

Status of Girls Education in Pakistan after 69 years of Independence

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Last month we celebrated Pakistan's 69th Independence Day with great pride, enthusiasm and with more promises than ever to work for a better Pakistan. Pakistan is a country with a great potential of growth, due to its geographic location between two of the world's fastest growing economies, its long coastlines, vast water and river endowment, natural resources still waiting to be explored, the entrepreneurship culture and of course the big bulge of youth which will continue to grow given our population growth rate is still at 2%.

To make the best use of all of Pakistan's assets, we urgently need to pay some serious attention to the education crisis Pakistan is facing. The statistics available paints a painful and desperate picture. According to the

recent UN report Pakistan's Education is some 50+ years behind in its Primary Education and 60+ years behind in its Secondary Education. With more than 50% of our children of school age are out of schools, i.e. nearly 25 million Pakistani Children between the age of 5 - 16 are out of school of which 52% (12.8 million) are girls.

Pakistan has the second highest number of girls out of school in the world. According to the 2014 ASER report, where the education is being provided it is unfortunately of such poor value that only 25% of students in class 5 possess the basic numeracy and literacy skills that they should have acquired in Class 2. With 42% of the population age 10 and over illiterate, and about two third of women age 15+ are unable to read and write.

The above is just an overall snapshot of education problem in Pakistan. This gets worse for girls.

Whilst the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan promises equal rights to all citizens and repudiates sexual discrimination, very little has changed for its female population since then as the highest female literacy rate is in the Punjab province at any alarmingly low rate of 48% and its lowest in Baluchistan at 22%, highlighting the urgent need for implementing effective reforms and policies. According to a UN report, Pakistan has a Gender Disparity Index of 0.82 which is extremely worrisome. The female education crisis has been exacerbated over the previous years as militant groups began campaigns targeting girls' schools that only further discouraged families from sending their



daughters to school. The effects of this are seen today in the province of KPK where the insurgency was strongest and consistent governmental failure to prioritise or overcome barriers restricting female education have created a dire situation in the province. There are only 2463 schools for girls compared to 3538 for boys (Pakistan Education Statistic 2014/15: 75) and over 453,000 out of school children are girls in this province (Pakistan Education Statistics 2014/15: 69) which shows the scale of Pakistan's education crisis.

Education and learning play a fundamental role in achieving broader development goals; equitable learning is essential to poverty reduction. Lifelong learning enables children, youth and adults to continually build their knowledge, skills and competencies to survive and thrive as productive members to society, leading to sustainable economic growth. Equitable access to quality education in our country will improve our country in a multitude of ways. Female education can have a ripple effect on Pakistani state. It can help the state address other pressing issues simultaneously such as its high infant mortality rate at 66 per 1000 child births by promoting a more educated female population which several studies have shown severely reduce infant mortality rates as mothers are more adept at dealing with their children's health related issues.

Poverty is another depressing issue that we are facing, regardless of all the resources at hand we have been unable to utilise them for improving lives of people. Though there is some progress but it is still very slow. However, focusing on girl's education can help boost our economy. We have many great examples right around us. For example, In 1980 Singapore had a female literacy rate of 74%. Today it almost closes to 100%. During the same period Malaysia's grew from 61% to 90%. In this duration they also experienced a period of sustainable long-term economic growth

as their GDP grew from \$11.8 billion to \$292 billion, Malaysia's economy grew from \$24.4 billion to \$338 billion.

An estimated 50% of Pakistani women are married by the age of 19 years. In rural parts of Sindh over 72% of women are forced into early marriages. Many of them are forced to drop out of primary school and lack the basic skills and knowledge to help raise children which is why Pakistan has one of the highest infant mortality rates. Education should be a young girl's priority. In villages where middle and secondary schools are not functional, or not there at all, have many girls who discontinue their education after primary level and sit at home. This often becomes a reason for the parents to arrange their marriage soon afterwards. On the other hand, early age marriage can result in educational discontinuation for girls who wish to study and the means to do so are also available. It is an established fact that education is the single strongest factor that delays the marriage of young girls.

And not to mention girls education addresses many other issues such as child labor, domestic violence and control population growth rate.

As stated by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in his report, *A Dignity for all*, "Much stronger efforts are needed to improve the quality of education and provide lifelong learning opportunities, especially for girls and

women". There is a global learning crisis, which is hitting the poorest, most marginalised children, youth and women hard. Pakistan finds itself engulfed in this crisis as more and more of its population find themselves entrenched in a vicious cycle of poverty and a worsening security situation over the preceding decade.

It is an alarming situation for every citizen of Pakistan. It is high time that all key stakeholders, policy makers, international community and the civil society supports a post 2016 global Sustainable Development Agenda that reflects the education priorities such as prioritising girls education through increase in budgetary support, better planning, improved governance and community engagement / awareness raising campaigns in rural areas to help better the education environment. More accessible schools, quality education, provision of basic facilities as a minimum, safe environment for girls, better trained female teachers are just a few of the measures that can be taken to increase number of girls in education. More so basic literacy and numeracy programmes can be developed on national scale to equip older women with basic reading and writing skills.

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