girls' education, which reduces dropout rates and helps them resist conventional pressures such as early marriage. Scholarships increase confidence, encourage independence, and provide job options, eventually encouraging gender equality and boosting socioeconomic position. Opportunities in Higher Education: Review of scholarship programs, quota systems, and other interventions.

Opportunities in Higher Education: Review of Scholarship Programs and Interventions

Scholarship programs play an important role in education because they not only provide financial assistance but also motivate students to excel academically. These programs are especially crucial in enabling more inclusive access to higher education for individuals from a variety of economic backgrounds. Scholarships allow talented but financially disadvantaged students to pursue an education without incurring high costs. Aside from financial help, scholarship programs provide extra perks that benefit participants' academic and personal growth. Many scholarships involve mentorship, training, and skill development activities that help students improve their talents and confidence, better preparing them for academic achievement and future prospects



Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to (a) investigate the socio-cultural challenges restricting the access of females of Balochistan to higher education; (b) identify the economic challenges restricting the access of females of Balochistan to higher education; (c) explore the opportunities of higher education for the females of Balocistan; and (d) suggest feasible measures to overcome the socio-cultural and economic challenges in accessing higher education.

Research Methodology

This study examined the challenges and opportunities of higher education for the females of Balochistan studying in South Punjab with a focus on economic, social, and cultural factors. It was a descriptive and exploratory study and therefore, qualitative research methodology was used for data collection.

Population and Sampling

The population of the study consisted of all the female students of Balochistan studying in universities of the South Punjab. A purposeful sample strategy was used; and thirty (30) students agreed to participate in the study. The participants were briefed for qualitative interviews. This sample assured equal representation of different socio-economic backgrounds, academic fields, and levels of study.

Data Collection Methods

This study used a semi-structured interview protocol for data collection. The interview protocol was prepared according to the objectives of the study. After finalizing the interview protocol, the researchers individually contacted the students and conducted their interviews after mutual discussion and agreement. The participation of the respondents was on volunteer basis. A total thirty (30) participants were interviewed. Besides, the researchers also elaborated their personal experiences and observations which have been described in the relevant section(s).

Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to uncover common themes and patterns in the interview data. Themes such as financial difficulties, cultural expectations, and social limitations were coded and examined to determine their influence on participants' educational results.

Ethical Considerations



The appropriate institutional review board provided ethical approval, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were carefully preserved, and participants were told that their participation was voluntary, with the chance to leave at any time without consequence.

Limitations of the Study

This study is constrained by its emphasis on females of the Balochistan studying in South Punjab institutions of higher education, which may not accurately reflect the experiences of all such girls seeking higher education in Pakistan. Furthermore, while qualitative interviews give in-depth insights, the use of self-reported data may create biases that limit the findings' generalizability.

Personal Journey:

Bridging Two provinces – From Balochistan to Bahawalpur

My life was shaped by customs and a strong bond with the natural world in a secluded region of Balochistan, where I was born and raised. My father, a retired Frontier Corps officer, and my mother, a Pathan tribe member, raised us in a remote area of Balochistan without access to electricity, gas, or other modern amenities. In Balochistan, hospitality, honor, and reverence for elders are fundamental aspects of our way of life. Our communities are united by strong tribal values that stem from a deep appreciation of simplicity. My community's women are more reticent, spending much of their time at home with little interaction with others. I grew up with two younger brothers and four sisters. Our family suffered financial difficulties, relying on my father's pension to survive. After obtaining my FSC, I understood that continuing my study would be difficult due to financial restrictions. However, when I discovered about the education quota at Islamia University Bahawalpur for Balochistan students, I opted to pursue further studies in the Education Department.

The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, founded in 1975, is a prominent institution in Pakistan known for its commitment to academic excellence and research. Offering a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees in many different subjects, it promotes a vibrant learning atmosphere. Bahawalpur, situated on the western edge of the Cholistan Desert, has a rich history as a former princely kingdom. The city, known for its stately palaces, stunning mosques, and lush gardens, has a regal past and architectural marvels like as the Noor Mahal and Derawar Fort. The residents of Bahawalpur, famed for their kindness and compassion, greeted students from Balochistan with open hearts. Regardless, adjusting to cultural differences was difficult. The



local languages, habits, and manner of life were unfamiliar to me, which made the transfer tough at first. However, over time, I gained the ability to adapt, boosting my Urdu and English, and gradually settling into the local society. As I grew to understand and appreciate the diversity around me, the differences in language, clothing, and social behavior faded. presently as a graduate and post-graduate of Islamia University Bahawalpur, I recognize that, while individuals and locations may appear to be different, patience and understanding are essential for overcoming those gaps. My transition from a socially isolated environment to a multicultural one has extended my academic horizons while also deepening my personal development.

Personal Observation Interactions and Cultural Circles

During my visits to various universities in South Punjab, I was able to closely observe Balochistan girls' daily routines and interactions in academic and social settings. Their social relationships with local students were particularly noteworthy. These girls would frequently form small, close-knit groups, primarily composed of others from Balochistan, and speak in their native languages. This tendency to stay within their cultural circle was not due to a lack of willingness to engage, but rather to feelings of lack of familiarity and a slight fear of being misunderstood by their South Punjab peers. A few pupils stated they frequently heard comments like, *"Why do you wear these types of clothes? You don't feel hot?"* This made them feel out of place and increased their sense of loneliness.

Classroom Dynamics and Linguistic Barriers

local students would mock their Urdu, asking, *"Why do you speak such Urdu which has no sense? You call a boy a girl and a girl a boy,"* highlighting their linguistic struggles and heightening their sense of isolation. This linguistic barrier not only affects their social interactions but also impacts their academic confidence, as they grapple with feelings of inadequacy in expressing themselves, local students would mock their Urdu, asking, *"Why do you speak such Urdu which has no sense? You call a boy a girl and a girl a boy,"* emphasizing their linguistic difficulties and increasing their feelings of loneliness. This linguistic barrier has an influence on both their social connections and their academic confidence, as they struggle with thoughts of inadequacies in expressing themselves.

Extracurricular Participation and Cultural Exclusion

In extracurricular activities, the situation was comparable. The Balochistan females seldom took part in group activities or university functions. On one occasion, I attended a university event



where most students openly socialized and took part in activities and performances. The females from Balochistan, on the other hand, watched from a safe distance, rarely moving closer. When asked, one pupil stated, *"We don't feel like we belong here. These events are not really for us."* Furthermore, during social encounters, they would occasionally get nasty comments such as, *"In Balochistan, people kill Punjabis, and you are studying here freely,"* which added to their sense of isolation and unease in associating with the local society.

Cultural and Linguistic Barriers Affecting Academic Confidence

Cultural and linguistic differences play a significant role in the social constraints these girls face. These hurdles have an impact not only on their social relationships, but also on their academic confidence and general integration into the university setting. Their reluctance to engage actively in the campus community reflects larger adjustment challenges. One student stated that local students would occasionally make them feel uncomfortable by making subtle remarks or gestures, such as criticizing their wardrobe choices, which is directly related to the aims of my research.

Economic Support:

Quotas and Scholarships as Key Opportunities

During my meetings with the females from Balochistan, I saw that many of them were able to attend university thanks to the quota system and numerous scholarship schemes. Several girls expressed that without these possibilities, it would have been practically difficult for them to gain admission and bear the financial load of studying away from home. One student stated that the allocated seats for Balochistan students provided her with a fair opportunity to pursue higher education, despite the competitive climate. Similarly, several students used scholarships to fund their tuition and living expenses. I noted a sense of relief among the students who received this financial support, as it allowed them to concentrate on their academics without always worrying about money. These opportunities are a critical support system, providing the Balochistan girls with an opportunity to education that would otherwise be unavailable due to economic or geographical disadvantages.

Personal Reflection on Cultural Differences

During my visits to South Punjab's universities, I encountered a complex landscape of cultural diversity and social dynamics. As I went across the crowded campus, experience a sensation of unfamiliarity, which reminded me of situations when I had entered a new setting. The lively



discussions surrounding me were full with languages and accents unfamiliar to my ears, and I realized how lonely it might be to feel out of place. Observing the interactions of Balochistan girls in this situation brought up memories of feeling like an outsider, navigating the complexities of local customs and social norms. Each time I approached a gathering to participate in discussion, I felt a mix of interest and nervousness, matching the difficulties of connection that numerous youngsters had. This experience reinforced my understanding of the significance of cultural integration and support systems in higher education, inspiring me to pursue these topics further in my research.

Conclusion

These observations revealed that Balochistani females face significant challenges when attempting to pursue higher education at South Punjab universities. The social and language difficulties I saw not only impede their capacity to integrate with local pupils, but also undermine their confidence and participation in academic and extracurricular activities. Despite these obstacles, the benefits given by these universities, such as access to higher education and exposure to varied cultural backgrounds, are considerable. However, these prospects may only be fully realized if suitable support structures are in place to assist them overcome the social and cultural barriers. Comments such, *"Why do you wear these kinds of clothes? You don't feel hot?"* or *"In Balochistan, people kill Punjabis, and you are studying here freely,"* highlight the significant cultural gulf. Furthermore, linguistic criticisms such as *"Why do you speak such meaningless Urdu? You call a boy a girl and a girl a boy,"* which contributes to their sense of estrangement. However, higher education provides individuals with access to a superior education as well as the opportunity to learn about various cultures, which might extend their perspectives.

In nutshell, the study demonstrated that the Balochistani girls face significant challenges in pursuing their higher education at South Punjab universities. The social and language difficulties not only hinder their mixing with local students; but also create challenges for them to be confident and participate in curricular as well as co-curricular activities. Despite of these challenges, there are considerable opportunities and benefits like access to higher education, learning life skills, earning degree(s) and exposure to varied cultural backgrounds are



considerable. However, these prospects may only be fully realized if suitable support structures are in place to assist the students to overcome the socio-cultural and economic barriers.

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