

GETTING HIGHER EDUCATION: IS IT REALLY A CHALLENGE FOR FEMALES IN PAKISTAN?

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the challenges, which girls had to face to overcome the cultural obstructions to get higher education. The study focused on the multitude of cultural barriers and challenges female had to face, coping-strategies adopted by girls to overpower these barriers and consequences girls had to undergone during coping strategies and the impact of their struggle to acquire higher education on the other girls of their family and community. Qualitative research approach was adopted in order to know about subjective experience of respondents which they experienced while getting admission in university. In-depth interviews and FGD were put into practice because the research question of the present study required both breadth and depth. The findings of the study suggested that cultural barriers faced by girls were based on stereotype gender roles. These stereotype gender roles were the reflection of values of a male-dominant society. The study also highlighted that girls had to face family resentment to convince their parents for getting admission in university. It also revealed most significant finding about the struggle of girls to overcome cultural barriers concomitantly brought some positive implications for other girls of their families. The efforts of a female student in a family had opened new vistas for other girls of the family to acquire higher education. In sum, there is a positive change in this direction going on. The change can be attributed to the establishment of various universities in major cities by efforts of the HEC. It is a key factor in this regard. It has provided females an opportunity to go to the university in their city or nearby city. Affordable fee, access to scholarships, easy availability of transportation and lucrative environ of the university attract a large number of female to get into it. But there is a long struggle of females behind this journey to the institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: Higher education, female education, cultural barriers, copying strategies

INTRODUCTION

Education must provide the opportunities for self-fulfillment; it can at best provide a rich and challenging environment for the individual to explore, in his (or her) own way (Barskay, 1998). It goes without saying that progress and prosperity of a country largely depends on the choices education made available to its people. Education is the backbone of the infrastructure of any country. It is the most powerful instrument of change (Khan, 2007). The goal of poverty reduction can be achieved by addressing the root causes of poverty such as lack of education and skills or ill health which will remove existing inequalities of opportunities. (Pakistan MDG Report, 2005) Provision of educational facilities to all its masses is the obligation of society in social perspective of the society (Shahzad et al 2011). Although Pakistan is a signatory of the UN Education for All (EFA) Framework for Action (2000) Document, which places considerable emphasis on women's education, particularly the elimination of gender disparities in primary, secondary and higher education, but the target of achieving Education for All in Pakistan is still far from satisfactory. The state of education, especially female education, is still abysmal. The female literacy rate clearly shows that investment in human development tends toward favoring men over women (Skalli, 2001). Women in particular have limited opportunities to acquire higher education and attain professional and technical degrees (Khan, 2007)

Pakistan has long been an international outlier in gender gaps in education. Girls lag behind boys in education access, in the quality of schooling available, and in the outcomes of education (Tembon and Fort, 2008). It is a matter of commonly held view that Pakistani society is a traditional one. The social and cultural context of Pakistani society is usually categorized as 'patriarchal' and is largely

conservative. There is a prevalence of the culture of honor. Gender is one of the organizing principles of Pakistani society. Patriarchal values embedded in local traditions and cultures predetermine the social value of gender. An artificial divide between production and reproduction, created by the ideology of sexual division of labor, has placed women in reproductive roles as mothers and wives in the private arena of home and men in a productive role as breadwinners in the public arena (Situational Analysis of Women in Pakistan—An Overview)

In Pakistani society, generally more resources are invested in education and skill development of boys than girls. Various possible explanations stand for this gender-based criterion of resource allocation. The preference for sons due to their productive role dictates the allocation of household resources in their favour. Male members of the family are given better education and are equipped with skills to compete for resources in the outside world. On the other hand, female family members are taught domestic skills—how to be good mothers and wives (Khan, 2007).

Social roles are clearly defined as it is expected the girls will perform household chores. Since these chores require relatively less skill development, therefore girls may have lesser share in terms of health, education and food resources. Also boys are viewed as old age security assurance; therefore investment in them is taken as safe-bet to secure the old age comforts. It is thought that they should be made strong enough by investing resources in them so that they can take care of their families and parents. Despite the higher rate of female enrollment in 1998–1999 at the primary (4.6 percent male and 8.0 percent female), secondary (1.2 percent male and 6.8 percent female), and high school levels (7.4 percent male and 8.3 percent female), the gender gap in the literacy rate is widening in Pakistan. Of those without basic education opportunities, about 70 percent are girls.

Financial constraint is another major barrier to female education. Those who belonged to the lowest strata of social order find it difficult to invest in education especially for females. Household-income of the family affects parents' decisions to prioritize expenditures on the education of their children. Khalid and Mukhtar (2002) in their research on "The Future of Girl's Education in Pakistan" noted that "Even if there is a minimal tuition fee charged in schools, expenditures on uniform, textbooks and other materials, besides the opportunity cost of sending daughters to school, serve as constraints. Opportunity costs increase when children grow up and become more useful in the family's income-earning/domestic activities. This explains higher school drop-out rates among grown up girls (grade 4 & 5)". So as girls grow up they get engaged at home and withdrawn from schools to help in domestic chores.

Practice of early marriages seems to be another major barrier to female education. Girls are taught not to disagree, stay modest and submissive in their behavior. Movement of girls is usually restricted especially as they grow whereas boys are encouraged to be assertive. They are usually assigned outdoor duties. The causal explanation for this behaviour is that after marriages girls have to do domestic work and look after the in-laws, husband and children. They need to be trained in a way so that they do not face difficulties in adjusting to their married life afterwards.

In Pakistani culture, marriage of girls is considered as the main responsibility of parents, and marriages within the family, cast and baraderi^{§§} are the common social norms. Parents also find it difficult to go against the baraderi customs, if there is no value of female's education in their cast or baraderi. Parents of the daughters also bear the financial pressure for preparing the dowry for their daughters. These cultural practices seem to be responsible for parents' preference to investment in son's education. Parents' prefer to invest more on a son's education as if their old age social security is attached with better economic ability of their sons. This provides enough justification to invest in the education of their sons.

Issues of safety and security of girls affect their access to education. Traveling long distances to attend educational institutions usually consider as threat to the personal security of girls. The incidents of girls' sexual abuse and the importance attached to the personal security of girls dominate parents' decisions of not sending girls, especially when they grow up, to educational institutions where

^{§§}A group of people who most likely have same cast system and have matrimonial relations within their cast is known as braderi

distances are long. Sathar and Haque (2000) have shown that access to school is one of the key determinants of enrolment in rural Punjab.

‘Girls are less able than boys to take public transportation or walk to school in Pakistan’s social context, and the cost of private transport – roughly equivalent to the 200 Rupees stipend – was the binding constraint for poor families,’ said Khalid Gillani, Secretary of Education in Punjab Province (World Bank, 2007).

In the recent decades it has been observed that a significant proportion of girls are getting education at higher level despite cultural barriers. Even in some cases, girls outnumber boys at high educational level. This trend seems to be good for development of Pakistani society because a significant proportion of population is coming out and taking part in academic activities.

The factors that contribute to this positive change to female education in Pakistani society are not well-researched and documented. Various speculations are advanced towards explaining this positive trend of increasing proportion of female education. Our own observation entails that it’s the rise of consciousness amongst females is a key feature in this regard as they want to make their lives on their own strong footings. However very few sociological studies are available that explains this increasing trend in females’ education. Present study is an effort towards understanding this phenomenon of increasing trend of female’s education. The study will center on the processes the girls have been through to overpower the cultural obstacles and restrictions for getting higher education.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of study are:

- a. To find out cultural barriers female have to face to get admission in Higher Education,
- b. To examine coping strategies female have adopted to overcome these barriers
- c. To study what sort of problems they faced during coping strategies
- d. To what extent they are supportive to other family girls who are facing the same barriers.

METHODOLOGY

Studying Socio-Cultural barriers being faced by female students to get higher education and their coping strategies to overcome these barriers is a complex phenomenon. The issue being studied in this research was subjective experience of respondents which they experienced while getting admission in university. Subjective experience being unique, varied from individual to individual, cannot be quantified; therefore, qualitative research approach was adopted.

Mixed method approach including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with female students were considered for collection of data to examine which socio- cultural barriers female students had faced and what coping strategies they had adopted to confront those blockades.

The study was conducted in the University of Gujrat because it was surrounded by different rural areas. Population of the present study consisted of the female students studying in BS (Hons) program in University of Gujrat. The respondents selected in this study were those who have spent at least four semesters in the university campus. The logic for making criteria of studying at least four semesters in the campus was based on the assumption that female students might have faced some problems due to socio-cultural barriers even after getting admission in higher education and to remain in the program.

For this reason it seemed to be reasonable ground to assume that if they had successfully gone to the fourth semester, there were more chances that they would complete their studies and handle the problems in a better way if they come across in future. Purposive sampling procedure was selected because only those specific respondents were interviewed who had experienced the socio-cultural barriers to get higher education and adopted different strategies to overcome obstacles.

The sample for this study consisted of 4 female students for in-depth interviews and 8 students for Focus Group Discussion.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Types of Cultural Barriers Faced by Female Students in Getting Admission in University

The in-depth interviews and FGD conducted with female students revealed various types of cultural barriers. For the purpose of analysis these types are grouped into five following categories.

Specification of Gender Roles

The category of gender based barriers consists of specification of gender roles and preferential treatment to males. Students' interviews and FGD revealed that specification of gender roles was one of the major barriers as indicated in the following statements:

"According to our traditions girls have to do household tasks after marriage"; "I had been given more household responsibilities"

"There is no need to get them highly educated as doing job is not their domain." "In my family's view females education has no importance."

"They think investment in women's education is of no use as they ultimately have to take care of home and family."

The second theme in this category was preferential treatment of males by the family. The students had described that they were not provided equal treatment regarding education because of gender discrimination between son and daughter.

"I would not be able to give economic benefits to my family in return of their investment in my education. If I were a boy, the situation would have been different";

Discussion with the respondents led to assume that gender specific barriers were reflected through allocation of more household responsibilities to girls, socializing them to accept these roles without questioning, lack of importance attached to girls education and giving preferential treatment to boys in terms of investing family resources.

Social Pressures on Family

The category of social pressure on family includes two important themes; traditions of *Baradari* system and influence of extended family members. It appeared from the interviews and FGD that sometimes girls could not get permission to acquire higher education because of strong attachment of family with their *Baradari*.

"They (my parents) had concerns about established traditions of Baradari system";

"Sometimes my mother shares her fears with me about my future that who will marry with me in Baradari after studying in co-education."

Another theme revealed from the data was the influence of extended family members. In the case of joint family system, usually the decisions of immediate family were not independent. So interference of the extended family was also a major barrier as described in these statements:

*"We have a joint family system. I mean my Uncle's family (Chacha^{***}) is also living with us. My "Chachajee" tried to stop me to get admission even in Girls College"*

"Traditions of my joint family were the major barriers in my way of getting admission in university."

This discussion suggested that in Pakistani society, families, by and large, were tied to the *Baradari* system. In this system various other relatives might take key position when it came to decide about girls' future. It was also observed from this discussion that going beyond *Baradari* decisions or expectations added to the family problems and families tried to avert these problems arising from *Baradari* pressure. Debaring girls from their right to education could be an example of family effort to show solidarity with *Baradari*.

*** Younger brother of father

Financial Constraints

The category of financial constraints included the theme of the scarcity of resources allocated to girls. From the interviews and FGD conducted, it appeared that in the case of poor economic conditions parents preferred their son's education as compared to daughter's education.

"I would not be able to give economic benefits to my family in return of their investment in my education. Because according to our traditions girls have to go another home after marriage"

*"As there is no concept of female's job in our family, so why they should invest to girl's education?"
"Financial problem was also a barrier to me."*

"Due to limited resources parents make choice between daughter's education and son's education. "

From these excerpts it was also revealed that families did not invest in girl's education due to their restricted productivity in generating income for family. Girls were supposed to take care of family and home after marriage. That's why parents invested their resources on boys as they have to take the responsibility as the bread-winner of family in future.

Perception about Co-Education

Female students also faced perceptions of their families about co- education as a cultural barrier to higher education. The theme related to this category was "perceived fears and threats to family honor". As the members of traditional society, families had mostly unfavorable attitude towards co-education.

"People think that co-education could have bad influence on their daughter's socialization"

"My family did not like girls being studied with boys. In their view, if I will study in co-education no one in family will marry me."

"In our family co- education was considered as a taboo."

"I tried to reduce their fear about co-education by wearing veil."

The comments given by girls about their families perceptions about co-education bring to surface the reality that Pakistani family system was more or less conservative system, where mixing of boys and girls even for the purpose of education was not liked. If we went back to the previous themes for example, gender specific roles and allocation of financial resources, we might come to know that all these themes impliedly worked for gender segregated society (a society where male and females have almost different responsibilities). Given this trend it could be assumed that co-education might be perceived as a threat to the status-quo which gave more power to male and lesser to females. Denying girls their right to higher education might be a reflection of gender segregated society.

Distance to Educational Institutions

Distance to educational institutions from home was another major barrier to female access to higher educational institutions. The theme related to this category was Issues of safety and security due to longer distance as described by students.

"In my family females do not travel alone due to security concerns. There were some incidents in our area in which girls had been kidnapped"

"Distance to educational institutions from home also matters. Girls' of small towns do not get permission to go to educational institutions that are far away from home."

"I wanted to take admission in Punjab University but I could not get permission to live in hostel."

Distance to educational institution seemed to come up with various possible explanations of denying girls their right to education. From discussion it seemed safe to conclude that greater distance of educational institution from home may raise the question of girl's security issue. It could be assumed that if girls had to stay in hostel due to distance, parents might have fears about their freedom and autonomy girls could enjoy living in hostel. As one respondent shared her view that she was not given permission to study in the PU just because of reason she has to stay in hostel.

Coping Mechanism/Strategies to Overcome Cultural Barriers to Female Acquiring Higher Education

Focus Group Discussion and in-depth interview conducted with the students revealed that these female students adopted different kind of strategies. This was also observed through findings that those who had great motivation level, they adopted different strategies simultaneously.

Convincing

Going through the interviews and FGD indicated that despite all cultural barriers, girls' decision to acquire high education consisted of some reason and logic. They tried to convince their families, but unfortunately in most of the cases this strategy did not work out.

"I tried to convince him (uncle) with logic. I told him that I want to support my family by doing some job and for respectable job education is must."

"My family strictly refused me after my repeated requests and long... long.... Conversations"

Students' responses suggested that convincing their elderly through argument did not come up as an effective strategy. Their discussion suggested that they tried to convince their family members but could not. As it was analyzed in previous section that Pakistani family society was still a conservative society, where women did not enjoy equal footing, there were chances that their argument may not be taken seriously. That's why for girls argumentation did not prove as effective strategy for their own rights.

Emotional Blackmailing

Another strategy that was revealed through data was emotional blackmailing used by females to compel their families for seeking higher education. This category includes schemes like Hunger strike, Boycott with family members and Attempt to commit suicide etc. Females usually seem to use strategies of emotional blackmailing when their convincing mechanism did not work out. Some of the students told that they took hunger strike as their coping strategy as these statements indicates.

"Very emotional kind of strategy I adopted, it worked out after all. I stopped eating."

"I stopped eating, due to this I got sick"

"All the time I used to weep, I stopped eating. Due to this I got sick."

Data revealed that girls adopted the strategy of boycott with family members. When they could not convince their parents, they forced them to give permission for higher education by not participating in family matters and by being isolated.

"I stopped talking to anyone and locked myself in a room";

"There was a marriage ceremony of my Khala's^{††} daughter. When all the family was ready to go, I refused to go"

"The relatives who visited our home, I stopped meeting them."

"I told them (parents) if I did not have the permission to study, I will not participate in any family function."

During Focus Group Discussion I came to know that one girl adopted a very serious and risky strategy to convince her parents. She tried to commit suicide.

"I got permission by my parents after torturing myself. I tried to commit suicide."

If we analyze above discussion in context of family structure, segregated society and power relationship, it becomes clear that females are less privileged. It is a natural phenomenon that when less-privileged are suppressed, a time will come that they may revolt to get their due rights in an affirmative way. May be, in this case of girls, they were left with no choice but to convince their

††† Sister of mother

families by medium of emotional black mailing. This emotional blackmailing may be a kind of revolt against their family wishes and traditions.

Consequences of Adopting Coping Mechanisms

During interviews students revealed that they had to face consequences due to adopting coping strategies. It seemed that parents gave permission to their daughters for higher education unwillingly. Even after admission in university they tried to stop their daughters by making studies difficult to them. The responses given by the students indicated the following categories of consequences of adopting coping mechanisms.

Family Anger

This category family anger included the issue of family's emotional breakdown. This was reported by the students as following excerpts indicate:

"My father had not talked to me for a period of almost two or three months"

"My uncle stopped talking to me. He even stopped his daughters to talk with me. I felt during that period as if I were a stranger in my own home."

"My brothers did not talk to me for a long period."

"I did not go to my sisters' home for a long time because of her in laws' unfavorable attitude towards my admission in university."

The views expressed by respondents about consequences of adopting strategies to overcome the barriers indicated that although they were succeeded in getting admission in universities, they had to bear their family's anger and wrath. This suggested that girls even studying at higher education could not escape the consequences to go against the wishes of their family.

This simultaneously exhibited that success in getting admission in university by coping strategies did not indicate the removal of cultural barriers. They had to face resistance even in the continuation of their studies. Thus their continuation in a university was marked by constant struggle.

Family Attempts to Distract

The category of family attempts to distract included the acts of over-burdening with household chores by family and forced engagements/ marriages. It had been discussed earlier in the section of cultural barriers that gender specific barriers were reflected through allocation of more household responsibilities to girls. The views expressed by respondents indicated that the strategy of augmenting household responsibilities was adopted by family to distract students from education.

"My mother increased my household responsibilities to make me sure that my primary responsibility is household chore not education."

"My family tried to stop me by different strategies. For example I had been given more household responsibilities so that I could not find enough time for my studies."

During in-depth interview on student told that she had faced consequences of her coping strategy in form of her forced marriage.

"When I was in 4th semester my uncle arranged my marriage. I could not stop him. He said that "you can continue your studies. Yours in laws and husband would have no objection with your education." So I got married. Now again I am living with my mother. My father in - law threw me out from the home because my family could not arrange dowry."

As mentioned in explanation of cultural barriers that families perceived girls education as a tool to get autonomy and power for themselves. Families feared that this autonomy might lead to challenging the status quo of family or power relations with in the family. Therefore, marriages and forced engagements might be seen as a strategy of parents to curtail girls' autonomy. Though girls had been given permission to get education, but families seemed not to let them have education to decide about their life.

Level of Positive Influence of Female Students' Higher Education on Other Girls of Family and Community

Although it was observed through the findings of in-depth interviews and FGD that girls had faced various types of cultural barriers to get permission from their families for higher studies. It was also noted that they had undergone difficult time when they adopted coping-strategies to overcome cultural barriers. At the same time it was also observed that their being in higher educational institutions brought some positive implications for other girls of their families. These respondents shared their views that some of the girls of their family were following their footsteps and getting education.

"One of my cousins got admission in university. She is my Khala's daughter. She convinced her parents by giving my example."

"Now after three years my sister got admission in university without any resistance. Even many other girls from my family got admission in university by following my example."

"I think, I will be helpful for my sisters and brothers' daughters in their education"

"Three girls from my street and one from my family got admission in university by following me"

CONCLUSION

Findings of the present study indicated that girls had been through difficult situations in the process of prevailing over cultural barriers in getting admission into higher educational institutions. Analysis of the types and forms of cultural barriers suggested that grounds of these cultural barriers were deep-rooted in gender discrimination based on patriarchal structure of society as a whole. For example, themes related to types of cultural barriers were specification of gender roles, preferential treatment of male by family, less-resource allocation for girls, issues of safety and security due to longer distance, perceived fear and threats to family honor due to co-education, and social pressure of *baraderi* regarding girl's marriage.

If we looked into the above mentioned themes, we might come to realize that all these themes impliedly worked for gender-segregated and male-dominated society. Given this trend, it could be assumed that higher education of female might be perceived as a threat to this existing status- quo which gave more power to male and lesser to female.

The findings of the study also suggested that despite these cultural barriers girl's motivation level for higher education had gone up thus reflecting their moral courage to defend their rights. Analysis of the discussion regarding coping-strategies adopted by girls to overcome cultural barriers suggested that all these girls tried to convince their families, but when this strategy did not work out, they adopted strategy of emotional blackmailing. If we analyzed above discussion in context of family structure, segregated society and power relationship, it became clear that females were less privileged.

It is a natural phenomenon that when less privileged are suppressed, a time comes that they may revolt to get their due right. May be, in this case of girls, they were left with no choice but to convince their families by using emotional blackmailing as a last resort to convince their parents for university/higher education. This emotional blackmailing may be a kind of revolt against their family gender biased cultural traditions. The study findings also revealed the problems faced by girls during process of coping strategies. They had to face family's anger, relatives' wrath and isolation to mend their attitude by spurning the idea of education. Their household responsibilities were increased to distract them from studies altogether.

The most important conclusion that emerged from the analysis of data was the positive impact of females' student efforts to get higher education on the other girls of family and community. Through findings, it was also observed that their presence in higher educational institutions brought some positive implications for other girls of their families. These respondents shared their views that some of the girls of their family were following their footsteps and getting education in a relative smooth way.

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