Challenges Regarding Access to Higher Education among Rural Women in Punjab Pakistan: Impact & Implication

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study examined the challenges regarding access to higher education among rural women in Punjab, Pakistan, and explored the impacts and implications of these challenges. The study examined the role of socioeconomic factors, family size and distance to educational institutions in shaping access to higher education for rural women. A sample of 384 participants from the region was surveyed using a well-structured questionnaire. The analysis revealed that household income and the perceived difficulty in paying school fees significantly influenced access to higher education with greater financial resources increasing the likelihood of educational opportunities for women. The size of a family has become another factor that affects educational outcomes because there are not enough resources and attention available for girl's higher education. Moreover, the distance of educational institution from home presented a significant barrier, hindering access to higher education for rural women. Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling showed that these factors were important to effect the rural women's ability to attend the institute. The study showed the need for targeted interference and policies to promote higher education and enhance access to higher education for rural women in Punjab, Pakistan.

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1.　　Introduction

Education is widely acknowledged as a crucial element in human development and societal advancement (Alex, 2011). 129 million girls in the world do not attend school, with 32 million of those girls being of primary school age and 97 million of those girls being of secondary school age. These figures are from estimations provided by the UNESCO. Enrollment rates in primary and secondary schools are growing closer to being equal for girls and boys around the world (90% of boys and 89% of girls are enrolled, respectively). In spite of the fact that enrollment rates are comparable, gender equality in primary school enrollment has been achieved in two-thirds of the world's countries. However, completion rates for girls are lower in low-income countries, where only 63% of female primary school students graduate from primary school compared to 67% of male primary school students.

In countries with a low per capita income, the proportion of girls who complete lower secondary school is significantly lower than that of boys; just 36% of girls do so, compared to 44% of boys. There is a comparable gender gap in the completion rates of upper secondary education in nations with poorer incomes; the completion rate is 26% for young men and 21% for young women. The disparities are far more pronounced in nations that are afflicted with fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV). According to the Gender Parity Index for Primary Enrollment (2012-2018), in nations affected by female genital mutilation (FCV), girls have a 2.5 times

greater chance of not attending school than boys do, and at the secondary level, they have a 90% greater chance of not attending secondary school than those in non-FCV environments.

Nonetheless, gender disparities in educational access continue to persist, particularly in rural areas of Punjab, Pakistan. In Pakistan gender inequality remains a persistent concern, particularly in rural communities where traditional norms and cultural expectations often restrict opportunities for women (National Education Census, 2004). By focusing specifically on the experiences of rural women in accessing higher education, this study seeks to illuminate the unique challenges they face and advocate for targeted interventions to address these challenge. The association between education financing policies and higher education access, the challenges faced by females in overcoming cultural barriers and the impact of gender disparities on educational aspirations within households and communities.

Bowden (2012) study sought to delve into the connection between economic and cultural factors and the ambition of students to proceed to higher education. The conclusion drawn was that a student's inclination towards advanced education was more probable if they had internet access at home, were inspired by their teachers, were enrolled in private or religious institutions, and enjoyed the backing of their parents. Interestingly, the study also showed that the educational achievements of parents significantly influenced their children's aspirations for university education. Similarly, Yang (2012) led a study across 86 nations, investigating the relationship between education funding policies and higher education accessibility. The research revealed that countries with a robust GDP per capita and high relative public education spending saw increased tertiary enrollment rates, indicating that when the economy flourishes and government invests in education, more people are likely to attend college. However, the study also found an inverse relationship between public spending per college student and college enrollment rates, implying a shift towards private funding to ensure higher education accessibility.

Maqsood (2012) conducted a research to understand the challenges young girls face in overcoming cultural barriers to higher education. The findings shed light on the familial resistance girls have to overcome to pursue university education. However, she also found that their struggle opened up more opportunities for other girls in their families to aspire for higher education. Noreen (2011) analyzed the value and challenges of women's higher education in Pakistani society. She found that education was crucial in empowering women, helping them overcome gender discrimination and participate in formal employment sectors. However, there were notable educational disparities between boys and girls, especially in rural and suburban areas, emphasizing the need to address these issues for equality. Aslam (2009) explored gender disparities in Pakistan's schooling system. He found that although women tend to attain higher education levels, they experience lesser returns in the labor market. This discrepancy results in parents investing more in their sons' education, perpetuating the gender inequality in both education and labor market outcomes.

Addy (2008), on the other hand, focused on the obstacles preventing girls from getting an education, like rigid cultural norms and lack of incentives. He underscored the importance of parental support and gender equality in classrooms. Lastly, the EFA agenda and initiatives targeting gender bias in education highlighted an overall increase in female enrollment. However, significant challenges still remain, particularly in secondary education. Issues such as educational quality, accessibility, transition from school to work, and health concerns were emphasized as areas that require urgent attention. Additionally, the study revealed the positive correlation between female educational attainment and economic growth, emphasizing the importance of improving educational quality to enhance both individual and societal outcomes.

Bhoy (2009) conducted a critical analysis of the higher education system in Pakistan and shows the challenges faced by public institutions in terms of instruction quality, research standards and issues related to student discipline and academic fraud. The study challenged the notion that increasing financial investment alone can address the structural issues in higher education. The findings called for inventive considering, relevant understanding of university quality, and investigation of potential cures to overcome the challenges confronted by the higher education system in Pakistan.

There are an estimated 22.8 million children in Pakistan between the ages of 5 and 16 who are not attending school. This number represents 44 percent of the total population in this age group and makes Pakistan the country with the second-highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC) in the world. After the age of primary school, the number of children and adolescents who are not enrolled in schools increases, with 11.4 million teenagers between the ages of 10 and 14 not receiving formal education. There are 5 million children in the age bracket of 5 to 9 who are not attending school. Significant differences exist on the basis of gender, socioeconomic position, and geographic location. For example, in the province of Sindh, 52 percent of the children from the poorest families (including 58 percent of girls) are not enrolled in school, whereas in the province of Baluchistan, 78 percent of girls are not enrolled in school. At the basic level, there are around 10.7 million male students and 8.6 million female students enrolled. At the lower secondary level, this number lowers to 3.6 million male students and 2.8 million female students.

The education of young girls and women is essential to the growth of the economy. Research investigations that were carried out in a variety of countries and locations came to the conclusion that educating females is one of the most cost-effective strategies to hasten the process of development. Education for girls results in significant reductions in levels of poverty and large increases in the amount of wealth that is passed down from generation to generation. It has a strong positive correlation with enhanced economic productivity, more resilient labour markets, higher incomes, and overall improvements in societal health and well-being. The Objectives are to find out socio-demographic profile of the respondents, to analyze the effect of socio-economic factors regarding attainment of higher education, to assess the challenges faced for attainment of higher education and to propose policy recommendations for promoting higher education. The Hypothesis are as follows;

H_1:   There is relationship between socio-economic factors and attainment of higher education.
H_2:   There is association between commuting challenges and attainment of higher education.

2.   Material and Methods

The research methodology employed in this study utilized a quantitative data collection and analysis. A quantitative Research design was adopted to observe the connections between various elements .The study focused on the population of Punjab, specifically the districts of Okara. The sample size for the study was determined to be 384 participants. A well-structured questionnaire was utilized as the primary data collection tool. The questionnaire was designed to gather information on various socio-demographic factors related to the participants' families. Questionnaire was also administered for survey to acquire data directly from the participants. Interviews were deemed appropriate considering the likelihood of participants being illiterate or having a low level of education, which could make it challenging to understand and respond to written questionnaires.

To ensure the reliability and consistency of the interview schedule, a pre-testing phase was conducted. Ten participants were selected for the pre-test, and based on their feedback, adjustments were made to the sequencing, phrasing, structure, and categories of certain questions. The coding process was employed to divide the data into categories and assign numbers or symbols to each item based on its category. The frequency percentage and linear regression analysis are used to analyzed collect data also apply Confirmatory Factor analysis & Structural equation modeling for data accuracy confirmation & hypothesis testing. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS & Amos software version 23.

3.   Results and Discussion

The table 1 provides information about the distribution of respondents across different age groups, education levels, marital statuses, family sizes, head of family gender, number of females in each family, and wealth index categories.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic profile of the Respondents

Categories	F	%	Categories	F	%
Age			Education		
20-24	3	.8	Primary	154	40.1
25-29	35	9.1	Secondary	65	16.9

30-34	71	18.5	**Higher**	52	13.5
35-39	110	28.6	**Illiterate**	113	29.4
40 & Above	165	43.0	**Family Size**		
Marital Status			**1-2**	4	1.0
Single	8	2.1	**3-4**	61	15.9
Married	334	87.0	**5 or above**	319	83.1
Separated	10	2.6	**Head of Family**		
Widow	32	8.3	**Male**	340	88.5
Number of female in a family			**Female**	44	11.5
1-2	74	19.3	**Wealth Index of the household**		
3-4	229	59.6	**Poor**	152	39.4
5 or above	81	21.1	**Middle**	150	39.1
			High	83	21.6

The table 2 provides valuable insights into the educational infrastructure, accessibility of educational institutions, and availability of girls' schools in the surveyed area.

Table 2: Type, Number and Distance of Educational institutes

Categories	F	%
Types of School near home		
Primary	147	38.3
Secondary	135	35.2
Higher	102	26.6
No. of girls school in this village		
1-2	254	66.1
3-4	95	24.7
5 and Above	35	9.1
Distance of School/College from your home		
2-4 km	174	45.3
5-8 km	93	24.2
9 and above	117	30.5
Distance of University from your home		
Don't know	63	16.4
10-20	95	24.7
20 & above	24	6.3

The table 3 provides insight into the challenges and realities faced by families with daughters between the ages of 15 and 25 years in terms of education. It highlights the number of daughters in this age group, their educational enrollment status, parental beliefs about their ability to provide education, and the financial difficulties associated with meeting educational expenses. This data can be crucial in identifying areas where additional support and interventions may be needed to ensure educational opportunities for these daughters.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Daughters Age, Number and Enrollment in School/College/University

Categories	F	%
Daughters between the ages of 15 years and 25 years of age	340	88.5
Number of daughters do you have between the ages 15 and 25 years		
1-2	290	75.5
2-3	86	22.4
4 and above	8	2.1
Oldest daughter currently registered at Higher Secondary School/Colleges/ university		
No	221	57.6
Parental knowledge, resources and skills, do you think that you could send all of your daughters to school/college/university		
No	216	56.2
Yes	168	43.8
Level of difficulty to pay school fees/Uniform/other costs for all of your daughters		
Very difficult	195	50.8

|			
Somewhat difficult		162	42.2
Not difficult at all		27	7.1

Table 4: Regression analysis effect of Socio economic factor in access of higher education

Predictors	Unstandardized Coefficient		T	P
	B	Std.Error		
Constant	0.824	0.175	4.714	0.000
Income of the household	0.364	0.083	4.402	0.000
Difficulty to pay College/University fees	0.273	0.093	2.918	0.004
R	0.336			
R^2	0.113			
Adj. R^2	0.106			

The results suggest that household income and the perceived difficulty in paying school fees have significant associations with educational attainment or access to higher education among rural women. In figure 1, the CMIN/DF value is 11.517, which indicates a reasonably good fit because it is less than 3. The RMR value of 0.085 is relatively low, which is indicative of a good fit. The GFI value of 0.790 suggests an acceptable fit. The RMSEA value is 0.166, which suggests an acceptable fit. The CFA shows the validity of hypothesized relationship between observed variable & underlying latent construct.

Figure 1: CFA (Confirmatory Factor analysis)
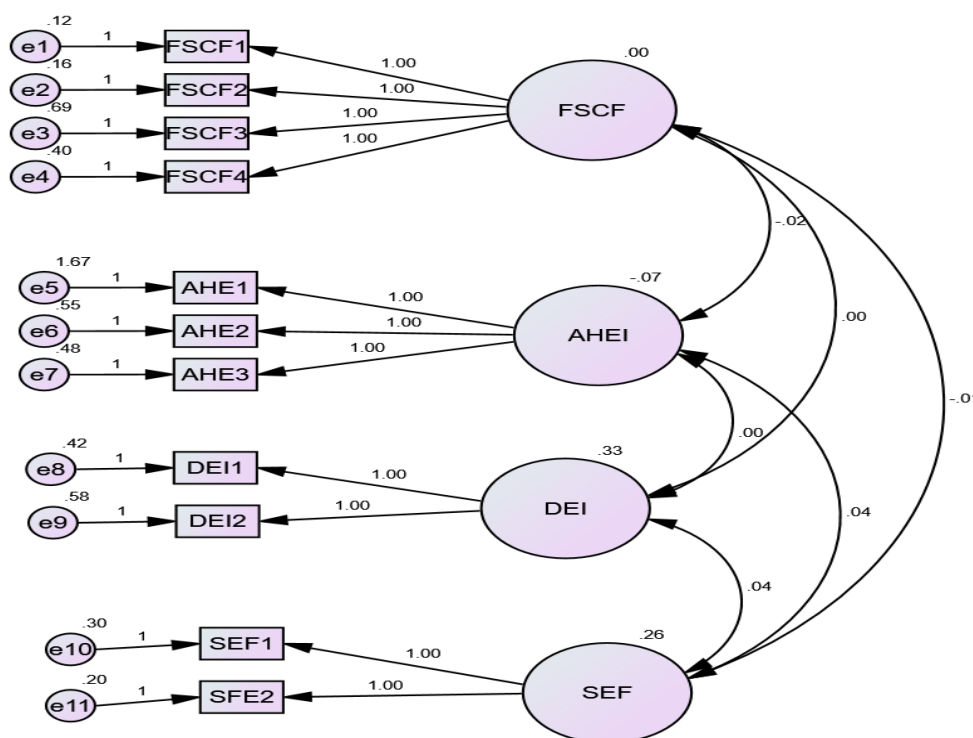
Note: FSCF= Family size Factor Contributing factor, SEF= Social Economic Factor, DEI= Distant Education Institutions, AHEI=Access to Higher Education institution. Chi square is 518.274 which is a low chi square values and it show a good model fit data.

In Figure 2, the chi-square value of 752.581 with 70 degrees of freedom, Probility level p-value =0.000 indicate the model fits data well. However, the chi-square test is sensitive to large sample size. Root Mean Square Residual (RMR): The RMR value of 0.107 indicates a reasonable fit of the model. Smaller RMR values indicate a better fit. Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI): The GFI value of 0.742 suggests that the model explains about 74.2% of the variance in the observed variables. Higher GFI values indicate better fit, but values above 0.9 are typically considered good. Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI): The AGFI value of 0.665 is similar to GFI and suggests an acceptable fit, but it could be improved. Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

(RMSEA): The RMSEA value of 0.160 indicates a reasonable fit, but it could be improved. Values below 0.08 are generally considered good.

Figure 2: Structural Equation Model (SEM)
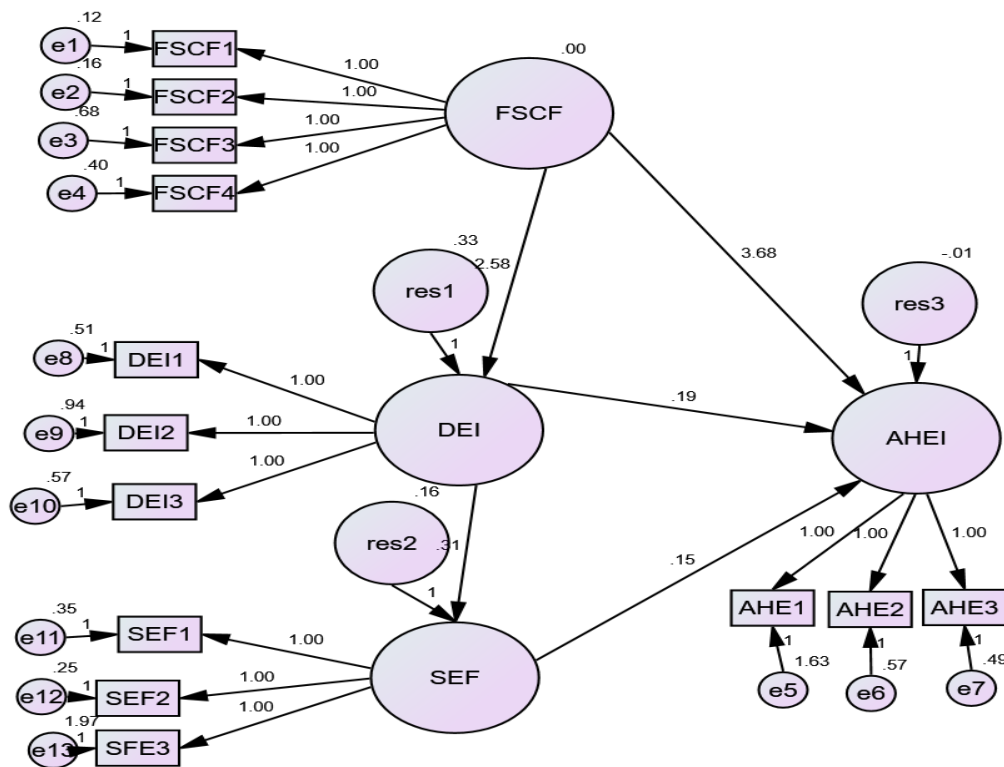
Comparative Fit Index (CFI): The CFI value of 0.259 suggests a mediocre fit of the model. Values above 0.9 are considered good. Mates The standardized regression weights represent the strength of the relationships between variables in standard deviation units. The SEM model fits Shows Family size, Household Income, distance of educational institutes' factors contributing important role in Access of Higher education among rural women.

4. Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the challenges for attainment of higher education among rural women in Punjab, Pakistan and explored the impacts and suggestions of these disparities. The socioeconomic factors, family size and the distance to educational institutions are challenges in order to get higher education. The study shed light on the challenges faced by rural women in pursuing higher education. Addressing the challenges regarding the attainment of higher education among rural women is fundamental for cultivating their strengthening and contributing to the advancement of their communities. Policy interventions should focus on improving financial conditions and also giving equal educational opportunities for all children in larger families and improving get to educational institutions through infrastructure advancement and transportation facilities. There are following Suggestions and Recommendations;

- To address the challenge of low family income for getting higher education, the government and relevant organizations should offer financial support/scholarships/Books particularly to rural women.
- Awareness campaigns should be conducted by stakeholders to promote the importance of education for girls and to address the challenge of cultural norms that limit educational opportunities for women. The religious leaders, guardians within local communities should also be engaged to change mindsets and make a stronger environment for girls' education.
- The higher education institutes should be established closer to rural areas.
- Provision of safe and reliable transportation facilities can help overcome the distance obstruction, making it easier for women to get higher education.
- Creation of mentorship programs and highlighting the successful women who have overcome barriers to access higher education. Mentorship and role models can inspire and motivate rural women to pursue higher education and break through the cultural barriers.

- Addressing gender disparities regarding access to higher education is a long-term endeavor that requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders. Policymakers should prioritize gender equality in education and allocate sufficient resources for its implementation and evaluation.

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