The Need for Cultural Interventions to Improve Girls' Education during COVID-19 and Beyond

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According to estimates, girls enrolment in schools has stagnated despite international pressure. In Pakistan, more than 10 million girls remained out-of-school before the pandemic, and this figure has risen since the pandemic to cross 22 million. This paper argues about the importance of the social construction of girls schooling for policy planning in regions that are dominated by culture and traditions. Cultural assumptions influence the support and community commitment for educating girls. The focus of past interventions has been non-gender-specific and with the target to improve enrolment through improving resources and infrastructure. What is critically needed however are region-specific and cultural interventions that can improve girl's enrolment, including areas related to (i) parental motivators, (ii) teacher motivators, (iii) resources and service motivators, (iv) safety and security, (v) community motivators, (vi) curriculum reform, (vii) integrating women social workers, (viii) opportunities for distance learning, and (ix) financing options.

Keywords: girls education, social construction, cultural interventions, COVID-19

Social construction of schooling girls

Though enrollment in schools has risen since the 1990s in LMIC, there are gender gaps, with some arguing that girls enrollment has in fact stagnated (Chuang, Mensch, Psaki, Haberland, & Kozak, 2019). Theories for gender equality suggest that based on rational and ethical claims for equality and human rights, all girls will inevitably gain an education (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013). Further, utility theories argue that to eliminate poverty and boost economic growth, even the most conservative nations will eventually invest in the education of girls and young women. Supplemented with pressure from international bodies like the UNICEF, which promote universal coverage of education for girls (Klees & Qargha, 2014), there is a need to recognize why gender inequality for girls education in some regions of the world is still not a reality.

In some LMIC cultural norms, historic traditions, and religious interpretations play a dominating role in shaping *the social constructions* for the schooling of girls. This social construction has an impact on deep-seated ideologies and cultural support for educating girls and determines the shaping of policy, how much is invested, and how much the community is mobilized to hold policy-makers accountable for development. To begin with, we will discuss the three models that guide investment and promotion of gender equity in education for LMIC. These models include

the traditional, neo-liberal and philanthrocapitalism approach (Porter, 2016). The first (traditional approach) emphasizes pure and holistic learning, the second (neo-liberal approach) focuses on the relationship between higher education and industrial output, and the third (philanthrocapitalism approach) has an agenda of promoting the capitalist economy and profit-maximization. In Pakistan and other conservative nations with a colonial history, there is a tendency to favor the traditional model for educating girls. 'Pure learning' is defined in culturally conservative and Muslim dominated nations as education that is closest to Islam (Sahin, 2018).

It is because of this conservative and traditional orientation that families prefer to provide girls with home-based or community-based informal religious education or Madrassah schooling (Bradley & Saigol, 2012); the belief being that traditional and religious education will retain ethics, domesticity and conservatism in females. However, girls that receive religious instruction or community-based Madrassah education face serious inequalities due to (i) non-regulation of religious interpretation and Madrassah content, (ii) untrained instructors claiming to have religious knowledge, (iii) influence of extremist bodies, (iv) issues of safety for young children and fear of abuse, and (v) inability to secure recognized academic certificates, enter professional degree programs, or gain income-earning opportunities in the future (Fair, 2008).

To compound problems the public sector educational services are unsatisfactory and the private sector education in Pakistan is dominated by the Western syllabus. The colonial history, the lack of national curriculum development, and majority funding for private, NGO and public sector schools by the West, have imposed the Western style of education and curriculum content. Mistrust and aversion to Western education for girls exist in culturally conservative LMICs like Pakistan and demotivates parents to send girls to school (Afzal, 2018). Parents fear Westernization and loss of traditional and ethical values in daughters more than in sons. This fear has to do with issues of honor and patriarchal tendencies to control daughters so they are prepared for compliance in the

family, with in-laws, and for decisions related to reproduction (Jamal, 2016). There is also the historic acceptance for keeping women at home as reserve labor for agricultural production. In contemporary times, many families have retained their traditional attitudes by encouraging women to engage in home-based income earning options (Hassan & Azman, 2014). For houses with internet access, some families also depend on online earnings of women related to teaching, research, and consultancy.

Other embedded problems related to cultural disincentives to sending girls and young women to public sector schools in the country, including lack of awareness and literacy in parents (Ghaffar et al., 2013), scarce female teachers and low quality teaching (Ghuman & Lloyd, 2010), inadequate resource and services support (including faulty infrastructure and lack of segregation) (Ahmad, Said, Hussain, & Khan, 2014), long-distances to school and financial cost of sending girls to school (Jamal, 2015), the threat of violence and sexual assault and damage to family honor (Farah & Bacchus, 1999), unsatisfactory curriculum design which promotes gender inequity (Halai, 2011), and lack of community support and religious misinterpretation (Nazar, Österman, & Björkqvist, 2017). In all, there are less opportunity both culturally and economically in keeping girls out-of-school for the majority of families that are poor and disadvantaged.

Pakistan's predicament – before the pandemic and beyond

Pakistan and other developing countries are struggling with both inherited and pandemic-induced problems related to girls education. Before the pandemic, an estimated 11 million girls were known to be out-of-school by a report by the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) (ASER Pakistan, 2019). Comparative statistics by ASER show shortfalls for girls compared to boys attending schools, in areas of literacy, reading, numeracy skills, and subtraction. Additionally, fewer mothers compared to fathers have attained primary education and coupled with duties of domestic and agricultural work, are unable to support children for

learning at home. Since the coronavirus pandemic it is estimated that 800 million girls across the world are not attending school (Burzynska & Contreras, 2020), with statistics for Pakistan estimated at 22.6 million (Umair, 2020). Several reasons have contributed to girls being unable to continue online schooling during the pandemic, including (i) greater household burden and assistance to mother for domestic chores (Burki, 2020), (ii) inability to purchase or gain access to limited resources for online learning- including laptops, personal computers, smartphones or touchpads (Rajput, Noonari, Bukhari, Dehraj, & Rajput, 2020), (iii) lack of access to a good internet connection, especially in rural and remote locations (Hasan, Rehman, & Zhang, 2021), (iv) less cultural and family-based support to girls for continuation in education (Akseer, Kandru, Keats, & Bhutta, 2020), and (v) the fear of violence and abuse against girls during the pandemic, as was true in the case of the Ebola virus (Onyango, Resnick, Davis, & Shah, 2019).

The annual budget of Pakistan, announced in June, did not include any special grants or emergency provisions for the education sector during COVID-19 (World Bank, 2020). Online instruction by teachers and public sector schools was not possible due to a lack of resources and skills. Instead, the government supported online learning for primary and secondary level students through television and radio for limited hours during the day, and online instruction was mandated for university students. The former initiative was not successful due to lack of access and awareness, lack of initiative in homes, and uncertainty of how the content would help each grade and different students for specific subject knowledge or help them prepare for comprehensive exams (Maryam Akmal et. al., 2020); while the latter was not successful for university students due to a lack of internet access (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). It is feared that this break may lead to discontinuation of education in many girls due to (i) financial burdens, (ii) greater household burden for care of sick, disabled or multiple infant children, and (iii) forced marriage and pregnancy.

Culturally appropriate regional interventions

Interventions that have been developed to improve education have tended to focus on school enrollment for girls and boys, and there is little evidence for differences in gender-based outcomes (Burde, Guven, Kelcey, Lahmann, & Al-Abbadi, 2015). Interventions have also focused more on policy, resources, and infrastructure; with less emphasis on interventions for the development of norms and inclusion (Unterhalter, 2017). Governments and communities from LMIC must develop their own region-specific interventions with a focus on culture and traditions (Herz, Herz, & Sperling, 2004). Nine cultural interventions are discussed to improve girls education in Pakistan, including (i) parental motivators, (ii) teacher motivators, (iii) resource and service motivators, (iv) safety and security motivators, (v) community motivators, (vi) curriculum reform, (vii) integrating women social workers, (viii) opportunities for distance learning, and (ix) improving financing.

Parental motivators

Two very important interventions to improve girls education are maternal literacy and parental awareness. The former is important to help support girls in studies, but the latter is integral to get them enrolled and retained in school. Awareness in parents about the importance of schooling their daughters and the benefits reaped in building resilience, fighting oppression and violence, improving life prospects, and providing opportunities for financial autonomy is imperative. Adult literacy programs for basic literacy in mothers must be initiated to provide better support for girl child admission and support in learning and studying at home. Opening day-care centers that are also early-age learning centers for girl infants is recommended. Parents in rural and urban areas who admit their daughters to learning centers at an early age would be more likely to keep their daughters in school. Early entry into learning centers will also help in building a culture of acceptance and a community that accepts norms of girls being in school. Finally,

conditional cash transfers are known to be the best motivators for parents to send their daughters to school (Gitter & Barham, 2008). Means to finance cash transfers and monitoring of attendance will be discussed in sections below ('Improving financing' and 'Integrating women social workers').

Teacher motivators

To build a culture of trust for parents and girl students, the recruitment and retention of female teachers are crucial. Specific hiring and selection of female teachers in STEM subjects are also recommended (Ullah, Ullah, & Bilal, 2020). Grants for women graduate applicants for teaching degrees in education and specialization in STEM subjects is recommended at higher education and graduate level. The introduction of favorable remuneration packages and professional development opportunities for female teachers is also needed to improve retention and job commitment. School teachers leading after-school remedial classes for girls would be more beneficial for learning, but they must be duly compensated for additional work hours. It is also proposed that training of teachers across Pakistan takes place about gender equity and inclusion for classroom climate, subject selection, grade allocation, and management of the hidden curriculum. Making the school climate more conducive to girls is needed through tools like improving class participation and student representation. Curriculum development and class discussion that promote gender equity can be an important tool to raise interest and commitment in learning and retention of girls (Klein, 2014).

Resource and service motivators

Opening girl's schools and ensuring segregation across the country is imperative to encourage enrollment and also to raise community awareness for the importance of girl's education as a national policy. Many disadvantaged and resource-short schools do not have sufficient boundary walls and privacy. There is a need for the development of existing infrastructure to ensure security, privacy, and also basic resource provi-

sion, including functional bathrooms, water system, proper roofing, adequate classrooms and desks, and fans and heating. Other material provisions like books, copies, and menstrual supplies must also be provided. Private sector leasing and franchising of schools by the government sector can also be considered in resource and budget short countries like Pakistan, which need to solve supply problems immediately. Other options to solve supply problems include the introduction of options for double-shifts; and reserving the morning shift for girls. Opportunities for accelerated learning programs and double promotions for girls must be incorporated not just for high achievers, but for girls for whom age is a consideration for late school entry. Accelerated learning and "catching up" will motivate admission (Randall, 2020). The introduction of breakfast and lunch for girls in school, with takeaway food rations for home, would go a long way in improving enrollment and retention. Girls who are well-fed and nourished will be fortified to attend school and concentrate on their studies. Additionally, providing multivitamin supplements to girls would help in their short and long-term health. Teachers and school social workers can be tasked to ensure multivitamin intake during school breakfast provision to girls.

Safety and security motivators

There is a critical need to modify school policies and environment to ensure safety, prevent corporal punishment, and maintain zero-tolerance for harassment or abuse of any kind. Measures must be taken to implement codes for safety and make the community aware that policies are implemented in schools. The improvement in awareness for identification of policy and definitions for harassment and abuse must also be initiated. It is also critical that the implementation of an anti-violence curriculum and activities for students, teachers, and school staff is undertaken. Ensuring a functional and independent reporting system and grievance committee, with representation from the community, should be made mandatory for each school. The strict monitoring and swift accountability against different forms of violence in school will

motivate enrollment and retention of girls. Additionally, the recruitment and retention of female teachers, administrators, staff, and school transport drivers are critical in improving the enrolment of girls in Pakistan. There needs to be assurance and communication to parents that girl students are being taught and monitored by female instructors and staff and are not left alone at any point with male faculty or single staff members at school, at pick and drop timings, in the washrooms, or during transportation. It is also possible to seek the assistance of the community through "walking bus" and "gatekeeping" initiatives (Kearns, 2003), where school children are chaperoned by parents or community volunteers along the path to school and at school premises.

Community motivators

It is vital to transform social and traditional values to support girl's education through community notables, religious leaders, and media. Improving awareness through Quranic text and Prophetic traditions, or *Hadees*, through Friday sermons and religious documentaries is needed. For Muslim dominated countries like Pakistan, it might be better to use the aims and advocacy of bodies that are more regionally accepted and trusted, like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (Blitt, 2016). The use of mediums like popular print, television and social media can be instrumental in promoting girl's education and also creating social shame against families who do not support the education of daughters. Influential community notables must lead community awareness programs with families to promote gender equity in education. The role of community notables is also instrumental for the promotion of the status of daughters, their potential for autonomy and income-earning, and the abandonment of early marriage. Informal family counseling and the introduction of "neighborhood watch schemes", can further help to create significant social control to reduce absences and dropouts. Intergenerational community learning groups can also be organized to help girls in homework, school projects, exam preparation, and remedial support for specific subjects.

Curriculum reform

Creating a region-specific model to promote gender equity in the education sector requires content development and consensus across communities for ownership and adoption. There is a need for the reform of textbooks and educational curriculum with content that promotes equality and rights of women. Special care must be taken to provide equal opportunities for subject selection and knowledge in science, engineering and mathematics for girls, including the provision of related resources like labs, skilled instructors, and practical application of knowledge. The poorer performance of girls in STEM leads to less specialization and income-earning opportunities which promote the culture that education does not reap material benefits for girls. Linking girl students with academic clubs and providing opportunities for prizes in achievement would also help. For girls that have been conditioned for years that their equality in education is not a priority, it is important to incorporate socioemotional learning and negotiation skills. This will help to build morale and commitment in girls and guarantee enrollment and retention (Whitted, 2011). Specific training for vocational skills and home-based employment skills are also recommended (Ahamad, 2016). Some examples of the latter include embroidery and stitching, tutoring, beauty parlor work, and online teaching or consultancy work. Confidence that the education system will provide opportunities for both out-of-home or the more culturally accepted home-based work opportunities will help to improve enrollment.

Integration of Women Social Workers

It is mandatory to introduce a School and Community Social Worker Programme and to enlist women social workers for this job in the country. At the moment Pakistan does not have a widely functioning Social Worker setup in the education sector or communities (Graham, 2007). Independently hired women social workers by the government will not have a conflict of interest in identifying and reporting problems and challenges related to girl's education

within the school or the community. The main tasks of social workers must be to monitor and intervene for: (i) increasing enrollment and retention, (ii) improving health status and needs, (iii) resolving shortages in educational resources and services, and (iv) raising community and household support and awareness. Secondary responsibilities of social workers must include the survey of domestic circumstances, household challenges, and parental neglect or abuse. Supplementary training of school and community social workers about the monitoring, detection, and reporting of all types of abuse against girls is essential, as the curriculum of trained Social Workers in Pakistan at the moment does not cover this aspect comprehensively. Finally, special SOPs must be included for the identification and specific support provision for the most vulnerable girls in the community, such as those from single parent households, reconstituted families, and those left alone with extended relatives, guardians, or instructors.

Distance learning

Distance learning must become an option for girls even beyond the pandemic, especially for girls who are unable to physically attend school, due to distance, family circumstances, or special needs. The government must launch a multi-stakeholder response to ensure the availability and access to laptops or touchpads and high-speed internet across the country. At a basic level, most disadvantaged public sector schools do not have computer labs or teachers who are technologically literate. There is an immediate need to prepare all schools with the appropriate digital infrastructure, skilled staff for maintenance, and digital training for teachers (Mumtaz, 2021). Additionally, there needs to be critical assessment and support for the learning needs and remote learning support for special needs girls or special needs children, the transgender community, refugee children, and children residing in remote locations without access to electricity throughout the day. Thus, teachers must also be provided training for blended teaching for all types of girl students within the community- in-class, online, and offline. All these efforts will not yield the desired re-

sults unless communities and parents are educated about normalizing access to technology for girls. Thus, awareness programs at community-level about the importance of digital access and internet use for girls is also needed.

Improving financing

Pakistan is a country known for its strong charity ethics, with the government tax pool or Bait ul Maal coming from charity and religious taxes (Khan & Ali, 2009). There is a need to increase this domestic tax pool and to remove the dependency on funding bodies and NGOs, by allocating a fixed share for girl's education from state-collected taxes. An increase in the budget allocation, at the federal and provincial level, for girls education in the country will keep governing bodies and taxpayers mobilized and committed to implementing policy and monitoring impact. Care needs to be taken that increase in budgets is not mismanaged or used for increase in salaries for administration, but rather for (i) building of schools, (ii) improving existing infrastructure, (iii) hiring and training teachers, and (iv) conditional cash transfers. The government also needs to adopt measures for supplementary financing by tapping into the successful and well-established culture that sustains private charities in the country (Irfan, 2003). Private charity organizations operating in the country must champion girls education through conditional cash transfers and community sponsorship schemes. Besides, private organizations and food chains that target corporate social responsibility objectives can be approached for sponsorship of girl's schools and provision of meals at schools. Last, the government and higher education sector, both private and public sector universities, must invest in collecting nationwide data for girls education and conducting pilot interventions to improve girl literacy. Longitudinal data is needed about enrollment and retention from the primary to tertiary level, along with data about the shift in social constructions and cultural norms for educating girls.

Conclusion

There is a direct association between 'education' and 'culture'. The former influences knowledge and achievement; while the latter influences attitudes and practices. For many families in countries like Pakistan, the final decision of educating girls and young women has less to do with utility and rationality, and more to do with traditions and community norms. The well-being of girls is associated with marriage, traditional values, family honor, and community acceptance. We can conclude that the ethics and planning for girl's education in Pakistan, and other LMIC with similar conservative cultures, must recognize and incorporate efforts to transform *the social construction of schooling girls.* The focus of cultural interventions must be on assisting change in primary agents that control decisions for education including parents, community

Table 1:
Summary of cultural interventions to improve girls education in Pakistan, and other culturally conservative regions, during the pandemic and beyond

Parental motivators	Teacher motivators	Resources & Services motivators	Safety & security motivators	Community motivators	Curriculum reform	Integrating Women Social Workers	Distance Learning	Improving Financing
Adult maternal literacy programs

Parental awareness about benefits of educating girls

Early age learning centers

Conditional cash transfers | Hiring female teachers

Grant allocations for teaching degrees for women

Improving remuneration & professional development

Training for gender equity & hidden curriculum

Remedial instruction & due compensation | Opening girls' schools & ensuring segregation

Functional buildings & material resources

Private franchising

Options for double-shift

Opportunities for accelerated learning

Breakfast/lunch & take-home meals

Multivitamin supplementation | School policy for safety & harassment

Antiviolence curriculum

Awareness for identification of different forms of abuse

Functional & independent committee for dealing with violations

Ensuring female administration, staff & transport drivers | Use of religious leaders, Quranic verses & prophetic traditions

Use of print, television & social media

Community awareness programs through community notables

Introduction of neighborhood watch schemes and intergenerational learning groups | Textbook & curriculum reform for gender equity

Equal opportunities for STEM

Linking girls to academic clubs and providing prizes for achievement

Integrating socioemotional learning & negotiation skills

Vocational & home-based skills development | Monitoring absenteeism & retention

Health status & need for medicines/consultation

Identification of vulnerable groups

Organizing family & community awareness for girls education | Availability & provision of digital technology & internet

Teacher training for digital literacy

Provisional support for offline & vulnerable groups

Availability of blended teaching | Increase in government budget allocation

Fixing a portion of state-collected taxes for girls education

Initiating private sector & community sponsorship for girl students

Linking existing charities for conditional cash subsidies & meal provision

Collaboration with higher education sector for research & pilot interventions |

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notables, religious leaders and media. Besides, there is a need to improve the perceptions and realities for the cultural assumptions related to resources and services, safety and security policies, and curriculum content. Finally, the protection of an integrated women social worker force and comprehensive financing schemes can be key cultural interventions to overcome barriers to educating girls.

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