

CULTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING GENDER LITERACY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This study “Cultural Factors Influencing Gender Literacy Level” shows local perception of parents regarding their daughters’ education. In spite of the fact that the people are aware of the importance of literacy, there is gender gap. People are still reluctant to send their daughters to the schools. This study identifies the culture factors concerning gender gaps in literacy. The focus of study is to find the actual reason of low participation rate of female education with reference to gender empowerment. The efforts have been made to find out the culture perception of parents regarding their daughter’s education and gender discrimination between female and male children in access to literacy. This study may help to find out low participation rate with reference to gender empowerment. There is no financial benefits for parents to literate their daughters. The main focus of the study is to explore the actual cultural factors involved in low literacy of female with reference to gender. This research was conducted in Villag Dasuha District Faisalabad. Qualitative anthropological techniques were used to collect empirical data.

Keywords: Gender, Literacy, Mobility, Dowry, Inheritance, Barrier, Patrilocal, Patriarchal and Partilineal.

INTRODUCTION

According to Census Report of 1998 and as quoted by UNESCO report on “Literacy Trends and Statistics in Pakistan” the literacy rate in Pakistan is 45%. Among the males it is 56.5% and among the females it is 32.6%. In urban areas it is 64.70% and in rural areas it is 34.40%. Among the females in rural areas this rate is 20.80%. UNESCO (2002) reports, “A comparison between the urban and rural population of Pakistan and between males and females reveals that rural literacy (34.4%) is less than that urban literacy (64.70%) and female literacy (32.6%) is less than male literacy (56.5%).” The lack of education among females especially in the rural areas creates many serious problems. The females being half of the population cannot play their roles in the national development because of low literacy level. They cannot find jobs, they cannot make decisions, they are not aware about their health; they cannot contribute in educating their next generation.

In our society, generally the parents deal with their male and female child separately. The sons are preferred over the daughters because they are supposed to be the helping hand for the parents. Parents tend to think that whatever they spent on sons is an investment where as spending over daughters is a waste, because they are considered as liabilities. The concept of not being dependent on daughter is a reason for the illiteracy among the females. “*Purdah*” is another reason. It is because they feel that their honour is at stake.

Low-income family cannot afford enough money to educate their children, so they choose their son for higher education. It is fact that the bringing up a child by an educated mother is superior to by an uneducated mother. Awareness about the importance of female education is not a new phenomenon. But there is gap present between male and female child in literacy. Literacy rate vary from region to

region as well as in case of sex. For instance, literacy rate in rural areas are lower as compared to urban areas. Similarly, female literacy rates are lower as compared to those of male (Ghafoor, 1994).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

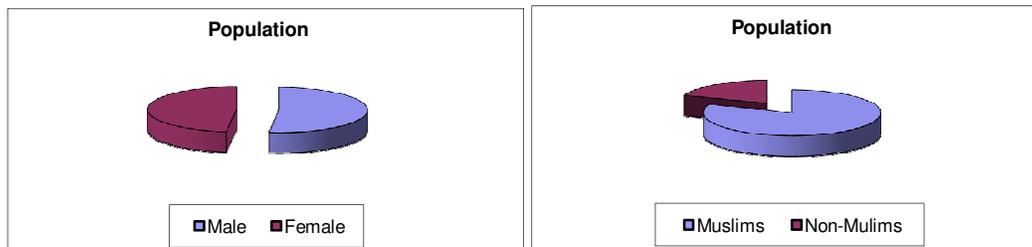
By “methodology” we mean the philosophy of the research process. This includes the assumptions and values that serve as a rationale for research and the standards or criteria the research use for interpreting data and reaching conclusions. Whereas by “method” we simply mean the research technique or tool used to gather data. Methodology of the current research was based upon qualitative anthropological research methods which include socio-economic survey, participant observation, key informant interviews, interviews, case studies and focus group discussions were used to collect empirical data. For socio-economic survey 100 households were selected through simple random sample. We choose two key informants in the village on our personal judgment basis, which knew most of the people in the village and their socio-economic conditions. Participant observation was used in order to get first hand and accurate information about the respondents. We participated in the daily activities of the village. In-depth interviews were conducted with the elder members of society to get detailed information. Structured Interviews were used to collect information from the teachers and other working women because they take the interview more seriously and give reasonably accurate answers. Case studies were conducted to get a detailed presentation of data related to different events. The first visit was conducted in 1996, and the second in 2006.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted in Village Dasuha (242-R.B.), District Faisalabad in Punjab, Pakistan. The village is situated at a distance of 15 km from Faisalabad city in South West direction and 2 km from Samundri Road from where a branch road leads to the village. According to 1998 population census report of district Faisalabad the total population of Dasuha is 9,557, which includes 4952 males and 4605 females. This total figure includes 7721 Muslims and 1838 Non-Muslims.

Table 1. Population of the Village

Total Population	Male	Female	Muslim	Non-Muslim
9557	4952	4605	7721	1838

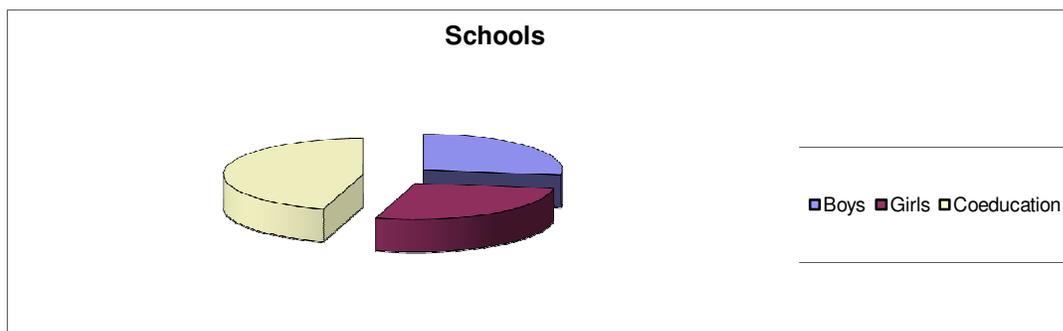


The educational facilities are present in the village both for boys and girls. The total number of schools present in the village is 11. There is one high and two primary schools for boys, one higher secondary and two primary schools for girls provided by the government. There are two middle schools, two primary schools and one nursery school in the private sector where there is coeducation. The schools in private sector are providing both Urdu and English medium education to the students. The number of male students in English medium sections of the school is more than females. Computer education

is also present in Kinder Middle School. For the higher education people send their sons to the colleges and universities in Faisalabad.

Table 2. Position of the Schools in the Village

Schools	For boys	For girls	Coeducation	Status
Higher secondary School	-	1	-	Government
High School	1	-	-	Government
Middle School	-	-	2	Private
Primary School	2	2	-	Government
Primary School	-	-	2	Private
Nurseries	-	-	1	Private



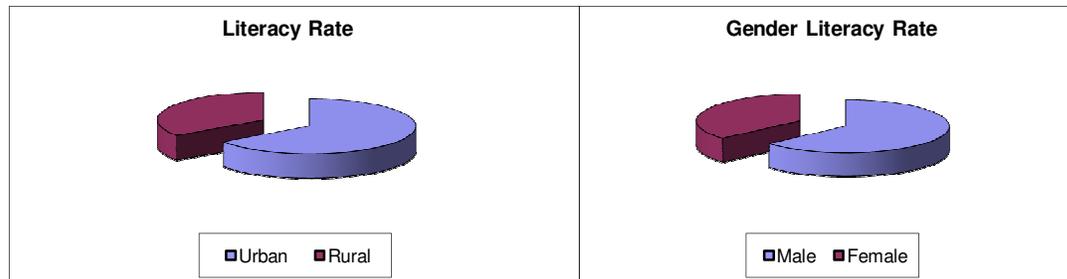
Cultural Barriers for Girl’s Education

Husain (1976) says that the quantitative interest in the education of girls does not go beyond the city limits. Whatever interest we have in female education is restricted to urban surroundings. Outside the cities, in the rural areas, where the bulk of Pakistani’s population lives, even the thin veneer of interest we find in the cities is absent. Poverty, early marriages, social customs and lack of education opportunities combine to inhibit any likely interest in female education. Thus in the villages as well as in the cities our first and immediate problem in the field of female education is to have a wider and deeper realisation of its importance.

Before discussing the cultural barriers for girls in education let’s see the overall position of literacy in Pakistan. Mumtaz & Shaheed (1987) stated, “As the socially prescribed role of women is limited to raising a family, education is never a priority for girls. The result is that the literacy rate for women in Pakistan is one of the lowest in the world.”

Table 3. Literacy rate in Pakistan

Literacy rate	Urban	Rural	Male	Female
45%.	64.70%	34.40%	56.5%	32.6%



Following are the major cultural barriers for girls in access to education.

Purdah: “*Purdah*” is observed in the village at different levels. Females do not come in front of stranger men and boys. They do not interact with them, and do not go out alone. “*Purdah*” is the major barrier for the girls in education. There is a slight change in the behaviours of the people regarding “*purdah*”. There are many females in the village who do not bother if any stranger watches them. They do not hide their faces even. Many of them are not sending their daughters for higher education. They said that we do not care if anybody sees our daughter. But it is the comment or a negative remark, which anybody may pass for their daughter, because these remarks often last with the girls forever and spoil their lives. Their marriages become problem. So it is better not to send them to schools. There is a small group of people who passes negatives comments on the ladies who come out of their homes for any purpose. They themselves are very strict with their ladies. They never allow them to go out of the homes alone because they may expect the same treatment for their ladies from anybody else. This group is harmful not only for others but for their own families also. So this factor is the major barrier for literacy gap regarding gender.

Dowry: As a tradition in Pakistani society a lot of dowry has to be given to the girl at the time of her marriage. This tradition is another barrier for the girls in education in the village. Many parents start collecting the dowry for their daughters just after their birth. The money, which should have been invested on their education, is spent on dowry. Many of the parents say that education is more important than dowry, but we cannot invest on both sides. We are investing on dowry because at the time of her marriage nobody will ever demand for education, everybody will ask for dowry. So it’s better to collect dowry than education.

Nonparticipation in Economic Activities: According to Klein & Renate (1992) “The preference for sons, who are obviously better fed and nursed, is based on the distribution of tasks and roles according to sex. It is the responsibility of the son for example to support his parents in old age and to ensure the survival of the family by linking the living and the dead. Men are also regarded as stronger and intellectually superior, a view that many women themselves hold.” The females are kept economically dependent on males no matter how hard they work to contribute to the family's income. They can only contribute in the income through embroidery; crochet work and stitching because by keeping themselves inside the house they could do these works. The ladies cannot go outside for jobs, because it is considered as dishonour for the males. The males who send their females for jobs face a bad reputation in the society as if they are living on the earnings of the females and they cannot earn to feed them. This concept is another major barrier for the girls in access to education. Most of the parents say that we do not have to send them for jobs so why to educate them.

Temporary Family Membership: Ghafoor (1994) said that “literacy, whether defined narrowly or broadly, is fundamental need of an individual if he/she has to lead successful, happy and prosperous life in a society.” As there is a patrilocal residence in our society the girls have to move with their husbands to live with them. So they are treated as temporary members of the family. Most of the

families do not want to invest much on the education of their daughters because they have to leave after their marriage and their investment would be of no use. Somebody else would be benefited from it. This patrilocal residence system is another barrier for the girls.

Division of Labour: Paranjape (1999) observed that one of the principal reasons which keep many girls out of school system especially in rural areas is that they are required to work at a very young age in various domestic chores.

There is no balance between the work assigned to the males and females especially at the school going age. The boys at this age have very little to do. They have a lot of free time for their studies. On the other hand the girls of the same age have to do a lot of work at home. They have to help their mothers in almost every household work. This imbalance is another barrier for the girls regarding education.

UNICEF's Convention on Child Rights (1990) states in background note No.6 that discrimination against women begins in childhood, when social and cultural attitudes conspire to apportion the girl child less than what the family and the nation would offer her brother. It is the male child who usually gets the lion's share of available resources: of food and maternal attention, of health care and education.

Inheritance: As I have mentioned earlier, according to Islamic Law, the women and girls are entitled to inherit the land and property, in which they get half of the male's share and the Pakistan's secular or judicial law also advocates women's share in the property, but the traditional practice prevalent in the village deprives them from their legal share in land according to which women are supposed to hand over their share of land in favour of their brothers. The common perception is that the girl is given her share of property in the form of dowry, and if the girl is given her share of land, then she'll take it to her husband's family and the family's property will go out of the hands of the actual owners. This factor, not giving the share of property to the girls is another barrier for the females in education, because if the girl gets education she may start demanding for her share of property.

Mobility: Her mobility is restricted and she is confined in the private domain i.e. the house. She is made to depend on her parents, brothers or elder relatives for the fulfillment of her requirements. They cannot study because of the restrictions on mobility. Although they can study further privately, but that too is not allowed by most of the male members of the family. The fear of outside world and sabotage of their "izzat" (honour) is infused in their minds. Therefore first of all they do not dare to go out alone, and those who break these rules; the male members of their family may give them even a physical assault. So this restricted mobility is another barrier for literacy gap regarding gender.

Power of Decision-Making: Being a patriarchal community, the decision making power is held by the male members of the family. In majority of the houses the males are the heads of the households. Fathers, brothers, uncles or the husbands have authority to make decisions. The males not only influence the external decisions, they also influence the internal decisions of the household. They make decisions regarding their females' education, where to study and how much to study. Normally the male decision makers stop the females of their families from education earlier because they are more conscious about the "purdah" and the concept of "izzat", which is linked with the females. If a female have to make the decision regarding education of the girls, she may not stop them as early as the males do. A hidden fear in the minds of males is that after getting education the females may start interfering in the decision making process, which is so far male's domain. He does not like any interference in his domain, so he keeps the female less educated. Whenever a question regarding the decision making power was asked from females of the house they said, "Obviously male and it is their

right. They go out of the homes, have interaction with the people and have a better vision, so they can make better decisions.” This statement may differ after they get education.

Changes Observed During Recent Past

Despite the rigid customs and traditions which are being followed by the villagers, certain changes have also taken place, like “*pardah*” these days is not as strict as it was in past. In the past the women had to wear a thick “*burkha*” from very young ages and had to cover themselves with it even in summers, but now the girls have started wearing “*chadders*” and veils although they still cover their faces and bodies with them. The use of “*burkha*” has reduced to great extent. In the past the “*pardah*” was so strict that women used to stop and turn their faces in the opposite direction or on the sides of the paths when they used to see men coming in their way, but now this activity is very rare. Then the girls and women only used to go out to meet their relatives during nighttime and that too with male companions, but now this practice is very rare. Now they can even go during the daytime. The girls go to schools and “*madrassas*” etc, and women can also be seen as L.H.Vs and L.H.Ws so this trend has changed.

Changes have also been observed in the health issues, as the people are gaining greater awareness about health, family planning and related issues through the Lady Health Visitors and media. The people have started taking their females to the hospitals.

A change has also appeared in context of education too. In the past people didn't even allow their daughters to study, but now they have started getting their daughters educated. Most of my respondents said that it's because of media. People have been made aware that it is as important for daughters to get education as it is for boys. There are many girls who were not allowed to study in the past but now their younger sisters are being sent to school by their parents.

There was a time when girls were not allowed to speak against any order of their parents, especially fathers, uncles and brothers. But now it was observed that girls have started speaking against not being allowed to study further, I've seen some girls who are getting higher education by force. Some girls although are not educated themselves, but have made their parents send their younger sisters to schools.

Although these are only few of the aspects in which change was seen but these changes were seen in majority of the families. Although the pace of social change is extremely slow but it is happening, showing that the rural society is not static and exposure to media and interaction with the urban community has also affected the Dasuha society in some ways.

But the harsh reality still holds a strong position as the girls of Dasuha, which is a fusion point of Punjabi Culture, are living in a conservative patriarchal and patrilineal society where they are assigned with the roles of a domestic worker expected to be submissive, chaste, “*pardah*” observing, dowry making and ready to be wed off and to nicely settle down in the house of their in laws. A little education with full devotion to household works in order to care and look after the members of the family in a docile and submissive manner is the normal life schedule of most of Dasuha girls who are groomed to accept the dominance of men as father, brother and husband.

This study also highlights the fact that a conscious and persistent effort is to be made to educate the society about the equal status of males and females. The girls are to be allowed to get educated so that they can have the confidence to face the world. The parents should have flexible attitude towards their children as it affects the life and personality of the children.

CONCLUSION

When babies come into the world, they are innocent, soft and totally at the mercy of their parents. Parents are self-reliant and world wise have their own ways and visions regarding their children's education. These ways have different sets of rules and regulations for the new comer. Male child is met with cheers and festivities moreover; he finds life an era of freedom to develop and grow in any direction of his desires and capabilities but arrival of girl child is met with a chilled hush. A life stuffed with suppressed sentiments and subdued existence awaits her. The stamp of second-class citizen is embossed on her soul in the name of love, concern and security.

In the family, parents differentiate among their children. Mother plays the major role in this differentiation. When a woman is expecting she says that a son should be born. If a son is born she thinks of herself as a great woman who has given birth to a man. This man will continue the lineage of his father. The females even managing the whole of household work are supposed as doing their routine work. The data shows that the males and females in the patriarchal Punjabi society are not rewarded for what they do. Females are the ones who suffer most. They do contribute in the family income in one way or the other but still their contribution is not considered as an extra work.

Then literacy level of the population shows that the women are the one who are less educated. Therefore, they are not given their due rights in the society as they cannot protest in getting their rights. The males do not accept this that the females are equivalent to them.

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