



Barriers to Higher Education for Girls in Pakistan: A Qualitative Exploration

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Article History:		<i>Education is a fundamental human right and a critical driver of individual and societal development. However, in Pakistan, girls' access to higher education remains constrained by socio-cultural, economic, gender-based, and safety-related barriers. This qualitative study investigates the lived experiences of eight Pakistani girls who were unable to pursue higher education due to these restrictions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed four main themes: financial difficulties, cultural and societal expectations, gender inequality, and safety concerns. These barriers are interconnected, significantly affecting girls' autonomy, emotional well-being, and future opportunities. The study emphasizes the need for multi-level interventions, including financial support, community awareness programs, safety measures, and supportive educational policies, to promote equitable access to higher education for girls. Understanding the perspectives of affected girls provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders to design culturally sensitive and practical solutions to reduce educational inequality in Pakistan.</i>
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Introduction

As an important factor in both personal empowerment and in socio-economic development of nations, higher education is a very important catalyst of intellectual growth, skill development and career progression. It encourages innovation, critical thinking and social mobility thus being a significant component of sustainable development.

However, the unequal access to higher education remains a markedly unequal situation, in particular in Pakistan, where gender discrimination continues to play a significant role in the access of higher education. Girls can have systemic barriers, which are the result of patriarchal norms, the gender role restriction and family requirements favoring male education. The problem of safety, family reputation, and stresses of early marriage cause a serious limitation of their

participation. Also, allocation of the scarce financial resources often favor sons thereby increasing gender inequalities and decreasing enrolment and progress of females in higher education.

Career opportunities and economic participation but also fosters psychological development, empowering students with self-confidence, autonomy, and the ability to contribute meaningfully to society. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes that higher education is essential for sustainable development, social justice, and the reduction of socio-economic disparities. Research has shown that individuals with higher educational attainment experience better health outcomes, higher lifetime earnings, and increased civic engagement compared to those without access to higher learning (UNESCO, 2020). However, despite its significant benefits, access to education is not equitably distributed, especially for girls in many traditional societies where cultural and structural barriers persist.

Globally, the issue of gender inequality in education remains a major development challenge. Although significant progress has been made in primary and secondary schooling for girls, the transition to higher education continues to display persistent gender gaps, particularly in developing countries. In Pakistan, the gender disparity in educational access becomes more pronounced at the tertiary level, where girls are underrepresented compared to boys. According to research conducted in Lahore, female students face socio-cultural and economic obstacles such as patriarchal norms, early marriage expectations, harassment, inadequate transport, and financial barriers that hinder their pursuit of higher education (Siddique et al., 2024). These barriers reflect deeply entrenched social norms and institutional limitations that shape educational participation patterns.

Socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping girls' educational trajectories in Pakistan. For example, stereotypes about gender roles often prioritize boys' education over girls', expecting girls to assume household duties or marry early rather than pursue academic achievement. Research from interior Sindh found that girls face discrimination and unequal opportunities compared to boys, and multiple social and economic challenges limit their ability to complete higher education. These include negative community attitudes, patriarchal traditions, and a lack of supportive infrastructure (Fatima et al., 2025).

In addition to socio-cultural barriers, economic constraints also significantly affect girls' access to higher education. Many families with limited financial resources allocate educational investments primarily to male members, viewing the education of girls as less economically beneficial. Studies in rural and tribal areas such as Dera Ghazi Khan show that poor infrastructure, lack of female teachers, and limited awareness further marginalize girls from educational opportunities (Aftab et al., 2023).

Region-specific research also points to broader structural issues, such as limited educational facilities, safety concerns, and inadequate government support in provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Constraints identified in these areas include cultural restrictions, family obligations, gender discrimination, early marriage, lack of universities, and financial challenges (Ullah et al., 2025).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of higher education for girls, many continue to face restrictions rooted in socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, gender expectations, and safety concerns. Existing research provides valuable statistics on enrolment trends and dropout rates, but relatively little is known about the lived experiences of girls who have been prevented from pursuing higher education. Specifically, there is limited understanding of how these girls interpret the restrictions placed upon them, what types of emotional and

psychological challenges they experience. Furthermore, the underlying reasons behind these restrictions particularly from the perspective of the affected girls remain insufficiently explored. This gap in qualitative, experience-based research leaves policymakers and psychologists without the nuanced understanding needed to design effective interventions. Therefore, the present study aims to address this research gap by exploring the personal experiences of girls facing educational restrictions, examining the reasons behind these limitations, and understanding how girls cope with the emotional and social consequences of being denied higher education.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Social Constructivist Theory and Intersectional Feminist Theory, which together provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how girls experience restrictions on higher education in Pakistan.

1.2.1 Social Constructivist Theory

Social Constructivist Theory, originally proposed by Vygotsky (1978), asserts that knowledge, meaning, and understanding are constructed through social interactions within cultural and historical contexts. Individuals learn not in isolation but through engagement with family, peers, schools, and communities, which shape their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours. In the context of girls' education, this theory helps explain how cultural and social norms regarding gender roles are internalized by both families and girls themselves. For instance, in communities where traditional norms prioritize male education or domestic responsibilities for females, girls may come to perceive limitations on their education as natural or inevitable. Social Constructivist Theory emphasizes that such restrictions are socially produced rather than inherent, and they are maintained through repeated interactions, communication, and societal expectations. This perspective allows researchers to understand how societal beliefs and interactions influence girls' educational opportunities and how girls interpret and respond to these social pressures (Vygotsky, 1978).

1.2.2 Intersectional Feminist Theory

Intersectional Feminist Theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), emphasizes that social inequalities do not exist in isolation but intersect with multiple factors such as gender, class, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographic location. In the context of Pakistani society, girls' access to higher education is affected not only by their gender but also by economic limitations, rural or urban residence, family status, and cultural expectations. For example, a girl from a rural, low-income household may face compounded barriers, including restricted mobility, early marriage pressures, limited parental support, and lack of safe educational facilities. Intersectional Feminist Theory provides a framework for analysing how these overlapping social forces interact to produce unique experiences of disadvantage, while also recognizing girls' agency in navigating and resisting these constraints (Crenshaw, 1991).

1.3 Research Objectives

- To explore the lived experiences of girls facing restrictions on higher education.
- To identify the types of restrictions imposed by families or society.
- To examine the underlying cultural, social and economic reasons behind these restrictions.

1.4 Research Questions

- What are the lived experiences of girls who face restrictions on pursuing higher education?

- What specific restrictions do these girls encounter from their families or society?

1.5 Significance of Study

This research is significant for several reasons. Academically, it fills an important gap in qualitative inquiry by centring the voices and lived experiences of girls who face educational restrictions. Narrative-based research allows for deeper exploration of girls' emotional responses and identity formation. Moreover, understanding girls' lived experiences offers insight into the psychological impact of educational restrictions and highlights how girls perceive and negotiate societal norms that constrain their educational opportunities.

Socially, the study's findings can inform policies and programs aimed at promoting equitable access to higher education. While infrastructure improvements and scholarship programs are essential, they may be insufficient if cultural and psychological barriers remain unaddressed. By exploring the meaning girls attach to their experiences, this research can help design culturally sensitive interventions that support girls holistically academically, socially, and emotionally. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader efforts to promote gender equity, human rights, and social inclusion in education.

2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews existing literature about the barriers to girls' participation in higher education in Pakistan. This research explores the socio-cultural, economic, family and institutional factors contributing to girls' access to education. The review encompasses qualitative research, which prioritizes the themes of patriarchal values, child marriage, gender inequality and institutional support. This chapter outlines the literature gaps and how the present study fits into the broader body of research.

Zainab and Alam (2025) stress that patriarchy continues to play a role in decision-making for women's education in Pakistan. According to the qualitative findings, decisions on education and careers are made by men in the family, particularly in conservative areas. Similarly, Jan and Azeem (2024) describe the influence of culture, including purdah and family honor (izzat), to restrict girls' mobility and pursuit of higher education.

Jabeen et al. (2024) demonstrate that traditional gender norms and expectations keep families from valuing girls' education. The findings are consistent with Raj et al. (2019), who argue the worth of education is often measured in relation to its effect on future marriage prospects. In all, these studies show that socio-cultural practices remain a significant barrier to girls from pursuing tertiary education.

Ali et al. (2022) note that gender discrimination is a major problem deeply seated in social, cultural and economic practices. The mixed-method study suggests women are often seen as dependent and confined to domestic work. Research in the form of Yasin and Aslam (2018) shows that discrimination by the parents leads to higher school drop-out rates for the girls.

Moreover, Maqsood et al. (2012) express that women often face stereotyping and have to negotiate with their families for their educational aspirations. These findings show that gender inequality is both structural and a cultural trait.

Geographical and economic factors limit girls' chances for higher education. Jan and Azeem (2024) note that financial constraints force families to also prioritize their sons' education. Similarly, Suleman et al. (2015) establish the links between household impoverishment and educational costs and girls' lower enrolment rates and higher attrition rates.

Khan et al. (2018) highlight those financial constraints, including tuition fees, transportation and housing costs have a greater impact on girls. Studies also show that early marriage and family goals are also a serious challenge.

Another barrier to education is early marriage, as shown by several studies. Jan and Azeem (2024) report that many families consider marriage as the prime goal for girls and, as such, girls leave school early. Similarly, Raj et al. (2019) note the high association between early marriage and the dropout rate.

Yasin and Aslam (2018) also state that expectations about household responsibilities add to the barriers girls face for education. The findings show that in many societies, there are family expectations regarding marriage and childbearing, rather than girls' education.

Barriers relating to institutions and structures are also significant. Bari (2020) notes that the lack of infrastructure, female teachers and safety concerns are major barriers. Zainab and Alam (2025) remark that the lack of research opportunities and female-friendly facilities for women hinder their academic progress.

Additionally, in rural communities, Jamal (2016) notes the lack of close proximity to schools, lack of female teachers, and lack of safety also constrain girls' education. The findings point to the need for improvements in the education system.

Family and community perceptions affect access to education for girls. Jabeen et al. (2024) show that parents have a tendency to consider girls' education to be less important than boys. Similarly, Jamal (2016) argues that the perspectives of men are important because of their decision-making role in patriarchal systems.

Halai (2017) suggests that parental attitudes and education have a positive effect on the education of girls. This shows a shift in community attitudes is essential for improving higher education.

Other recent studies support these assertions. According to UNESCO (2022), there are significant gender gaps in education in developing nations due to social and cultural factors as well as poverty. Malik and Courtney (2021) underline that sexual harassment and safety issues discourage girls from availing of higher education.

Likewise, as declared by Aslam et al. (2019), location and transport facilities considerably affect girls. Ahmad and Najeeb (2020) point out that a lack of access and availability of digital technologies significantly limits the education of girls, particularly in rural areas.

Theoretical Perspective

The current literature focuses on feminist theory and social constructivism. Feminist theory explains how patriarchal power structures create and sustain gender inequalities, while social constructivism focuses on the influence that social norms and ideas play in the perception of girls' education. These theories help us to conceptualize the nature of the obstacles to education.

In conclusion, based on existing literature, it is evident that barriers to girls' higher education in Pakistan are multifaceted. Socio-cultural practices, gender discrimination, financial constraints, marriage at a young age and institutional restrictions all contribute to girls' lack of opportunity for higher education. Although improvements, significant barriers remain, particularly in rural and conservative areas.

This review underscores the need for qualitative inquiries into girls' experiences to provide insight into the challenges they encounter, and develop culturally responsive interventions focused on improving girls' educational opportunities and outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore young women's perceptions and lived experiences regarding restrictions on girls' access to higher education in urban areas of Pakistan. A qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate when the aim is to obtain a clear and comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences using their own perspectives and language, without imposing complex theoretical interpretations. This design aligns with the objectives of the present study, which focus on identifying the social, cultural, familial, and economic factors that restrict girls' access to higher education and examining the emotional and personal consequences of these restrictions.

3.2 Participants

A total of eight female participants took part in this study. All participants were non-students who had either discontinued their education or were unable to pursue higher education due to various social, familial, cultural, or economic restrictions. The participants belonged to urban areas of Pakistan and ranged in age from 18 to 25 years.

The sample size is consistent with recommendations for qualitative research, where smaller samples are considered sufficient to achieve thematic saturation when the research focus is specific and the participant group is relatively homogeneous. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct and meaningful experiences related to restrictions on access to higher education and could provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

3.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

- Female participants aged 18–25 years
- Non-students who had discontinued education or were unable to access higher education
- Residents of urban areas
- Experienced social, familial, cultural, or economic restrictions related to higher education
- Willing and able to participate in a face-to-face interview conducted in English and Urdu
- Provided informed consent

3.2.2 Exclusion Criteria

- Male participants
- Currently enrolled college or university students
- Participants below 18 or above 25 years of age
- Individuals who reported no restrictions in accessing higher education

3.3 Data Collection Tool

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher specifically for this study. The interview guide was designed to explore participants' educational backgrounds, perceived restrictions on higher education, family and societal influences, and the emotional impact of these barriers. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share detailed narratives and reflect on their personal experiences.

The interview guide consisted of questions related to participants' understanding of higher education, their educational journeys, the types of restrictions they faced, and their views on possible support mechanisms. Neutral probing questions were used to clarify responses and encourage deeper reflection. All interviews were conducted in English and Urdu to maintain consistency in data collection and analysis.

Note: Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language, either English or Urdu, to ensure comfort and facilitate rich, detailed responses.

3.3.1 Interview Questions

- What is your experience of not having the opportunity to get education?
- What do you think are the barriers/reasons for this behavior?
- How do family traditions affect girls' education?
- How do safety or distance issues affect girls' schooling?
- What effects do these restrictions have on girls' futures?
- What can be done to remove these restrictions on girls' education?

Additional neutral probes (e.g., “Can you give an example?” or “How does that make you feel?”) were used to clarify responses or elicit deeper insights. The guide was pilot-tested with two participants to ensure clarity, cultural relevance, and an interview duration of approximately 20–25 minutes.

3.4 Procedure

Data collection followed a systematic and ethically appropriate process to ensure participants' comfort, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

3.4.1 Recruitment and Initial Contact

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling through personal contacts and community networks in urban areas. The study was introduced as an exploration of young women's educational experiences and challenges, avoiding stigmatizing or judgmental language. Interested individuals contacted the researcher voluntarily and were provided with detailed information about the study.

3.4.2 Informed Consent Process

Prior to data collection, each participant received a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and confidentiality assurances. Written informed consent was obtained before conducting the interviews. Participants were informed of their right to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

3.4.3 Interview Conduct

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet and private settings to ensure confidentiality and participant comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 20–25 minutes. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation of the data.

3.4.4 Ethical Handling of Data

Audio recordings were securely stored using participant codes instead of real names. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Access to recordings and transcripts was restricted to the researcher only.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. This approach was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data.

The analysis process involved:

- Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts
- Generating initial codes related to educational barriers, family influence, and emotional impact
- Collating codes into broader categories and potential themes.
- Reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and relevance.
- Defining and naming themes based on participants shared experiences.
- Producing a structured report supported by verbatim quotations.

An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed by existing theories.

3.6 Researcher Positionality

The researcher acknowledges her positionality as a female researcher belonging to the same cultural context as the participants. This shared background facilitated rapport-building and encouraged open discussion of sensitive issues related to family control, cultural norms, and educational restrictions. To minimize potential bias, the researcher engaged in reflexive practices throughout the research process, including maintaining reflective notes during data collection and analysis to ensure that participants' voices were represented accurately.

3.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, strategies aligned with qualitative research standards were employed.

- **Credibility** was ensured through in-depth, face-to-face interviews and the use of verbatim quotations to support findings.
- **Dependability** was maintained by clearly documenting all research procedures and analytic steps.
- **Confirmability** was strengthened through reflexive journaling and supervisory review of the analysis.
- **Transferability** was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics.

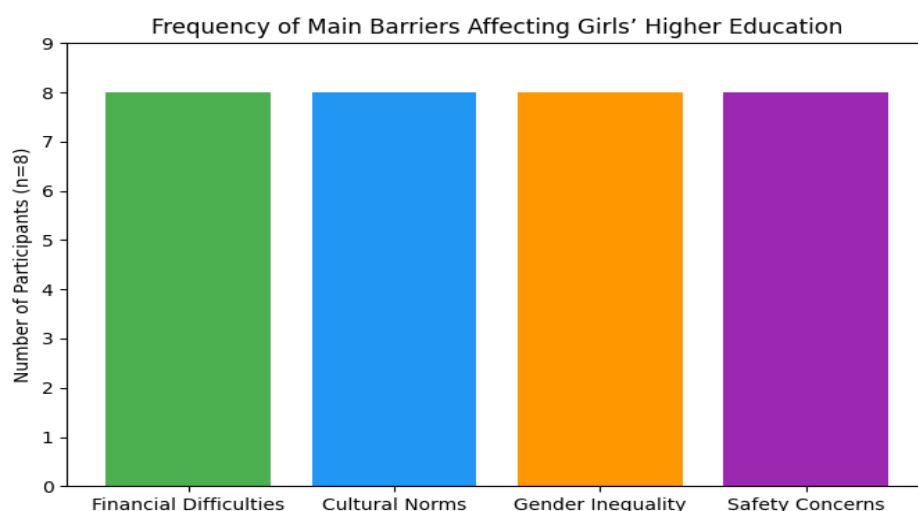
3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, audio-recording procedures, and the intended use of data for academic purposes only. Given the sensitive nature of discussing educational restrictions, participants were reassured of emotional support and their right to withdraw at any time.

4. Data Analysis & Results

4.1 Thematic Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to explore the lived experiences of young women who faced restrictions in accessing higher education. The analysis resulted in four major themes, each representing a significant barrier that shaped participants' educational trajectories. These themes emerged inductively from repeated reading and coding of interview transcripts. The themes reflect not only structural barriers but also deeply rooted cultural and emotional dimensions influencing girls' educational discontinuation. Each theme is presented with a detailed narrative description, sub-themes, frequency (n), and verbatim quotations to ensure transparency and credibility.



Thematic map of the four major themes and their sub-themes.

4.1.1 Theme 1: Financial Difficulties (n = 8/8)

Financial difficulties were identified as a primary and pervasive barrier affecting all participants. Across interviews, participants consistently described how poverty, limited income sources, and lack of financial stability forced families to deprioritize girls' education. Education-related expenses such as tuition fees, transportation costs, uniforms, and learning materials were perceived as unaffordable, particularly in households struggling to meet basic needs.

Participants explained that when families faced financial strain, girls' education was often considered expendable, while boys' education was prioritized due to perceptions of future economic return. Several participants reported that financial hardship directly led to early marriage or increased household responsibilities, further closing pathways to education. The absence of financial security also meant that girls had no autonomy to continue education independently, reinforcing dependence on family decisions.

4.1.2 Poverty

Poverty was described as a constant stressor that directly obstructed educational continuation. Participants explained that limited household income made it impossible to afford educational expenses, particularly at higher levels where costs increase significantly. Education was often interrupted when families faced rent obligations, medical expenses, or food insecurity.

“Our financial situation was not good there were many family members and only one person earning.” (P1)

Girls' education was frequently viewed as a financial burden rather than an investment, leading to its discontinuation.

4.1.3 Lack of Financial Security

Beyond poverty, participants highlighted the absence of financial stability as a major concern. Dependence on a single income source or irregular earnings created uncertainty, forcing families to prioritize immediate survival over long-term educational goals. Education was framed as a privilege rather than a right.

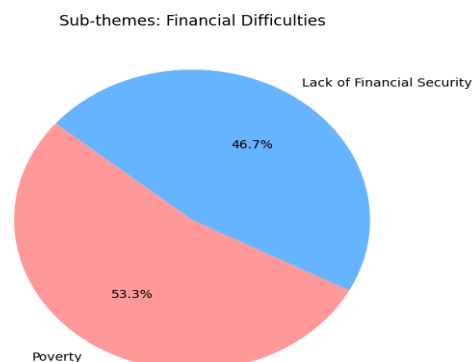
“Studying became a luxury I could not afford.” (P4)

This lack of security left girls vulnerable, dependent, and unable to pursue education independently.

Table 4.1: Theme 1: Financial Difficulties Affecting Girls' Higher Education (n = 8)

Sub-Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Sample Evidence
Poverty	Insufficient financial resources to afford educational expenses	7/8	“Our financial situation was not good... education expenses could not be managed.” (P1)
Lack of financial security	Dependence on a single income source and unstable earnings	6/8	“Studying became a luxury I could not afford.” (P4)

Figure 1



Distribution of Sub-Themes under Financial Difficulties (n = 8)

4.1.4 Theme 2: Cultural Norms and Societal Expectations (n = 8/8)

Cultural norms and societal expectations strongly influenced participants' educational experiences. All participants described living within social environments where traditional gender roles were deeply entrenched. These norms positioned girls primarily as caregivers, homemakers, and future wives rather than as students or professionals. Participants explained that even when education was not explicitly forbidden, girls were gradually pushed out of education due to expectations to manage household duties. Relatives and community members often reinforced these beliefs through comments about marriage, age, and propriety. Over time, these societal pressures normalized educational discontinuation, making resistance emotionally and socially difficult for girls.

4.1.5 Focus on Household Responsibilities

All participants reported being burdened with domestic responsibilities at an early age. As eldest daughters, many were expected to manage household chores, care for siblings, or support ill family members. Education became secondary as domestic labor consumed time and energy.

“All household responsibilities came on me, so I had to leave my studies.” (P2)

4.1.6 Priority Given to Household Work over Education

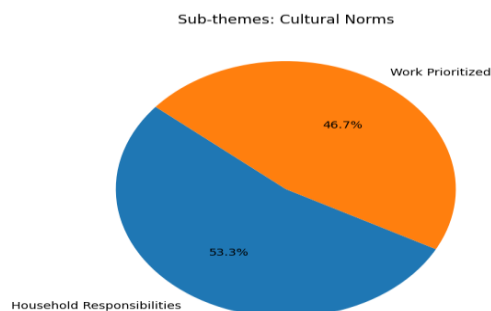
Participants explained that families valued domestic skills more than education for girls. Marriage preparation was often prioritized, reinforcing the belief that education was unnecessary for girls' future roles.

“Girls are taught household work instead of being encouraged to study.” (P7)

Table 4.2: Theme 2: Cultural Norms and Societal Expectations (n = 8/8)

Sub-Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Sample Evidence
Focus on household responsibilities	Expectation that girls manage domestic duties	8/8	“All household responsibilities came on me, so I had to leave my studies.” (P2)
Priority given to household work over education	Domestic roles valued more than academic achievement	7/8	“Girls are taught household work instead of being encouraged to study.” (P7)

Figure 2



Distribution of Sub-Themes under Cultural Norms and Societal Expectations (n = 8)

4.2.1 Theme 3: Gender Inequality (n = 8/8)

Gender inequality emerged as a structural and interpersonal barrier that systematically restricted girls' access to education. Participants highlighted unequal treatment within families, lack of encouragement for female education, and strict parental or male authority over educational decisions.

Girls' aspirations were often dismissed, while boys were supported and encouraged to continue education. Participants described feeling powerless, as decisions regarding schooling were made without their consent. This lack of agency contributed to emotional distress and reduced self-confidence. Gender-based control reinforced the belief that girls' futures were predetermined, limiting their ability to imagine alternative life paths.

4.2.2 Lack of Social Support for Female Education

Participants reported minimal emotional or practical support for continuing education. Community attitudes often dismissed girls' aspirations.

“People believe that girls do not need higher education.” (P8)

4.2.3 Limited Opportunities for Females

Discontinued education restricted employment prospects and personal growth, reinforcing dependence.

“My job opportunities became very limited.” (P7)

4.2.4 Parental Figure Control

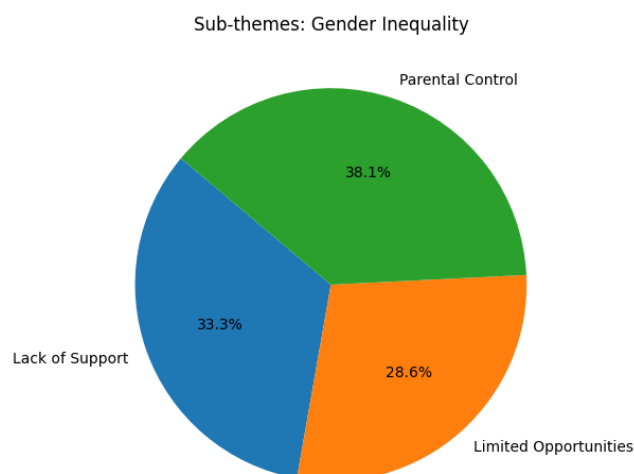
Educational decisions were controlled by parents or male guardians, leaving girls powerless.

“My family did not allow me to continue my education.” (P7)

Table 4.3: Theme 3: Gender Inequality (n = 8/8)

Sub-Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Sample Evidence
Lack of social support for female education	Minimal encouragement from family and community	7/8	“People believe that girls do not need higher education.” (P8)
Limited opportunities for females	Restricted access to education and employment	6/8	“My job opportunities became very limited.” (P7)
Parental figure control	Educational decisions controlled by parents or male guardians	8/8	“My family did not allow me to continue my education.” (P7)

Figure 3



Distribution of Sub-Themes under Gender Inequality (n = 8)

4.3.1 Theme 4: Safety Concerns (n = 8/8)

Safety concerns were consistently identified as a critical barrier to higher education. Participants described fear of harassment, unsafe travel conditions, and long distances to educational institutions. The absence of secure and affordable transportation heightened parental anxiety, leading families to restrict girls' mobility.

Participants reported that constant fear related to safety made education emotionally exhausting. Negative societal narratives about girls' mobility further reinforced parental fears. As a result, education was viewed as a risk rather than an opportunity, particularly in urban settings where harassment was perceived as common.

4.3.2 Lack of Transport

Absence of safe and reliable transportation limited attendance.

“There was no proper transportation facility.” (P8)

4.3.3 Fear of Harassment

Harassment fears discouraged families from allowing girls to travel alone.

“There is so much harassment on the streets.” (P6)

4.3.4 Far Schools and Colleges

Long distances increased safety concerns and fatigue.

“The college was very far away.” (P7)

4.3.5 Security Issues

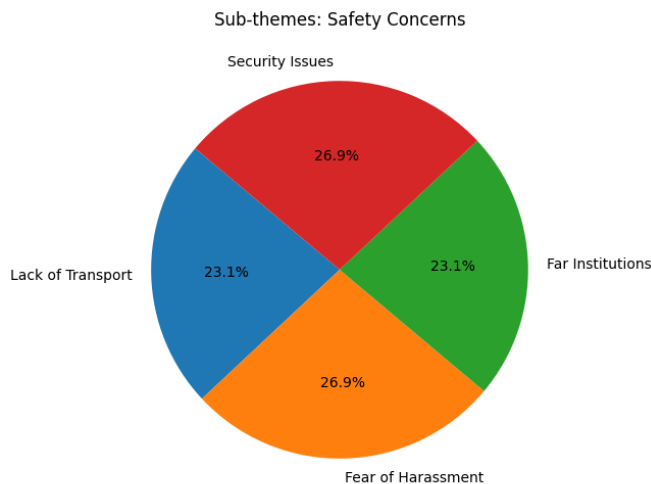
General safety fears reinforced strict mobility control.

“Safety concerns created constant fear.” (P4)

Table 4.4: Theme 4: Safety Concerns (n = 8/8)

Sub-Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Sample Evidence
Lack of transport	Absence of safe and reliable transport	6/8	“There was no proper transportation facility.” (P8)
Fear of harassment	Concerns about street harassment	7/8	“There is so much harassment on the streets.” (P6)
Far schools and colleges	Long distances discouraging attendance	6/8	“The college was very far away.” (P7)
Security issues	General fear for girls' safety	7/8	“Safety concerns created constant fear.” (P4)

Figure 4



Distribution of Sub-Themes under Safety Concerns (n = 8)

4.4 Overall Interpretation of Findings

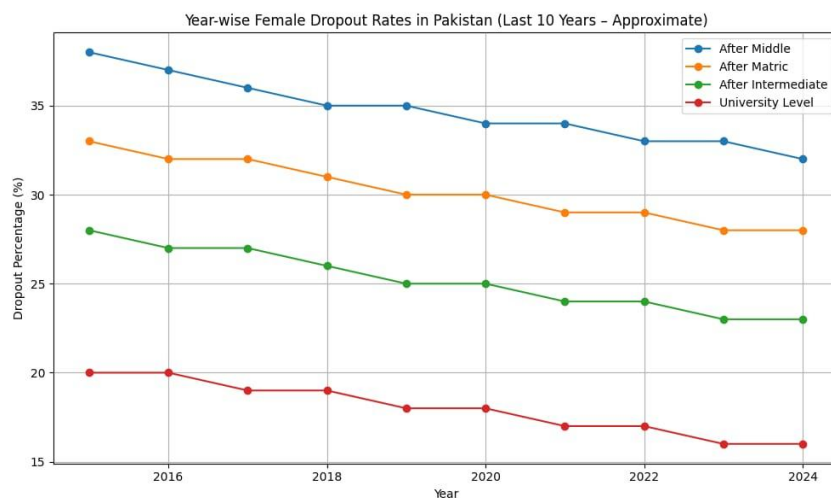
The findings demonstrate that restrictions on girls' access to higher education are not the result of a single factor but rather the interaction of economic hardship, cultural norms, gender inequality, and safety-related concerns. These interconnected barriers shape girls' emotional well-being, limit autonomy, and significantly influence life trajectories. The participants' narratives reveal how educational restriction is experienced not only as a structural limitation but also as a deeply personal and emotional loss.

4.5 Overall Estimate (2015–2024)

Average girls (18–25) enrolled in public higher education: $\approx 7\%$. Average girls (18–25) not enrolled in public higher education: $\approx 93\%$.

Over the past 10 years in Pakistan, only about 7% of girls aged 18–25 accessed public higher education, while nearly 93% remained excluded from public universities.

Figure 5



Girls' higher education enrolment in Pakistan (2015–2024).

5. Conclusion

Restrictions on girls' access to higher education in Pakistan are multifaceted, reflecting socio-economic, cultural, and structural barriers rather than a lack of personal motivation or ability. The findings from this study align with existing literature, showing that financial hardship, cultural expectations, gender inequality, and safety concerns interact to restrict girls' educational opportunities.

The most prominent barrier identified is financial difficulty. Families with limited income struggle to support daughters' higher education due to tuition fees, transportation, accommodation, and study materials. Fatima et al. (2025) report that economic challenges significantly reduce girls' access to higher education, often forcing families to prioritize immediate survival over long-term education. UNICEF (2022) similarly highlights that girls from poorer households are disproportionately affected, with financial limitations directly influencing school continuation rates. Participants in the study reflected this reality, stating that their families could not afford to pay for college, making education seem like an unattainable luxury.

Cultural norms and societal expectations represent another significant barrier. Traditional beliefs about gender roles place domestic responsibilities and early marriage above educational attainment for girls. Malik & Ahmad (2025) found that societal pressure discourages girls from pursuing higher studies, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. In this study, participants described being expected to manage household chores or assist in family businesses, reducing the time and energy available for academic pursuits. These internalized norms reinforce the perception that education for girls is less valuable than for boys, creating subtle yet powerful constraints.

Gender inequality further limits girls' educational choices. Ullah et al. (2025) highlight that household decision-making and male-dominated family structures often restrict female autonomy in pursuing education. Participants reported minimal encouragement from family members and communities, with some stating that their families explicitly denied permission to continue education. This aligns with broader patterns in Pakistan, where patriarchal norms and gender-based discrimination continue to influence educational access and aspirations.

Safety concerns are the fourth major barrier. Bibi et al. (2024) report that inadequate infrastructure, long distances to schools, and fear of harassment deter families from sending girls to college.

Human Rights Watch (2018) also notes that fewer secondary schools and colleges for girls compared to boys exacerbate these issues. Participants in the present study echoed these concerns, citing unsafe travel routes and long commutes as reasons for discontinuing education. These restrictions not only limit access but also reinforce dependency and curtail girls' independence.

Taken together, these barriers demonstrate a complex, interlinked system in which financial hardship, cultural norms, gender inequality, and safety concerns collectively restrict girls' higher education. The lived experiences of the participants reflect broader structural challenges in Pakistan, where socio-economic inequities, patriarchal norms, and inadequate institutional support intersect to produce persistent educational disparities (Fatima et al., 2025; Malik & Ahmad, 2025; Ullah et al., 2025; Bibi et al., 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

5.1 Implications

The study's findings suggest several practical and policy-oriented implications:

- **Financial Support Programs:** Scholarships, stipends, and transportation subsidies targeted at female students can reduce economic barriers and enable continued education (Fatima et al., 2025; UNICEF, 2022).
- **Community Awareness and Cultural Sensitization:** Programs aimed at parents and community members can challenge restrictive gender norms and promote the value of girls' education (Malik & Ahmad, 2025).
- **Safety Measures:** Enhancing campus security, providing safe transportation, and improving local infrastructure can address mobility concerns and alleviate parental fears (Bibi et al., 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2018).
- **Supportive Educational Policies:** Flexible learning schedules, mentorship programs, and structured guidance can help girls balance domestic responsibilities with academic requirements, reducing dropout rates (Ullah et al., 2025).

5.2 Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

- The study focused on a small group of female students from a single urban women's university, limiting generalizability to rural areas, co-educational institutions, or other provinces.
- Data relied on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability bias.
- Regional and cultural diversity in Pakistan means that barriers to girls' education may vary, and findings cannot fully represent all contexts.
- Future research should include larger, more diverse samples, compare experiences across gender, region, and academic discipline, and evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions to improve female educational participation.

5.3 Conclusion

This study highlights that restrictions on girls' access to higher education in Pakistan are structural, socio-cultural, and financial in nature. Economic hardship, entrenched gender norms, family-based discrimination, and safety concerns collectively impede girls' educational progress and limit their long-term autonomy and employment opportunities. Addressing these barriers requires

comprehensive strategies combining financial support, cultural awareness, safe learning environments, and flexible educational policies. By understanding the lived experiences of girls themselves, policymakers, educators, and community leaders can develop practical, culturally sensitive solutions to enhance female participation in higher education and break the cycle of educational inequality (Fatima et al., 2025; Malik & Ahmad, 2025; Ullah et al., 2025; Bibi et al., 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2018; UNICEF, 2022).

5.4 Summary of the Study

This qualitative study explored the barriers faced by Pakistani girls in accessing higher education, based on interviews with eight participants who were unable to continue their studies due to various socio-economic, cultural, gender-based, and safety-related restrictions. Thematic analysis revealed four main themes financial difficulties, cultural and societal expectations, gender inequality, and safety concerns. The findings confirm that girls' educational discontinuation is influenced by structural and social constraints rather than lack of ability or interest.

5.5 Key Takeaways

- **Financial constraints** were a major barrier, affecting tuition, transport, and study materials (Fatima et al., 2025; UNICEF, 2022).
- **Cultural norms and societal expectations** often prioritized household responsibilities or early marriage over education (Malik & Ahmad, 2025).
- **Gender inequality** limited girls' autonomy, with family or male guardians often controlling educational decisions (Ullah et al., 2025).
- **Safety concerns** including harassment fears, long distances, and poor transport deterred families from allowing girls to attend college (Bibi et al., 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2018).
- **Cumulative impact:** These barriers are interconnected, creating persistent educational inequality and limiting girls' future autonomy and career opportunities.

5.6 Recommendations

5.6.1 For Students and Families

- Support girls financially through scholarships, stipends, or community funding.
- Promote awareness about the value of girls' education in communities.
- Teach strategies to manage safety risks, like group travel or safe routes.
- Encourage girls to advocate for their educational rights within families.

5.6.2 For Teachers and Educational Institutions

- Provide flexible schedules for girls balancing domestic responsibilities.
- Offer mentorship and guidance, especially for at-risk students.
- Ensure safe learning environments, with female-only spaces and harassment prevention measures.
- Recognize achievements and provide supportive feedback to increase motivation.

5.6.3 For Universities and Policy Makers

- Expand financial support programs, including transportation subsidies for female students.
- Increase female-accessible institutions in rural and urban areas.
- Implement community campaigns to challenge restrictive gender norms.
- Provide counseling and mentorship programs for girls facing cultural or family pressure.
- Monitor and enforce equitable access policies across provinces.

5.6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

- Conduct region-specific studies to understand rural vs. urban disparities.
- Investigate the influence of family pressure, cultural norms, and gender expectations on educational access.
- Evaluate safety interventions for increasing girls' enrollment and retention.
- Examine the effectiveness of scholarships, transport facilities, and mentorship programs.
- Study long-term social and economic impacts of restricted higher education for girls in Pakistan.

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