

Socio-economic and Cultural Factors Behind Female Students' Dropout in District

Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract



This study aims to explore the factors influencing girls' dropout in the Malakand district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The study specifically examined socioeconomic and cultural factors that contributed to girls' dropping out of school. Data were collected from twenty-seven girls who dropped out of school. An interview guide was used for in-depth interviews with students who dropped out of secondary school certificate (SSC) and higher secondary school certificate (HSSC) levels. The data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis methods and techniques. The study highlighted that early marriage of girls is one of the major factors that causes girls to drop out of school. We also found that domestic responsibilities were other factors behind girls' dropping out of school. This study further concluded that social norms and cultural restrictions were among the dominant factors leading girls to drop out of school in the early years, such as in SSC and HSSC.

Keywords: Girls' Dropout, Schooling, Socioeconomic, Cultural Factors, Societal Norms.

Introduction

Education is a foundation of socio-economic development and empowerment, yet in many rural regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), especially in District Malakand, female students face significant barriers to accessing and continuing their education. Despite global efforts to promote gender equality in education, dropout rates among female students in rural areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa still exist, and District Malakand is no exception in this context. This issue is not merely a reflection of individual choice but is deeply rooted in the country's social structure and culture. District Malakand in KP province exemplifies the challenges rural communities face in achieving educational equity. Given its unique socio-cultural settings and economic constraints, the district presents a compelling case for examining why female students are disproportionately affected by dropout. This paper aims to unpack the socioeconomic and cultural factors driving female students' discontinuation of education in this region.

Socio-economic factors such as poverty, limited access to educational resources, and economic pressures on families play a critical role in influencing educational outcomes (Faiza & Dawood, 2023). In many rural areas across the countries, financial constraints can force families to prioritize immediate economic contributions over long-term educational goals (Yu et. al., 2024). Additionally, the scarcity of female teachers and inadequate school infrastructure further exacerbate the educational challenges faced by girls (Du-Plessis, 2025). Cultural factors also significantly impact female education in various countries. Traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and prevailing attitudes towards female education often undermine efforts to retain girls in schools. Cultural norms may place a higher value on early marriage or domestic responsibilities for girls, leading to increased dropout rates (Chisamya et. al., 2012).

Literature Review

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of socio-economic development and gender equality. However, in Pakistan, particularly in rural and conservative regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), female students face disproportionately high dropout rates compared to males (Aziz et. al., 2023). Studies indicate that girls' education is often undervalued due to deep-rooted gender norms, economic constraints, and limited institutional support. The issue is especially

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pronounced in districts like Malakand, where socio-cultural traditions strongly influence educational participation. Research conducted in the Malakand Division highlights persistent gender disparities rooted in cultural practices and economic deprivation (Naz & Ahmad, 2012). The phenomenon of female student dropout in rural Pakistan constitutes a profound impediment to the nation's quest for gender parity, socio-economic development, and human capital accumulation (Malik, 2021). Despite concerted efforts to enhance access to education, the persistence of gender-based disparities in educational attainment underscores the complexity of this issue. Malakand District, a rural enclave in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, exemplifies this paradox, where the interplay of socio-economic and cultural factors conspires to truncate the educational trajectories of female students (Abbas & Smith, 2023).

It has been reported that patriarchal norms are one of the influential factors that influence girls' drop out ration from the schooling. Shah (2018) found that patriarchal attitudes and gender biases can contribute to dropout, as girls may be seen as less worthy of education than boys. Sociocultural structures affect girls' education in many ways, including dropping out of school. In this context, early marriage is a structural barrier. Rahman (2019) highlighted that early marriage is a significant factor in female student dropout, as girls may be forced to leave school to get married. Early marriages of girls are influencing girls' schooling, which is increasing their dropout rate from school. Similarly, Domestic responsibilities of girls are common in many cultures, which affect girls' schooling. Khan (2017) noted that domestic responsibilities, such as household chores and childcare, can contribute to dropout, as girls may be expected to prioritize these responsibilities over education. Studies have also reported that gender biased societies within patriarchal structures are directly connected with girls' dropping out of school. For instance, Shah (2018) found that patriarchal attitudes and gender biases are deeply ingrained in rural Pakistani society, leading to a devaluation of girls' education.

A Note on Methodology

Feminist epistemology has guided the methodological construction of this study. Within feminist frameworks, this study asks two questions: whether the girls' dropout rate is higher in the study area. If the phenomenon of girl's dropout ration prevails, what are the socioeconomic and cultural factors behind this phenomenon in District Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa? Data for this study were collected through an interview guide. Twenty-seven in-depth interviews were conducted with the girls' students of the Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) level. It is pertinent to note that our female research collaborator conducted these interviews from a strong positionality within the gender context. The collected data were transcribed into meaningful text, and some interview transcripts were also subjected to member checking to ensure the data's authenticity and accuracy. The data were then managed manually and revisited time and again to familiarize ourselves with it for an accountable analysis. After this, codings were given to the data. Themes were then generated from the coded data. The following themes are the results of this process, which have been analyzed through an empirical and theoretical review.

Early Marriages and Girls Dropping Out of School

The analysis in this study reveals that early marriage of girls (marriage before age 18) prevails in Malakand, KP which is one of the dominant reasons of girl's drop out from the school. It is reported that girls marry early and are unable to continue their studies. In some cases, school management drops them out, or they leave the school on their own. Many participants in this study indicated that early marriage is associated with girls' educational discontinuation, particularly at the secondary level. This finding resembles the study conducted by Birchall (2018), where he found that early marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth are the common problems which are associated with girls' drop out of school. Research consistently shows that early marriage functions both as a direct cause and a structural mechanism reinforcing gender inequality in education. Many of the participants in this study indicated that their marriages were done at an early age and they left their schooling because they were unable to keep it continue. One of the participants revealed that:

I was in the first year of my studies when I got married to an illiterate person. After marriage, he told me to leave school. I tried my best to convince him, but he didn't agree and stopped me from schooling.

The tradition of early marriage of girls in Pashtun society still exists, in which Malakand District is no exception. Many participants confirmed that they left the school

because they were married during their schooling. A female from one of the rural areas of Malakand confirmed that:

I was studying at the secondary school level when my marriage was concluded. My in-laws were against my education. They were of the opinion that once a girl gets married, she is not supposed to continue her education because it is not considered good in our society.

This study confirms that early marriage in a traditional Pakhtun society in the district Malakand is one of the prominent factors that causes girls to drop out of school. In most cases, In-laws do not consider it good for a married girl to go to school after marriage.

Domestic Responsibilities and Girls Dropping Out of School

Women in the Malakand district remain housewives in most of the cases, where they perform heavy domestic responsibilities. When a girl gets married and starts working while holding domestic responsibilities, she cannot continue her studies. Domestic responsibilities, such as cleaning, cooking, pressing clothes, and caring for children, are heavy and prevent girls from continuing their schooling. Khan (2017) reported that domestic responsibilities, such as household chores and childcare, are often prioritized over girls' education. This shows that the problem of girls dropping out due to domestic responsibilities is not only present in Malakand, but also in other parts of Pakistan. One of the newly married girls explained that:

I was in my first year in a government college, and I was the second position holder at the secondary school level in my school. In my first year of college, I got married, and my domestic responsibilities immediately increased. I have completed my second year of college education in too many crises.

In Pakhtun society in Malakand district, girls after marriage are normally expected to assume domestic responsibilities. It is considered their prime domestic duty. The same situation is reported from some other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Pakistan. One study reported that girls are expected to take on these responsibilities from a young age, leaving little time for education (Ali, 2019). Similarly, in this study, a young girl expressed that *“after my marriage in the tenth class, I dropped out of school because my domestic responsibilities increased and I was not able to continue my schooling”*. Another participant indicated that:

I left my schooling in the third year because I got married and my in-laws expected me to remain at home and serve the family. Serving the family is not an easy job. It includes cooking, cleaning, pressing, attending social events, and performing the duties of all family members.

This analysis provides a clear picture of girls dropping out of school due to domestic responsibilities. When a young girl gets married and takes on domestic responsibilities, she remains unable to continue her schooling because she is expected to cook, clean the house, pressing of cloths, and perform all other heavy domestic work.

Societal Norms and Cultural Restrictions in Girls' Dropping Out of School

Societal norms and cultural restrictions, such as purdah, cultural roles, and structural barriers, are among the common factors in District Malakand that affect girls' dropping out of school. Participants shared experiences showing that, due to our cultural roles and social expectations, we give more time to families, which affects our schooling. One of the girls studying in class tenth revealed that *“it is very hard for me to manage my school timing and study because I am expected to play my role in my family”*. Another participant explained that *“when I go to school, boys are often standing in the way and looking at other girls and me. My father often tells me to keep strict purdah. This is really hard to manage my schooling in this situation*. One study by Shah (2018) found that cultural restrictions, such as limitations on mobility and interaction with men, can limit girls' access to education. He asserted that, due to strict cultural restrictions, many girls in KP face difficulties in continuing their schooling smoothly. Explaining societal norms and cultural restrictions, one of the second-year students in this study reported that:

My father and brothers always tell me to keep strict purdah while going to school. They suggested to me that if something happened to you in the way, they wouldn't be able to allow me to go to school then.

Another participant revealed that *“my mother instructs me to follow societal norms at school because, once trust is broken, I will not be allowed to continue my schooling”*. Similarly, a study

conducted by Javed (2020) reported that girls may be restricted from attending school due to concerns about their safety and reputation. As this study indicates, a similar situation is common in the Malakand district, where girls fear damage to their reputations while attending school. A few participants explained that:

Our parents always tell us to prioritize our reputation because our society does not tolerate a girl once her reputation is at stake. They suggest we go straight to school and then home directly. These instructions often build fear among us and affect our schooling.

The above analysis gives a clear picture of how societal norms are prioritized over girls' schooling. These norms, along with cultural restrictions in a Pakhtun society in Malakand, influence girls' dropping out of schooling in the early years, such as at the secondary and higher secondary school levels.

Conclusion

This study concluded that socioeconomic and cultural factors influence girls' schooling, and that dropping out is common in the Malakand district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Among these factors, early marriage of girls is one of the serious issues that causes girls to drop out of school in the early years of education, such as from the ninth to the twelfth classes. When girls marry at an early age, they cannot continue their schooling because their in-laws do not want them to. After early marriage, girls are expected to meet the standards and requirements of their in-laws, which is why they often leave school early. perform domestic responsibilities. This study further highlighted that domestic responsibilities, whether in the in-laws' home or parents' home in the district of Malakand, are another major factor that causes girls to drop out of school. Girls' domestic roles, such as house cleaning, cooking, pressing clothes, and child rearing and care, are among the responsibilities that require too much time and energy and do not allow girls to smoothly pursue their schooling. As discussed in the analysis, the study also found that societal norms and cultural restrictions are the other barriers to girls' schooling in Malakand. Girls are expected to prioritize societal norms during their schooling. Within the strict normative structure, girls often remain uneasy and drop out of school. Similarly, cultural restrictions, such as purdah and other cultural values, make girls sensitized about their reputation, and as a result, they drop out of their schooling because girls prioritize cultural restrictions over schooling.

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