

Barriers and Opportunities: The Influence of Social and Cultural Dynamics on Girls' Secondary Education in Tribal Regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: Girls' education is one of the persistent dilemmas facing mostly tribal regions of developing countries, including Pakistan. This study explores the complex social and cultural factors that influence girls' secondary education in the tribal regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, specifically focusing on the district Bajaur. The study aims to explore the barriers and opportunities surrounding post-primary girls' education. In this qualitative study, eighteen (18) male guardians of the girls were recruited for in-depth interviews using an interview guide through a purposive sampling technique. Thematic analysis technique was utilized to analyze the data while engaging "equity of opportunity in education" discourse as a theoretical framework to examine the socio-cultural dynamics of the region. The findings illustrate that most of the participants support both boys' and girls' secondary education, and many perceive the cultural environment as conducive to girls' secondary education. However, the study also reveals multifaceted challenges faced by young girls, including governmental neglect, illiterate parents, and the unavailability of educational facilities. These are the key barriers that discourage girls from pursuing post-primary schooling. The study offers key policy recommendations and highlights its theoretical and practical contributions to tackling the educational disparities faced by girls in tribal areas.

KEYWORDS: Girls' Education, Guardians' Decision, Socio-cultural Factors, Equity of Opportunity in Education, Pakistan

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Introduction

A society's conducive socio-cultural environment and availability of education facilities improve the rate of girls' education. In a socio-cultural setting where girls' education is discouraged and basic educational facilities are lacking, the level of girls' education tends to be lower (Ullah et al., [2021](#); Ullah et al., [2020](#)). Social and cultural factors are the major forces within society that influence people's behaviour, thoughts, and feelings toward girls' education. Cultural forces include people's way of living, values, attitudes, traditional mindset, customs, and religion. On the other side, social factors that affect girls' education include poor access to school, poverty, lower income status of parents, extreme weather, number of children, and parental education (Andiema, [2021](#); Ullah et al., [2021](#)). These practices are more commonly exist in rural areas of developing countries (Mwanza, [2017](#)). Social-cultural hindrances and economic factors create barriers to access to education, especially for young girls (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund {UNICEF}, [2019](#)). In most rural areas of Pakistan, many girls do not receive an education due to socio-cultural factors (Ali, [2022](#)).

However, the education ratio in Pakistan has improved to some level, but there are still challenges in the way of female education in most tribal regions. The overall literacy rate of Pakistan has increased from (62.4% to 64.8%), with the male literacy rate from (73.0% to 73.4%) and female (51.5% to 51.9%) from 2018-19 to 2020-2021. The literacy rate in rural areas is 54.0% and in urban 77.3%, respectively. Male and female literacy disparity decreases over time in all provinces of Pakistan. The literacy rate increases in all provinces: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (52.4% to 55.1%) following Punjab (66.1% to 66.3%), Sindh (61.6% to 61.8%), and Baluchistan (53.9% to 54%) respectively (Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2020-21, [2022](#)).

Girls' schooling is one of the major issues in most of the tribal areas of Pakistan. It is estimated that in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, more than two million children are out of school, two-thirds of girls (Malik, [2021](#)). Girls' education in the erstwhile Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (Fata) of Pakistan is very dismal. More than 1 million children aged 4-16 years are out of school, while 67 percent of the population cannot read and write, including 87 percent of women (Bureau Report [2020](#); The Express Tribune, 2020). The ratio of females education in ex-Fata is only 7.8%, while males have around 45%, which is the lowest in Pakistan (Khan, [2022](#); Khan & Muhammad, [2022](#); Sultan, [2022](#)); 73% of girls quit their school after primary education in the merged tribal areas of KP (Khan, [2021](#)). In district Bajaur, around 5% of girls study beyond primary school (Ullah, [2022](#)).

Multiple barriers limit girls' access to education in Pakistan (Iqbal et al., [2021](#)). Females are often unpaid for their work in caring homes as mothers and wives, while males are traditionally seen as the family's breadwinners. Additionally, family income status influences access to girls' higher education (IIPS, [2021](#); Buzdar et al., [2011](#)), most poor families do not support investment in female education (Sultan, [2022](#)), unconducive social environment, combined with cultural practices and gender discrimination are the contributing factors of female low literacy (IIPS, [2021](#); Mustafa et al., [2016](#); Sultan, [2022](#)).

Keeping in view the above empirical studies on girls' education, the issue, especially beyond the primary school level in the specific socio-cultural context of tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Pakistan, is one of the neglected issues and a gap in the literature. Therefore, this research aims to investigate guardians' perceptions and decisions about the challenges and opportunities surrounding girls' secondary education in the tribal areas of KP. By understanding guardians' decision-making and perspectives, the study explores potential strategies and interventions that can contribute to overcoming hindrances to girls' education in these backward areas. Eventually, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on girls' education in tribal regions and provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and other non-governmental organizations to promote gender equity, equality, and social inclusion.

Research Questions

This study focuses on two major research questions:

- ▶ How is girls' post-primary education considered in the socio-cultural context of the tribal district Bajaur of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan?
- ▶ How do social and cultural forces influence girls' education in the tribal regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan?

Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinning

The lack of equal access to school for girls is a serious dilemma in most tribal areas of developing countries. Around 32 million girls of primary school age and 29 million of lower secondary school age are deprived of education due to different obstacles (Ali, [2022](#)). The case of Pakistan is not different; 73% of children aged 5-16 quit school before completing their secondary education. Pakistan ranks second in the world with the highest number of out-of-school children (Ullah, [2020](#); UNICEF, [2019a](#)). About 10.7 million boys and 8.6 million girls are getting an education at the primary level. After that, 3.6 million boys and 2.8 million girls dropped to the lower secondary level (the lower secondary stage consists of classes 9 and 10) (UNICEF, [2019](#)). It is estimated that 49 % of girls drop out of school between grades 1 and 5 (Ali, [2022](#)). Furthermore, in Pakistan, only 46.5% of females are literate. Additionally, 61.6% attend primary school, 34.2% attend secondary school, and 8.3% attend tertiary school (Kamal, [2022](#)).

The issue of girls' inequality in accessing education presents a formidable challenge for nearly all developing nations, including Pakistan. Kamal (2022) points out that there is a significant gender disparity in the field of education. Factors such as the distance between home and school, an unsupportive learning environment for girls, inadequate school facilities, and teacher absenteeism compound the obstacles they face in pursuing their studies (Ramachandran, 2004, pp. 43-44).

However, in the rural areas of developing countries, girls' education faces numerous socio-cultural hindrances from the head of the family and community. As a result, people do not value girls' higher education (John, 2017; Purewal & Hashmi, 2015). In Pakistan, the majority of females are illiterate because most people do not consider education to be a good thing for females (Mustafa et al., 2016). Education is often considered unnecessary for girls (Ramachandran, 2004, p. 43). The attitude of parents and communities toward female education is crucial in determining its accessibility. Parental disapproval of promoting girls' education is a significant obstacle hindering girls from getting an education (Purewal & Hashmi, 2015; Onoyase, 2018). Additionally, entrenched cultural practices influence girls' education, and male guardians are often reluctant to send their girls to school, fearing it may tarnish family honour (Yakubova, 2020).

Moreover, the strict implementation of the *Purdah* (veil) restricts girls from getting an education (Awan & Malik, 2020). Likewise, most parents spend money on boys' education instead of girls' (Purewal & Hashmi, 2015). Investment in girls' education is considered to have fewer chances of return than investment in boys' education (Herz, 2006). In traditional society, women do not expect financial returns. Therefore, there is less value for girls' education, particularly if their education costs their parents (Tembon & Fort, 2008, p. 275). Poor families invest more in boys' education (UNICEF, 2019). For girls, along with the cost of education, their responsibility at home to take care of children and help with household chores was given a reason for not attending school (Ramachandran, 2004, p.43). Furthermore, the lack of educational facilities restricts girls from education (Jalal-Din et al., 2008; Naveed, 2018; Ullah et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the discourse of equity of opportunity in education is engaged as a theoretical framework for this study. This was a feminist struggle that started in the 1970s for justice and equity in education, particularly for women and girls (McLeod, 2017; Ullah, 2013). This popular discourse allows me to critically analyze the guardian's perception regarding the socio-cultural influence on girls' education in the specific context of district Bajaur in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, it is significant to focus here that getting gender equity in education for girls in the social-cultural environment of district Bajaur will be a greater task in the future. Based on this understanding, I engage the equity of opportunity in the education debate to analyze the data. Equity in education refers to when every student receives the basic facilities required for schooling. The education system offers every student what he or she needs for education (Amadeo, 2018). Fairness in the available opportunities for all students/individuals (Villain, 2022) and gender equity means that boys and girls have social, economic, and educational justice. If gender equity is achieved, females will benefit from education and other domestic domains, just as boys do (Sahin, 2014). Gender equity focuses on those people who are in a position of disparity in education and other domains of life (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2019). The core belief of equity of opportunity believers is that boys and girls should be treated fairly and provided access and opportunities per their needs (Roya, 2017; Soika, 2020). Applying this theory to the study, I attempt to explore whether girls in the merged districts of KP have supportive social and cultural environments that allow them to get secondary education without the fear of discrimination, negative attitudes, and harassment.

Materials and Methods

This is a qualitative study conducted in the district of Bajaur, Pakistan. Bajaur is a tribal district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan located in the North West of Pakistan. Geographically, it has a 52 km long border with Afghanistan Kunar province in the northwest. District Muhammad in the South West, Dir in the North East, and Malakand in the South East (Zeb et al., 2023). I utilized the qualitative research approach, which is best for getting deeper information from heads of families regarding the sociocultural factors that affect girls' education, particularly after the primary school level in the newly merged district of Bajaur.

Sampling and Technique for Data Collection

In this qualitative study, the respondents were recruited through a purposive sampling. This sample was applied to investigate the influence of the socio-cultural environment of district Bajaur on girls' education after primary schooling. Only male guardians aged 18 and above were recruited for this study because, in the tribal areas, mostly men are the heads of the families.

For in-depth interviews with the male guardians of girls, I visited their homes, markets, agriculture fields, and schools. The participants included teachers, farmers, laborers, religious scholars, youth, and community leaders. All the respondents were interviewed face-to-face while using an interview guide. The data collection was restricted only to male guardians. It is pertinent to mention here that collecting data from women in the specific socio-cultural context of district Bajaur was very difficult because family heads did not allow their women to give information to any strange person; thus, only male guardians were approached for conducting in-depth interviews regarding their girls' education. The data collection process stopped at 18 respondents when it reached the point of saturation. The interviews were conducted in Pashto, the local language of the area. All the interviews were audio recorded with the consent of respondents. Each interview took 30 to 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was carried out using the thematic analysis technique, following the six common steps of the thematic analysis technique proposed by Charke and Braun (2013). For example, in the beginning, all the recorded interviews were transcribed, and then I read the transcribed data repeatedly to familiarize myself with the data. After that, the data was coded, generating broader and specific themes. After a systematic review of the broader themes, I came up with specific themes and then defined them and named them to know what each theme is about. Finally, writing started, and each theme was discussed and debated with the help of respondents' views, relevant theoretical assumptions, and empirical reviews skimmed for this paper.

Ethical Statement

The study followed the ethical protocol of social sciences research. I strictly adhered to the research area's cultural norms when collecting data from male guardians. I interviewed the participants in their local language to ensure a better understanding of the study's nature. I have ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of all the participants. Informed consent was obtained from each respondent before conducting and recording in-depth interviews. I informed each participant that the study's findings are intended solely for academic purposes and will contribute to improving educational policies in the tribal regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, especially regarding girls' education. I have avoided any form of academic misconduct and have strictly adhered to academic norms and integrity standards.

Findings

Despite gender disparity, access to education for girls remains a serious challenge in developing countries, including Pakistan. This paper explores the guardians' perceptions about the challenges and opportunities that influence girls' education after primary school in the tribal district of Bajaur Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The study's findings suggest that most guardians support both boys and girls with similar levels of education. They favour girls' higher education, and even investment in girls' education considers their liability, not a burden. The majority of the respondents believe that the cultural environment in the area is friendly toward girls' education as long as it is preserved within the cultural context of the area. However, a few guardians believe their culture creates a major hurdle in girls' education. Moreover, the findings reveal that the key challenges to girls' post-primary education are the unavailability of transport facilities for distant schools and the lack of middle, high, and higher secondary schools in most periphery areas. Furthermore, government authorities and illiterate parents reported the major hindrance to girls' education. The following are the key findings extracted from the guardian's (male heads of the family) interviews about their girls' secondary education.

Guardians' Perceptions of Gender Equality in Education

A positive home environment and favourable parental attitudes can encourage their children to continue their education (Ghosh & Dep, 2017; John, 2017). Conversely, this study found that most guardians in district Bajaur favour gender equality and believe

that both boys and girls should have equal opportunities for secondary education. One of the respondents stated: "Both boys and girls need equal education. Most girls complete their school up to primary level, then quit their school due to the lack of middle and high school". Another respondent said: "I support boys' and girls' equal level of education". One of the respondents asserted: "Girls can get a similar level of education when providing them a proper arrangement of *Purdah* and availability of educational facilities". A *Masjid Imam* (religious scholar) stated:

Boys and girls are servants of Allah, and education is their basic right. I am in favour of equal education for boys and girls. However, girls should be educated according to the Holy Quran and *Hadith*. If *Purdah* is provided in educational institutions, girls can achieve education up to graduation.

The above responses reveal that many respondents were not against girls' and boys' similar levels of education provided in their locality. However, educational institutions are necessary for girls in their locality, where they can easily access them. Purewal and Hashmi (2015) identified similar findings. They state that girls can carry the burden of family dignity and respect. Therefore, people do not want their girls to get an education far away from their homes when their honour is threatened.

Guardians' Perspectives on Investment in Girls' Education

Less investment in girls' education is one of the key reasons for the low level of girls' education in most developing countries, especially in rural areas. The majority of parents spend money on boys' education instead of girls' (Purewal & Hashmi, 2015; Herz, 2006). Traditionally, women did not expect financial returns (Tembon & Fort, 2008, p. 275). Contrary to the above studies, my findings reveal that many caregivers stated that spending on their daughters' education is their responsibility and not a waste of money. They view education as a valuable asset for their daughters, believing that educated girls can better educate their children after marriage, manage household responsibilities effectively, and enhance the family's social standing. One of the respondents argued: "I never thought that my daughter would earn money for me after education. An educated mother can better train and socialize their children". A similar response came from another respondent who argued, "In our area, people do not think that investment in girls' education is a waste of money." Likewise, another respondent asserted, "I educate my daughter because her life will be comfortable after getting married". Another respondent said: "my sister has engaged, but my father willingly sent her to college to have a comfortable life after marriage." Another respondent argued that our daughters also have rights. In the future, they could be mothers and require financial support to afford their children's educational expenses and daily needs. I do not view my daughters' education as a burden but as a responsibility.

A similar response came from another respondent who stated:

Spending income on children's education is the duty of parents. I believe that daughters are members of another family when they marry; an educated daughter will pass her life easily and comfortably and have respect in family and society. Furthermore, she will courteously perform her responsibilities.

A village *Imam* (Religious scholar) argued in the following way:

Education is the fundamental right of men and women. However, it is against the principle of Islam to expect women/girls to earn money after getting an education and becoming doctors or teachers. What Allah has decided is the best. Allah has decided that a man will be ruler, he will earn money, and a woman will serve the house. Allah Almighty has made the house a place of great honour for women. However, girls can get an education and do a job when they have financial needs, and there is surety of the provision of *Purdah*.

To sum up, a significant number of guardians favour spending on girls' education to empower them for life before and after marriage. They believe that educated girls can best educate their children and can make their lives comfortable. They consider spending income on girls' education their responsibility. However, expecting financial returns from girls after they complete their education is inappropriate.

Girls' Education: The Influence of Culture

This study reveals a split perspective, which suggests that experiences and perceptions about culture and its impact on girls' education are varied and context-specific. The majority of participants from the main and urban areas believed that their culture is not a major barrier to girls' education, while an almost equal level of interviewees from the rural and periphery stated that their culture hinders female education after the primary level. So, a society's cultural and social environment significantly impacts girls' education. In a socio-cultural setting, a lack of educational institutions and transport facilities often leads to lower levels of girls' education (Ullah et al., 2020; Ullah et al., 2021). This study's findings support the above studies. Most respondents believed their cultural environment is not a major barrier to girls' education. The majority of the interviewees want to educate their girls like boys. However, the challenge is the lack of girls' educational facilities in the area. One of the respondents stated: "Our culture is promoting female education. Because women/girls-related issues have been increased, and its solution is difficult without educating girls". Another respondent argued that: "the present generation do not take their culture seriously in the context of girls' education and ambitious to see their girls educated". A similar response came from another respondent who argued that: "culture is not an obstacle at all, but the main issue is lack of educational institutions and adequate transport facilities". A veterinary assistant argued that,

"Our culture is not a barrier to girls' education. In my home, one of my nieces has done intermediate and also got a degree from *Wifaqul Madaris* (Board of religious institutions) and currently searching for a job".

The above findings illustrated that the majority of key informants wanted to educate girls according to their socio-cultural norms. They explicitly stated that *Pashtun* culture was once a barrier, but not now. People now support girls' education provided in the normative structure of the area. Similarly, Ullah et al. (2021) found that the socio-cultural environment is not a major barrier for school-going girls. However, the main factors that are affecting girls' education in district Bajaur are the lack of girls' educational institutions, lack of female teaching staff, inadequate transport system, and poverty.

The responses of the majority are concluded here:

Females in district Bajaur face different issues (such as health, children's socialization, and unemployment); girls' education is needed in our tribal areas. Most of the females are illiterate, do not facilitate their parents financially, and are even unable to raise their children and teach them manners and discipline properly. Nowadays, tribal culture promotes girls' education because people have become aware and realize the negative impact of their culture on girls' rights. People favour educating their girls according to their socio-cultural environment. (Extract from interviews).

Conversely, most of the study respondents from the periphery had the opposite view and believed that socio-culture impedes school-going girls in the newly merged district of Bajaur. They stated that people considered females as a servant and did not provide them with education. Parents think that girls in puberty moving outside of the home is inappropriate in our culture. One of the respondents stated: "Our culture is a barrier. In *Pashtunwali*, females have to live in the four walls of their home". Another respondent argued: "Most of the elders of our areas are not in favour of girls' education." A similar response came from another respondent who asserted: "Purdah is a part of our culture; thus, some people do not favour allowing girls outside of their home." Another respondent stated: "*Pashtun* culture does not promote girls' education".

One of the respondents argued:

Culture is a barrier to girls' education. Elders inculcate in our mind that adult girls going to school is a violation of our cultural norms; thus, we do not allow girls to go outside from home. Moreover, when a girl is engaged, we do not favour investing in her education because we consider her a member of another family.

Another respondent stated: "In our area, people do not support, passing negative comments and discourage guardians when a girl goes to a distance school beyond primary level". A similar response came from another respondent who argued: "In my area, the main obstacle toward girls' education is culture. Because there is no issue of educational institutions, transport, etc, however, those guardians who do not educate their girls are due to socio-cultural norms".

According to the study findings, sociocultural factors still create hurdles in the way of girls' education. There is less support from the community for school-going girls in most of the periphery and even in the main city where education facilities are available for girls. Some people link girls' schooling to vulgarity and threats to family dignity and respect; that is why they consider it better to keep girls inside the home instead of going outside from home. Similarly, Gauthier (2018) found that Socio-cultural norms limit females' access to education. Culture is a hindrance in the way of school-going girls. Most tribal cultures are rigid and create barriers to girls' education (Amer et al., 2017). Moreover, a family male guardian is not willing to send their girls to school due to the unsafe social environment. Girls' self-respect and honour are important for families (Yakubova, 2020).

The same response came from another respondent, who argued:

In my area, people behave with girls like servants. Girls do different tasks inside and outside the home. They perform household responsibilities such as cooking, washing clothes, and caring for children. Outside of the home, they work in the field, harvesting crops, collecting food for the animals, bringing wood for the fire, bringing water, etc., which prevents girls from continuing their education.

However, in some rural areas of the newly merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, people do not consider females human beings. People deprived girls of their basic rights, including education. In Bajaur, girls perform most of the household chores and fieldwork. Females perform different tasks in society, which is why they are unable to get an education. Similar findings were given by Naz et al. (2020). They stated that women perform double responsibility in the community. Managing household tasks and working in the field. Furthermore, females are treated differently than boys. Females have been excluded from decision-making and deprived of the right to education (Arif, 2011).

Government Authorities and Illiterate Guardians: Key Factors behind Low Literacy in Girls Secondary Education

Various factors prevent girls from getting an education after primary school. The study highlights that the government authorities and illiterate guardians contribute to the low literacy rates among girls in the tribal areas of KP. Most study respondents reported that the government authorities do not seriously focus on the worse condition of girls' education. The region has been deprived of all the basic rights since 1947. One of the respondents stated: "The government is responsible because there are no basic educational facilities, including schools and transportation." Another respondent said: "Lack of government attention to girls' education is the main factor of low literacy of girls. People want to educate girls, but unavailability of educational facilities like schools, teachers, boundary walls, clean water, and transport are the key obstacles in the way of girls' education". Similar response came from another respondent who stated that: "girls' education is not the priority of the government. There is one middle school, but it has been closed since its foundation". Another respondent narrated that:

"Solely responsible is the government because people are poor and cannot afford girls' education expenses. The government does not facilitate us regarding school, transport facilities, and scholarships for poor girls".

The above responses reveal that the people of Bajaur are poor, and schools are out of access for the majority of girls. Primary schools are available at some level, but there is a shortage of middle and high schools. Most people consider government authorities responsible for inadequate educational facilities in these areas because the government is not prioritizing addressing the issue of girls' education. Another respondent said, "The government is liable; our area is backward; we need schools, roads, and transport facilities."

A similar response came from another respondent:

"Our politicians have been politically exploiting us. They do not focus on education issues. Our elected candidates (members of the National assembly and Provincial assembly) and *Maliks* (elders of society) have always struggled to establish schools and colleges in their land, which is sometimes an unfeasible position for the majority of girls'.

Naveed (2018) has also given similar findings. He found that in the ex-Fata, *Malikism* and *Khanism* are big impediments to female education. They have made schools in such areas to which neither common people have access nor do they want to

equip common people with the ornament of knowledge. Based on the number of government schools, the rural situation is worse than the main cities. Secondary schools for girls are less than boys, and college is scarce, especially for females (Human Rights Watch, [2018](#)).

Furthermore, illiterate guardians are considered one of the major factors for discouraging girls' education in a country like Pakistan (Khan [2016](#); Suleman et al., [2015](#)). Tembon and Fort ([2008](#)) identified that illiterate parents do not understand the value of girls' education. Likewise, Chingtham and Guite ([2017](#)) found that educated parents better understand the necessity of girls' education than illiterate parents. Similarly, the research findings reveal that most of the guardians were illiterate; they were unaware of the importance of girls' education. They only believed in girls' household responsibilities. Illiterate parents do not take the issue of girls' education seriously. One of the respondents argued that: "most of the parents in our areas are illiterate, and they do not know how important education is for a girl." One of the other respondents asserted that "our guardians are illiterate. They do not become aware of the socialization of their children". Another respondent argued that: "most parents are illiterate and poor. They do not take girls education as a serious matter because they think that school education is only necessary for boys, not for girls".

The above responses reveal that illiterate parents are also one of the key reasons for the low ratio of girls' secondary education. Sarker et al. ([2019](#)) identified that illiterate parents are less interested in and engage with education, which poses a greater risk of dropping their children out of school. Parental education has a positive impact on their children's education. Educated parents can provide better education facilities to their children than illiterate parents (also see Shoukat et al., [2013](#)).

Discussion

This study investigated male guardians' perceptions and decisions about the deeply embedded socio-cultural factors that influence girls' secondary education in the tribal area of district Bajaur. The study found that the majority of the respondents in district Bajaur supported post-primary girls' education. The guardians (head of the family) favoured girls' and boys' similar levels of education, while traditional values historically favoured boys' education. However, there is a growing recognition of the value of educating girls. Many interviewees considered an investment in girls' education their responsibility, not a waste of money. The findings further reveal that the cultural forces of the area mostly supported female education. However, in the periphery, people were still reluctant and considered girls' education after primary school to be against their culture. The study shows that the challenges discouraging girls' education were the lack of educational institutions (mainly after primary schooling), inadequate transport facilities for distance schools, and illiterate guardians.

Guardians' positive decisions regarding their girls' education are an important factor in promoting girls' education. Most of the study findings reflected that the majority of heads of family supported post-primary education for boys and girls when girls' education was provided in their respective areas. However, respondents do not deem spending on girls' education as a useless resource. Conversely, this study's findings contrast with the findings of previous studies. Previous studies found that most parents are unfavorable toward post-primary girls' education in developing countries. They considered spending on girls' education as a burden on their families (Onoyase, [2018](#); Purewal & Hashmi, [2015](#); Kaur & Kaur, [2020](#)). In addition, the cultural and social environment significantly impacts girls' education. It is pertinent to mention that the district Bajaur cultural environment supports girls' education. The findings revealed that Pashtun culture was once a barrier to girls' education. However, now people do not take it as a serious barrier in the way of girls' education in the areas where people have been exposed to outside influences such as tourists, social media, and higher education. Most respondents argued that the cultural environment is not a major obstacle to girls' post-primary education, provided that it is within the normative structure of the area. Conversely, people in the periphery still consider their culture a key barrier and support the previous studies that found that sociocultural norms limit females' access to education. Most tribal cultures are rigid and restrict girls from getting an education (Gauthier, [2018](#); Amir, 2015). Parents do not want to educate their children after the primary level. They believed that after primary school, girls are not considered appropriate to move outside their homes (Awan & Malik, [2020](#); Mustafa et al., [2016](#)).

Furthermore, this study's findings indicate that some traditional-minded individuals still create barriers to girls' education. People in the peripheries of Bajaur still have a traditional mindset and negative attitude toward girls' education. They are discouraging those parents who educate their daughters. Likewise, most of the previous studies identified traditional mindsets and illiterate guardians who do not believe in girls' secondary education. Traditional mindsets and rigid social values have adversely affected female education (Onoyase, [2018](#); Khan, [2017](#); Mehmood et al., [2018](#)). Sarker et al. ([2019](#)) identified that illiterate parents were less interested in their children's education, and as a result, they dropped out of school. Moreover, the study mostly shows that the lack of middle and high schools in the area seriously discourages girls' education.

Several middle and high schools are situated in settled areas that are inaccessible to girls in rural areas. The majority of girls receive education up to the primary level. However, after that, they discontinue their education due to the unavailability of middle, high, and higher schools nearby. Similarly, the previous studies highlighted that in rural areas, girls lack access to post-primary education due to the shortage of education institutions and transport facilities (Naz et al., [2020](#); Buzdar et al., [2011](#); Naveed, [2018](#)).

Implication of the Study

This study's findings contribute to the existing literature on the issues of post-primary girls' education in the tribal areas of Pakistan. The results of the study buttress the equity of opportunity in education argument. The core belief of equity of opportunity believers is that boys and girls should be fairly treated and provided access and opportunities as per their needs (Roya, [2017](#); Soika, [2020](#)). As stressed in the theoretical framework and I focused on the study findings, girls in the Bajaur district must be provided education per their needs within their normalized existing socio-cultural environments. As stressed by the study respondents, girls need to be provided transportation, and middle and high schools in the adjacent areas must be available. Similarly, many respondents unanimously asserted that girls should receive education while following the existing *pardah* standards. This includes safe transportation to and from school, school boundary walls, and toilet facilities. Thus, stresses for the special needs of girls vividly reflect and buttress the "gender equity in education" argument. Gender equity in education focuses on special needs and education requirements for disadvantaged girls. Gender equity in education will lead to gender equality (INEE, 2019). The study results added some new insights to the existing empirical literature. The findings suggest that most people of district Bajaur KP are not against girls' education; they support both boys' and girls' equal level of education after primary schooling. The cultural environment of the urban area is friendly for girls' education. One clear implication of this study is that people are not a major barrier to girls' education. However, the lack of post-primary education institutions such as middle, high, and higher secondary schools and the unavailability of special transport facilities for girls' education are the derived forces that impede girls' education in district Bajaur. Providing education facilities in the normalized socio-cultural context of the area can encourage girls' education after primary schooling.

Limitations of the Study

These findings are based on in-depth interviews with a small sample of 18 male guardians in district Bajaur. Interviewing a larger sample size, including females, could reveal different findings. Other methodological approaches, like quantitative studies, might have deepened our understanding. Finally, this study did not collect data from female students and teachers; they might have been provided with different perspectives.

Conclusion

The study examines the challenges and opportunities surrounding girls' secondary education in the tribal district of Bajaur of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. A considerable number of guardians in the area advocate for equal educational opportunities for boys and girls beyond primary schooling. They viewed investing in girls' education as a responsibility rather than a waste of resources. Additionally, the socio-cultural atmosphere in the region is mostly supportive and conducive to fostering girls' education. On the other hand, guardians in rural areas believed that their culture posed a barrier to girls' education after primary school. Similarly, government authorities and illiterate parents present significant challenges to girls' education. The main obstacles

are the lack of middle, high, and higher secondary schools, as well as inadequate transportation to distant schools. The results suggest that people are not against girls' post-primary education. However, the lack of education facilities in the region is the major obstacle that discourages girls from pursuing education after primary schooling.

Keeping in view the study findings, the following policy suggestions are forwarded for improving girls' education beyond the primary level in the area. Middle, high, and higher secondary schools should be constructed and made accessible to all girls in their nearby locality. Those schools situated at a distance should be ensured special transport facilities for girls. Basic school facilities should be provided, such as qualified teaching staff, security guards, clean water, and separate toilets for girls. The government should grant special scholarships to poor and needy girls. Furthermore, government and non-government organizations should create community-based awareness about girls' education. Last but not least, reluctant parents should be motivated through media and community engagement and mobilization to change their attitude toward girls' education.

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