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Girls' Access to Higher Education in Balochistan: An Analysis of Socio-Cultural, Economic, and Structural Barriers

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ABSTRACT

Girls' access to higher education in Balochistan has remained low despite national and international commitments to achieve gender equality in education. This study identifies and analyzes socioeconomic and structural barriers to female participation in higher education in Balochistan. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 200 girls who completed intermediate education but could not pursue higher education. The sample was drawn equally from four districts: Quetta and Sibi, where Universities exist, and Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi, without universities or their sub-campuses. To gain deeper contextual insights, qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions with girls and in-depth interviews with parents and educators.

The quantitative findings indicate that restrictions on female mobility, discrimination, gender inequality in decision-making, and domestic responsibilities decrease the likelihood of girls enrolling in higher educational institutions. Economic constraints and the rising cost of education have become prominent obstacles across all districts. Structural challenges, including the considerable distance to the nearest higher education institution and the lack of safe transportation and hostel facilities for girls, impede female access to universities, particularly in rural areas where such institutions are unavailable.

The study concludes that girls' limited access to higher education in Balochistan results from a combination of patriarchal norms, financial limitations, and shortcomings in educational institutions, rather than merely the lack of institutions. To solve these problems, we need a wide range of policy changes that focus on things like financial support, infrastructure that is sensitive to gender, campaigns to raise awareness in the community, and strict enforcement of laws against early marriage and harassment.

Keywords: Girls 'Education, Higher Education, Sociocultural Barriers, Economic Constraints, Structural Challenges, Balochistan

Background

Higher Education is the prerequisite for socioeconomic and political development of a country. Access to higher education is a fundamental human right for every person, regardless of gender, socio-economic status, race, color, religion, or place of residence. Higher education not only benefits individuals but also industries, the economy, and the



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whole society (Gracia, 2009). The United Nations emphasizes the importance of higher education for girls, since it not only improves their socioeconomic status but also contributes to national development. A strong and sustainable education system can provide opportunities for children, especially girls, to acquire knowledge and skills that make them self-reliant, responsible, and productive citizens of the country (Panzai, 2023).

Evidences suggest that higher education supports positive change in society by fostering awareness regarding social issues, equipping young women with traits such as “self-resilience”, eliminating discrimination based on gender, caste, class, religion, and beliefs, and uplifting vital factors such as democratic governance (McClelland & Evans, 1992). Education, especially higher education, is essential for empowering women in social, economic, political, and psychological domains. Increasing women's access to higher education plays a key role in achieving gender equality in society because education enables women to actively participate in all spheres of life (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005).

There is a notable disparity in women's access to higher education globally. In developed countries, both men and women reportedly have equitable opportunities for higher education. However, in developing countries like Pakistan, gender-based barriers persist within the education system. Girls face specific socioeconomic and cultural obstacles to accessing higher education (Ali et al, 2015). According to census data (2023), Pakistan's overall literacy rate was 60%, with male literacy at 68% and female literacy at 52.84% (NCHD, 2025). In rural areas, the female literacy rate was only 36%, compared to 63% for males (Ahmed et al, 2024).

Pakistan now has the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC), with an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5 to 16 not attending school, accounting for 44% of the overall population in this age group. In Balochistan, these gaps are particularly acute, with 78% of girls out of school (UNICEF, 2025). These figures reveal that a large number of children, particularly girls, do not have access to school, demonstrating that gender disparities in education are a major concern in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan Province. According to the Balochistan Gender Parity Report 2024, female literacy rates are significantly lower than male literacy rates, and there are a large number of poorly-resourced girls' educational institutions. These structural difficulties create considerable hurdles to females' access to education (BCSW, 2025).

Along with these structural challenges, Females in the country also face significant socio-cultural barriers to higher education, including strict gender roles that confine many to household responsibilities such as childcare and elder care. Additional obstacles include harassment, limited access to education and employment, cultural restrictions, unsafe environments, limited public transport options, early marriage, financial challenges, and long distance to educational institutions (Maqsood et al, 2012; Uddin et al, 2021). These factors collectively hinder women's access to higher education.

Although some studies and reports document the scale of girls' exclusion from the education system and its causes, little systematic research has integrated quantitative information with qualitative insights to explain how sociocultural norms, economic constraints, and structural barriers limit girls' entry, persistence, and success in higher education in Balochistan. This study will fill that gap by focusing on the sociocultural, economic and structural barriers girls face in accessing higher education, documenting quantitative and qualitative data to formulate evidence-based policy recommendations. By focusing on higher education, the study will inform interventions to increase girls' enrollment in universities and address community and household norms that restrict their



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participation.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant in several ways. First and foremost, it will fill a research gap by providing evidence-based data specific to Balochistan. This data will demonstrate how the sociocultural norms, financial constraints, and structural hurdles unique to Balochistan province hinder girls' access to higher education there. In addition, the study will include experiences from girls who, despite several challenges, are pursuing higher education through various coping strategies. This will encourage other women to become active participants in higher education. Additionally, the research findings will provide policymakers with the information needed to draft legislation and implement interventions that promote girls' access to higher education, while accounting for a range of sociocultural, economic, and structural barriers. Additionally, the research findings will assist the institutions' administrations in establishing a safe environment for women, taking into account the tribal nature of Balochistan's society.

Objectives of the Study

To identify and analyze sociocultural, and economic barriers hindering girls' access to higher education in Balochistan

To examine structural challenges impeding girls' participation to higher education

To assess the combined impact of sociocultural norms, financial constraints, and structural challenges on girls' participation in higher education

To suggest evidence based policy recommendations to address sociocultural and structural barriers, enhancing girls' access to higher education in Balochistan

Literature Review

In Pakistan's conservative, male-dominated society, women are often perceived as weak, dependent on men, and primarily suited for household responsibilities (Sen, 2001). This prevailing mindset significantly impedes women's access to education, particularly at the higher education level. Opportunities for women to pursue professional and technical degrees remain limited (Shoaib et al., 2025). The patriarchal structure of society reinforces the perception of male superiority and female inferiority (Malik, 2011). Consequently, societal attitudes restrict women's roles to childcare and domestic work, while men are encouraged to pursue higher education as they are considered as the primary providers for their families (Liaqat, 2022).

Social norms often lead parents to prioritize the education of male children, viewing it as essential for the family's future and financial stability. Early marriages, cultural expectations, and dowry pressures create significant barriers to women's access to higher education. Many believe women should focus solely on domestic responsibilities and child-rearing, which leads to the perception that investing in their education is unproductive. Women in Pakistan remain among the most marginalized groups in society. Although the government has introduced policies to empower women, these initiatives have not achieved their intended outcomes. Gender inequality persists in higher education due to various socio-cultural and economic factors (Mehmood & Hussain, 2018).

A significant challenge is the social pressure on girls to marry at a young age, typically between 16 and 21 years. A UNESCO survey found that 68% of females who wished to attend university were unable to do so because their families prioritized early marriage. Families often believe that early marriage ensures the woman's protection, respect, and well-being. Early marriage is therefore a primary cause of high dropout rates and a major



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barrier to university attendance for girls (UNESCO, 2010).

Malik and Najeebullah (2016) identify economic constraints as a primary barrier to women's education, as resources are often preferentially allocated to male members. Expanding scholarships and employment opportunities is critical to improving access. In addition to economic challenges, the limited accessibility of educational institutions poses significant obstacles for female students. Travel is often perceived as a risk to personal safety, exacerbated by considerable distances and the persistent risk of sexual harassment and abuse, even when boarding facilities are available (Sattar et al., 2000).

In Pakistan, only 8% of individuals aged 17 to 23 are enrolled in postsecondary education. Most institutions and campuses are situated in urban centers and more developed regions, which restricts access to higher education for millions of young people in rural and impoverished areas (MFEPT, 2017). Gender disparity in Pakistani higher education is the result of persistent bias in the education system that began at an early age. Girls have fewer educational opportunities than boys (Tembon & Fort, 2008). Pakistani society is still conservative, with coeducation seen as a major threat to society. Many parents believe that co-education does cause physical damage to their daughters. They are particularly concerned about their daughters' future, believing that if they study in a coeducational system, no one will want to marry them. This idea frequently forces girls to drop out of further study. Women face gender discrimination as a result of Pakistan's socio-cultural climate (Malik, 2011).

Prevailing societal beliefs assign women the responsibility for household chores and child-rearing, while men are expected to be the primary earners. This division implies that, even if women pursue education, their primary role remains at home, discouraging investment in higher education (Liaqat, 2022). In many regions of Pakistan, women's formal education is either banned or heavily criticized. Following 9/11 and the onset of the war on terror, Pakistan has experienced the influence of religious extremist groups, particularly in Fata, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Swat Valley. These groups have imposed their own laws, restricting women to religious education only. Targeting education, especially for women and girls, has served as a political tool for the Taliban. They misinterpret Islamic teachings for their own interests and label modern education as promoting Western values and obscenity (Ali & Zeb, 2014).

The lack of adequate infrastructure presents a major barrier to female students' university attendance in Pakistan. Many districts do not have all-girls campuses, deterring conservative families from allowing daughters to enroll in co-educational institutions (Khan, 2007). Additionally, universities often fail to provide sufficient on-site accommodation, intensifying parental safety concerns, especially for rural families (Jamal, 2016). The absence of safe and reliable transportation options forces women to use unsafe public transport or travel long distances, raising the risk of harassment. Inflexible class schedules, especially evening classes, are also perceived as unsafe for women, further limiting their opportunities for higher education (Liaqat, 2022).

Research Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This methodology facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how the interplay between sociocultural norms, economic hardships, and institutional shortcomings impedes females' access to higher education in Balochistan. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 200 females aged 18 to 23 years who had completed their Higher Secondary education (F.A./F.Sc.) and



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wanted to enroll in university for further education, but were unable to do so. In addition to the survey, qualitative data were gathered through focus group discussion with women and in-depth interviews with parents, and academics to investigate cultural norms, household responsibilities, institutional barriers and economic constraints that affect girls' decisions regarding higher education.

Four districts were selected to provide diverse perspectives: Quetta and Sibi, which have universities, and Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi, which do not. This selection was deliberate and aligned with the study's objective to examine the interplay among structural availability, sociocultural norms, and financial constraints. Quetta and Sibi offer contexts where universities are present, allowing for analysis of why qualified girls may not pursue higher education despite the availability of institutions. In contrast, Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi lack higher education institutions, making access conditional on mobility, relocation, safety, and affordability. These factors often exacerbate existing societal constraints. Comparing these contexts enables the identification of differences in barriers to higher education.

The quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS using frequency distributions, percentages, and regression analysis, while the qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results

Quantitative Results

The quantitative data collected from 200 females belonging to four districts of Balochistan were analyzed using frequency distributions, percentages, and regression analysis.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by District (N=200)

District	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Quetta	50	25
Sibi	50	25
Jaffarabad	50	25
Jhal Magsi	50	25
Total	200	100

Table 1 indicates that 50 respondents were selected from each of the four districts included in the study. This equal distribution provided balanced representation of districts with universities, such as Quetta and Sibi, and those without universities, such as Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi. This sampling strategy facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the barriers encountered by females in varying structural contexts.

Table 2: Marital Status of Respondents (N=200)

Marital Status	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Married	112	56
Engaged	48	24
Unmarried	40	20
Total	200	100

Table 2 shows that 56% of girls were married and 24% were engaged. This finding indicates that most girls who could not enroll in higher education programs were either



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already married or had committed to marriage at a young age. These results suggest that entering marriage commitments early directly limits girls’ ability to access higher education in the province, as their marital status may prevent them from further education.

Table 3: Reason for Not Receiving Higher Education (Multiple Response)

Barrier	Frequency (n)	Percentages
Restriction on female mobility	122	61
Perceived or experienced harassment and Safety Concerns	112	56
Domestic responsibilities	102	51
Gender inequality in decision making	130	65
Early marriage	162	81
Household income constraints	174	87
Education cost	156	78
Long distance to nearest higher education institution	98	44
Lack of safe transport or hostel	108	54

Table 3 presents the key barriers girls reported during the survey. Household income constraints (87%), early marriage (81%), education costs (78%), and gender inequality in decision-making were the most frequently reported barriers. Similarly, restrictions on female mobility (61%), harassment and safety concerns (56%), lack of safe transport or hostel (54%), domestic responsibilities (51%), and the long distance to the nearest higher education institutions were also reported as significant barriers. These results show that girls face a combination of sociocultural, economic, and structural barriers that limit their access to higher education in Balochistan.

Table 4: District-wise Comparison of Major Barriers to Girls Access to Higher Education

Barriers	Quetta (n=50)	Sibi (n=50)	Jaffarabad (n=50)	Jhal Magsi (n=50)
Restriction on female mobility	27%	42%	62%	72%
Harassment and Safety Concerns	65%	61%	63%	67%
Domestic responsibilities	36%	41%	61%	65%
Gender inequality in decision making	41%	46%	72%	78%
Early marriage	36%	43%	70%	74%
Household income constraints	71%	72%	81%	84%
Education cost	70%	72%	79%	82%
Long distance to nearest higher education institution	20%	32%	71%	75%
Lack of safe transport or hostel	25%	36%	73%	77%

Table 4 presents a district-wise comparison of the major barriers to female access to higher education in Balochistan province. The results reveal that household income constraints remained the most significant challenge across all districts, with 71% in Quetta and sharply increasing to 81% in Jaffarabad and 84% in Jhal Magsi, indicating



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severe poverty and limited family income in rural areas. In addition to income constraints, the high cost of education is also frequently reported as a key barrier. Specifically, the data show that 70% of girls in Quetta, 72% in Sibi, 79% in Jaffarabad, and 82% in Jhal Magsi face difficulties in managing tuition fees, transportation fares, books, and hostel arrangements.

Moreover, a lack of safe transportation is a key barrier outside Quetta. The nearest higher education institution is far, and public transport is inadequate. This problem affects 73% of girls in Jaffarabad and 73% in Jhal Magsi, showing that distance can limit access to higher education. Harassment, whether real or perceived, is also a major barrier. Harassment concerns affect 65% of girls in Quetta, 61% in Sibi, 63% in Jaffarabad, and 67% in Jhal Magsi. This shows that female safety clearly shapes educational decisions.

In addition, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and decision-making inequality remain major barriers in Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi compared to Quetta and Sibi. This comparison indicates that patriarchal norms are stronger in rural areas.

Table 5: Comparison Between Marital status and Enrollment Aspiration

Marital Status	Wanted to Enroll	Did not want to Enroll
Married (n=112)	40 (35.71%)	72 (64.28%)
Engaged (n=48)	40 (83.33%)	08 (16.66%)
Unmarried(n=40)	34 (85%)	06 (15%)

Table 5 shows that a higher proportion of engaged (83.33%) and unmarried (85%) girls expressed a desire to pursue higher education than married women (35.71%). This finding suggests that marriage substantially reduces educational aspirations, which may be attributed to increased household responsibilities, restricted mobility, and a shift in family expectations after marriage.

Table 6: Logistic Regression Results

Variable	B	SE	p-value	Exp (B)
Restriction on female mobility	-1.621	.680	0.017	.198
Harassment	-2.879	.711	0.000	.056
Domestic responsibilities	-1.415	.611	0.012	.213
Gender inequality in decision making	-1.466	.616	0.017	.231
Early marriage	-1.418	.625	0.023	.242
Household income constraints	-1.842	.725	0.011	.158
Education cost	-1.457	.613	0.017	.233
Long distance to nearest higher education institution	-1.411	.592	0.017	.244
Availability of safe transport or hostel	1.191	.570	0.37	3.291
Constant	6.001	1.463	0.000	403.670



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The logistic regression results presented in Table 6 indicate that girls face a combination of socioeconomic, cultural, and structural barriers that limit their access to higher education. All variables, except for the availability of safe transport or hostel facilities, exhibit a negative relationship with access to higher education.

Restrictions on female mobility are strongly associated with access to higher education (OR = 0.198, $p < 0.05$), indicating that girls who experience such restrictions are 80% less likely to receive higher education. The findings also reveal a strong negative association between harassment and university access. An odds ratio of 0.056 suggests that concerns about harassment in educational institutions reduce the likelihood of pursuing higher education by 44%, highlighting the significant impact of safety concerns on educational attainment.

The analysis further indicates that significant involvement in domestic responsibilities (OR = 0.213, $p < 0.05$) reduces educational opportunities by 79%, reflecting cultural expectations that prioritize household chores over schooling for girls. Early marriage (OR = 0.242, $p < 0.05$) is associated with a 76% lower likelihood of higher education enrollment among married girls compared to their unmarried counterparts. Household income constraints (OR = 0.158, $p < 0.05$) suggest that girls from low-income families are 84% less likely to pursue higher education. Additionally, the high cost of education (OR = 0.233, $p < 0.05$) reduces the likelihood of enrollment in higher education institutions by 77%.

The data also reveal that a long distance to the nearest higher education institution (OR = .244, $p < 0.05$) is likely to limit the opportunities for higher education by 76%. However, the availability of safe public transport or a hostel facility for girls 3 times increases the likelihood of pursuing higher education.

Qualitative Results

Focus groups with females who were unable to enroll in universities and in-depth interviews with parents and academics across four districts of Balochistan were held to gather qualitative insights to support the quantitative results. These conversations yielded rich insights into the multifaceted obstacles that shape girls' educational choices. Three primary themes emerged from the thematic analysis: sociocultural barriers, economic barriers, and structural challenges.

Sociocultural Barriers

The participants identified five key sociocultural obstacles that hinder girls' access to higher education: restrictions on female mobility, harassment, household responsibilities, gender inequality in decision-making, and early marriages.

Restriction on Female Mobility

A significant obstacle consistently noted across all four districts was the strict restrictions on females' mobility enforced by families and communities. Participants from Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi emphasized that girls are rarely permitted to travel outside their villages or districts without a male family member. In Quetta and Sibi, where universities exist, parents express significant concern about their daughters traveling alone, particularly when campuses are far from their residences and require public transportation. Girls indicated that such restrictions significantly hinder their access to higher education when they must commute every day or relocate to pursue it. Numerous participants indicated that these constraints arise from cultural norms that emphasize female modesty and safety, as well as from concerns over reputational damage.



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Harassment

In all four districts, harassment was identified as one of the main obstacles seriously preventing girls from pursuing higher education. Girls mentioned that they frequently feel frightened when traveling to college because of inappropriate behavior, verbal abuse, and unwanted staring from strangers. These experiences make them nervous and frightened, and they lose confidence in their ability to continue their studies.

According to parents, harassment occurs in both university campuses and public transportation. The primary reason they are forced to keep their daughters at home instead of letting them move outside the district for higher study is the harassment scandals in universities. Such incidents undermine public trust in universities and demonstrate that these institutions have failed to create a secure environment for girls. Additionally, even in districts like Quetta and Sibi, where universities exist, parents were not allowed to allow their daughters to enroll in universities due to the news of harassment cases that are shared on social media.

Domestic Responsibilities

Domestic responsibilities emerged as a significant sociocultural obstacle for married, engaged, or older girls. According to parents, girls are expected to prioritize family support and housework over their education. Many girls in FGDs explained that managing household duties is a full-time job that takes a lot of time and effort. They lack the time and energy necessary to attend regular lectures and study after a full day of unpaid labor. Parents frequently saw girls' education as incompatible with the gender roles that girls are supposed to perform in the home. In rural areas like Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi, where girls typically take full responsibility for cooking, caring for children and elders, and cleaning the house, these expectations were more noticeable.

Gender Inequality in Decision Making

The theme of inequity in decision-making was prominent throughout the discussions. Girls indicated that decisions regarding their higher education are predominantly made by their fathers, brothers, or husbands. In cases where girls aspired to attain higher education, they frequently lacked the autonomy to make independent decisions. The academics indicated that patriarchal power dynamics are prevalent in the region, constraining girls' autonomy in decisions about migration, marriage, caregiving, and education. Numerous parents acknowledged a preference for investing in their sons' education when family resources are constrained. Gender-based decision-making greatly restricts females' access to higher education institutions.

Early Marriage

Thematic analysis reveals that one of the main obstacles that directly affects girls' access to higher education is early marriage. The married girls emphasized that because of new family expectations, continuing education becomes socially unacceptable or practically impossible after they are married or even engaged. Parents and educators pointed out that in many communities, marriage is prioritized over education, and females are expected to take on household duties as soon as they are married.

Participants stated that after a woman marries, she loses the ability to decide whether to pursue higher education, as her husband and in-laws discourage her from enrolling in a university if it requires daily travel or relocation. Many participants mentioned that early marriage limits a girl's autonomy, restricts her mobility, and forces her to perform her traditional responsibilities of cooking, caring for children, and cleaning the house, even if she demonstrates a strong desire for higher education.



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Economic barriers

The primary and most consequential obstacle highlighted by participants in conversations was economic constraints. They identified two primary economic barriers that impede girls' access to universities: household income constraints and the high cost of education.

Household Income Constraints

Economic hardship was repeatedly identified as a significant barrier that restricts girls' access to higher education. Parents in Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi indicated that extreme poverty prevents them from financing higher education, even if the tuition fee is low. They deemed the expenses for food, clothing, books, transportation, and relocation unreasonable. Numerous girls indicated that limited financial resources compel families to prioritize basic needs or boys' education over girls' education. The educators explained that higher education is a luxury rather than a necessity, particularly for economically deprived populations.

High Cost of Education

Participants across all four districts reported that the high cost of education was a significant barrier to many girls pursuing higher education. Even in Quetta and Sibi, where universities exist, parents said the financial burden of tuition fees, hostel charges, examination fees, and transportation costs is unaffordable. Educators highlighted that, due to the financial crisis, many universities have raised fees, making higher education inaccessible to a significant number of girls. Many girls reported that without scholarships or government support, continuing education beyond the intermediate level is practically impossible for them.

Structural Challenges

The participants, mainly from Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi, reported structural challenges, including long distance to the nearest higher education institution and a lack of safe transport or hostel facilities, as significant barriers that limit girls' access to universities.

Long Distance to Nearest Higher Education Institution

Participants considered a considerable distance to universities a significant obstacle, particularly in regions such as Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi, which lack higher education institutions. In these areas, girls need to travel for hours or migrate to other districts to pursue higher education. Parents express significant concern regarding their daughters' everyday travel due to safety concerns. Participants indicated that long travel distances significantly hinder girls' access to universities, even in districts such as Quetta and Sibi, where institutions are available.

Lack of Safe Transportation and Hostel Facilities for Girls

The lack of safe and reliable transport emerged as a key challenge for girls in accessing higher education institutions. Participants considered unsafe or overcrowded public transport as a significant deterrent. Parents highlighted that the absence of girls' exclusive transport facilities is a major barrier and a cause of great concern, as overcrowded public transport increases the chances of female harassment. They also mentioned that hostels for girls are either unavailable, inaccessible, or socially inappropriate. Educators acknowledged that inadequate infrastructure disproportionately affects girls, as boys have more mobility, safety, and social freedom.



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Discussion

The results of this study show that a complex network of barriers hampers girls' access to higher education in Balochistan. These restrictions are present in families, communities, and institutions, and they are interrelated. Girls' educational pathways are constrained by a complex web of factors, including cultural norms, financial constraints, safety concerns, and institutional flaws, as demonstrated by both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Quantitative results indicate that restrictions on female mobility, early marriage, and gender inequality in decision-making are among the strongest predictors negatively associated with girls' access to higher education in Balochistan. These findings are strongly supported by qualitative insights where girls, parents, and academics consistently described how concerns and social expectations related to female mobility, early marriage, and gender roles diminish opportunities and motivation for higher education. In districts like Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi, families often prohibit girls from traveling alone or relocating due to safety concerns and fear of stigma. Even in districts like Quetta and Sibi, where universities exist, parents do not allow their daughters to travel long distances on a daily basis to reach universities. In this way, mobility constraints, along with the lack of safe public transport, become a decisive factor limiting girls' ability to attend universities regularly.

The findings also indicate that early marriage is negatively correlated with females' access to higher education. The quantitative data indicate that married females show a lower desire to enroll in universities; however, qualitative analysis clarifies that this reduced aspiration is a result of marriage-related responsibilities and a loss of autonomy rather than a lack of interest in pursuing higher education. Thus, early marriage serves as a significant barrier that restricts educational opportunities by confining females to traditional gender roles and diminishing their capacity for autonomous decision-making. Safety concerns, particularly related to harassment, emerged as a critical consideration influencing parental decision-making. Families are less inclined to permit their daughters to attend universities due to concerns about potential harassment during travel and in public spaces. Qualitative findings also revealed that extensively publicized harassment scandals within universities have significantly eroded parental confidence in higher education institutions. These incidents lead individuals to perceive universities as hazardous environments for women, prompting families to prioritize safety over educational pursuits. This perception persists in districts with universities, indicating that safety concerns within universities are considered more significant than the nearness of the institutions.

These challenges are compounded by domestic responsibilities, which limit the time and effort that women can devote to their education. Girls reported that, particularly after becoming engaged or married, they are expected to assume caregiving duties and household chores. The notion that higher education conflicts with conventional female roles is reinforced by these responsibilities, which hinder academic progress and impede consistent university attendance.

Access to education is also profoundly influenced by financial barriers. Regression analysis indicates that household income constraints and the high costs of education substantially reduce the probability that females enroll in universities. The qualitative interviews also suggest that families often face challenges covering indirect expenses, such as academic materials, accommodation, and transportation, alongside tuition fees. In households with limited resources, boys' education is frequently prioritized, reflecting profoundly rooted gender biases. Financial limitations cannot be addressed by the



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presence of universities within a district; instead, the burden is shifted to hidden expenses that remain unaffordable to many families.

When districts with and without universities are compared, it becomes evident that access cannot be ensured solely through the physical availability of higher education institutions. Although there are fewer geographical barriers to female education in Quetta and Sibi, societal norms, the high cost of education, and safety concerns continue to restrict their access to university. Conversely, females in Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi encounter additional obstacles due to their isolated locations, insufficient infrastructure, and more restrictive mobility regulations. This contrast illustrates that structural availability must be supported by societal acceptance, economic support, and gender-sensitive infrastructure to ensure meaningful access.

Overall, the findings indicate that barriers to girls' higher education in Balochistan are complicatedly linked and mutually reinforcing. Cultural norms influence household decisions, poverty constrains available choices, and institutional deficiencies intensify existing inequities. Focusing on a single dimension in isolation is improbable to produce enduring change. A comprehensive strategy that simultaneously tackles gender stereotypes, affordability, safety, and infrastructure is necessary to enhance educational opportunities for females throughout the province.

Conclusion

This study concludes that girls in Balochistan are prevented from pursuing higher education by a complex interaction of sociocultural, economic, and structural barriers. Sociocultural obstacles, including early marriage, gender inequality, harassment, and mobility restrictions, are the most significant factors restricting girls' access to and motivation for higher education. Two financial obstacles that further limit women's educational opportunities are household poverty and the high cost of education. Inadequate hostel facilities, unsafe transportation, and long commutes to universities are just a few of the structural obstacles that, when paired with cultural norms, made things even worse for girls, especially in areas without universities.

Recommendations

To improve girls' access to higher education in Balochistan, efforts must be multifaceted. Establishing universities or their sub-campuses in underserved districts such as Jaffarabad and Jhal Magsi is imperative. The government should provide safe, affordable transportation options for women. It will enhance safety protocols along travel routes to mitigate harassment. Providing safe, affordable hostels near universities, along with effective monitoring, will address parental concerns and increase female enrollment in higher education. Likewise, it will be beneficial to increase scholarship stipends and fee waivers for girls from low-income families. Furthermore, the government should offer subsidized accommodation, educational materials, and transportation support to female students from low-income families.

The provincial government, in collaboration with NGOs, should initiate awareness campaigns highlighting the importance of girls' higher education and involve religious and local leaders in addressing harmful norms and gender stereotypes that impede girls' access to higher education institutions. The government must ensure the effective implementation of laws regulating underage marriages to enable girls to seek higher education before taking marital and domestic responsibilities. The university administration must create a safe environment for female students by implementing a campus-wide reporting mechanism for harassment and conducting periodic awareness



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seminars on reporting it.

Coordinated efforts covering sociocultural, economic, and institutional dimensions are necessary to increase girls' access to higher education. Policymakers, communities, and parents may foster an environment where girls can pursue higher education opportunities without fear, restriction, or discrimination by implementing the above-mentioned suggestions.

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