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Inequality of opportunity – gender bias in education in Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

The subject matter of this study is inequality of opportunity (IO) through the lens of unequal access to education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26) states that “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages” (United Nations, 1948). Access to schooling is an opportunity which should be available to all – girls and boys. Gender equality and education are bonded to each other. Advancing gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy society and economy, including education. While the world has made progress towards achieving gender equality, there are still places where girls and women continue to suffer discrimination (UN, 2019), among which is Pakistan. The disadvantages in education translate into a lack of access to skills and limited opportunities in the labour market. The relegation of females to an inferior position, thereby depriving the country of the talents and energies of a significant part of its people, may hamper economic growth and development.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the premise and potential consequences of unequal access to education for Pakistan and to bring closer the specifics of the country concerning the issues discussed. The impact of IO on economic growth and development means there is need for research. The problem of access to schooling of Pakistani girls is high-profile thanks to the youngest Nobel Prize laureate, Malali Yousufzai. The paper concerns access to education in general, although the emphasis is placed on the primary and secondary levels. The thesis set out in the present study is that gender bias in education in Pakistan is determined by various and deeply rooted factors. Their nature puts equal access to education in the realm of a distant goal, constraining the growth and development of the country.

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The plan of the paper is as follows. After the introduction, the first section explains the notion of IO and presents theoretical premises concerning the relation between IO and economic growth and development. The emphasis is on unequal access to education due to gender. A data set on education in Pakistan and the reasons for gender bias in this area are presented in the subsequent parts. The last section highlights the policy recommendations to reduce IO. The main conclusions are reported in the final part. The research methods used are a critique of the literature, analysis of statistical data, documents and online sources, and elements of case study.

THE CONCEPT AND IMPORTANCE OF INEQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY (WITH EMPHASIS ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION)

Every outcome (wages, educational attainment, employment) is affected by the effort of individuals, various circumstances, and sometimes even by random factors – such as luck (Lefranc *et al.*, 2009). Effort refers to the variables that are within the realm of the individual's control (e.g. schooling choices), while circumstances are individual, household, geographic characteristics for which the individual cannot be held responsible (Roemer, 1998). Based on the literature review provided by Brzeziński and Magda (2016) and Shaheen *et al.* (2016), some important circumstances can be enumerated: parental education, gender, race, language, family background and parental social status, ethnicity, place of birth, caste, tribe, number of siblings, parental occupation, and exposure to financial difficulties during childhood. Both the presence and the significance of these factors vary depending on the country, but commonly held is the view that these circumstances should not determine the individual's access to goods or services, which every society usually accepts should be universal (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Opportunities

Source: World Bank, www1.

Depending on the country, the set of opportunities might be modified (Figure 1). The World Bank created the Human Opportunity Index to measure how circumstances beyond the control of children and youth affect their access to goods and basic services like education, water, electricity, sanitation and the Internet (World Bank, <https://>).

Some publications concerning IO (Marrero, Rodríguez 2010; Ayiar, Ebeke, 2019) postulate that it retards economic growth, whereas other works (Ferreira et al., 2014; 2018) which do not contain robust conclusions as to whether IO is bad for growth can also be cited. The ambiguity of the findings can be due to the indistinct conceptual understanding of the phenomenon and to the usage of various indices or methods; however, it is impossible to find a research study which proves a positive impact of IO on growth. This may suggest that the relationship between IO and economic growth is less controversial than the relationship between income inequality and growth (Tusińska, 2016). From a normative perspective, IO seems to be morally unjustified. As most authors would agree, the principle of equality of opportunity requires that individuals with similar effort face “the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system. In all sectors of society there should be roughly equal prospects of culture and achievement for everyone similarly motivated and endowed” (Rawls, 1999, p. 63).

As part of IO, gender bias in education is most likely to be a constraint for growth and development in developing countries. First of all, untapped “female potential” in the form of lower than average levels of education, then of employment, remuneration and access to production resources, leads to the allocation of resources in the economy not being optimal (Korinek, 2005). Narrowing the considerations to the Muslim world, B. Lewis (2002) claims that the lack of economic progress in most of these countries is due in large part to the relegation of women to an inferior position in society, thereby depriving the Islamic world of the talents and energies of almost half of its people. Secondly, in developing countries the diversity of education bears consequences in the diversity of fertility. Fertility falls with a rise in education because the more educated women are, the higher the market wages they command, and the higher the opportunity costs of time spent rearing children. If substitution effects outweigh income effects, then educated women have fewer descendants. Assuming children of educated women are more likely to become educated, this fertility differential increases the proportion of unskilled workers, reducing their wages, and thus their opportunity cost of having children, creating a vicious cycle (Kremer, Chen, 2002). Uneven distribution of human capital leads to a reduction in the level of average human capital in society in the next generation, which has a negative impact on economic growth. Moreover, women with schooling are more likely to have more power over the home budget, and invest more not only in education, but also in the health and wellbeing of their families as well (Korinek, 2005). As a result, physical and mental health can be nurtured, which can also be included among the factors that impact economic growth through absence from work,

work performance, life expectancy, learning ability, school attendance, creativity or mental resilience (Howitt, 2005). If education is acquired most commonly by single women who usually do not have children, accumulation of human capital in the next generations cannot take place.

Educated women usually marry later. Child marriage, which takes place in some developing countries, has devastating consequences for human capital. Children who marry do not only find their childhood cut short and their education abandoned, but if they become parents too soon, girls face serious health risks, including death, due to early pregnancy. Married girls are also at a higher risk of domestic violence (Central Asia Institute, 2016).

Beyond the evidence that common education is a driver of economic growth, which has been extensively studied and is well accepted (UNICEF, 2015, pp. 6–8), education also improves quality of life and is crucial to fostering tolerance between people. This contributes to creating more peaceful societies. Moreover, it enables upward socioeconomic mobility and is essential to achieving other goals as a break from the cycle of poverty. Education helps to reduce income inequalities: one extra year of education is associated with a reduction in the Gini coefficient by 1.4 percentage points (UN, 2017). Schooling, in particular for young women, can improve not only individual life and family outcomes, but community outcomes as well. Access to education can help equip locals with the tools required to develop innovative solutions to their problems. A pool of women with middle or high school education in a community is likely to attract resources in the form of interventions, such as in health and education, when investors know that human resources are available. Education is also linked to empowerment for women individually – those with education are much more likely than uneducated women to be able to make their own choices in life concerning their spouses, number of children, working outside the home and making important household decisions (Zaidi, Farooq et al., 2018, p. 18).

REVIEW OF STATISTICAL DATA – EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

Policy documents in Pakistan, notably the Five Year Plans since the early 1960's, have paid heed to improving the system of education, ensuring adult literacy and providing a network of state schools. Article 25-A of the Constitution recognises free and compulsory education until the age of 16 for all citizens. Education as an end and a right is also well recognised in the many UN conferences and Resolutions. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have prioritised education through Goal 4: *Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning* (Zaidi, Farooq et al., 2018, p. 7). The data presented in Table 1 juxtapose these expectations and the real state of affairs.

Table 1. Statistics on education in Pakistan

Specification	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
1) Expected years of schooling												
Female	3.0	3.9	4.8	5.7	6.8	6.8	7.0	7.0	7.4	7.4	7.8	7.8
Male	6.2	6.6	7.0	7.4	8.2	8.3	8.4	8.5	8.7	8.9	9.3	9.3
2) Mean years of schooling												
Female	1.0	1.3	1.4	1.5	3.0	3.1	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.8
Male	2.7	3.5	3.7	4.0	6.1	6.2	6.4	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5
3) Population with at least some secondary education (% of population aged 25 and older)												
Female	6.9	9.8	12.8	19.9	20.7	19.3	24.4	25.2	26.5	26.5	26.6	27.0
Male	19.2	21.4	24.0	32.1	44.9	46.1	45.1	45.2	47.3	47.3	47.3	47.3
4) Literacy rate, adult (% of population aged 15 and above)												
Female	:	:	:	:	41.02	41.98	43.07	41.97	44.28	:	:	:
Male	:	:	:	:	68.90	66.99	69.86	68.63	69.07	:	:	:
5) Literacy rate, youth (% of population aged 15–24)												
Female	:	:	:	:	62.30	63.14	64.47	63.44	65.55	:	:	:
Male	:	:	:	:	79.50	78.04	80.29	79.40	79.77	:	:	:

Source: 1–3 UNDP, 2018a; 4 and 5: World Bank, data from database: World Development Indicators.

The number of years of schooling that a girl of entrance age can expect to receive if prevailing patterns of age-specific enrolment rates persist throughout her life amounted to 3 in 1990 and almost tripled during the period considered. The analogous indicator for boys increased from 6.2 to 9.3. The average number of years of education received by people aged 25 and older grew from 1 to 3.8 (female) and from 2.7 to 6.5 (men). The percentage of the population aged 25 and older that has reached (but not necessarily completed) a secondary level of education increased respectively from 6.9% to 27% and from 19.2% to 47.3%. At first glance, these statistics may look optimistic because the changes are relatively quicker for females, which means that the gender gap in education is decreasing. The country has also made some good progress on the educational attainment sub-index according to the “Global Gender Gap Report 2018” by the World Economic Forum (WEF). However, this progress was insufficiently quick to avoid the country being overtaken by a number of faster-improving countries at the lower end of the index rankings (WEF, 2018). Pakistan still has very large segments of the population who are illiterate – more than 50% of the women over the age of 15 years and 30% of men cannot read and/or write. The statistics look better for the younger population, but still more than one third of young women and 20% of men are illiterate (Table 1). Pakistan also does not fare well in the context of a regional comparison – according to the various educational indicators only Afghanistan lags behind Pakistan (Pakistan Economic Survey 2018–19, p. 158). Moreover, there is a rural-urban divide: the literacy level

for rural women aged 15–64 years old is 35% and 69% for their urban counterparts and literacy for rural males is 63%. Older women, whether in urban or rural areas, tend to have lower literacy levels – only 16% of women aged 45–49 years old are literate, dropping to a low of 7% for those aged 60–64 years. Young women aged 15–24 have better literacy rates: 54% of rural and 84% of urban young women are literate (Zaidi, Farooq et al., 2018, pp. 5, 10–11). The spatial and gender divide is compounded by class and ethnicity (UNESCO, 2016). The most disadvantaged group oscillates between Sindhi, Saraiki and Pashtun, where 98.8% of women from a rural background and 29.3% of the richest urban dwellers lack access to education (Dagia, Ismail, 2018).

REASONS FOR THE EXCLUSION OF PAKISTANI GIRLS FROM THE EDUCATION PROCESS

In total, Pakistan has relatively large numbers of children who never enter school because of the size of their school-age population (UNICEF, 2015), but there are also multiple, often interrelated reasons for low enrollments and dropout rates from schools, specifically concerning girls. The first one is the Islamisation of the state. Before this process took place, the practice of coeducation was common. Following the Second World War, the teaching of girls had to be carried out by women in separate schools, which became problematic in the face of a lack of infrastructure and female teachers. Some conservative residents of Muslim Pakistan also believe that girls cannot study. The low social status of women and the belief that their education leads to neglecting the duties assigned to them by culture excludes girls from the education process (World Bank, 2005, p. 43). The view that girls should contribute to care work at home has long existed in their education system. Textbooks contained few illustrations depicting women, which suggested that females were associated with the private part of life, whereas social, political and scientific activities were reserved for men. It should be noted that in the private sphere most women were presented in their domestic roles, whereas fathers were presented as responsible for moral education. Other mentions of women (mainly important figures such as Chadidža or Fatima) appeared while teaching history and religion. Occupations suitable for a given gender were also presented: men were associated with intellectual or physically strenuous work, while women with helping others and other non-prestigious jobs that were unrelated to economic benefits. Women were described as emotional and dependent on men, men as courageous and intelligent (Waleczek, 2013, pp. 198–201). The content of textbooks is evolving towards gender equality; however, to remove such enduring stereotypes is extremely difficult.

Another factor affecting gender bias is poverty. Parents perceive both sons and daughters through the prism of their ability to work, regardless of access to free

public education – especially since they have to pay for exams and uniforms. In poor families sons are sent to school while daughters stay at home. A poor welfare system prompts parents to invest in boys' education, predicting they will be dependent on their sons in the future (Waleczek, 2013, pp. 198–205). Investing in the education of sons brings greater benefits also due to the gender pay gap. Another issue associated both with culture and poverty is child marriage, which also affects the cessation of education. When there is a lot of unpaid labour to be done, education is a luxury, especially for a young daughter in law. The percentage of Pakistani women aged 20–24 who were first married or in a union before the age of 18 is 21% (2003–2017) and for the age under 15 the figure is 3% (UNDP, 2018b).

This comes as no surprise since the number of institutions for girls at each level of schooling varies significantly, and more so in rural areas where access to private education is limited to primary schooling, if at all. Thus, rural girls do not have recourse to private education, available to urban girls if public schools do not suffice or are not perceived to be of adequate quality. In extreme cases, rural schools are still one room institutions with several age groups and classes sitting in an overcrowded space or under the open sky (weather permitting), with inadequate water and sanitation facilities, and electricity. Since the quality of education is poor, it may appear to parents as pointless. In rural areas women contribute the bulk of their labour as unpaid family workers in agriculture, meaning that attendance of girls at school plummets during the harvest season (Zaidi, Farooq et al., 2018; World Bank, 2005, p. 43). In some places children cannot reach a school on foot safely in a reasonable amount of time. The number and quality of the roads in Pakistan generally (and in rural areas especially) is not coupled with reasonable transportation services and results in limited mobility of girls and women in rural areas.

Another issue involves location, culture and mobility. When a girl becomes an adult (at the time of the first menstruation) parents often start seeking a spouse for her, and fear the distance to school due to the potential threats of harassment and unwanted pregnancy. To avoid a violation of honor, which would make a future marriage impossible, the girl is allowed to travel, if at all, only with an appropriate man as her guardian (Waleczek, 2013, pp. 203–204).

Natural conditions do not help either. For example, after the flood in 2010 women who previously worked as teachers were forced to change their place of residence. Moreover, the flood destroyed a significant number of schools and interrupted the learning process of many girls, whose reintegration into the education system has been extremely difficult.

Last, but not least, there is no enforced government expectation that children should study. Various problems, such as political instability, the disproportionate influence on governance by security forces or escalating ethnic and religious tensions, distract those in power from the obligation to deliver essential services like education – and girls lose out the most. In some places influential local people forcibly occupy the land and school buildings for their personal use, with little

fear of consequences. Beyond this, corruption exists in the government school system. One of the most pervasive forms is nepotism or bribery in the recruitment of staff. Some people simply purchase teaching positions or obtain their jobs through connections. They may not be qualified or motivated to teach, and they may not be expected to. Especially in rural areas, some schools sit empty because corruption has redirected the teacher's salary to someone who does not teach. Moreover, there have been hundreds of attacks on schools in Pakistan, on teachers and students, giving parents still more reasons to keep girls at home, especially in regions dominated by the Taliban or other rebel groups (Human Rights Watch – HRW, 2018b).

In 2017, paradoxically on the International Day of the Girl Child, Pakistan's Senate rejected a bill that would have raised the minimum age for girls to marry from 16 to 18 (Ijazz, 2017).

The government has consistently left the education system severely underfunded, spending less than 2.8% of its GDP on education (2017) – far below the UN recommended standard of 4% to 6%. Government schools are in short supply in Pakistan's major cities, even more so in rural areas (HRW, 2018a). While allocations for education have shown a consistent percentage increase in provincial budgets, through amendments that delegated power to the provinces, the reality is that most of the funds are for recurring expenditures (salaries and infrastructure maintenance). This has not translated into improvements on the ground, while improvements in the quality of education have been dismal (Zaidi, Farooq et al., 2018, pp. 11, 14 and 184). In response to the abdication by the government of their responsibility to provide free education, there has been an explosion of private schools, largely unregulated. These schools may be compromised by poorly qualified and badly paid teachers, idiosyncratic curricula, and a lack of supervision. There has also been an increase in the provision of religious education, ranging from formal madrasas to informal arrangements where children study the Quran (HRW, 2018a).

GENDER EQUITY IN EDUCATION – RECOMMENDATIONS

The awareness of the need for a national categorisation of the mentioned SDGs and enforcement of monitoring mechanisms resulted in the “Pakistan 2025: One Nation, One Vision” measure. In terms of the study topic, the first pillar mentions “(...) improving the human skill base of the population, (...) a rapid scaling-up of investments in education, (...), gender equality and women's development (...)”. Under this, primary school enrollment and completion rates should increase to 100% and the literacy rate to 90%. Concurrently, the target is to improve the Primary and Secondary Gender Parity Index to 1 (Ministry of Planning, Development & Reform – MoPDR, 2014, pp. 8, 13). To improve the situation it would be necessary to:

- 1) modify cultural patterns; most of all, end child marriage and enforce anti-child labour laws. The UN explains that investing in education programmes for girls and increasing the age at which they are legally allowed to marry can return \$5 for every dollar spent, and investing in programmes improving income-generating activities for women can return \$7 dollars for every dollar spent (UN, 2016);
- 2) increase expenditure on education and abolish any fees at government schools, and provide poor students with all needed items such as uniforms, bags, textbooks, etc.; increase the number of schools for girls in rural areas and provide safe (and free or affordable) transport for students to go to their educational institutions;
- 3) endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration, an international political agreement to protect schools, teachers, and students during armed conflicts (GCPEA, 2019);
- 4) expand adult literacy outreach programmes for women; tap into the innovative models (the distance learning literacy programmes) available within Pakistan (through the Allama Iqbal Open University) that have learner centred curricula and teaching methodologies, teacher training and incentives (Zaidi, Farooq et al., 2018, pp. 11, 14, 184);
- 5) provide a united and supportive framework for the education foundations that have been set up and draw on public and private initiatives for rural areas; link tax incentives for the private sector and for-profit companies to invest in non-profit rural schools and colleges (Zaidi, Farooq et al., 2018, p. 185);
- 6) improve the quality of education to make it useful and related to people's lives, and cut the corruption;
- 7) decrease bureaucracy, especially at the provincial level; strengthen supervision of provincial education system progress toward achieving parity between girls and boys and universal primary and secondary education for all children, by requiring provinces to provide accurate data on girls' education, monitoring enrollment and girls' attendance, and setting targets in each province;
- 8) be more transparent about the terms and conditions of all foreign cash injections – aid packages must be partially redirected to boost education budgets across the board; especially for women (Daily Times, 2018).

The tasks presented above are challenging, especially for a developing country like Pakistan. The weak implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (the foregoers of SDGs) and of SDGs (Table 1) makes one skeptical of success before 2025 or at best 2030. To implement these recommendations, the determination of central authorities is primarily demanded. Cooperation with both international organizations and provincial authorities is also important. Modification of law could be relatively easily done on the country level (if there were a desire to change), but it is much harder to change the mentality of society. This does not mean that it is not worth trying to change it – paradoxically, through education.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many goals concerning education and gender equality to achieve according to Pakistani and supranational declarations. Despite them and some improvements, there remain substantial challenges ahead. Actions for equity of opportunity seem both economically and morally justified, but Pakistani girls still face barriers to entering schools precluding the full participation of women in the labour force, which would probably add percentage points to most national growth rates. It seems that no sufficient steps have been taken to eliminate these barriers. The Pakistan government simply has not established an education system adequate to meet the needs of the country's children, especially girls. Under-investment, lack of schools and/or infrastructure, education costs (including alternative ones), corruption and the poor quality of the existing education are the main culprits. Apart from this, it is hard to alter stereotypes that favour keeping girls at home to help in household work instead of educating them. Cultural patterns endure and are extremely difficult to change within one generation, if at all. Beyond the stereotypes, poverty itself encourages parents to educate their sons. The trend is evident in rural areas, where gender disparities are high.

While enrollment rates remain an important measure, these do not quite bring about progress for girls, indicating issues with quality as well as their dropout rates – whether due to inadequate infrastructure, school insecurity or due to social norms (i.e. restrictions on mobility, early marriage). Therefore, educational frameworks and policies need to focus on learning outcomes, and not just primary enrollment. For unless and until girls and women are mainstreamed, the country will have no hope of bridging the gender gap that remains a constraint on growth and development.

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Summary

The subject matter of the paper is inequality of opportunity (IO). Contemporarily, as part of IO, gender bias in education is most likely to be a constraint for growth and development in developing countries. The focus is on gender bias in education in Pakistan, which is a widely discussed problem thanks to the Nobel Prize laureate Malali Yousufzai. The goal is to present the premise and potential consequences of unequal access to education for Pakistanis, and to bring the specifics of the country into clearer focus. The thesis is that gender bias in education in Pakistan is determined by various and deeply rooted factors that place equal access to education in the realm of a distant goal, hampering the growth and development of the economy. The research methods used were a critique of the literature, analysis of statistical data, documents and online sources as well as elements of case study. Plans concerning education have been sketched in SDG-4 and in the document “Pakistan 2025”, but despite some improvements, Pakistan is still a country where one’s future depends on whether one is male or female. A lack of access to education for girls is part of a broader landscape of gender and spatial inequality. The findings suggest that the main circumstances for the exclusion of girls from education are culture, poverty and the state. If recommendations for these areas are not implemented, gender bias will remain one of the barriers to the growth and development of Pakistan.

Keywords: gender inequality, inequality of opportunity, education, economic growth, economic development, Pakistan.

**Nierówności szans
– dyskryminacja dziewcząt w dostępie do edukacji w Pakistanie**

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem rozważań w niniejszym artykule są nierówności szans. Jeden z rodzajów nierówności szans, nierówny dostęp do edukacji ze względu na płeć, jest współcześnie uważany za barierę wzrostu i rozwoju gospodarczego w krajach rozwijających się. Problem nierówności płci w kontekście edukacji został nagłośniony przez laureatkę pokojowej Nagrody Nobla – Pakistankę Malali Yousufzai. Celem artykułu jest prezentacja przesłanek oraz potencjalnych skutków nierównego dostępu do edukacji ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem specyfiki Pakistanu. Postawiono tezę, iż dyskryminacja pakistańskich dziewcząt w dostępie do edukacji jest determinowana zróżnicowanymi i głęboko zakorzenionymi czynnikami, co czyni realizację celu eliminacji tego zjawiska niezwykle trudną i odległą w czasie, hamując wzrost i rozwój gospodarczy tego kraju. Zastosowane w artykule metody badawcze to: krytyczna analiza literatury, analiza danych statystycznych, dokumentów i źródeł internetowych oraz elementy studium przypadku. Ambitne plany dotyczące zmiany sytuacji dziewcząt i kobiet zostały zarysowane w Celach Zrównoważonego Rozwoju (SDG-4) oraz w strategii “Pakistan 2025”, jednakże – mimo obserwowanych postępów – Pakistan nadal pozostaje krajem, gdzie sukces jednostki jest zależny od jej płci (szczególnie na obszarach wiejskich). Utrudniony dostęp dziewcząt do edukacji jest tylko jednym z rodzajów nierówności występujących w różnych wymiarach w Pakistanie. Wnioski, jakie można wyciągnąć na podstawie badań, wskazują, że najważniejszymi czynnikami decydującymi o wykluczeniu dziewcząt z procesu kształcenia są uwarunkowania kulturowe, ubóstwo oraz słabości państwa. Rekomendacje wskazane w artykule dotyczą zatem przede wszystkim tych obszarów.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja, nierówności szans, nierówności ze względu na płeć, rozwój gospodarczy, wzrost gospodarczy, Pakistan.

JEL: I24, I25, O00.