Girl Education in Rural Pakistan

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Abstract

Girl Education is a global issue. Many reports and papers, including UNESCO reports on gender monitoring and education highlight the intensity of the challenge across the world. It is underpinned by myriad factors ranging from a genuine desire on the part of the family to protect and safeguard the girls in specific contexts to cultural determinants, social manipulations, gender discrimination, economic priorities, religious interpretations, political exploitations, vested interests, and simple pragmatics, among many others. However, the nature of these factors and their combinations vary in diverse societies influenced by dominant cultural and belief systems, as well as by the economic parameters. This paper attempts to debate the issue, inviting to respond to legitimate concerns, to involve all stakeholders, to solicit social mobilisation, to remove practical barriers, to facilitate acceptable structures, and to ensure effective outcomes. The underlying argument is that ensuring education for girls is crucial, not only for resolving gender inequities, but it is also critical for combating with personal and national poverty.

Keywords: girls education, rural pakistan, cultural and belief systems

Girls' education is a global issue. Several research studies and papers, as well as reports from different UN agencies on global gender monitoring in education highlight the intensity of the challenge across the world, particularly in the developing countries including many in Asia, Africa, Latin America and other parts of the world. It is underpinned by myriad factors ranging from a genuine desire on the part of the family to protect and safeguard the girls in specific contexts to blatant gender discrimination, powerful cultural determinants, social manipulations, economic priorities, religious interpretations, political exploitations, vested interests, and simple pragmatics, among many others. However, the nature of these factors and their combinations vary in diverse societies influenced by the economic parameters as well as dominant cultural and belief systems (Shah and Conchar, 2009).

This paper first provides the regional context to locate the issues impacting on girls' education in rural Pakistan. The next section introduces the study followed by a discussion of girls' education in rural Pakistan, debating the forces, discourses and dynamics shaping the practice. The final section will present some conclusions and suggestions informed by the study data and relevant literature.

Girls' Education in Rural Pakistan: the regional context

Girls' education in rural Pakistan is a serious issue. In some regions, the literacy gap between men and women is as large as 45 percent (Simons, 2007), and at least 47 percent of all girls never enrol in a school (McCutcheon, 2007). Economic imperatives emerge as a significant factor but the feudal patriarchal structure of the society (Mernissi, 1991; Shah, 2008; Weiss, 1994), religious discourses (Al-Hibri, 1982; Talbani, 1996), gendered roles, stereotyping (Griffin, 2006; Shah, 2008), entrenched traditions, social practices underpinned by public/private divide (Afshar, 1991; Seller, 1996; Shah, & Conchar, 2009), and a lack of effective responsive policies exacerbate the situation.

This paper draws on a study conducted in a girls' primary school in rural Pakistan. The gravity of the issues raised has implications for many similar schools in Pakistan and elsewhere, demanding attention

from the local and national governments as well as from the researchers, academics and wider international community. The underlying argument is that ensuring education for girls is crucial for combating personal and national poverty:

> Ensuring education for girls is vital, not only for resolving gender inequities such as those occurring in Pakistan and many of the world's lesser developed countries, but it is also critical for helping these countries rise up out of poverty (Simons, 2007, p.7).

A single year of primary education correlates with a 10-20% increase in women's wages later in life (Herz and Sperling, 2004), and enhances family's health, and social and educational upward mobility. Herz and Sperling (2004) claim that girls' education contributes to female empowerment and prevention of violence against them. UNESCO's Dakar Framework of Action for Education For All (EFA, 2000) places great emphasis on girls' education, particularly at early education level, emphasising to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education 'with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality' (Article 7 – ii & v). The Dakar Framework of Action was followed by the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) for the East Asia and Pacific Region, launched in May 2002. Some action points suggested to governments and policy makers to improve girls' education included:

- Reducing school fees;
- Covering indirect costs of schooling through scholarships, stipends and school health and nutrition programs;
- Building schools close to girls' homes;
- Making schools more girl-friendly and ensuring girls' safety at school;
- Providing more female teachers for girls;
- Improving the quality of education by ensuring basic teacher training.

However, these action points are enacted within each country context leading to varying outcomes because of contextual differences. For example, across the South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sari Lanka), 'Bangladesh and Maldives are the only two countries …where gender disparities in primary education are in favour of girls' (Chitrakar, 2006, p.33). These are both high majority Muslim countries, while Pakistan, another Muslim majority country in the region has a much lower girls' primary education rate. Looking at economy (UNICEF, Online), Pakistan's GNI per capita is $980, and 23% of the population is below international poverty line of US$1.25 per day, while Bangladesh's GNI is $520 with 50% of population below poverty line, and Maldives' GNI is $3630 with Nil below poverty line. Looking at primary girls' primary education statistics in these three Muslim countries in the region with different economic statistics, neither faith nor poverty appear to be determining factors, which underlines the need to look for context-specific factors in each case.

In Bangladesh, in spite of poverty, unavailability of teachers, harassment of girls, domestic violence and child marriage etc (Raynor and Wesson, 2006, p.4), 'profound social changes, of which gender role integration and breaking down of gender barriers represent a key element, … increased participation of women in the formal sector labour force, … [and] new economic opportunities and change in social and family role of women through women's access to micro-credit' (Ahmed and Chowdhury, 2005, p.5; see also Sperandio, 2008) have immensely contributed to tipping the gender disparities in primary education in favour of girls. In Maldives, women 'operate without the secondary burdens of class, caste, race or purdah faced by their sisters in nearby countries … [and enjoy] equal access to education' (ADB, 2007, p.1). Apparently, girls' access to education is considerably influenced by their role in the society, access to economic resources and equal rights. Chitrakar (2006) claims Sri Lanka as the only country in South Asia with 'almost no child of school age who is not enrolled in school, meaning obviously equal participation of girls' (Chitrakar, 2006, p.107), attributing this to its democratic history giving equal rights to all its population. Karlsson and Mansory (2007) claim huge increase in girls' education in post-Taliban Afghanistan

with the restoration of democracy, although they equally attribute it to 'the centuries-old Islamic principle of farz (obligation) in education' (Karlsson and Mansory, 2007, p.284). Nevertheless, records also confirm that in the name of Islam, and in spite of the Quran's emphasis on education for both women and men, girls' schools were closed in Afghanistan during the Taliban's rule (USAID, 2006, p.4). Such evidence adds to the complexity of analysis, discouraging any generalisations regarding barriers to girls' education.

Discussing primary education in South Asia, Chitrakar (2006) posits that 'the barrier to education for girls is often compounded by other issues including caste, ethnicity, religion, poverty and remoteness' (p.v). For example, India is 'one of the world's fastest growing economies' (Chitrakar, 2006, p.52), but 'the growth in the number of girls attending and completing primary school is not as commendable' (p.53). In the case of India, a major barrier emphasised by many studies is the caste system, the assumption among 'upper caste' that 'knowledge is not for the lower castes to acquire' (Chitrakar, 2006, p.57), depriving a large number of girls who belong to scheduled castes from accessing education. Nayer (2002) claims that enrolment within scheduled castes and scheduled tribes is lower than all other communities, with worse implications for girls from scheduled castes and tribes in India. Rampal (2005) confirms this, referring to Dalit girls in whose case 'caste discrimination from peers and teachers continues to obstruct social access to education, by hurting their dignity and self worth' (p.4).

Studies and evidence from different countries confirm that it is not individual factors such as religion, poverty, ideology, culture, caste, race, gender, or even a given combination of few factors which act as barriers to girls' schooling, but a complex interplay of diverse dynamics and discourses in each context, which needs to be unpicked as such. Around the world, '100 million primary school-age children do not go to school [and] two-thirds of them are girls' (Global education, 2006, Online). Poverty, inequality and culture are the main reasons many girls do not go to school. However, the factors leading to these decisions are not always simple economic determinants.

Pakistan is a Muslim country and traditionally a feudal patriarchal society where social structures and cultural practices emerge as significant factors determining girls' education (Farah and Bacchus, 1999). Patriarchy and feudal structures are widely recognised as gender discriminatory, and Witz explains patriarchy as "the ways in which 'male' power is institutionalised within different sites of social relations in society" (1992, p.11). In feudal societies, through a specific concept of family structured round the head of the house, control over resources and decision making has remained centralised with the males excluding women from positions of power 'in politics, employment, and education, in the family and by the institution of the family' (Mies, 1986, p.21; also Fine, 1992; Murray, 1995; Sharma, 1980; Smart, 1984). In the Muslim society of Pakistan, this patriarchal discourse of family is further strengthened by vested interpretations of the concept of family in Islam, with implications for the girls'/women's education and role in society.

Family is a vital unit of Islamic social structure underpinning the Islamic legal and social systems (Shah, 1998), but it is often exploited in male-dominated Muslim societies to control and discipline women in the name of Islamic teachings. It is availed to reinforce male power in spite of the fact that family as presented in the Quran is a site for equality, love and justice. The Quran emphasises women's equal rights including education, earnings and property as well status and scholarship (the Quran, 4:7, 4:32, 4:124). However, within feudal patriarchal structures of most Muslim societies, this space of equality is closed by given interpretations of the Quran:

> Patriarchy co-opted Islam after the death of the prophet - many passages in the Quran were interpreted by patriarchy loosely and out of context, in support of a vicious patriarchal ideology. These interpretations were then handed down to women as God's revealed words. (Al-Hibri, 1982, p.viii)

Afshar argues that traditionally Muslim women have not been well versed in religious teachings, and 'have been barred from ijtihad, religious discourse and interpretation" (1994, p.131; see also Ahmed, 1992; Hussain, 1984; Mernessi, 1991). This lack of religious

knowledge among women, and male control over interpretation and discourse formation (Foucault, 1980) contributed to marginalisation of women and girls, wielding religion to depower women and constrain girls' access to education through discourses of segregation, veiling, izzat and Islamic moral code (Basit, 1997; Ijaz, and Abbas, 2010; Shah and Conchar, 2009). These practices are deep-rooted in the culture and structure of the society, and continue to act as barriers to girls' education in different ways.

The Study

This paper draws on data from a study conducted in a girls' primary school in rural Palistan, exploring the factors influencing girls' education in that region and seeking perspectives of the teachers, parents and the students. The case girls' primary school was located in a village in Pakistan, in a highly rural district with the largest number of girls' primary schools (517 schools). The schools differed in sizes and resources and the number of teachers in these schools varied from 'Nil/1' to 14 with the numbers of students ranging from 12 to about 500[1]. The case school was selected for ease of access, as an average rural girls' primary school, which had one headmistress, three teachers and 141 students. The four-member staff managed teaching/learning of six classes (pre-school and year 1-5), using the rooms and verandas as class-rooms, each teacher often working with two classes simultaneously. The school building consisted of four rooms with verandas and lacked most basic facilities.

The access was facilitated by shared language, profession, gender, ethnicity and faith, creating spaces where 'researchers connect their own experiences to those of others and provide stories that open up conversations about how we live and cope' (Ellis and Berger, 2003, pp.471). In conversations 'face-to-face responses are not simply given to the questions, but to the researcher who poses those questions, in interplay with how the participants perceive the researcher and themselves in that social context (Shah, 2004, 551). Gubrium and Holstein discuss that 'Interviewers are generally expected to keep their 'selves' out of the interview process' (2003, p.13), but Oakley (1981) argues that interviewers ought not to resist friendship and involvement

because sharing experiences and attitudes helps to develop trust.

The research participants included all four members of the staff, thirteen students, seven mothers, two fathers, a local education officer, a local councillor, and a community group[2]. Detailed conversations were conducted with the headmistress and the three teachers, and data was mainly recorded as field-notes except the interview with the headmistress and the teachers. There was some reluctance among the participants about recording their conversations, and secondly there were issues of space and noise for recording.

The study was guided by two research questions:

·   What are the barriers to girls' education in rural Pakistan?
·   How these barriers can be removed or minimised?

Interviews/conversations were conducted in Urdu (national language of Pakistan), and Punjabi (local language); none of the participants could speak English, although the teachers did understand English. The quotes used in this paper are the researcher's translations of the original data. The data provides insights in the perceptions and experiences of the participants and the impact of cultural, religious and economic systems on girls' education, presented in the next section. The findings are discussed informed by the wider international literature. The final section concludes by exploring perceived barriers as well as possible strategies for improving girls' education in rural Pakistan.

Girls' Education in Rural Pakistan

Pakistan is a developing country with 23% of population below international poverty line. Relevant policy documents emphasise the significance of education for individual and collective advancement through contributions to the development of human capital. Article 37 of the Pakistan constitution (Khan, 1973) says that education is the fundamental right of every citizen. However, the literacy rate in Pakistan is less than 50% (The World Fact Book, 2008). According to EFA Report (2008) 6.5 million children across the country don't have access to schools and the report claims that 4 million of these are girls, and all are under nine years old, highlighting gender disparity in accessing early education. Official statistics released by the Federal

Education Ministry of Pakistan provide a desperate picture of education for all, especially for girls:

> 'In the North West Frontier Province the male literacy rate is 61%, while the female literacy rate is an abysmal 22%. In some rural areas of the country such as Kalat in the Province of Balochistan, only 9% of women are literate – compared to 40% of men … Only 22% of girls over 10 years old will finish primary school – compared with 47% of boys' (Simons, 2007, p.5).

The girl enrolment at primary level is much lower than the boys, with a very low completion rate. The table below shows that not only the girls' enrolment rate is lower than the boys but there is a much higher drop out rate leading to a very low completion rate:

Table 1: Drop out Rates in Primary Education

	Total	Female	Male
Primary Education Enrolment	66% of total population	50% of female population	82% of male population
Dropout Rate	50%	56%	44%

Adapted from *Education Sector Reforms (2001-2005)*

The actual situation can be worse still as reliable consistent statistics are often not available in Pakistan. Mostly the statistics are estimated which can be misleading, requiring a cautious approach. Although the official statistics do acknowledge that the overall literacy rate is less than 50 per cent, while only 26 per cent of girls are literate, the independent sources and educational experts, however, are sceptical of these statistics:

> They place the overall literacy rate at 26 per cent and the rate for girls and women at 12 per cent, contending that the higher figures include people who can handle little more than a signature. (Latif, Online)

Primary education in the public sector is predominantly segregated. There are 163,000 primary schools in Pakistan, out of which about 40,000 cater to girls (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2004-05). There are more than twelve thousand Deeni Madaris (religious schools) with enrolment of 1,544,838 students (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2004-05, p.9) but it is only recently that a very small number of these Madaris have started girls' enrolment and that also for political rather than educational purposes (Johnston, 2008). Not providing girls equal access to education becomes difficult for Madaris to explain and justfy to today's more informed world community, particularly in view of the explicit emphasis on education for all in Islam validated by the Quran. Secondly, girls' education in developing countries is receiving specific attention from international funding agencies and is attracting a big share of funding, which is another driving factor for Madaris to enrol girls.

Multiple policy initiatives in Pakistan focusing on girls' education, often supported by international funding, have been unable to achieve the desired educational outcomes because of a lack of multiple social, economic and cultural barriers. An apparent absence of political will and action, made worse by a lack of continuity in the relevant national policy has intensified the challenges causing concerns nationally and internationally. Women activists and some international NGOs working for women in Pakistan have been struggling to cultivate political awareness at different levels but inadequate understanding of cultural and belief systems on the part of international NGOs often jeopardises the desired effects.

A complex interplay of diverse factors influenced parental decisions regarding girls' education. However, the factors that emerged as very significant were impact of religious discourses, socio-economic constraints, and cultural systems which are discussed in the following sections supported by the data.

Girls' Education, Islam and Gender

Pakistan was created in the name of Islam and it is a Muslim state by constitution. Islam makes it incumbent upon every Muslim male AND female to seek knowledge. Knowledge is perceived as a part of

'believing' (faith), and the explicit promise is that 'God will raise in rank those of you who believe, as well as those who are given knowledge' (Qur'an, 49:11). The Quran and the Prophet explicitly lay emphasis on seeking knowledge, and men and women are both equally encouraged in these efforts (Stowasser, 1994). Hadiths abound in the Prophet's insistence to pursue knowledge 'even to the borders of China' (Al-Bukhari, Vol 1). The Prophet taught men and women in the Mosque of Medina, and when the women of Medina once complained that the specific teaching time did not suit them because of the nature of their work in the family, the Prophet immediately made the required alterations so women could participate in teaching/learning (Mernissi, 1991). The interest of the Prophet in female education was manifest in the fact that he himself used to teach women along with men (Al-Turabi, 1991). He instructed his followers to educate not only their women but their slave girls as well. Early Islamic history is replete with examples of Muslim women who were great scholars and Aisha, the Prophet's wife herself taught in Masjid-e-Nabvi. However, in spite of women's equal right to education in Islam, female access to education in Muslim societies and communities, including Pakistan, has been conspicuously less than men (Brock et al, 2006; Kirdar, 2006; Qureshi, 2004; Shah and Conchar, 2009).

The study unveiled discourses of 'bad influence' of education, in contention with being a 'good Muslim girl/woman'. The participants were unanimous that a Muslim girl should be brought up according to Islamic teachings to become good daughter, sister, mother and wife, although, there was vagueness regarding what this implied perhaps due to a lack of religious knowledge. A general perception among the community was that schools did not contribute to becoming 'good Muslim girl':

> Many families believe that girls who go to schools don't take interest in house chores. They are often not good daughters or wives compared to girls who stay home and learn these roles. When they go to schools they become less obedient so why make them bad! M3

There were concerns about the influence of education in encouraging girls to become 'independent' – a word used with negative connotations – thus presenting a potential risk of girls ignoring their future role as

Muslim wives and mothers:

> A girl who was to be married to a man thirty years her senior
> protested, unfortunately she had attended the school till class
> three. She was finally married to the same man by force, but
> she became a negative example in the village and school
> enrolments went down. T2

In spite of the Islamic emphasis on education for both men and
women, female education in Muslim communities is often constrained
by customs and traditions. Mernissi argues that in Muslim societies
educated women are seen as posing a threat to the accepted cultural
norms (1993), and to the institution of family, which forms the basis of
Islamic social system. It is feared that by moving out of the domestic,
girls would violate Islamic teachings. Even Muslim scholars such as
Mulana Maududi, who recognise women's physical and mental
equality (1979, pp.113-122), strongly argue that woman's 'sphere of
activity is home' (1979, p.152). Thus, religion becomes a tool to
restrain young women within homes, which indirectly becomes barrier
to education:

> My teacher says that learning is *faraz* (obligatory) upon every
> Muslim, but my dadi (grandmother) is always telling my
> mother not to send me to school as it will bring evil – that
> *Maulvi Sahib* (Mosque Imam[3]) ordered women to stay home
> and serve family and their men. S5

For a Muslim who may not possess relevant religious knowledge to
challenge or debate such discourses, any statement given by a Maulvi
is a religious injunction to be obeyed without questioning (Talbani,
1996). This creates a paradox where un-Islamic practices may find
way in Muslim societies in the name of religion. These discourses are
constructed and disseminated in such a way that masses are unable to
differentiate between Islamic injunctions and teachings, and the
accepted cultural practices. What is Islamic and what is un-Islamic is
often determined by those having power over interpretation of
religious texts, and then enforced in the name of religion. Concepts of
veiling (Mernissie, 1991), izzat (Haw and Shah, 1998; Basit, 1997;
Parker-Jenkins et al, 1997) and sex-segregation (Shah and Conchar,

2009) further problematise girls' access to education. Many families and parents believed that girls became 'evil' by going to schools:

> *Maulvi Sahib* says that when a young girl goes out of home unaccompanied by a *mehram*[4] there is always Satan misguiding her. God orders to keep girls covered and hidden. I accompany my daughter to school every day – Allah may protect her. My husband and son both work in city and I want her to be able to read and write letters for them but all time I am trembling that some evil may happen. F4

Apparently the *Maulvis* often obstructed girls' education in rural areas where they exercised stronger authority, by declaring going to schools, particularly co-education as un-Islamic. Consequently, women teachers and girl students felt unsafe and threatened while going to schools, as mentioned by a teacher:

> We have to be very careful how we encourage girls and their families to send girls to school. We are women ourselves and if we annoy *Maulvi Sahib* (Imam of mosque), can be bad for us and for the school. (T3)

In rural areas Imams' appear to have considerable power over social conduct and discourses. According to Sattar and Baig (2001), many NGOs working for girls' education in rural Pakistan received continued threats from local religious leaders and organisations (2001, p.15). This power of Imams and religious leaders in rural communities in particular emerged as a serious barrier to girls' education. Girls as well as parents just submitted to their advice/orders because of the fear of being labelled as 'enemies of Islam'.

Economic Factors

Socio-economic class and poverty emerged as another major barrier to girls' education in Pakistan. Pakistan is primarily an agricultural country and within its history of feudal structure peasants and farmers have low incomes and little rights. Per capita income in Pakistan is approximately $770 a year (Finfacts 2007), but the poverty gap between rural and urban population is very high (World Bank, 2002)

with implications for education in rural Pakistan, which is a luxury for the majority of the rural population they could hardly afford. About 43% population in rural areas and 26% population in urban areas are below poverty line (Anwar, Qureshi and Ali, 2003). As a consequence, many cannot afford to educate their children. This gets worse for girls due to gender dynamics, as reflected in the girls' higher drop out rates and lower completion rates, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, many rural schools lacked basic facilities as was the case with the case school:

> This school has only four rooms – we use one for office, admin, store, staff, everything, and the other three are classrooms for six classes. We are lucky we now have a toilet – this was ordered by the local councillor three years back. Previously girls had to go outside (pointing to the bushes outside the window) or go home for natural needs. T1

Sometimes even teachers were not available to teach in rural schools. Women teachers from other parts of the country avoided coming away from home towns due to their family responsibilities, while educated girls were often not available locally, as explained one teacher:

> It is difficult for women from far off areas to come here for jobs and cause inconvenience to their own family. And locally educated girls are not available, because people here don't let girls' complete education. The girls of local landlords do study in the city but obviously they don't work in these village schools! T2

Another reason for discontinuing studies was the need to work. The teachers and mothers mentioned the problem of low income, which required children, specifically girls to leave school to contribute to family earnings by engaging in paid work, particularly in the cases of large families in the low-income bracket. While there were laws in Pakistan against child labour, many children worked to sustain their families because of poverty. In the absence of reliable data, it is hard to give exact numbers of these girls or even all children who could not study because they had to work; but their number 'in Pakistan can be probably somewhere between 2 and 19 million' (BILF, 2008). The

girls commonly worked as house maids and domestic servants, besides working in textile, carpet industry and sports industry to supplement the family income:

> Many girls leave school when there is paid work available. X was such a bright girl – so good in studies and only nine years old - but they are eight brothers and sisters – so many mouths to feed. She is now sent to the city to work as domestic help in some officer's house. M3

Rural girls also worked in the agricultural sector (IPEC, 2005) and the teachers complained that school attendance was low when the girls were needed in the fields, such as during harvest time. The research participants confirmed huge drag on girls' time confirming that besides being required to help the family in the fields, these girls were often needed at home to care for younger siblings or grandparents:

> There are many reasons. If there is an elder disabled or old or sick in the family or if mother has given birth to another child it will be the girl who will work as carer, which means no school for her. (T4)

Another important factor highlighted as a barrier to girls' education was the perception of male role within the rural community. 'The preference for sons due to their productive role dictates the allocation of household resources in their favour' (Moheyuddin, 2005, p.8), marginalising the girls. Boy being the perceived bread-winner-to-be and the potential head of house was entitled to opportunities and investment:

> I have four daughters and three sons – only one girl comes to school. If all go to school, who will help us at home and in the fields? Then money is needed for their bags, books, notebooks, pens, clothes, shoes, and many things. Why spend so much money on girls who will soon go to in-laws. Sons will stay with us, help us in earning and feed us in old age. (M1)

Early marriages emerged as another cause of drop-outs. Many girls, particularly those from large families were married very young so the parents had fewer mouths to feed. In their in-laws' household these girls would become unpaid labourers with no rights to luxuries such as education:

> My younger daughter is in the school. My husband married our elder one last year - she was also in this school. She will be 13 this harvest time and soon to be a mother herself. She does all work in the in-laws house as her mother-in-law is ill and all three sister-in-laws are married. She is very quiet and very weak now, but she is a good daughter – never complains. F6

The data provided some examples of very young girls married to old men for money or in exchange for getting a bride for a male member of the family, or in exchange to settle a debt. Apparently their education was not a priority for poor parents in a hard economic environment, and under complex cultural pressures, particularly in the remote areas, confirming that gender disparity was 'even wider in remote and more conservative provinces' (Chitrakar, 2006, p.90).

Cultural Factors

Besides economic imperatives, cultural norms and traditions appeared to confine girls within homes by emphasising their domestic role. Chitrakar considers feudal structures responsible for 'gender discrimination and social exclusion' (2006, p.72). In the feudal patriarchal society of Pakistan, social structures determined gender roles. In addition to that, cultural constructions of female role in Muslim societies (Shah, 2008) with emphasis on sex-segregation (Shah and Conchar, 2009), and gendered division of labour enhanced barriers to girls' education in that remote rural area. Discourses of family, izzat (honour) and veiling added to the challenges:

> We are poor - our only wealth is izzat. We have to be very careful about our daughter's izzat. Otherwise we will lose izzat in family and no one will marry our daughters. F3

A specific discourse of izzat prevails in most Muslim societies which is gendered and discriminatory, subjecting women/girls to exclusion, surveillance, and suppression, with implications for their access to right to education (Shah and Conchar, 2009). In Pakistan, as in most feudal patriarchal societies, male dominated structures prevailed, exercising authority and decision making powers on behalf of the female members of the family. Economic and social roles associated with girls/women marginalised them, constraining their access to education and other basic right:

> Women's position is structured by a double set of determinants arising from the relations of gender and derived from the economic organisation of the society. (Afshar, 1991, p.1)

A common perception was that the female role was domestic, and therefore the priority was that the girls should be prepared for that role. Although a high proportion of both boys and girls dropped out from primary education because of poverty in Pakistan, the drop-out rates were much higher among girls. When parents were too poor to pay for school fees, books etc, and when the choice was between sending a girl and a boy to school, then the decisions did not favour the girls:

> It is hard job to convince parents, particularly fathers to send their daughters to school. We try to explain the value of schooling particularly for child/mother and family health and long term social and economic benefits they don't listen. T1

An interesting finding was that although some parents did mention 'boys not wanting to study', in the case of girls it was parents, family or Imam stopping them from studying. In some cases, the traditional culture dictated that girls should stay at home, making attending school very difficult (Global education, 2006, Online). If a girl's school was at a distance, the parents were often unwilling to allow her to attend the school because of the fears of her safety and *izzat*:

> I walk 3 miles every day to come to school and then back. We
> are three girls who come together and if on any day any one of
> us is not coming then we all stay home. My father worries and
> does not let us walk all that way on our own.

There were genuine concerns for girls' safety and protection. If school
was too far away, the parents would not send girl/s to the school
because they didn't want them to walk long distances on their own.
'For the average girl, school is too far, too expensive or not safe
enough for her parents to allow her to attend even if she wanted to go.
Distance was particularly a problem where parents often feared rape
and abduction' (McCutcheon, 2007), which besides personal suffering
could become a social stigma for all the family.

Conclusions

In spite of high exodus to the cities, rural population in Pakistan is still
about 70% (The World Fact Book, 2008) who live in areas with very
limited opportunities for education. Poverty and lack of public
education provision meant that education percentages at all levels were
considerably lower in rural areas, as compared to urban areas which
had better income and educational facilities. In addition to that, rapid
population growth and limited economic development over the years
had constrained educational development. Low levels of financial
allocation and inefficient utilization of limited resources complicated
the situation. The situation was worse regarding girls' education,
predicting a bleak future not just for the girls and the future generations
of the society but also for the country. Any genuine re-negotiation of
these issues required an understanding of the contextual and structural
conditions (Rizvi, 1994).

Besides serious economic issues, cultural and belief systems acted
as another barrier. Religious teachings and moral code were availed
selectively to control and discipline girls in that rural area. For
example, the Quran asks men to keep their eyes 'cast down' and
women to cover their bodies in the same Sura[5] (24:31) suggesting

moral code for both sexes. However, the study highlighted that it was girls' demeanour that was an issue, often exploited to deprive them of their basic religious right to education, while male behaviour was not even challenged if it did not confirm to religious teachings. The outcome of these discriminatory practices was that women and girls were devoiced and marginalised, as highlighted by the research findings, and became deprived of many rights including education in the name of religion.

Furthermore, the patriarchal practices and values embedded in Pakistani society, and local traditions and culture predetermined the social value of gender. Gendered perceptions of women led to low level of resource investment in women by the family and even the state. This low investment in women as human capital compounded by negative social biases and cultural practices restricted their accessing opportunities for education. Given religious discourses of family responsibility, female role, veiling, and segregation coupled with harsh economic realities and gender discrimination enforced segregation and marginalisation. The challenges to girls' education in that rural community were myriad and complex. Many factors such as ' poverty, lower status of female in society and her security concerns, coupled with lack of school facilities, teaching materials and inadequacy or absence of female teachers' (Khalid and Mujahid-Mukhtar, 2002, pviii) restricted girls' access to education. Feudal patriarchal structure of the society and vested interpretations of religious discourses further marginalised girls, placing serious constraints on their education.

International organisations such as UNESCO have been introducing initiatives to promote girls' education in poor and developing countries to eliminate gender discrimination and gender disparity in the educational system by emphasising basic education. Different initiatives are used to support/facilitate parents and to inspire girls to continue with their studies as well as to make men understand the challenges girls have to face in pursuit of their study/career, and the need to give them support. A World Food Program initiative that provided both food and take home rations for students increased girls' attendance by at least 50 percent in all targeted countries. Some international initiatives and strategies for girls' education include:

· Role Model Visits' of successful women from same society
· Enhancing awareness among men/boys of female education
· Financial support to girls' families
· Recruitment of teachers locally and investment in their training, as well as relaxing qualification
· Flexible terms and hours, and curricula to suit the demands of agricultural societies
· Ensuring safety and protection of girls.

Relevant reports and documents highlighted that in some parts of rural Pakistan, some initiatives have been introduced to promote girls' education over the last two decades. During Social Action Programme (SAP-I, 1993-96), 70% of increased enrolments in Punjab were of girls, mostly in rural areas. In Sindh, girls' schools increased by 15%. In NWFP 55% of the growth in enrolments has been of girls. In Balochistan about 75% new schools were for girls (MSU, 1995). In 2003, the Punjab government with assistance from the World Bank implemented the 'Girls' Stipend Program' which provided cash stipend of Rs. 200 to families to ensure their daughters attended school. As a result girls' enrolment in secondary schools in the fifteen poorest districts in Punjab increased. Another example was Pakistan's national Bait-Ul-Mal program which was started after the 2005 earthquake. A pilot child-support program was developed aiming at increasing enrolment of children from poor households at the primary level (IDA, Online). In Punjab province, the Bait-Ul-Mal along with the Punjab Government's education program has shown positive results and is now facing new challenges in hiring more teachers, building new schools, and ensuring that the quality of service is maintained (IDA, Online).

However, no programme to get girls into school and to keep them there has yet succeeded without strong partnerships among stakeholders at all levels (UNICEF, 2003b, p.9). In rural Pakistan, young children in general and girls in particular are subject to parental approval for their education. Assuring parents of girls' availability for

domestic and agricultural activities and of their safety and protection can contribute to positive responses. School calendars that are adapted to the seasons of rural life and use curricula relevant to local needs can help lower barriers to education among young girls.

The study suggests that providing proactive policies, essential infrastructures and necessary resources is vital for improving girls' education. However, the findings also signal that a more important factor is to prepare the community to welcome and participate in educational opportunities and to be aware of the significance of education for the girls. At local level, enrolment campaigns could prove successful when backed up by a strong communication component undertaken through local leaders and community members. Awareness of the importance of girls' education could be created through social mobilization and community outreach efforts that involve all stakeholders as well as by improving knowledge of religious teachings. In view of the power of religious discourses in the region, teachings of Islam could be effectively used to encourage a yearning for and commitment to education and seeking knowledge. Religion has a high priority among most Muslims, but people in rural areas such as the context of this study are often not sufficiently educated in the teachings of the Quran and consequently tend to accept vested interpretations of self-proclaimed religious leaders. The reiteration of seeking education as a religious obligation and providing appropriate environment for that could play a tremendous role in facilitating girls' education among rural community who, in spite of general ignorance, identify closely with religion.

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Endnotes

1 Information collected from the office of the Director Schools, Lahore Division, Punjab, Pakistan.

2 The sample was coded in four groups for reference to the data: all staff/teachers as T1, T2 …; Students as S1, S2 …; mothers as F1, F2 (females) …; and all males as M1, M2…

3 Maulvi is a Mosque Imam who is assumed to possess religious knowledge; Sahib is marker for respect. Besides leading the daily prayers a Maulvi Sahib generally delivers Friday sermon, teaches Quran,to children and new learners, has a role in conducting Islamic weddings, funerals, Eid prayers, Ramadan prayers and other religious rituals, and enjoys great positional influence on the lives of the community particularly in the rural areas where most people lack religious knowledge to critically engage with related issues.

4 Mehram includes the husband of a married woman and all those unlawful for a woman to marry due to marital or blood relationships.

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