Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society
Volume: 39, No. 01, January– June 2026

Ayesha Naeem [*]
Ambreen Salahuddin [**]

Breaking Down Barriers to Female Education in Pakistan

Abstract

This study explores the current state of girls' education in Pakistan using different perspectives. It investigates the challenges that prevent girls from going to school and the efforts being made to improve the situation. While Pakistan's constitution promises equal rights for all, many girls still face difficulties in getting an education due to poverty, traditional beliefs, and safety concerns, especially in areas influenced by the Taliban. The research uses important educational ideas to understand these problems. Thinkers like John Dewey and Nel Noddings help show how schools can better serve girls through practical lessons and caring environments. The study shows both positive developments, such as more girls studying science and technology, and ongoing problems, including early marriages and school materials that reinforce gender stereotypes. It highlights the important work of local activists, government policies, and women teachers in bringing change. The findings suggest that while some improvements have been made in certain areas, real progress requires tackling deeper issues like unequal resources and traditional attitudes about gender roles. The paper ends with practical suggestions for making education fairer and more accessible for all girls in Pakistan, including better teaching methods, fair distribution of resources, and working closely with communities.

Keywords: Girls education, educational philosophy, feminist perspectives, equal opportunities, gender equality, Pakistan education system.

1. Introduction

Women's education in Pakistan has made some progress, but serious challenges remain. According to Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), approximately 22.8 million children in Pakistan are out of school and more than 60% of them are girls.[1] The situation is even worse in rural areas, where cultural norms, poverty, and lack of infrastructure make it difficult for girls to attend school. In provinces like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, female literacy rates are as low as 24%, compared to the national average of around 48%.[2]

The barriers to girls' education are deeply rooted in socioeconomic and cultural factors. Many families, especially in conservative regions, believe that investing in a girl's education is unnecessary because she will eventually get

[*] *Ayesha Naeem, (PhD Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan), ayeshanaeem11@hotmail.com.*
[**] *Dr. Ambreen Salahuddin, (Department of Gender Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan), ambreen.dgs@pu.edu.pk.*

married and take care of her household.[3] Boys, on the other hand, are seen as future breadwinners, so their education is prioritized. Early marriages also play a significant role nearly 21% of girls in Pakistan are married before the age of 18, cutting short their educational opportunities.[4] Additionally, safety concerns, such as harassment and long distances to schools, discourage parents from sending their daughters to school.[5]

Even when girls do attend school, the quality of education they receive is often poor. Many government schools lack basic facilities like clean water, toilets, and trained teachers, which disproportionately affects girls. [6] Moreover, the curriculum in many schools reinforces traditional gender roles, teaching girls domestic skills while boys are prepared for careers. This systemic inequality ensures that even educated women struggle to compete in the job market, perpetuating the cycle of economic dependence on men.

To fully grasp why women's education in Pakistan remains so limited, we need to examine it through a feminist lens. Feminist theory helps us see how education is not just about learning math or science but is deeply connected to power, control, and societal expectations. In Pakistan, education policies and cultural attitudes are shaped by patriarchal values that view women primarily as wives and mothers rather than as independent individuals with their own aspirations.[7]

Liberal feminists argue that equal access to education is a basic right and that denying girls schooling is a form of discrimination.[8] They push for policy changes, such as increasing the number of girls' schools and providing scholarships for female students. However, radical feminists go further, stating that the entire education system is designed to maintain male dominance. They point out how textbooks often portray women in submissive roles, and how female students are discouraged from pursuing "male-dominated" fields like engineering or politics.[9]

Postcolonial feminists add another layer to this discussion by highlighting how Pakistan's history of colonialism and religious conservatism has influenced its education system. During British rule, education was used as a tool to create a subservient workforce, and after independence, religious groups gained more influence over schooling, further restricting women's education. [10] Even today, extremist groups like the Taliban actively attack girls' schools, as seen in the infamous Malala Yousafzai case, showing how deeply threatened some factions are by the idea of educated women.[11]

Feminist philosophy also questions whether education alone can liberate women if the broader societal structures remain oppressive. For example, a woman with a degree may still face workplace discrimination, wage gaps, or family pressure to quit her job after marriage. [12] Therefore, feminists argue that real change requires not just schooling but also challenging the cultural and economic systems that keep women disadvantaged.

This study uses important ideas about learning to understand girls' education problems in Pakistan. Great thinkers like John Dewey and Plato show us what good education should look like equal for all, practical for daily life, and caring for each student's needs. Their wisdom helps explain why Pakistan's schools often fail

girls and how we can fix them. This article examines the systemic obstacles that prevent Pakistani women from accessing quality education economic hardships, cultural traditions, religious extremism, and government failures. It also explores how feminist activists, educators, and progressive policymakers are fighting back. By looking at real-world examples, from grassroots campaigns to legal reforms, we can assess whether education in Pakistan is truly empowering women or merely reinforcing existing inequalities.

2. Educational Philosophy for Gender Equality

This study uses main ideas from great education thinkers to understand and improve girls' education in Pakistan. John Dewey's concept of "learning by doing" shows why schools must teach practical skills that help girls in their daily lives, not just book knowledge.[13] Nel Noddings' "caring education" approach explains why having more female teachers and safe classrooms matters for girls' learning.[14] Plato's belief that education should be available to all supports the fight for equal school access for Pakistani girls.[15] Rousseau's ideas about natural development help us understand why many rural girls struggle with rigid school systems.[16] Together, these philosophies help us see what needs to change - schools should be practical, caring, equal and flexible to really work for Pakistan's girls.

2.1. John Dewey (Learning by Doing)

John Dewey believed education should connect to real life. His "learning by doing" idea means children learn best when they practice things, not just read books.[17] For Pakistani girls, this shows why schools should teach useful skills like managing money, using technology, or solving health problems. Many girls drop out because they don't see how school helps their daily lives. Dewey's approach would make lessons more practical - like teaching math through market shopping or science through farming problems villagers face.

Dewey also thought schools should be active places where students work together. This could help Pakistani girls gain confidence by working on group projects and discussions. Most government schools still use old "teacher talks, students listen" methods that don't work well, especially for girls who need to practice speaking up (Education Ministry, 2023). Dewey's ideas suggest training teachers to use more activities, experiments and real-world examples that keep girls interested in learning.

2.2. Nel Noddings (Caring Education)

Nel Noddings said good schools must care about students' feelings and lives. Her "caring education" approach shows why Pakistani girls need teachers who understand their problems.[18] Many girls quit school because teachers shout at them or don't help when they fall behind. Noddings would argue for training teachers to be kind mentors, especially important for girls facing family pressures or early marriage risks.

She also believed lessons should connect to students' cultures. In Pakistan, this means using local examples girls recognize, not just city-based topics. A caring school would have female counselors, clean bathrooms, and flexible timings for girls who work at home - small changes that could keep more girls in

class. Noddings' ideas prove education isn't just about tests, but making girls feel valued and supported.

2.3. Plato (Education for All)

Plato believed every person deserves education to reach their full potential. His ideas support giving Pakistani girls equal learning opportunities, as many still can't access schools.[19] In Pakistan, this means building more schools in villages and making sure girls can study all subjects, not just "girl-appropriate" ones like home economics (Education Ministry, 2023). Plato would argue that when Pakistan educates its girls, the whole country benefits, as educated women contribute more to society (UNDP, 2022).

Plato also thought education should develop both mind and character. For Pakistani girls, this means schools should teach confidence and leadership, not just facts (ASER, 2023). Many girls' schools focus only on basic reading while boys learn problem-solving - Plato's philosophy shows why this unfair system must change (HEC Report, 2023). His vision of equal education for all remains unrealized in Pakistan, where 12 million girls still can't go to school (UNICEF, 2023).

2.4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Natural Learning)

Rousseau believed children learn best when education follows their natural development. His ideas explain why Pakistan's rigid school system fails many girls.[20] In villages, girls often start school late or miss classes for farm work - a flexible schedule would help them learn better (World Bank, 2023). Rousseau would argue against punishing these girls, suggesting schools adapt to their lives instead (Idara-e-Taleem, 2023).

He also thought education should match children's interests. Pakistani girls often quit school when lessons seem unrelated to their lives (ASER, 2023). Rousseau's approach would use local examples - like teaching math through sewing or farming - to keep girls engaged (UNESCO, 2023). His philosophy shows why Pakistan needs schools that fit girls' realities, not force them into systems designed for city boys (Malala Fund, 2023).

3. History of Women's Education in Pakistan

Pakistan's journey with women's education has been difficult. Before 1947, few girls went to school only rich families taught daughters at home. After independence, the government promised equal education but built few girls' schools, especially in villages. During the 1980s, military rulers made schools more religious and less useful for girls. Today, more girls attend school but many still drop out early due to poverty, early marriage, or lack of nearby schools. Terrorist attacks on schools like Malala's show how dangerous learning can be for girls in some areas.

3.1 Before British Rule (Before 1858)

Before the British came, formal education for girls in the subcontinent was very limited. Most families, especially in rural areas, did not send their daughters to school. Only wealthy and noble families arranged private tutors at home to

teach their girls the Quran, Persian poetry, and basic mathematics.[21] Poor families needed their daughters to help with household chores and farm work, so they learned practical skills from their mothers instead of going to school. Even though society was mostly against female education, a few exceptional women became scholars and poets, but they were very rare.[22]

The education girls received at this time was mostly religious and focused on preparing them for marriage. There were no proper schools for girls, and people believed too much learning could make women "difficult" to marry off. Some royal and upper-class women, like Mughal princesses, were educated in literature and arts, but they were the privileged few.[23] For most ordinary girls, education meant learning how to cook, sew, and manage a householdskills considered more important than reading or writing. This tradition of keeping girls away from formal education would later make it harder to change people's minds about women's schooling.[24]

3.2. British Period (1858-1947)

When the British ruled India, they set up modern schools, but these were mostly for boys. Even by 1900, hardly any Muslim girls could read only about 1%.[25] Some important leaders like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan said girls should be educated too, but most families thought girls belonged at home. A few girls' schools opened in big cities like Lahore and Karachi, but very few parents were willing to send their daughters there.[26]

The British government didn't do much to help girls' education at first. Missionaries started some schools for girls, but Muslim families often didn't trust them. By 1947 when Pakistan was created, less than 10% of Muslim women could read and write. The few educated women usually came from rich families in cities. In villages, most people still believed educating girls was against their culture and religion.[27]

3.3. Early Pakistan (1947-1977)

When Pakistan became a new country in 1947, leaders said all children should go to school. The 1956 laws said women had the same rights as men. More schools for girls opened, but things didn't improve much. Even by 1970, only 18 out of 100 women could read. Most villages had no schools for girls. Many parents feared school would make their daughters "bad wives".[28]

The government tried to help but faced many problems. City schools got some new teachers and books, but village areas were mostly forgotten. Poor families needed girls to work at home, not study. Some religious leaders said girls shouldn't go to school. Without enough schools or teachers, most girls never learned to read or write.[29]

3.4. Zia's Military Rule (1977-1988)

When General Zia took control in 1977, he made many changes to Pakistan's education system that were bad for girls. He ordered schools to teach more religion and removed lessons about successful women from textbooks. Instead of science and math, girls were told to focus on cooking and housework. Many girls' schools were shut down, especially in rural areas. Because of these changes, fewer

parents sent their daughters to school. Many families believed the new strict Islamic rules meant girls should stay at home.[30]

During these 11 years, education for girls went backward. Schools that stayed open taught girls they should only become good wives and mothers. The government spent less money on girls' education and more on religious schools for boys. By the time Zia's rule ended in 1988, Pakistan had fallen far behind other countries in educating its girls. This difficult period showed how government decisions can hurt children's futures, especially girls.[31]

3.5. Recent Years (2000-Today)

In the last 20 years, Pakistan has made some good progress in girls' education. The government has built more schools for girls across the country, especially in big cities. They started free education programs to help poor families send their children to school. In 2010, Pakistan passed a law saying all children between ages 5-16 must go to school. Because of these changes, more girls are going to school now than ever before.[32]

However, there are still many problems. Terrorist groups like the Taliban have attacked girls' schools, especially in areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The most famous case was Malala Yousafzai, who was shot for going to school in 2012. Even today, many parents in these areas are afraid to send their daughters to school because of safety concerns.[33]

In villages, education for girls remains very poor. About 60% of girls don't finish primary school. Many village schools don't have proper buildings, clean water, or enough teachers. Poor families often make their daughters work at home or in fields instead of studying. Some families still believe girls don't need education and marry them young.[34]

The government is trying to fix these problems but change is slow. Some organizations are helping by giving money to poor families who send their daughters to school. More people now understand that educating girls helps the whole country. But Pakistan still has a long way to go before all girls can get a good education.[35]

4. Feminist Views on Women's Education

Different feminist thinkers have different ideas about girls' education in Pakistan. Some focus on giving girls equal chances to go to school like boys. Others say we need to change the whole education system that favors men. Another group looks at how poverty and village life make it extra hard for poor girls to study. All agree that education should help girls become independent, not just prepare them for marriage. These ideas help us understand why so many Pakistani girls still can't get proper schooling today.

4.1. Equal Rights Approach (Liberal Feminism)

This approach believes every girl should have the same education opportunities as boys. It focuses on fixing practical problems like building more girls' schools, training female teachers, and making sure girls can study all subjectsespecially science and math. As Nussbaum writes:

"When we educate a girl, we educate a whole family." [36]

Supporters work to change laws so girls get equal access to education, like Pakistan's Right to Education Act in 2010.However, critics say this approach doesn't do enough. While it helps some girls go to school, it doesn't challenge the deeper reasons why girls are kept uneducated. As one education expert notes:

"Building schools is easy, changing centuries-old traditions is hard" [37]

The approach also mostly helps city girls, while village girls still face many problems like early marriage and poor school facilities (ASER Pakistan, 2022, p. 15).

4.2. System Change Approach (Radical Feminism)

This approach says Pakistan's whole education system needs to change because it's designed to keep men in power. Radical feminists argue that just adding more girls to the current system isn't enoughthe system itself teaches girls to be submissive. As Dr. Rubina Saigol explains:

"Schools don't just teach math and science, they teach girls their 'place' in society" [38]

They point out how textbooks show women only as mothers and wives, never as leaders or scientists.These feminists want to completely rewrite school books, train teachers differently, and change how schools are run. They say education should teach girls to question traditional gender roles, not follow them. Feminist educator Farida Shaheed writes:

"The classroom should be where girls learn to challenge patriarchy, not accept it," [39]

However, this approach faces strong opposition from religious groups and conservative politicians who call these ideas "against Islam".

4.3 Local Problems Approach (Postcolonial Feminism)

This approach looks at how Pakistan's history affects girls' education today. It says we can't understand education problems without seeing how poverty, village life, and religion work together. As scholar Afiya Zia explains:

"A poor farmer's daughter faces different barriers than a rich city girl"[40]

The 2022 Pakistan Human Development Report shows village girls are 3 times more likely to miss school than city girls (p.23), proving how location matters.

This approach also studies how old colonial attitudes mixed with local traditions to limit girls. Historian Ayesha Jalal notes:

"British rulers didn't educate girls, and neither did our own leaders after independence,"[41]

It highlights special problems like:

1. No schools near home (parents worry about safety)
2. Teachers not showing up in village schools
3. Families needing girls to work instead of study

As researcher Farida Shaheed found:

"Many parents would send daughters to school if it was closer and had female teachers" [42]

5. Systemic Barriers to Women's Education

5.1. Money Problems

Many families in Pakistan struggle to afford school costs. Even when schools are free, parents must pay for uniforms, books, and transportation expenses too high for poor families. A 2022 study found that 60% of out-of-school girls come from homes earning less than $2 a day.[43] Fathers often choose to educate only sons, believing "boys will support us, girls will marry and leave".

The government doesn't spend enough on education. Village schools often lack proper buildings, clean water, or working toiletsproblems that especially affect girls. When schools are far away, parents must pay for transport or risk girls walking unsafe distances. Some programs now pay families to send daughters to school, but these reach only a small fraction.

5.2.Old Traditions

Many families in Pakistan follow traditional beliefs that stop girls from going to school. Some parents think education makes girls "too modern" or "difficult to marry".[44] Early marriage is a big problemnearly 1 in 5 girls marry before 18, and most drop out of school after marriage. In villages, people often say "a girl's place is at home" and believe schooling is wasted on daughters who will eventually care for their husbands' families.[45]

Safety concerns also keep girls at home. Many parents worry about girls traveling to school or mixing with boys in classrooms. Some conservative religious leaders teach that girls should only learn about religion at home, not study science or other subjects. These old ideas change slowly, even when schools are available. [46]

5.3. What Schools Teach

The lessons in Pakistani schools often work against girls' education. Many textbooks show women only as housewives or mothers, never as doctors, engineers or leaders. For example, a 5th grade book asks students to "help mother in the kitchen" while telling boys to "become doctors". This teaches girls they belong at home, not in professional jobs. Schools also don't teach about women's rights or gender equality, missing chances to change old ideas.

The way teachers treat girls makes problems worse. Many teachers, especially male ones, pay more attention to boys in class.[47] Some even tell girls "this math is too hard for you" or "you'll get married anyway". Schools also lack

basic things girls need, like separate toilets or female teachers, which forces many to drop out.

6. Feminist Resistance and Progress

6.1. Local Groups Helping

Many local organizations are working hard to get more girls into schools across Pakistan. Groups like the Malala Fund and Alif Ailaan help poor families by paying school fees, giving free books, and even providing meals to encourage parents to send daughters to school.[48] In villages, women's groups go door-to-door to convince parents that education will help their daughters have better lives. Some organizations set up small schools in areas where government schools are too far, making it easier and safer for girls to attend.

These local groups also train female teachers from the same communities, which helps parents feel more comfortable sending their girls to school. They run special classes to help older girls who dropped out catch up on their studies. As one mother in rural Sindh said:

"Because of this school in our village, my daughter will finish 5th gradesomething I never did".[49]

While these efforts are making a difference, they still reach only a small part of the millions of girls out of school.

6.2.New Laws and Global Help

Pakistan made an important law in 2010 called the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act. This law says all children between 5-16 years must go to school, including girls. The government also promised to spend more money on education, aiming to reach 4% of the country's budget.[50] These changes helped more girls enroll in schools, especially in cities where the law is better enforced.[51]However, many rural areas still struggle to follow this law because there aren't enough schools or teachers.[52]

The United Nations is also helping through its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 4 focuses on quality education for all children by 2030. Because of this, international organizations like UNICEF give money to build girls' schools in poor areas and train female teachers. The Global Partnership for Education donated $100 million to Pakistan specifically for girls' education projects. These global efforts have helped build about 5,000 new classrooms for girls in the last five years.[53]

Pakistan also receives help from other countries. The UK government supports education programs in Punjab, while the US helps in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. China is building schools in Balochistan as part of its CPEC projects.[54] This international support makes a big difference, but there are still problems. Sometimes the money doesn't reach the poorest areas, or local officials misuse it.

New technology is also helping. The government started online classes during COVID-19, and some continue for girls who can't go to school regularly. Mobile schools in vans bring education to remote villages where there are no

school buildings. Radio lessons help girls who must work at home but can listen while they work. These new ideas are slowly making education more available.While these laws and global programs are good steps, experts say Pakistan needs to do more. The government admits that about 22 million children are still out of school, most of them girls. This shows that despite progress, the country has a long way to go to educate all its girls.[55]

6.3. Role of Female Educators and Scholars in Reshaping the System

Female teachers in Pakistan are making big changes in education. They serve as important role models, showing girls and their families that educated women can have successful careers. In villages where people don't trust male teachers, female teachers help convince parents to send their daughters to school. Research shows that schools with more female teachers have higher numbers of girl students. These teachers also understand the special challenges girls face and can help them better.

Women professors at universities are changing what students learn. They are writing new textbooks that include stories about successful Pakistani women. Some have started special programs to encourage girls to study science and technology. As Dr. Fouzia Khan explains:

"When girls see women teaching difficult subjects like physics, they believe they can do it too" [56]

These efforts are slowly changing old ideas about what women can achieve.

Many female educators are also training the next generation of teachers. Organizations like the Teachers' Resource Center run workshops where experienced women teachers share better ways to teach girls. They teach methods that make girls more confident in class and encourage them to speak up. Some have developed special programs to help girls who missed years of school catch up quickly.[57]

Women scholars are researching Pakistan's education problems to find solutions. Their studies show why girls drop out and what policies actually work. Some have created simple tests to check if girls are really learning in school. Others work with the government to improve education policies based on real evidence. Female educators still face many challenges during their important work. They often get paid less than male teachers and fewer become school leaders. In some areas, people don't respect women teachers or listen to their ideas.[58] However, more women are now speaking up about these problems and demanding change. Their growing numbers and strong voices give hope that Pakistan's education system will keep improving for girls.

7. Case Studies & Lived Experiences

7.1. Success Stories

Pakistan has seen many success stories of women breaking barriers in education. In cities like Karachi and Lahore, more girls are now studying science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). For example, the number of girls in engineering colleges increased by 25% between 2018-2022.[59] Women like Dr.

Nergis Mavalvala, who worked on the Nobel Prize-winning gravitational waves discovery, show Pakistani girls can excel in science.[60]

The story of Malala Yousafzai has inspired millions. After being shot for going to school, she became the youngest Nobel Prize winner and continues fighting for girls' education worldwide. Her courage made many Pakistani parents rethink their views on daughters' education. "After Malala, I decided all my daughters would finish school," said a father from Swat.[61]

Other women are making change in different ways. Young activists like Maria Toorpakai Wazir pretended to be a boy to play sports, then became a famous athlete and education campaigner.[62] Organizations like STEM Pakistan help girls from poor families study science, with many getting scholarships to top universities.[63]In rural areas, success stories are growing too. Village schools with female teachers report higher graduation rates, showing how small changes help.These examples prove change is possible, but much work remains. For every success story, thousands of girls still can't go to school. This gives hope that more success stories will follow.

7.2.Persistent Challenges

Despite progress, many girls in Pakistan still face serious problems getting an education. In some areas, especially near the Afghanistan border, Taliban groups continue to attack girls' schools or threaten families who send daughters to school.[64] Just in 2022, over 50 schools were damaged or closed because of these threats.[65] Many parents keep girls home because they fear violence, saying “we want our daughters alive more than educated”.

Poor families often need girls to work instead of study. About 40% of out-of-school girls help with housework or jobs to support their families.[66] In villages, girls as young as 10 work in fields or as maids because their families need the money. Even when schools are free, these families can't afford to lose the help or income girls provide.

8. Conclusion

Pakistan has made some progress in girls' education, but serious challenges remain. More girls are going to school today than ever before, especially in cities where opportunities have improved. Programs like free education, cash incentives for families, and more girls' schools have helped increase enrollment numbers. However, millions of girls especially in poor and rural areasstill miss out on education completely.

The biggest problems haven't changed much over the years. Poverty forces families to keep girls at home to work. Old traditions still convince many parents that girls don't need schooling. Terrorist groups continue to attack girls' schools in some regions. While laws promise education for all, the reality is different for most village girls who lack proper schools nearby.

There is hope for the future though. Brave women like Malala have shown what Pakistani girls can achieve. More female teachers and professors are changing what and how girls learn. Local organizations and international help are making small but important differences in communities across the country. The

growing number of girls studying science and professional fields proves change is possible.

Real change will require solving all parts of the problem together. Building more schools isn't enoughwe need to change old ideas about girls' roles. Education should help girls become independent, not just better wives. As more educated women become leaders, they can improve the system for the next generation.

The path forward is clear but not easy. Pakistan must keep girls' education as a top priority, with more funding and stronger efforts to reach every child. When girls get quality education, whole families and communities benefit. The country cannot progress while leaving half its population behind. Educating girls isn't just good for womenit's essential for Pakistan's future.

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