
Out-of-School Children in Pakistan: A Comparative Gender Analysis of Boys and Girls

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Abstract

Pakistan continues to face a severe educational crisis, with millions of children outside the formal schooling system. The education ministry has presented alarming statistics, revealing that 26,206,520 children are currently out of school across the country. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa out-of-school children reach 4.92 million. Among the out-of-school children, 53 % are girls and 47% are boys. Gender disparity is a persistent challenge, particularly in rural districts. This study provides a comparative analysis of out-of-school boys and girls, focusing on Mardan and Swat districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A qualitative approach was employed for data collected from 10 secondary school teachers (5 male teachers from Mardan and 5 female teachers from Swat). Findings reveal that girls face socio-cultural restrictions, early marriage, household responsibilities, and infrastructure deficits, while boys are more affected by economic pressures, child labour, and peer influence. Teacher responses provide nuanced insights into district-specific barriers. The study concludes with recommendations for gender-specific, context-sensitive interventions to reduce out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan.

Keywords: Out-of-School Children, Gender Disparity, Socio-Cultural, Economic, Factors, Pakistan, Swat, Mardan

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of national development. Despite national and international commitments to universal education, Pakistan remains among the countries with the highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC), with estimates exceeding 26 million children aged 5–16 (AEPAM, 2024; ASER, 2024). Gender disparities are especially pronounced: girls are restricted by cultural norms, early marriage, and safety concerns, while boys are withdrawn for economic reasons, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. This study examines gender-specific barriers to education in Mardan and Swat districts, drawing insights from secondary school teachers to understand local realities and identify practical interventions. In Pakistan, the phenomenon of out-of-school children (OOSC) reflects deep-rooted gender-based discrimination that disproportionately affects girls. Despite constitutional guarantees of free and compulsory education, millions of children aged 5–16 remain excluded from schooling, with girls forming a higher share of this population. Socio-cultural norms that prioritize boys' education, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, safety concerns, and restricted mobility

significantly limit girls' access to schools, particularly in rural and conservative regions. In contrast, boys are more likely to be excluded due to economic pressures, child labor, and engagement in informal work to support household income. Structural inequalities such as the shortage of girls' schools, lack of female teachers, and inadequate sanitation facilities further widen the gender gap, especially at the middle and secondary levels. These disparities are most pronounced in provinces like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where poverty and traditional norms intersect. Overall, gender discrimination in Pakistan's education system not only sustains higher exclusion rates for girls but also reinforces intergenerational cycles of inequality and social disadvantage.

Problem Statement

Despite reforms and policy initiatives, Pakistan's educational system continues to exclude a significant portion of children, especially girls in rural areas and boys engaged in economic work. Understanding gender-specific and district-specific factors is essential to developing effective strategies for universal education.

Research Questions

1. What are the major gender differences among out-of-school children in Pakistan?
2. What socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors prevent girls from attending school in Swat?
3. What factors contribute to boys dropping out in Mardan?

Literature Review

Gender Disparities in Pakistan

Studies consistently show that girls have lower enrolment rates and higher never-enrolment rates than boys due to socio-cultural norms, early marriage, household responsibilities, and lack of female teachers (UNESCO, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Economic Pressures on Boys

Boys face economic pressures that often force them to leave school for work in agriculture, shops, or family businesses (World Bank, 2022).

Infrastructure & Teacher Availability

Lack of female teachers, separate toilets, boundary walls, and distant schools particularly impacts girls' enrolment and retention (ASER, 2024).

Regional Variation

Gender disparities are more severe in rural districts such as Swat compared to semi-urban districts like Mardan, highlighting the importance of context-specific interventions (PSLM, 2024).

Out-of-School Children in Pakistan from a Gender-Based Perspective

The persistence of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan has been widely examined in education and development literature, with gender-based discrimination identified as a central determinant of educational exclusion. Pakistan ranks among the countries with the highest number of OOSC globally, with estimates ranging between 22 and 26 million children aged 5–16 not enrolled in formal schooling (UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Scholars consistently report that girls constitute a disproportionately higher share of this population, reflecting entrenched gender inequalities within social, cultural, and institutional structures. A substantial body of

research highlights the role of patriarchal norms and household decision-making in shaping unequal access to education. Studies argue that parents often prioritize boys' schooling due to expectations of future economic returns, while girls' education is undervalued because of their anticipated domestic and caregiving roles (Sathar et al., 2013; Lloyd & Mensch, 2008). This discriminatory preference leads to higher non-enrolment and dropout rates among girls, particularly at the middle and secondary levels. Conversely, boys' exclusion from schooling is more frequently linked to economic pressures, including child labor and early entry into informal employment to support household income (Bhalotra & Heady, 2003).

The literature further emphasizes mobility restrictions and safety concerns as key barriers to girls' education in Pakistan. Research conducted in rural and conservative regions shows that long distances to schools, fear of harassment, and concerns related to family honor discourage parents from sending adolescent girls to school (Murray, 2014; UNGEI, 2019). These concerns intensify at puberty, contributing to sharp gender disparities in enrolment beyond primary education. In contrast, boys experience fewer restrictions on mobility, allowing relatively greater access to educational institutions. Institutional and infrastructural inequalities also reinforce gender-based exclusion. Multiple studies document the unequal distribution of schools, with significantly fewer girls' secondary schools compared to boys', particularly in provinces such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Government of Pakistan [GoP], 2021; Malik, 2018). The absence of basic facilities such as boundary walls, functional toilets, drinking water, and electricity disproportionately affects girls' attendance and retention (ASER, 2023). Additionally, the shortage of female teachers has been identified as a critical constraint, as their presence is often a decisive factor in parental approval of girls' schooling in conservative contexts (Andrabi et al., 2013). Provincial and rural–urban analyses reveal significant spatial variation in gender disparities. Research indicates that rural girls in Balochistan, southern Punjab, and newly merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face the highest risks of educational exclusion (UNESCO, 2021). Intersectional factors such as poverty, disability, conflict, and displacement further compound gender discrimination, placing girls at multiple layers of disadvantage (UNICEF, 2022).

The consequences of gendered educational exclusion are well documented. Literature links girls' lack of schooling to early marriage, poor maternal and child health outcomes, limited labor market participation, and reduced intergenerational social mobility (King & Winthrop, 2015). Boys who remain out of school, meanwhile, are more likely to enter low-skilled and precarious employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty (World Bank, 2020). These divergent outcomes highlight how gender discrimination produces distinct but equally harmful long-term effects. Overall, the literature suggests that while poverty and systemic inefficiencies contribute to OOSC in Pakistan, gender discrimination acts as a cross-cutting and amplifying factor, particularly for girls. Scholars advocate for gender-responsive interventions, including conditional cash transfers, expansion of girls' secondary schools, recruitment of female teachers, and community engagement to challenge discriminatory norms (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2020). However, gaps remain in qualitative and district-level research capturing lived experiences of discrimination, underscoring the need for context-sensitive empirical studies.

Theoretical Framework

Human Capital Theory

Education enhances productivity and economic opportunity. Families may weigh the perceived return on educating boys versus girls differently (Becker, 1993).

Gender Socialization Theory

Cultural norms and gendered expectations shape access to education, determining whether children are allowed to attend school (Ridgeway, 2011).

Social Exclusion Theory

Marginalized groups, including rural girls, face systemic exclusion from education due to structural barriers (Silver, 2007).

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative method was adopted for data collection from teachers. Research Sites comprised of: Mardan District and Swat District. Data was collected from 5 male secondary school teachers from Mardan and 5 female secondary school teachers from Swat. Data collection tool were Semi-structured interviews. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding.

Findings

Mardan Male Teachers: Ten Thematic Responses

1. Economic Pressure: Boys leave school to work and support family income.
2. Child Labour: Employment in agriculture or local businesses reduces school attendance.
3. Peer Influence: Friends working instead of studying encourages dropout.
4. Low Motivation: Lack of interest due to perception that school has low immediate value.
5. Parental Attitude: Families sometimes prioritize girls' education over boys'.
6. School Infrastructure: Overcrowded classrooms and poor roads affect attendance.
7. Curriculum Relevance: Boys find school subjects less applicable to earning opportunities.
8. Migration Impact: Families moving for work cause interruptions in boys' schooling.
9. Cultural Norms: Societal expectation that boys contribute economically.
10. Health and Fatigue: Boys involved in labour report fatigue affecting learning and regular attendance.

Swat Female Teachers: Ten Thematic Responses

1. Cultural Restrictions: Families restrict girls' education after primary school.
2. Early Marriage: Many girls leave school due to planned early marriages.
3. Household Duties: Girls contribute to childcare and domestic chores.
4. Safety Concerns: Parents fear harassment during travel to school.
5. Distance to School: Long travel distances discourage enrolment.
6. Lack of Female Teachers: Absence of female staff reduces parents' willingness to send girls.
7. Inadequate Facilities: Schools without toilets and boundary walls reduce enrolment.
8. Seasonal Farming Duties: Girls pulled from school during planting/harvest seasons.

9. Irregular Attendance: Domestic and cultural pressures cause frequent absenteeism.
10. Community Attitude: Conservative norms prioritize domestic roles for girls over education.

Cross-District Comparison

Aspects	Mardan Male Teachers	Swat Female Teachers
Main barrier	Economic pressure, labour, peer influence	Cultural norms, early marriage, household duties
Infrastructure	Overcrowding, poor roads	Distance, lack of female teachers, toilets, walls
Parental attitudes	Mixed; supportive for girls in some cases	Highly conservative; prefer girls stay home
Gender effect	Boys dropout more	Girls never-enroll early
Teacher observation	Economic motives dominate	Safety, cultural and household factors dominate

Discussion

Teacher responses highlight distinct mechanisms causing gender disparity: Girls restricted by cultural norms, early marriage, household duties, lack of female teachers, and poor infrastructure. Boy's dropout driven by economic pressures, child labour, peer influence, and low school motivation. District-specific differences demonstrate the need for tailored interventions. Swat requires culturally sensitive measures for girls, whereas Mardan needs economic and motivational support for boys. Girls are more likely to never enrol in rural areas like Swat due to socio-cultural restrictions, safety concerns, early marriage, and household duties. Boys are more likely to drop out in Mardan due to economic pressures, labour demands, and peer influence. Teacher perspectives emphasize the need for holistic strategies combining social, economic, and infrastructural solutions.

Recommendations

Girls (Swat and similar districts)

1. Build secondary schools closer to communities.
2. Recruit female teachers.
3. Provide safe transportation.
4. Launch awareness campaigns emphasizing girls' education.
5. Improve school facilities (toilets, walls).

Boys (Mardan and similar districts)

1. Provide conditional cash transfers to reduce economic pressure.
2. Offer flexible or evening schooling.
3. Improve teaching quality and classroom engagement.
4. Engage communities to balance education and economic contributions.

Policy Level

1. Increase education budget to $\geq 4\%$ of GDP.
2. Strengthen monitoring through district Education Management Information System
3. Expand non-formal education programs.
4. Promote gender-sensitive, context-specific planning.

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