Barriers to Female Education in Rural Areas: A Case Study of PEF Partner Schools

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Abstract

Purpose of this study was to explore the barriers to female education in rural areas, focusing on Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) partner schools. Girls in the rural setting have a number of challenges that prevent their access to education despite attempts to enhance access to education. The study was conducted to identify those challenges that hinder girls' education. The qualitative research design was used. Population of the study was all the parents/community member all over the rural areas of Lahore having out of school girls. The sample of the study was five purposely selected parents/community members of out of school girls live in rural areas within the premises of PEF partner school. The data was collected using semi-structured interview protocol to get insights of parents/community members regarding barriers to female education in the rural areas. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, with NVivo software utilized for organizing, coding, and identifying emergent themes. The analysis revealed that girls' education in rural areas of Lahore is limited by interrelated economic, social, and cultural barriers, such as poverty, household chores, security concerns, and mobility restrictions. Yet both parents and girls value education, seeing it as a path to independence and a better future. On the basis of the result of the study, it is suggested to improv financial support, transport, school security, community awareness, parental involvement, and flexible birth-certificate provision time policies to help girls to enroll in school and continue their education.

Keywords: Barriers, Female Education, Rural Areas.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental tool for social, economic, and human development. It promotes empowerment, reduces poverty, and contributes to sustainable national growth. In Pakistan, however, gender disparities in education remain significant, particularly in rural areas where girls face multiple barriers to access and retention. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS, 2025), approximately 22.84 million children are out of school, and nearly 60% of them are girls. Female education discrimination in rural Pakistan is a complex issue influenced by cultural norms, poverty, lack of educational facilities, financial constraints, security concerns, and the shortage of female teachers. These interconnected factors continue to hinder girls' access to education and contribute to high dropout rates.

In many rural communities, cultural norms play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward girls' education. Education is often not prioritized for girls, as they are expected to marry early and take on domestic responsibilities. These expectations limit their time and opportunity to attend school. Families frequently

perceive girls' primary roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers, which discourages investment in their education (Amin et al., 2021). In some cases, parents believe that educating girls is unnecessary because daughters will eventually marry and join another household.

Economic constraints further exacerbate the problem. Many families in rural Pakistan struggle to meet their basic needs and therefore hesitate to invest in girls' education. Even when public schooling is nominally free, hidden costs such as uniforms, books, transportation, and examination fees can prevent girls from attending school. According to the World Bank (2018), limited access to education for girls leads to an estimated global loss of between 15 and 30 trillion US dollars in lifetime productivity and income. Educating girls not only benefits individuals but also contributes to poverty reduction and economic development at household and national levels.

Global studies also emphasize the importance of female education for social development. For example, projections by the World Bank (2025) indicate that improved girls' education could generate an additional 240 billion US dollars in income in African countries by 2040. Similarly, the United Nations reports that secondary school enrollment among rural girls in developing countries is approximately 39%, significantly lower than that of rural boys (45%), urban girls (59%), and urban boys (60%).

In Pakistan, educational disparities between rural and urban women remain substantial. According to UNESCO (2024), the literacy rate among rural women is approximately 42%, compared to 73% among urban women. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) also shows that about 32% of girls in rural Pakistan are out of school, compared to 21% of boys.

Cultural gender norms further influence girls' access to education. In many communities, expectations regarding modesty, family honor, and traditional roles limit girls' mobility and educational opportunities. These norms require women to uphold family reputation through modest behavior and adherence to traditional practices (Amin et al., 2021). As a result, parents may restrict girls' participation in education, particularly in co-educational institutions.

Early marriage is another significant barrier to girls' education. In several regions, especially conservative rural areas, girls are expected to marry at a young age, which often leads to school dropout. Cultural traditions such as Pashtunwali emphasize women's roles as mothers and caregivers, reinforcing the perception that education is unnecessary for girls. Consequently, some families consider schooling a waste of time and financial resources (Ahmad et al., 2014).

Patriarchal structures also contribute to gender disparities in education. In many households, male family members make decisions regarding girls' education, including whether daughters should be enrolled in school. These decisions are often influenced by traditional beliefs that prioritize male education over female education (Sultana, 2010; Sarkar, 2022). Such patriarchal attitudes reinforce gender inequality and limit girls' access to educational opportunities.

Socio-cultural barriers also influence attitudes toward co-education (Mehmood et al., 2018). identify several factors that discourage girls' participation in co-educational systems, including male dominance, conservative traditions, gender segregation, and the purdah system. Religious misconceptions and resistance from conservative religious leaders further complicate efforts to promote girls' education.

Empirical studies across different countries highlight the strong influence of cultural norms on girls' educational participation. For instance, research in Nepal shows that patriarchal structures and gendered expectations contribute significantly to female school dropout (Dahal, 2023). Similarly, studies in India and Nigeria indicate that parental attitudes, early marriage, and gender roles strongly affect girls' enrollment and retention in school (Gochhayat & Ravindran, 2025; Ige et al., 2024). In Pakistan, community power structures and cultural values continue to shape access to education for girls (Kalani, 2025).

Beyond cultural factors, poverty remains one of the most critical barriers to girls' education. Many families cannot afford educational expenses and instead rely on children, particularly girls, to contribute to household labor. Girls are often responsible for domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, caring for siblings, fetching

water, and tending livestock (Khan et al., 2022). These responsibilities reduce the time available for schooling and increase the likelihood of dropping out.

Economic hardship also influences parental decisions regarding educational investment. Families facing financial difficulties often prioritize boys' education because they are viewed as future breadwinners, while girls are expected to marry and leave the household. As a result, girls from low-income families are significantly less likely to attend school (Shahidul & Karim, 2015).

The availability and quality of educational facilities also affect girls' access to education. Many rural areas lack adequate schools, particularly at the secondary level. Even when schools exist, they often suffer from poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and inadequate sanitation facilities. These conditions discourage parents from sending their daughters to school (Somani, 2017). Distance to school is another major obstacle. In many rural communities, schools are located far from residential areas, requiring students to travel long distances. Approximately 29% of rural households report that schools are too far away (World Bank, 2021). Parents may be reluctant to allow girls to travel long distances due to concerns about safety and social norms regarding female mobility.

Security concerns further discourage girls' school attendance. Fear of harassment, violence, or unsafe travel routes often leads parents to withdraw girls from school once they reach adolescence. Reports from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan indicate increasing cases of gender-based violence, which further heightens parental concerns about girls' safety. Transportation challenges also affect girls' education. Lack of reliable and safe transportation options makes it difficult for girls to attend schools located far from their homes. Studies have shown that transportation difficulties, travel time, and associated costs significantly influence girls' educational participation (Shahzad, 2017).

Another important factor is the shortage of female teachers. In many rural schools, the number of female teachers is very limited. Parents often prefer female teachers for their daughters due to cultural and safety concerns. The absence of female role models in schools can therefore discourage girls' enrollment and retention.

Overall, the barriers to girls' education in Pakistan are multidimensional and interconnected. Cultural norms, poverty, limited educational facilities, security concerns, and gender discrimination collectively contribute to the low participation of girls in education. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy interventions, including improving school infrastructure, providing financial support to families, promoting gender-sensitive policies, and raising community awareness about the importance of girls' education.
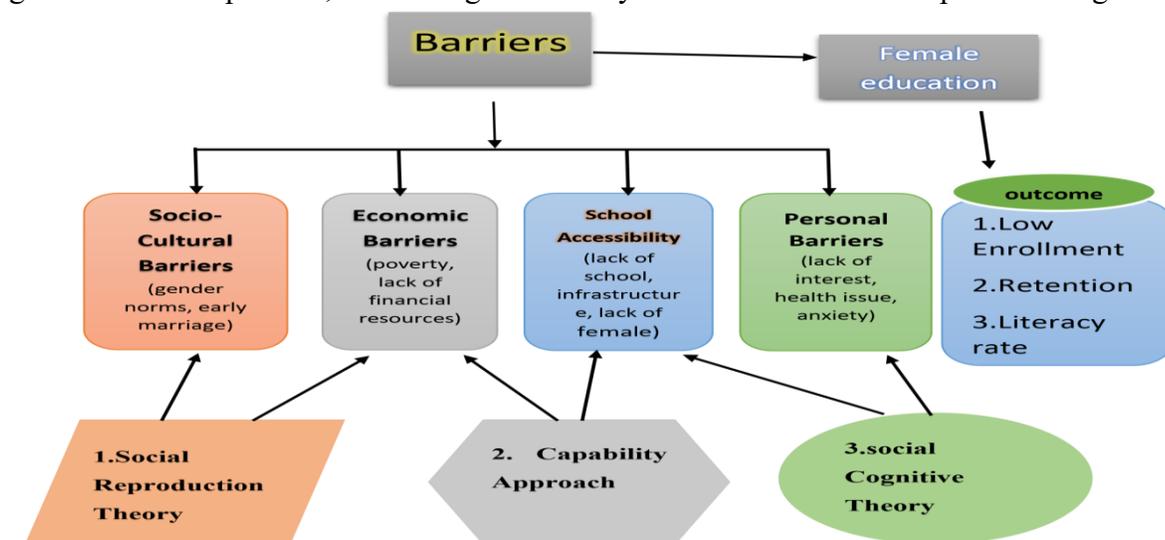

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Therefore, this study aimed to generate localized, evidence-based findings through a qualitative approach. The results can assist policymakers, school administrators, and community stakeholders in designing targeted interventions to promote gender equity and sustainable educational development in rural Punjab.

Research Objectives

The study was based on the following objectives:
1. To explore the economic factors that hinder girls' access to and continuation of education in rural areas.
2. To examine influence of poverty, household income constraints, and domestic responsibilities on parents' decisions regarding girls' schooling.
3. To understand parents' and community members' perceptions regarding school security and accessibility in rural settings.
4. To explore socio-cultural beliefs and gender norms in shaping parents' attitudes toward girls' education.

Research Questions

The following were the research questions of the study:
1. How do economic factors affect girls' access to and continuation of education in rural areas?
2. How do poverty, household income constraints, and domestic responsibilities influence parents' decisions about girls' schooling?
3. How do parents and community members perceive issues of school security and accessibility in rural settings?
4. How do socio-cultural beliefs and gender norms shape attitudes and practices toward girls' education in rural communities?

The study was limited to parents/community members within the premises of PEF partners school and specific in rural places in Lahore in the province of the Punjab Pakistan.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore barriers to girls' education in rural areas, particularly within schools supported by the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF). Grounded in the interpretive paradigm, the research sought to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of parents and community members regarding girls' access to education in rural areas. A qualitative descriptive case study design was employed, focusing on five purposively selected PEF-supported schools and their surrounding rural communities in Lahore to examine the issue within its real-life context.

Purposive sampling was used to select five parents and community members who had direct knowledge of girls' education in their communities. Although limited in number, the sample ensured depth and richness of data. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews developed in line with the study objectives and literature. The interview guide addressed socio-economic challenges, cultural norms, parental attitudes, school accessibility, safety concerns, and perceptions of PEF partner schools. The instrument was reviewed and pilot-tested to ensure clarity and validity.
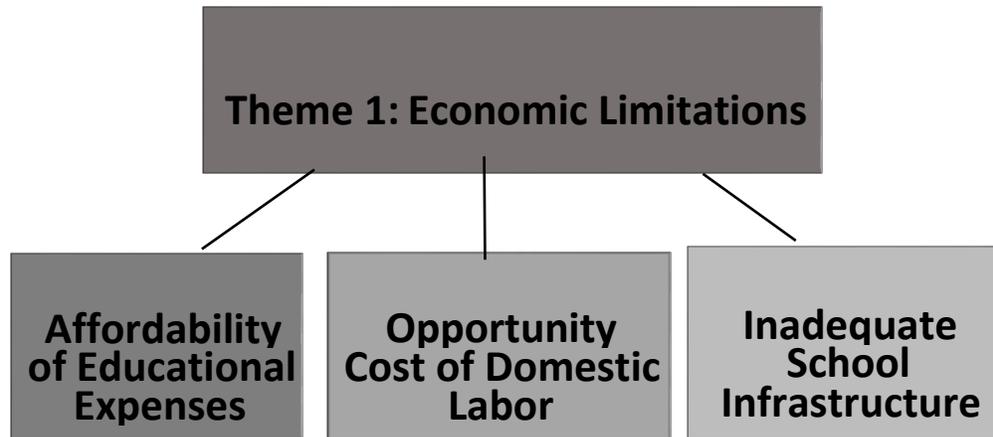
Interviews were conducted in comfortable settings within the selected communities and were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure accurate transcription. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were coded and organized into themes with the support of NVivo software. Ethical principles, including confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw, were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents the thematic analysis in order to examine the information gathered by the participants. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying themes and patterns in qualitative data. Finding themes that is, significant and fascinating patterns in the data and using them to answer the research question in the aim of thematic analysis.

Theme 1: Economic Limitations

This theme highlights how poverty and limited household income restrict girls' access to education in rural areas. Many families prioritize basic survival needs over schooling, leading to difficulties in paying for uniforms, books, and transportation.

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                  │  Theme 1: Economic           │
                  │  Limitations                 │
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  │ Affordability │ │  Opportunity  │ │  Inadequate   │
  │ of Educational│ │ Cost of       │ │  School       │
  │ Expenses      │ │ Domestic Labor│ │  Infrastructure│
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Sub-theme 1.1 Affordability of Educational Expenses

Focuses on whether families can afford the hidden costs of schooling beyond tuition. Even when education is free, expenses like uniforms, books, and transport can prevent girls from enrolling or attending regularly.

P1 said that: *I cannot afford to provide my children with uniforms, shoes and stationery. We are in bad financial times. Provided a person provides us with shoes, uniforms or cost assistance, I will certainly educate my daughters. We are not able to cope with school expenses.*

P2 said that: *Our daughters are not attending school due to the fact that our income is low. The schools do not provide copies, uniforms and food; they only give books. Had there been money we would get them at once.*

P3 said that: *I am a widow and I do not have resources to educate my daughter. It was during the first class that she dropped out of school since I could not afford any more.*

P4 said that: *I am divorced and my economic status is not good. I am not even yet made my identity card. This is why I am not able to cover education costs in my daughters.*

P5 said that: *We are not in a stable position financially. We would like to learn our girls, yet we just cannot afford it. In case we improve our financial position, we would certainly forward them.*

Sub-Theme 1.2: Opportunity of Domestic Labor

Examines how girls' involvement in household chores affects their schooling. When families rely on girls for cooking, cleaning, childcare, or farming, education may be seen as a lost economic contribution. This often leads to irregular attendance or dropout, as domestic responsibilities take priority over schooling.

P1 said that: *Daughters are doing the chores, supporting economically, looking after younger children.*

P4 said that: *At home, girls are employed as thread cutters.*
P5 said that: *At home, girls cut clothes and help their parents.*

Sub- theme 1.3: Inadequate School infrastructure

Inadequate school infrastructure refers to schools lacking basic facilities needed for effective learning. This includes insufficient classrooms, poor sanitation, limited access to clean water, and broken furniture or teaching materials.

P1 said that: *I did not state the number of schools but we lack effective systems of enrollment or access.*
**P2 said that:** *We have a sufficient number of schools around us, so that is not an issue.*
P3 said that: *The figure of schools is not as important to us as the environment and safety.*
P4 said that: *The school of the government is quite a distance, whereas NSP school is located near home and thus it is not a big problem.*
P5 said that: *We do not have online schools, so that is a major challenge to us.*

Theme 2: Safety and Accessibility

This theme focuses on how concerns about girls' safety, long distances to schools, and lack of reliable transportation limit their access to education. Parents' fears regarding harassment and insecure travel routes often discourage regular school attendance and continuation.
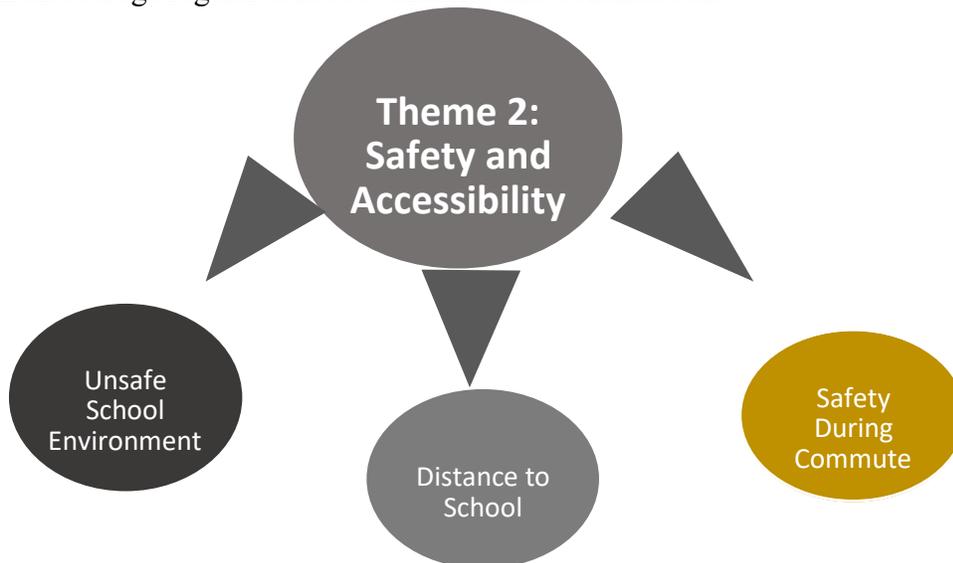
Sub theme 2.1: Distance to School

This sub-theme highlights how long distances to school hinder girls' access to education in rural areas. Traveling far can be tiring, unsafe, and costly, leading to irregular attendance or dropout. Ensuring nearby schools or safe transport is crucial for increasing enrollment and retention of girls.

P1 said that: *I did not mention distance particularly, but it is tough to get girls to school.*
P2 said that: *No, schools are nearby. We do not have a problem with distance.*
P3 said that: *I have not said anything about school distance literally but external conditions are not favorable.*
P4 said that: *yes, the government school is distant. I feel more at home in the NSP school since it is nearer.*
P5 said that: *Yes, the school is far. I find it extremely hard to drop and collect my daughters.*

Sub-theme 2.2: Unsafe School Environment

This sub-theme highlights how unsafe school environments both physical (poor infrastructure, lack of sanitation) and social (harassment, bullying) negatively affect girls' attendance and learning. Such conditions create fear among students and concern among parents, reducing school participation.

P1 said that: *Yes, I am worried. Our daughters are not going to school because of male teachers.*

P2, P4 said that: *No, it is not a hostile school atmosphere. I am sure that I am sending my daughters there.*

P3 said that: *Yes, I believe that the place is not safe with girls. Individuals gossip, and such influences the safety of my daughter.*

P5 said that: *I am not concerned with the school, but the external environment. I do not want girls to be spoiled by going out.*

Sub- theme 2.3: Safety during Commute

This sub-theme highlights how unsafe school commutes long distances, poor roads, lack of transport, and harassment risks negatively affect girls' attendance. Fears for their safety often lead parents to keep them home, increasing absenteeism and dropouts.

P1 said that: *I did not discuss the issue of commuting directly, but the existence of the male staff has an influence on our choice.*

P2 said that: *No, I feel my daughters are okay going to school.*

P3 said that: *Yes, I am very concerned. The area is not good. Human beings talk behind, and that is bad with girls.*

P4 said that: *No, I am not concerned since the NSP school is locally situated and girls do not travel too far.*

P5 said that: *Yes, I have never sent my daughters to school. I fear they shall be contaminated by the outside world.*

Theme 3: Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Expectations

This theme examines how traditional beliefs and gender roles influence attitudes toward girls' education in rural communities. Preference for early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and
the perception that boys' education is more valuable often restrict girls' educational opportunities.

Sub-theme 3.1: Cultural beliefs against Girl education
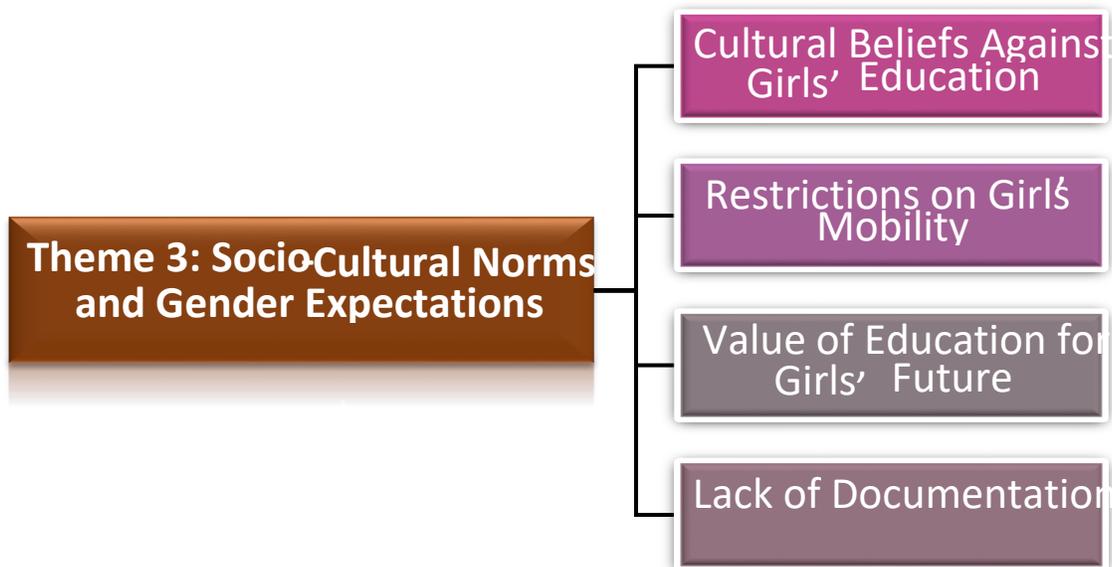
This sub-theme highlights how traditional cultural beliefs and societal norms in rural areas often discourage or block girls from accessing education. Girls are expected to prioritize household duties, and education is seen as harmful to family honor or marriage prospects. Addressing these norms and involving the community is crucial to improving girls' enrollment and reducing dropouts.

P1 said that: *Yes, our elders think that once girls start studying, they become rude and lose morals. But even then, I would like my daughter to be educated.*
P2 said that: *No, I think it is good to educate girls. It will be able to change their future and even their relations.*
P3, P5 said that: *Yes, the elders say that girls will be spoiled in case they are not educated at home. Instead, they like girls to study at home.*
P4 said that: *No, girls are thought to be good at studying, and nobody objects. Other parents mentioned that their elders in the family feel that educating girls outside the home will spoil them or compromise their morals and they would rather educate them at home.*

Sub-theme 3.2: Restrictions on Girls Mobility
This sub-theme highlights how restrictions on girls' mobility driven by safety fears and cultural norms limit their ability to attend school or participate in activities. Such constraints reduce attendance, punctuality, and engagement in learning.
P1, P3, P5 said that: *Yes, our daughters are kept at home to come and assist and since the elders do not want their daughters to go out. Human beings gossip and we cannot afford to risk.* **P2 said that:** *It is not very strict with a few restrictions. We would release them, were we able moneyed.*
P4 said that: *No, in our neighborhood it is not a problem with girls going out and they are not forbidden to study.*

Sub-theme 3.3: Value of Education for Girls' Future
This sub-theme shows that girls and their families view education as a pathway to personal growth, independence, and improved family well-being. Despite challenges like poverty and cultural restrictions, many girls remain motivated to learn and pursue careers.
P1 said that: *I believe my daughter will become a better person if she studies. I want her to be educated even though our elders are against it.*
P2, P5 said that: *Education will make us daughters independent. They will have better lives and good relationships. Education will make them stronger and more independent.*
P4 said that: *Yes, girls should study. I believe they will be more empowered and capable.*

Sub-theme 3.4: Lack of Documentation
This sub-theme highlights how the lack of essential documents like birth certificates or IDs prevents girls from enrolling in school. Vulnerable families face challenges obtaining these records, leading to delayed or denied education. Ensuring proper documentation is crucial for guaranteeing all girls access to schooling.
P1, P5 said that: *I haven't made identity cards for myself or birth certificates for the children. That stops me from enrolling them. We can't even think of admission without documents.*
P2 said that: *I didn't mention documentation, but financial challenges are my main issue.*
P4 said that: *I couldn't make my ID card because our marriage isn't registered online. That's a big barrier.*

Discussion

The results of this study showed that several challenges continue to restrict female education in rural regions, even with the support of the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF). Parents highlighted financial constraints, socio-cultural limitations, safety concerns, and domestic duties as the main causes of educational exclusion. These findings align with previous studies in similar rural settings in Pakistan, which indicate that educational barriers remain deeply rooted in social and structural inequalities.

According to (Rizwana et al., 2023), traditional beliefs, patriarchal control, and poverty are major obstacles to girls' schooling in Punjab. Similarly, parents in the current study noted that cultural beliefs and the opinions of community elders often discourage girls from attending school due to fears of social gossip or moral decline. (Noureen & Awan, 2010) also reported that "hidden fences," such as gender roles and culturally imposed expectations, continue to obstruct girls' access to education even where schools are physically accessible. This corresponds to concerns raised by participants regarding movement limitations and safety in the vicinity of PEF partner schools.

Economic difficulty was among the most prominent barriers in both this and previous research. Studies such as *Access to Education of Rural Girls in Pakistan* (SAGE Open, 2022) and (Malik & Zahra, 2023) report that poverty limits families' ability to afford fees, uniforms, books, and transportation, while also perpetuating intergenerational poverty. Parents in this study similarly noted that education serves as a pathway toward independence and socioeconomic stability, particularly for single mothers.

Distance to schools and safety concerns were also major themes. Parents reported harassment, unsafe routes, and lack of reliable transportation as significant deterrents to schooling. This aligns with (Hussain et al., 2025), who found insecurity and long travel distances as key barriers for rural girls, and with (SAGE Open 2022), which noted that perceived safety rather than proximity determines school attendance.

Another significant obstacle was domestic labor. Household responsibilities, such as cooking, sewing, and caregiving, heavily occupied girls' time, echoing findings by (Noureen & Awan, 2010) and Rizwana et al. (2023), who emphasized the impact of gendered household roles on educational participation. Despite these challenges, families expressed the value of education, viewing it as a tool for empowerment and social mobility, reflecting the positive aspirations reported in (Qureshi, 2023).

The study further highlights institutional constraints that persist despite PEF assistance. Parents indicated that the absence of female teachers and inadequate school facilities reinforces cultural reservations regarding girls' education. This aligns with (Noureen & Awan, 2010), who noted that families are more willing to send girls to school when the environment is safe and supportive. Similarly, (Rizwana et al., 2023) emphasized that poor infrastructure strengthens preconceptions about danger, and (Hussain et al., 2025) highlighted safety-related concerns including lack of boundary walls, safe classrooms, and adequate supervision. These findings suggest that financial support alone is insufficient; structural improvements in staffing, facilities, and safety measures are critical to complement financial interventions and ensure sustained educational participation.

Conclusion

This study provides a well-informed insight into the barriers that hinder access to and persistence in education for girls in rural areas, based on a case study of a PEF partner school. The findings illustrate that numerous interconnected barriers such as financial issues, family commitments, safety concerns, and sociocultural factors severely limit girls' educational opportunities. Families, particularly low-income households and single mothers, often struggle to afford transport, books, and uniforms, while girls must balance school with household chores, which can interfere with their studies. Social norms and safety concerns further restrict girls' mobility, as parents fear gossip, harassment, or exposure to external influence.

Despite these challenges, both parents and girls place a high value on education. Many girls expressed a strong desire to learn, pursue meaningful professions, and achieve greater independence, highlighting the potential for positive change. This suggests that rural communities are increasingly ready to support girls' education if

provided with appropriate interventions.

Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional approach, including financial support, safe access to schooling, reduction of domestic burdens, given the time limit to get birth certificates, and community awareness to counter restrictive cultural norms. Through such measures, policymakers and educational institutions like PEF can improve enrollment and retention, foster long-term social and economic development, empower women, and contribute to breaking cycles of poverty in rural areas.

Recommendation

Following recommendations were devised on the basis of the results of the study:

- Financial support like; scholarships, stipends, uniforms, books and transport subsidies should be provided to help decrease the dropout caused by poverty.
- Schools should introduce income-generating skills programs to support students financially.
- Practical skills such as tailoring, handicrafts, digital skills, agriculture, and small business training can be taught within schools.
- PEF-affiliated schools provide a time frame of six months for parents to obtain birth certificates of their children.
- To support families, schools facilitate access to these documents by arranging NADRA vans, helping eliminate barriers to enrollment.
- Make schools safer and more accessible by providing safe environments, routes, and transport facilities where they are needed.
- Introduce flexible learning opportunities such as modified schedules and part time- and home-based learning to girls having domestic duties.
- Increase the female teachers have more women teachers and mentorship programs to create parental trust and support the girls.

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