

Getting the Girls to School: The Community Schools Project in Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper reviews a ten-year, two-phase educational project that, amongst its main aims, attempted to increase significantly the enrolment of girls in schools. After discussing the constraints on the lives of females in the region, the paper analyses the effects of the project on enrolment. Although girls' enrolment doubled, a large proportion of girls remained out of school and the drop-out rate of girls was significantly higher than that of boys. The paper examines the reasons for these trends and suggests that, contrary to some expectations, many parents are willing to send their girls to school, but only under strictly controlled and monitored conditions. Finally, there is a discussion of some broader implications of developments that took place during the project.

Key Words: Gender, community schools, girls' education, culture

1. Background: The Gilgit-Baltistan

Seen as part of the larger 'Kashmir' dispute, the region known as Gilgit-Baltistan had the status of a 'territory' of Pakistan, not a full province, since the country got independence in 1947. However, the current political government in Pakistan took the historic and long-awaited decision in 2009 by giving some 'controlled' autonomy to this area as a semi province. Set amongst some of the highest mountains in the world, even today the region is relatively isolated and sometimes difficult to access. Although it is generally believed that Gilgit-Baltistan is one of the least advantaged areas of Pakistan, it is difficult to find objective data to support the assertion. However, the challenges and daunting nature of the region are self-evident. By way of illustration, the following assessment, written by the then Chief Secretary of Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan, 1995: 1) provides a graphic account of some of the major characteristics and difficulties of the region:

The population of [Gilgit-Baltistan] is currently estimated at 968 000 scattered over an area of 72 496 square kilometres. The presence of a difficult terrain comprising snow-clad high mountains, rivers, nullahs and streams, coupled with harsh weather and an undeveloped communications infrastructure, complicates accessibility to most communities. Four of the world's highest mountain ranges – the Himalaya, Karakoram, Pamir and Hindukush – meet here and [the] altitude of much of the region is above 3000 metres; many communities are settled at 3000 metres or above. The population is divided over 650 settlements dispersed in 20 different valleys.

2. Gender Issues in Pakistan with Specific Reference to Gilgit-Baltistan

By way of introducing gender issues in education in Gilgit-Baltistan, we begin with general observations on the condition of women in Pakistan. An assessment by the Asian Development Bank (2000: 2) provides a stark account of the position:

The social and cultural context of Pakistani society is predominantly patriarchal. Men and women are conceptually divided into two separate worlds. Home is defined as a woman's legitimate ideological and physical space, while a man dominates the world outside the home... Therefore women's mobility is strictly restricted and controlled through the system of *pardah*, sex segregation, and violence against them.. (original italics)

The United Nations Development Program's *Country Programme for Pakistan, 2004-2008* (2003: 1) states, 'With a human development index of 0.498 in 1999, Pakistan ranked 127 out of 162 countries, and with a gender-related development index of 0.466 in 1999 it ranked 117 out of 146 countries...' Reflecting on similar data and findings for a number of countries, Lee (2004: 6) offers the following two maxims that are as relevant to Pakistan as they are elsewhere:

- No society treats its women as well as its men.
- Gender inequality is strongly associated with human poverty.

It is not surprising to find that formal education closely reflects the general situation. A paper by the Asian Development Bank shows (op. cit: 3) that in 1998-1999, overall participation rates in education were as follows:

Table 1: Pakistan: overall participation rates in education, 1998-1999

	Males	Females
Primary school	92%	62%
Middle school	64%	37%
High school	45%	26%

The drop-out rate amongst girls during the primary school phase was estimated to be about 50% (ibid.).

As a number of publications observe (cf. Asia Development Bank, 2000; Hussain, 2003), poverty and conservatism are more prevalent in Pakistan’s rural areas where, predictably, literacy rates for women and their participation in education and the economy are also much lower. Before discussing the condition of women in Gilgit-Baltistan, it is pertinent to observe that this is a patchily researched region. Consequently, in what follows, I am writing largely from my own experience. In the case of the author, born and bred in Gilgit-Baltistan to a local family and having spent most of his life there, this experience is extensive.

A recent report by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) (2003: 37) refers to the significant gender disparities in education, stating, ‘Despite significant improvements over the last two decades, enrolment patterns in Gilgit-Baltistan are still characterised by high drop-out rates and large disparities between male and female student numbers.’ The disadvantages that females in Gilgit-Baltistan experience in education and literacy are symptomatic of many other aspects of their lives as well. For instance, farming is the largest source of income for the vast majority of people in the region. In most cases, with both men and women working long hours in their fields, older children, particularly girls, have to take care of younger siblings as well as handle other household chores. Generally, these older girls are not able to attend school or enjoy an uninterrupted education. This factor also contributes to the higher drop-out rate amongst girls.

Traditionally, females have been largely confined within the four walls of the house, giving birth to and nurturing their children as well as attending to numerous other household chores. It is no exaggeration to say that many women in Gilgit-Baltistan are marginalised and secluded from wider society. Usually men decide what is or is not good for women; and, as a result, women are often deprived of their fundamental human rights such as being educated or choosing their life partners. Certain injunctions of Islam reinforce these practices, recommending that women should wear veils and should avoid looking into the eyes of men other than their relatives. Where extreme purdah is observed, women are expected to cover themselves so completely that no parts of their bodies are visible to men outside of their family. Furthermore, as is true in other societies, parents strive to protect the modesty and chastity of their daughters. A woman accused of having illegitimate, premarital relations, consensual or otherwise, is disgraced and rejected by society. Men belonging to the more conservative groups claim that they restrict their women to their homes to protect them from such risks. Many girls do not proceed to higher phases of education simply because there is no school near to their homes.

Daughters are considered to be ‘guests’ in their parents’ homes, because eventually they will move to their husbands’ homes. As can be expected, this sense that girls are only ‘temporary sojourners’ often negatively influences parents’ attitudes towards their daughters’ education. Related to this, sons, not daughters, are regarded as the legitimate heirs to authority, property, and tradition. The ‘superior’ status of men is reinforced by the rules and regulations that flow from the Islamic law of inheritance, by which a son inherits two-thirds of both the movable and immovable property of his father, whereas one-third goes to a daughter. Moreover, because the joint family system and the sense of tribalism are also deeply rooted in the cultures of Gilgit-Baltistan, having a number of male children is regarded as a source of strength and security for a family. Therefore, males usually enjoy greater advantages in many if not all aspects of social, economic, and political life. As can be expected, families regard the birth of a son as a good omen and as an occasion for celebration. On the other hand, women who only bear daughters are generally not only looked down upon by their families but also have low opinions of themselves.

The socially constructed disadvantages are reinforced by the geo-physical conditions of Gilgit-Baltistan, which are major hindrances to females in regard to access to education, particularly higher education, and also restrict their general movements, as most of the population lives in small hamlets and villages that are scattered all over a vast, mountainous area. In spite of what has been said, the situation in Gilgit-Baltistan is not universally bleak. Conditions vary from area to area, sometimes substantially, and the situation is changing rapidly in some areas. Forces for change include the Karakoram Highway, which links Gilgit-Baltistan with the rest of the country, together with the development initiatives taken by government, NGOs (particularly the Aga Khan Development Network - AKDN), and other international agencies. For instance, there is no doubt that both the awareness of, and demand for, education have been growing rapidly since the early 1990s.

3. The Community Schools Project

In this article, we focus on gender issues in education, mainly by analysing experiences from the community schools project, which operated in Gilgit-Baltistan from the mid-1990s until 2003. This project was part of a national initiative known as the Social Action Program (SAP), which, amongst others, had the direct aim of increasing the number and proportion of girls attending school. The national plan provided strong rationales for investing in female education, stating that, 'Female education is the key to most aspects of socio-economic development: higher economic productivity, lower population growth rate, better education, and health of children and family' (Pakistan, 1992: 11). To equalise the numbers of girls and boys attending school, the planners proposed that the project should boost the enrolment rate for girls to at least twice that for boys (op cit.: 36). Interestingly, the plan for the first phase of SAP in Gilgit-Baltistan did not prioritise education for girls, even although it featured strongly in the national plan. However, it did propose that the new 'community schools' should be staffed with female teachers, both to boost the number of women in the teaching force and to make the schools more acceptable to parents of girls. It was only in the second phase, when major donors were involved, that the project overtly prioritised girls' education.

A significant feature of the Social Action Programme was its emphasis on community involvement:

It is universally accepted and advocated that without community involvement and participation, development initiatives either in the economic or the social sector, have few chances of success, especially at the grassroots level, where the majority of the population resides. (op. cit: 26)

The World Bank, the major donor to the second phase of SAP, advocated community participation 'because parents contribute more and because teachers become accountable to parents for observable results' (World Bank, 1996 (a): i). The new 'community schools' were at the heart of this plan; after the last additions in 2001-2002, the official figure rose to 543 community schools that were established within six years. Another central feature of the project was the creation of Village Education Committees (VECs) to manage the schools. VECs were not only central to the plan to increase community participation but were also products of a perception that the Department of Education could not manage its schools effectively (cf. Azfar, et al, 1996: 9). However, although VECs might be able to manage the schools with varying degrees of effectiveness, it soon became clear that most communities could not afford to operate the schools from their own resources. Consequently, the Department of Education provided a one-time grant of 100 000 rupees to each school on the understanding that the interest would be used to pay the teachers' salaries. Later, during the second phase when more resources were available, the community schools received subsidies of sixty rupees per child per month (Pakistan, 1999: 7).

The second phase in the project began with the inception of the World Bank-financed Northern Education Project (NEP), which had the major aims of increasing school enrolment by 28%, doubling the number of girls at school, and reducing the drop-out rate of girls. In addition, the project aimed at improving management throughout the system, improving the learning environment, and increasing the number of female teachers (World Bank, 1996 (b): ii). NEP commenced in March 1998 and concluded in December 2003. Supplementing NEP, the Northern Areas Education Project, funded by the British Government's Department for International Development, provided technical assistance.

4. Gender-Related Trends During the Project Period

Two issues underlie our discussion of significant gender-related trends during the project period. Firstly, why a significant number of girls in Gilgit-Baltistan still did not attend school, in spite of increases in enrolments?

Secondly, we are interested in the question that is the logical corollary of the first, namely, why there was in fact an increase in the number of girls attending school, in spite of the apparent reservations of parents and others. Answers to these questions should improve our understanding of the sociology of education in the under-researched Gilgit-Baltistan, as well as contribute to the initiative to bring about gender equity in education. In this section, data is used from a research project called “Evaluating the Project Success: The Community Schools of the Northern Areas of Pakistan,” by Harlech-Jones and Baig (2005). The project covered both phases of SAP and investigated the effectiveness of the community schools project primarily by comparing official data with the stated aims of the project and by surveying two groups of educationists, namely 50 ‘master trainers’ and 50 Assistant District Education Officers, all of whom were closely acquainted with the community schools.

Data from the research project suggests six significant trends that are relevant to gender:

1. Although the number of girls at all types of schools more than doubled between 1996-97 and 2002-03, the proportion of girls at school improved by only a relatively small percentage (from 31.29% to 40.34%). In other words, the enrolment of boys also increased significantly, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Enrolments in all schools in Gilgit-Baltistan: 1996-97 and 2002-03

	1996-97	% of total for 1996-97	2002-03	% of total for 2002-03
Boys	40221	68.71%	63766	59.56%
Girls	18318	31.29%	43130	40.34%
Total	58539	100%	106896	100%

(This table has been compiled from unpublished figures provided by the Department of Education of Gilgit-Baltistan)

2. In the community schools, in 1996-97 girls comprised the majority of the total enrolment (just over 60%). Similarly, six years later, in 2002-03, girls comprised about 58% of the total. However, the reverse obtained in the regular government (FG) schools: in 1996-97, girls comprised only 35% of the total enrolment in the primary school classes, and slightly less (34%) in 2002-03.

3. A third significant trend is that girls were even more under-represented at high school level, as shown in Table

Table 3: Enrolments in high school (classes 9 and 10) in all schools in Gilgit-Baltistan in 2002-03

	1996-97	% of total for 1996-97	2002-03	% of total for 2002-03
Boys	6317	81.04%	7890	71.2%
Girls	1478	18.96%	3192	28.8%
Total	7795	100%	11082	100%

(This table has been compiled from unpublished figures provided by the Department of Education of Gilgit-Baltistan.)

4. In the community schools, the cohort of girls that enrolled in class one in 1997 was 17.5% smaller by the time it reached class five, while the 1998 cohort was 19.6% smaller. In the case of boys, the 1997 cohort increased by 3.3% and the next one decreased by 30%. In the regular government (Federal Government or ‘FG’) schools, the drop-out rates were as follows: the cohort of girls that enrolled in class one in 1997 was 5.5% smaller by the time it reached class five, while the 1998 cohort was 14.0% smaller. However, the sizes of the boys’ cohorts had increased by 48.31% and 5.1% respectively.

5. When asked to evaluate teachers against eighteen criteria of educational quality, the master trainers who were respondents in the survey gave the teachers in community schools indifferent to poor rankings on fifteen criteria, and only ranked the teachers as ‘good’ on three criteria. Significantly, on fifteen of these criteria, the master trainers ranked community school teachers much lower than teachers in all other types of schools.

6. When the same respondents were asked to evaluate the performances of class five students against twelve criteria of student qualityⁱ, they only rated students at community schools as better than acceptable in respect of two criteriaⁱⁱ, while they gave them negative ‘indifferent-to-poor’ rankings for the remaining criteria.

Overall, on these criteria the respondents gave the highest rating to students at 'other' private schools, followed by AKESP schools, followed by FG schools, followed at a distance by the community schools.

In summary, it appears that the Social Action Programme and its second phase, the donor-supported Northern Education Project, succeeded in significantly improving enrolments at primary level, with the new community schools making an important contribution. However, although the overall number of girls at school increased substantially, the proportion only improved by a relatively small percentage.

As seen, there appears to be a 'ranking order' amongst types of schools, with the community schools ranked lowest of all. The general opinion amongst the public and amongst education professionals in Gilgit-Baltistan supports this concept. How much significance should be attached to the fact that considerably more girls than boys attend the 'inferior' community schools, and vice versa for the 'better' regular government (FG) schools?

The drop-out rate for girls was also much higher than it is for boys. For the cohorts that began class one in 1997 and 1998 in the community and FG schools, there was an overall drop-out of 13.9% for girls, while the boys showed a gain of 14%. Presumably, transfers from other types of schools and repetition of grades account for this apparently anomalous figure.

5. Analysis and Conclusion

The lack of relevant research into social attitudes and expectations in Gilgit-Baltistan hampers our attempt to give meaning to the data. In fact, on reflection, it is surprising that donors and their local partners should launch multi-million dollar education projects without first trying to understand the attitudes and mores that would influence the success of their projects.

At first sight, the data seems to suggest that parents and significant family members are both less eager to send girls to school and are less committed to keeping them there than they are for boys. This seems to be predictable, in view of what has been said earlier about girls and gender roles in Gilgit-Baltistan. This having been said, the enrolment of girls doubled during the ten years that encompassed the Social Action Program in Gilgit-Baltistan. This is a significant achievement, even if it falls far short of the ideal of universal primary education. If there are so many difficulties and reservations surrounding the issue of girls' schooling, why did this increase occur? While it is likely that the system of community management of schools played a role, the answer probably lies more in the fact that the establishment of a large number of community schools made schooling much more accessible, in the sense that there were more facilities closer to more homes. As is well known, many parents do not want their daughters to travel far to school. This is corroborated by Lloyd, Mete and Sathar (2002: 27) who, in their study of factors that influence enrolment in rural Pakistan, note that 'living in a village with no primary schools ... has a huge impact on the primary enrolment of girls but not on the enrolment of boys.'

Secondly, parents of daughters would probably be reassured by the fact that female teachers predominated in these new schools. For instance, in her report on the Northern Areas Education Project, Merchant (2003: 34) observes that 'one of the major factors contributing to low enrolment of girls in schools is that more male teachers are teaching in girls' schools.' Similarly, Lloyd, Mete and Sathar (*ibid.*) suggest that parents want to be reassured about the conditions in the school when they note that 'raising the share of public school teachers residing in the village ... leads to a dramatic increase in overall enrolment for girls ...'

The issue of parents' expectations about schools is closely associated with that of 'educational quality'. Many village parents in Gilgit-Baltistan are illiterate and probably had their first experience with formal schooling through the SAP project. As a result, not surprisingly, they seem to have singular definitions of 'quality'. Merchant and Ali (1998: 142 - 145), in their baseline report for the Northern Areas Education Project, alluded to this when they noted that most of the schools that they studied were deficient in many respects, such as having poorly qualified teachers with poor pedagogical skills (employing only rote learning and being textbook-bound) who did not do any lesson planning and had a poor command of the content of key subjects. In addition, most of the schools were unhygienic and lacked essential furniture. However, the authors noted (*op. cit.*: 5) that most of the parents who were interviewed were satisfied with the teachers' professional performances. They reported,

Mothers and VEC/PTA members consider teachers' behaviour as good because they observe following characteristics: no conflict in the school; teachers fulfil their duties and responsibilities; have sense of duty; good to students; they teach them with "love & care" without beating them; have good relations with each other; both parents and students are satisfied and students are happy.

It appears that these parents value the school as an agent of socialization into local norms - not socialization into a culture that will facilitate 'escape' from the local context, as is the case in some school communities in less wealthy countries, including Gilgit-Baltistan. Bringing together what has been said above, it seems that an unknown but significant percentage of parents are not necessarily opposed on principle to their daughters attending school. However, they do have strict expectations of the conditions under which this will occur: for instance, the teachers should be female and of local origin; the school should be close to home; and the teachers should be known to the parents and should observe certain behavioural norms.

Here, it is apposite to observe that social situations are never static – not even in the most physically remote and seemingly most culturally cordoned-off valleys of Gilgit-Baltistan. The region no longer has impermeable barriers, whether social, intellectual, or physical. People travel and mix with each other, ideas spread through contact and through the media, economic change creates new demands and new opportunities, expectations alter as horizons widen, and one part of a society inevitably has to respond to changes in other parts. Furthermore, expansion in the provision of education itself inevitably creates an impetus for further changes. For instance, as better educated girls get to be more in demand as brides, more parents begin to demand both more and better education for girls. In the second generation, better educated parents not only want education for their children but also are more critical about both educational provision and quality. Lloyd, Mete and Sathar (op. cit: 26) note that 'having a mother who has completed primary schooling relative to having a mother who has not increases the probability of girls' enrolling in public school from 49 to 87 percent ...' In the case of the community schools project, by establishing more than 500 schools in a region that was estimated to have 650 settlements (see above), inevitably there would be a significant impact on a large proportion of the overall population of Gilgit-Baltistan. In fact, the project was predicated on substantial behavioural change and brought significant intrusions of the yeast of the 'modern' into the space that was formerly almost exclusively appropriated by the 'traditional'.

As the two phases of the Social Action Program concluded, and the administration and management of the SAP schools has been entrusted to the National Education Foundation (NEF), it is pertinent to ask questions on the quality of education and equity issues of these schools. With regard to the education of girls, some of the questions are:

- Will the community schools, attended as they are by a majority of girls, continue to provide 'inferior' facilities and services?
- As expectations develop, will the parents accept disparities between types of schools?
- As ever more girls pass through primary school, are preparations being made to cater for the inevitable demand for more places at higher levels? (In view of the social conventions that govern the lives of females, providing these places will entail significantly higher costs and will require more complex logistical arrangements.)

Simultaneously with the precipitate expansion over more than a decade which set in motion a chain of changes – not all of them foreseen or foreseeable – a need was felt to develop a clear vision of the future of education in Gilgit-Baltistan. Kotter (2001: 4) observes that 'leading an organization to constructive change begins by setting a direction – developing a vision of the future (often the distant future) along with strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision'. Without a vision, there is a danger that the gains might dissipate and that the tensions and anomalies might be exacerbated. Therefore, it was through the generous financial and technical support from the European Union (EU) through its Northern Pakistan Education Project (NPEP) Phase Two (i.e. 2003-2008) that a roadmap for education for Gilgit-Baltistan (called the Gilgit-Baltistan Education Strategy: 2008-2025) was formulated. The Gilgit-Baltistan Education Strategy is a significant leap forward in having a clear sense of direction for schools and the wider education system in the region and in realizing the long-term needs and priorities in the education sector.

While the SAP, NEP and the NPEP projects regarded community management as a means of improving conditions in schools, Adams (2002: 48) suggests that local control can widen 'the gap in education opportunity ... between students in wealthy and poor areas'. Bray (1999: 223) observes starkly, 'In general, decentralization is likely to permit and perhaps encourage social inequalities'. In fact, in Gilgit-Baltistan it appears that inequalities between types of schools are already a significant factor. Fullan (2002: 415) raises a concern that is pertinent to Gilgit-Baltistan when he cautions that "'sustained" improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward'.

One of the main reasons why Fullan is probably correct is that different rates of progress and different levels of performance will cause rivalries, jealousies, suspicions, and unhealthy competition for resources. If Fullan is correct, sooner or later the disparities amongst types of schools in Gilgit-Baltistan will cause strains and tensions. Therefore, it seems incumbent on the government to foresee this serious social issue and take corrective measures before it becomes too late to address the issues.

Finally, we observe that if and when the increased presence of girls in schools begins to generate benefits, there will inevitably be demands for more extensive, more varied, and better facilities to allow even more girls to attend school to higher levels. Moreover, because of social conventions, these demands will be accompanied by requirements for specific conditions to be observed. Complying with these conditions will be difficult and expensive. There is also a paradox: the community schools project, the very factor that has reduced inequality in one respect by increasing the enrolment of girls, has also exacerbated inequality because the educational quality of these schools appears to be lowest of all. It is a truism to observe that inequalities become a social 'problem' because they provoke dissatisfaction and prompt a struggle for equilibrium – an initiative that is usually resisted by those who have investments in preserving inequalities.

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ⁱ The qualities were: Cooperation with teachers and fellow students; attendance; reading ability; writing ability; mathematical ability; getting good marks/results; problem-solving ability; ability to transfer successfully to other schools; motivation to learn; understanding of subjects; general intellectual development; active participation in the classroom.

ⁱⁱ These criteria were (1) their cooperation with teachers and fellow students, and (2) their attendance at school.