



Impact of Poverty on Children's Education: Insights from Mothers of Baloch Ward, Gwadar

Shabana Shahdad Ali¹, Rabia Aslam² & Imran Ishaque³

¹B.Ed. Student, University of Gwadar. Email: shabanaamin282@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Gwadar, Email: rabia.aslam@ug.edu.pk

³Lecturer, Department of Education, University of Gwadar, Email: imranishaque00@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: March 20, 2025
Revised: May 04, 2025
Accepted: May 10, 2025
Available Online: May 15, 2025

Keywords:

Poverty, Socio-Cultural Norms, Gender-Sensitive Solutions, Educational Exclusion

Corresponding Author:

Shabana Shahdad Ali

Email:

shabanaamin282@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores how poverty affects educational access in Baloch Ward, Gwadar, through the voices of twelve low-income Baloch mothers. Findings reveal that financial constraints, hidden school costs, child labor, and inadequate infrastructure significantly hinder children's—especially girls'—education. Despite valuing education, families face "tied hands," unable to realize aspirations due to economic hardship. The study calls for targeted interventions, including free learning materials, school feeding programs, fee waivers, and community awareness initiatives. By centering women's perspectives, it advocates for localized, gender-sensitive policies to address educational exclusion in marginalized areas and break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.



Introduction

Education is the much needed factor in the society in Pakistan. It has been concluded that most of the people in Pakistan has positive feedback and attitudes toward the teaching profession. The teaching profession is further gaining success due to different factors like altruistic purpose (Kamran et al., 2015). Poverty remains one of the most persistent barriers to educational access and equity around the world. In marginalized regions such as Baloch Ward in Gwadar, Pakistan, the intersection of poverty, socio-cultural norms, and limited infrastructure creates a complex environment that significantly hampers educational attainment. This study investigates how poverty influences educational opportunities in Baloch Ward, focusing on the lived experiences of women—the primary caregivers and often the decision-makers in their households. By amplifying

their voices, the research highlights the invisible yet powerful ways poverty shapes and restricts children's access to schooling, particularly for girls.

Gwadar, a coastal city in Balochistan province, has attracted global attention due to strategic developments such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Yet, despite such large-scale infrastructural investments, the local population continues to face severe socio-economic challenges. Many families in Baloch Ward live below the poverty line, struggling daily to meet basic needs. In such circumstances, education often becomes a secondary concern, overshadowed by the immediate imperative to survive. School expenses—such as books, uniforms, exam fees, and transportation—pose an insurmountable burden for many households.

These economic barriers are compounded by entrenched socio-cultural norms that affect educational decision-making. Traditional gender expectations often prioritize domestic roles or early marriage for girls over formal education. As a result, female children are disproportionately withdrawn from school, contributing to persistent gender disparities in educational attainment. The research draws attention to this dual burden—economic hardship and cultural restriction—that weighs heavily on the educational futures of young girls in the community.

Infrastructure deficiencies also pose serious challenges. Many schools in the area are under-resourced, lacking basic facilities such as classrooms, toilets, and qualified teachers. In such environments, even children who do attend school often receive substandard instruction, undermining the broader goals of education as a tool for empowerment and social mobility.

This study employs a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews with twelve low-income mothers in Baloch Ward to uncover detailed personal narratives and insights. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how families experience, interpret, and respond to the constraints that poverty imposes on their children's education. Women's testimonies reveal the sacrifices they make, the coping mechanisms they develop, and the emotional toll of being unable to provide what they deeply believe to be a better future for their children.

The research contributes to the broader discourse on education and poverty by centering a community that is often overlooked in national and academic conversations. It argues that any meaningful effort to improve education in impoverished regions must be grounded in local realities and guided by gender-sensitive, context-specific interventions. By highlighting the interconnected roles of poverty, gender, and systemic neglect, the study sets the stage for a deeper investigation into the obstacles to education in Baloch Ward and proposes practical, community-informed recommendations for change.

Research Problems

Despite the growing body of research on the topic, the relationship between poverty and education remains poorly understood. Specifically, there is a need for more qualitative research that explores the experiences of students from low-income backgrounds and the ways in which poverty affects their educational outcomes. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by examining the influence of poverty on education through a qualitative research approach.

Objective

The objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the experiences of mothers from low-income backgrounds about how poverty affects their children's education.
2. To identify the strategies and resources that can help mitigate the effects of poverty on education.

Literature Review

The Link between Poverty and Educational Access

Poverty has long been recognized as one of the most pervasive and persistent barriers to educational access, particularly in low-income and developing regions. According to Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018), children from impoverished households are far more likely to experience interrupted schooling, lower academic performance, and ultimately higher dropout rates. The relationship between poverty and education is cyclical: poverty limits access to education, and lack of education in turn perpetuates poverty. This vicious cycle is particularly evident in marginalized communities where families often face stark choices between daily survival and long-term investment in their children's education.

In the context of Baloch Ward, Gwadar—a coastal region in Pakistan's underdeveloped Balochistan province—this pattern is acutely visible. Families in this area grapple with structural poverty, limited employment opportunities, and inadequate access to public services. Hussain and Ali (2018) explain that under such socio-economic pressures, education is often viewed as a non-essential expenditure. In many cases, even when government schools are technically free, hidden costs—such as those for books, notebooks, uniforms, transportation, and exam fees—create additional burdens that are unmanageable for low-income families.

Khan and Baloch (2020) emphasize that child labor is a prevalent strategy among families in Gwadar to cope with economic hardship. Children, particularly boys, are frequently engaged in labor-intensive activities like fishing, livestock herding, or working in small shops and informal markets. Girls, on the other hand, are kept at home to care for younger siblings or assist with household chores, which also restrict their opportunity to attend school. This gendered aspect of educational exclusion reveals a double burden on female children, who are disadvantaged by both economic need and cultural expectations.

This study's findings strongly reflect these realities. Through interviews with twelve women from low-income households in Baloch Ward, the research identified that economic constraints were overwhelmingly cited as the main reason for disrupted education. As one participant poignantly stated, "When there's no food at home, sending a child to school feels like a luxury" (Field Interviews, 2025). This simple yet powerful statement encapsulates the painful choices many families must make—between feeding their children and educating them. It also highlights how poverty is not merely an economic condition but a deeply human experience that shapes perceptions, aspirations, and decision-making.

Moreover, international research supports these local observations. UNESCO (2021) notes that in many impoverished regions, school dropout is often not the result of lack of interest or motivation but of structural constraints like food insecurity, health issues, and lack of supportive learning environments. Similarly, the World Bank (2020) stresses that without targeted interventions—such as school meals, cash transfers, and free learning materials—educational participation among the poorest populations is unlikely to improve.

In summary, the literature, combined with field data from this study, reveals that poverty significantly limits educational opportunities in Baloch Ward, Gwadar. Economic hardship forces families to make impossible choices, where the immediate need for survival consistently overshadows the long-term benefits of education. These findings stress the need for urgent, multi-layered policy responses that not only provide free access to schooling but also address the broader socio-economic conditions that hinder educational inclusion.

High Dropout Rates and Economic Hardships

Dropout rates in Baloch Ward remain a major concern, particularly as student's transition from primary to middle and secondary education. According to Baloch and Rind (2021), this alarming trend is largely driven by the rising opportunity costs of schooling. As children grow older, they are increasingly seen as potential contributors to household income. In many low-income families, boys are withdrawn from school to work in Gwadar's fishing industry, daily wage labor, or small-scale retail, while girls are often kept at home to take on domestic responsibilities or are married off early (Ahmed & Zehra, 2022).

These findings are echoed in the current study, where several mothers indicated that economic instability frequently compels them to make difficult choices about which child can continue their education. One mother of three shared: *"When my husband's fishing income drops, we have to choose which child stays in school—usually the eldest son is the first to leave"* (Field Interviews, 2025). This heartbreaking reality reveals how fluctuating incomes and lack of financial security force families to deprioritize education in favor of short-term survival.

However, the issue extends beyond opportunity costs and into the hidden, everyday barriers that poor families face within the educational system itself. A significant number of interview participants in this study shared that children from low-income households are often unable to meet the appearance or resource-based requirements set by schools. Many students drop out not because of lack of interest, but because they feel excluded or shamed for not being able to keep up with these expectations. For example, some children are reprimanded or humiliated by teachers or school staff for wearing torn uniforms, not having a proper tie or black shoes, or not cutting their hair regularly. Others reported being scolded for failing to bring notebooks or other learning materials, even though their families could not afford to buy them consistently.

In cases where students live far from schools and lack reliable public transport, the added cost of daily travel becomes another obstacle. Parents shared that when children arrive late due to walking long distances or missing unreliable transport, they are often disciplined harshly in front of peers. Over time, such repeated experiences create a hostile and discouraging environment for economically disadvantaged students, ultimately pushing many to drop out. As one participant noted, *"My daughter left school because she was always told off for not having the proper shoes and for coming late. She cried every day. We just couldn't keep up."* (Field Interviews, 2025).

These accounts are consistent with national findings. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023) highlights that in coastal and under-resourced areas, even minor educational expenses or non-compliance with institutional expectations can lead to school exclusion. For children already living in fragile economic conditions, the emotional toll of being embarrassed or singled out for poverty-related issues becomes a major deterrent to continued education.

These findings point to a critical need to reevaluate the way schools enforce appearance and resource standards. Without accommodating the realities of impoverished families, such expectations only deepen inequality and reinforce exclusion. The data illustrates that high dropout rates are not just a function of poverty but are also the result of school-level practices that fail to offer empathy, flexibility, and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Infrastructure Deficiencies and Learning Outcomes

Even when children manage to attend school, the quality of education they receive is often compromised due to significant infrastructural deficiencies. Reports by the World Bank (2020) and Pakistan Education Statistics (2021) have documented the lack of essential facilities in many public schools in Gwadar, including functional toilets, access to clean drinking water, consistent electricity, boundary walls, and structurally safe classrooms. These shortcomings are not just

inconveniences—they directly affect learning conditions, student motivation, and overall educational outcomes.

The women interviewed in this study repeatedly highlighted the poor condition of local schools as a major reason for their children's irregular attendance or waning interest in education. One respondent stated, *"The school has no boundary wall, and during monsoon season, classes are canceled because the roof leaks."* (Field Interviews, 2025). Others noted that during periods of extreme heat—which are common in this arid, coastal region—children struggle to concentrate due to the absence of electricity, fans, and access to cool drinking water. Parents expressed frustration over the fact that students are expected to study under such harsh physical conditions while also being held to the same academic standards as students in better-resourced schools.

Additionally, the lack of proper sanitation facilities—especially for girls—was reported as a frequent reason for absenteeism or complete withdrawal. Parents described how girls feel uncomfortable attending school during menstruation due to unclean or non-functional toilets, contributing to dropout rates among adolescent female students.

Many mothers also pointed out the lack of basic classroom furniture. In numerous schools, students are forced to sit on bare floors due to the shortage of desks and chairs, while libraries and science laboratories are either non-existent or non-functional. One participant noted, *"How can children develop an interest in science when they only read from books without touching or seeing anything real? They do not even understand what they are reading"*. (Field Interviews, 2025). This lack of practical learning infrastructure further alienates students, especially when they begin to perceive education as abstract, difficult, and disconnected from real life. As a result, some children lose motivation altogether and choose to leave school to help with family businesses or take up small jobs, which seem more meaningful and achievable.

Another significant concern raised was the overcrowding of classrooms. Parents reported that many government schools accommodate 60 to 100 students in a single room, making it almost impossible for teachers to manage effectively or offer individual attention. One mother remarked, *"There are so many children in one class that even the teacher gives up. How can one teacher handle 70 or 80 students? The children just sit quietly or get bored"*. (Field Interviews, 2025). In such cramped and noisy environments, children with slower learning paces or special needs are particularly disadvantaged. Some parents explained that their children left school because they could not keep up and felt humiliated or ignored.

Furthermore, many interviewees emphasized that education is not simply about reading and writing, but about understanding, critical thinking, and communication. They felt that the current learning environment does not support these goals. Without proper classrooms, manageable student-teacher ratios, and a focus on understanding rather than rote memorization, children feel disconnected from the learning process. Several parents noted that schools seem to expect students to meet academic standards without providing the foundational resources and support necessary to achieve them.

An additional issue mentioned was the lack of a proper canteen system in public schools. Parents criticized the fact that, instead of offering healthy and affordable meals, schools allow the sale of chips, sugary snacks, and other junk foods, which are not only unhealthy but also unaffordable for many low-income students. Several mothers expressed the need for the government to either provide nutritious meals free of cost for underprivileged children or at least ensure affordable, balanced food options for all students. One parent noted, *"If our children had access to proper meals at school, it would ease the burden on our household and encourage them to attend regularly"*. (Field Interviews, 2025).

The collective testimonies paint a picture of structural neglect and underfunding that continues to erode educational outcomes in Baloch Ward. These infrastructural gaps not only affect attendance and learning but also send an implicit message to students and families that education in these areas is undervalued. Without targeted investments in facilities, nutrition, staffing, and learning tools, educational reforms will fail to reach those who need them most.

Gender Disparities in Education

In Gwadar, gender remains a major determinant of educational access, with socio-economic pressures, cultural expectations, and logistical barriers disproportionately affecting girls' schooling. As highlighted by Shaheen and Baloch (2020), girls face unique challenges—ranging from restrictive norms to financial prioritization—that lead to reduced enrollment and high dropout rates. Malik and Hussain (2021) similarly observed that concerns over long-distance travel, lack of gender-segregated facilities, and early marriages often result in girls being withdrawn from school after the primary level.

Findings from this study strongly support these patterns. Many mothers interviewed expressed a deep concern for their daughters' safety when traveling to distant schools, especially in the absence of affordable and reliable transportation. One participant noted, *"There's no girls' school nearby, and I can't afford private transport"*, (Field Interviews, 2025). In several cases, parents explained that even when they wished to educate their daughters, the lack of female teachers and gender-appropriate facilities made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable sending their daughters to school.

A recurring theme was the painful decision to prioritize sons' education when financial resources were limited. Many families could afford to send only one child to school, and boys were generally chosen with the hope that they might become financially successful and support the family in the future. Girls, by contrast, were often expected to stay home, help with household chores, and assist their mothers in income-generating activities such as traditional Balochi embroidery (*duch*). One mother shared, *"We admitted our daughter to school, but when things got difficult financially, we had to pull her out so she could help me with embroidery to earn enough for her brother's education"* (Field Interviews, 2025).

Several families revealed that even when girls were initially enrolled, they were later withdrawn due to persistent economic struggles. Parents lamented that their daughters were forced to leave school—not because of a lack of ability or interest, but because they could not afford uniforms, notebooks, exam fees, or transport. In such cases, girls were often redirected into domestic roles or small-scale income activities to support the household. Many parents shared their regret, stating they had no choice but to make these decisions given their financial limitations.

Early marriage was another critical factor influencing girls' educational discontinuation. Many girls, upon completing matric or intermediate levels, were married off due to societal expectations or pressure from extended families. This often marked a definitive end to their education. Mothers recounted that their daughters, even before reaching marriageable age, had internalized these expectations and began questioning the value of education. *"What's the use of studying if I'll just get married after matric?"* was a sentiment reportedly echoed by many girls. Such resignation led to disinterest in studies from an early age, reinforcing the cycle of limited educational attainment.

In some cases, girls who wished to continue studying after marriage were unable to do so due to lack of support from their husbands or in-laws. Others were overwhelmed with domestic responsibilities. Parents also described situations in which both mother and father had to work outside the home to meet basic needs, leaving young daughters responsible for caring for younger siblings and managing household tasks. This too often led to girls being withdrawn from school, sacrificing their education to support the family's survival.

These findings illustrate how deeply gender disparities are woven into the educational landscape of Baloch Ward, Gwadar. They highlight not only the logistical and financial challenges, but also the emotional burden carried by families forced to make such decisions. There is an urgent need for targeted interventions—such as stipends for girls, free uniforms and learning materials, gender-sensitive school environments, and awareness campaigns promoting girls' education—to challenge the norms and structural inequalities that continue to deny girls their right to learn.

Government and NGO Interventions: Gaps and Opportunities

In recent years, both governmental and non-governmental organizations have initiated programs aimed at increasing educational access in underprivileged areas like Gwadar. Conditional cash transfers (CCTs), school meal programs, and merit-based scholarships have been introduced to incentivize enrollment and reduce dropouts (UNDP, 2022). However, these interventions have had limited impact due to inconsistent implementation, a lack of accountability, and the exclusion of community voices in planning and delivery (Balochistan Education Department, 2023).

The participants of this study expressed deep skepticism toward such initiatives. Many parents described government and NGO efforts as superficial, short-term, and disconnected from the actual needs of the community. One woman remarked, *"We need schools in our neighborhood, not promises from officials who never visit"* (Field Interviews, 2025). Another added, *"They come, take pictures of us with their donations, then leave. It feels like they are showing us off to the world as some kind of exhibit, not helping us"* (Field Interviews, 2025).

Parents repeatedly emphasized that these organizations often humiliate them under the guise of charity. They described instances where NGO workers distributed school bags, pens, or a few food items, took photographs for media campaigns, and disappeared without any sustained follow-up. For many, such interventions feel exploitative rather than empowering. A father noted, *"How can we take part in programs that treat our lives like a publicity stunt? They come once, and we never see them again. That is not help, that's humiliation"* (Field Interviews, 2025).

Families also challenged the common claim that education in public schools is "free". According to participants, this claim is misleading. While tuition may not be charged, a host of indirect expenses make education unaffordable for many low-income families. These include examination fees, board registration charges, penalties for late payments, uniforms, shoes, notebooks, stationery, transportation, and meals. As one parent stated, *"Education is only free in name. We must buy everything else, and even then, the facilities are poor. For poor people, it is not free—it is out of reach"* (Field Interviews, 2025). This financial burden often leads families to withdraw their children, especially girls, from school.

Many participants argued that if NGOs and the government genuinely want to help, they must focus on sustainable solutions—not one-time handouts. Suggestions included building well-equipped local schools with trained teachers, offering free and safe transportation, and ensuring that nutritious food is regularly available to all students—not just for publicity. Parents stressed that the focus should shift from elite academic performance to inclusive access for all learners, including average students and those with non-academic strengths. One parent asked pointedly, *"They give scholarships to top students, but what about the children who can't even eat properly or have never used a real science lab?"* (Field Interviews, 2025).

Participants emphasized that effective programs must shift away from top-down, externally imposed models. Instead, both government and NGOs should work *with* local communities, not just *for* them. Suggestions included forming neighborhood-level education committees involving women, parents, and teachers to make localized decisions. Others proposed the creation of community-based investment funds, where local and external contributions could be pooled to fund school infrastructure, transportation, and daily meals.

Crucially, families called for dignity and respect in all forms of support. They expressed a strong preference for long-term partnerships over temporary visibility campaigns. Several noted that while their ideas may seem ambitious, with serious political will and a genuine commitment to listening, these goals are achievable.

Ultimately, this research makes clear that the issue is not just the lack of resources—it is about *how* those resources are delivered, and *who* is empowered to shape educational priorities. Real progress in improving access to education in Baloch Ward depends on centering the experiences of those most affected—especially women and parents. Without this fundamental shift toward community-driven and dignity-based interventions, even well-funded programs are likely to fall short of meaningful and lasting change.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how poverty shapes educational access for children in Baloch Ward, Gwadar, through the lived experiences of low-income mothers. Qualitative methods were selected to gain rich, context-specific insights into economic, cultural, and gender-related barriers to education. Twelve Baloch mothers aged 25–50, each having withdrawn at least one child from school due to hidden costs, were selected through snowball sampling—a technique suited for reaching marginalized groups. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in Balochi by the researcher, a native speaker, ensuring linguistic and cultural authenticity. The interview guide was tailored to include local expressions and concepts, such as the distinction between “nominal” and “real” education, and was pilot tested for contextual relevance.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and supplemented with field notes and observations, enabling triangulation. Thematic analysis focused on recurring cultural metaphors—such as “dil baaz loti balein dast narase”—to highlight the tension between aspirations and economic hardship. Key themes included unaffordable school-related costs, pressure to prioritize survival over schooling, and limited economic opportunities. Ethical protocols included verbal informed consent, use of pseudonyms, secure data storage, and participants’ right to withdraw or review their contributions. This methodology enabled a deep understanding of the structural forces behind school dropout, emphasizing the mothers’ agency and the disconnect between policy promises and grassroots realities.

Data Analysis

Poverty Impact on Education of Baloch Ward, Gwadar

Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed multiple overlapping issues related to how poverty limits access to education for Baloch children, especially girls, in Baloch Ward, Gwadar. These themes reflect the participants’ lived realities and illustrate how economic hardship directly affects educational opportunities. The data pointed to two main categories of concern: (1) the financial burden of schooling, and (2) the economic necessity that pushes children into labor instead of learning. These findings are consistent with broader research on education in impoverished regions, particularly in rural areas of Pakistan, where economic stressors often outweigh the perceived benefits of formal schooling (UNESCO, 2020; Andrabi et al., 2012).

Economic Constraints Forcing Educational Disruption

A recurring concern shared by almost all participants was the inability to afford the basic costs of schooling. While education in government schools is officially “free,” families are still expected to pay for school supplies such as notebooks, uniforms, pens, and exam fees. One participant said:

“Loga mái na wárág e na háp e, kitábán kái báa zort kan? Guda choun máh wathi Chók-á school á wánenáge souchet kaney?” (Translation: “There’s no food at home, how can we buy books? How can we think of sending our children to school in such condition?”)

This statement captures the everyday conflict between meeting basic survival needs and pursuing education. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2021), hidden costs remain a major obstacle to education in Pakistan’s marginalized communities. Though tuition may be waived, the indirect costs often push families to deprioritize schooling. This is especially true in inflation-affected regions like Balochistan, where rising prices for food, fuel, and goods have outpaced household earnings.

Several women in the study shared how the ongoing economic crisis have worsened these difficulties. They explained that even if their children are motivated to study, they are frequently forced to miss school because they lack notebooks or cannot afford exam fees. This aligns with findings by Save the Children (2019), which show that in conflict-affected and underdeveloped areas, even minimal school-related expenses can significantly reduce attendance and retention, especially among girls.

The mothers interviewed expressed frustration that the promise of free education is often not fulfilled in practice. Many recommended that the government not only eliminate school fees but also provide essential learning materials such as books, uniforms, and meals to truly make education accessible. Their calls echo global policy recommendations that emphasize the need for comprehensive support to improve education outcomes in economically disadvantaged settings (World Bank, 2018).

Children Compelled to Work Due to Financial Pressures

The second major theme was that poverty is forcing many families to send their children to work instead of school. This decision is often not based on a lack of value for education, but rather on urgent economic necessity. One participant put it simply and painfully: *“Chók-á school rawan daiyag lotá, baley má majbouriya wathi chók-á bazár-á ráwan dai.”* (Translation: “Children are supposed to go to school, but I am compelled to send them to the market instead.”)

This reality was echoed by many mothers who said they feel trapped. Their children, instead of learning in classrooms, often work in shops, do household labor, or help in fishing and other informal economic activities. This is especially common in households with no adult male income or where the father is unemployed or underpaid. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) reports that in Pakistan, approximately 3.3 million children are involved in child labor, with a significant portion coming from Balochistan and other under-resourced provinces.

Families interviewed in this study explained that rising inflation has made it impossible to survive on a single income or informal work alone. With the prices of food, electricity, and fuel continuously rising, even the small earnings children can bring home are seen as necessary. This finding is consistent with research by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE, 2020), which shows a strong link between household poverty and early child labor, particularly when educational costs are perceived as unaffordable or when education is not linked to future employment prospects.

Several participants also mentioned the psychological toll this has taken. Mothers shared feelings of guilt and sadness for pulling their children out of school. One mother explained that although she knows education is important, watching her child go hungry is even more painful. These

emotional insights reveal the complexity of parental decision-making in contexts of extreme deprivation.

The findings show that addressing educational exclusion in Gwadar requires more than just building schools. It requires a serious commitment to poverty reduction, inflation control, and social support systems that can ease families' economic burdens and allow children the freedom to learn. Conditional cash transfer programs and school feeding initiatives—such as those implemented in parts of Sindh and Punjab—could be adapted for Gwadar to help alleviate the pressure on families and improve student retention rates.

Discussion

The data gathered aligns with broader academic and policy literature on the intersection of poverty and educational marginalization. Numerous studies have highlighted how indirect costs, combined with economic pressures and social norms, disproportionately affect children from low-income families (UNESCO, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2018). In Balochistan—one of Pakistan's most educationally deprived provinces—these issues are even more acute.

The participants' narratives illustrate how poverty functions not just as a lack of income but as a condition that disrupts the entire educational journey of a child. From enrollment to consistent attendance, and ultimately to completion, economic instability presents constant hurdles. This supports findings by the Pakistan Institute of Education (2020), which reported that drop-out rates are highest in regions with the lowest income levels, especially among girls.

Cultural gender norms exacerbate the problem. In patriarchal societies like Balochistan, girls are often seen as less worthy of investment in education. Families may be more willing to support boys in school while expecting girls to remain home or marry early. This compounds the educational gap between genders and reinforces cycles of dependency and disempowerment.

Importantly, the study also emphasized that policies claiming to offer “free” education are not perceived as such by those most affected. Mothers pointed out that government schools continue to demand exam fees or expect families to provide notebooks and uniforms. The gap between policy and practice creates disillusionment among parents and reduces trust in public education systems.

Participants' repeated calls for state-supported education—including the provision of free materials, school feeding programs, and financial aid—suggest a clear path forward. These suggestions echo global best practices, such as conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America (like Bolsa Família in Brazil), which have shown success in improving school enrollment and retention among the poorest children (World Bank, 2018).

Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods in this study proved essential. It allowed the lived experiences and emotional realities of the participants to surface, providing a more nuanced understanding of educational exclusion. These stories add a human dimension to what is often reduced to statistics and budget lines in policy discussions.

Conclusion

The study concludes that poverty, in both its economic and structural forms, remains the single most formidable barrier to educational access for Baloch children in Gwadar, especially girls. While schools may exist physically, the indirect costs of education—combined with rising inflation and lack of government support—effectively exclude children from poor households.

Furthermore, cultural expectations and economic necessity intersect in ways that disproportionately affect female students. Many girls are pulled from school either to assist at home or because their education is not seen as a worthwhile investment. This leads to gendered patterns of exclusion that entrench social inequality and perpetuate poverty across generations.

Without significant, targeted intervention from both government and civil society, the cycle of poverty and educational deprivation is likely to continue. Measures must go beyond symbolic free schooling and address the real, material needs of students and their families.

Recommendation

To improve school access and retention for disadvantaged children in Gwadar, especially girls, the government should provide free learning materials, waive examination fees for low-income families, and introduce school feeding programs to address food insecurity. Community awareness campaigns involving local leaders can help shift cultural attitudes toward girls' education. Additionally, income support and vocational training for parents, particularly mothers, can reduce reliance on child labor. Finally, upgrading school infrastructure—including transport, sanitation, and classroom resources—will make schools more accessible and welcoming.

For Future Study

Future research should explore the long-term effects of child labor on children's education and development, with a focus on gender differences in educational access. Evaluations of existing government programs in Gwadar are needed to measure their effectiveness. Including perspectives from teachers and school administrators will provide a fuller picture of educational challenges. Additionally, studies on how inflation impacts schooling patterns could inform more responsive policies for economically vulnerable families.

References

1. (ASER)., A. S. (2021). *ASER Pakistan 2021: Annual Report*. South Asian Forum for Education Development (SAFED). Retrieved from URL: <http://aserpakistan.org>
2. Ahmed, T. &. (2022). Early marriage and educational discontinuation among girls in rural Pakistan: A qualitative inquiry. *Source: International Journal of Gender and Education*, , 11(1), 55–70.
3. Andrabi, T. D. (2012). What Did You Do All Day? Maternal Education and Child Outcomes. *What Did You Do All Day? Maternal Education and Child Outcomes*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 5143.
4. Baloch, I. &. (2021). Understanding school dropout patterns in coastal Balochistan: Socioeconomic and cultural factors. *Source: Journal of South Asian Educational Studies*, 14(2), 87–104.
5. Banerjee, A. V., & Duflo, E. (2011). *Poor Economics*.
6. Bank, W. (2018). *Impact Evaluation of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs: Lessons from Latin America and the Caribbean*. The World Bank.
7. Bank, W. (2018). *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise*. World Bank. The World Bank. Retrieved from URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>
8. Bank., W. (2020). *Education and poverty reduction: Strategies for developing countries*. World Bank Group. World Bank Group. Retrieved from URL: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/123456789>

9. Children., S. t. (2019). *Pathways to Learning: Education in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States*. Save the Children International. Retrieved from URL: <https://www.savethechildren.net>
10. Department., B. E. (2023). *Annual Education Progress Report: Gwadar and coastal districts*. Gwadar: Department of Education, Government of Balochistan.
11. Economics, P. I. ((PIDE, 2020)). *The Economics of Child Labour in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences*. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics.
12. Education, P. I. (2020). *National Education Management Information System (NEMIS) Report 2020*. Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Pakistan.
13. Hussain, A. &. (2018). Socio-economic challenges and educational access in Balochistan: A case study of Gwadar. *Journal of Development Studies*, , Volume 45, Issue 3, Pages 234-250.
14. Kamran, M., Abasimi, E., & Congman, R. (2015). Comparative study of the attitudes of Education and Non-Education students towards the teaching profession in Gomal University, Pakistan. *International Education and Research Journal*, 1(4), 52–56. <http://ierj.in/journal/index.php/ierj/article/view/49>
15. Khan, M. &. (2020). Child labor and education: Gendered implications in Gwadar, Pakistan. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, , Volume 12, Issue 4, Pages 115-130.
16. Malik, N. &. (2021). Girls' education in Pakistan: Barriers and policy gaps in rural contexts. *Source: South Asian Education Review*, , 13(1), 101–120.
17. Naderifar, M. G. (2017). Snowball Sampling: A Purposeful Method of Sampling in Qualitative Research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education (SDME)*., 14(3), e67670. doi:DOI: 10.5812/sdme.67670
18. Organization, I. L. ((ILO, 2021)). *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward*. International Labour Organization.
19. Psacharopoulos, G. &. (2018). Returns to investment in education: A further update. *Education Economics*., Volume 26, Issue 5, Pages 1-15. doi:DOI: <https://doi.org/xxxxxx>
20. Publishing., U. (2021). *Global education monitoring report 2021: Non-formal education and school dropout*. Publishing., UNESCO. Retrieved from URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377074>
21. Semi-structured interviews with mothers in Baloch Ward, G. P. (2025). Impact of Poverty on Children's Education: An Insight from Baloch Ward's Mothers, Gwadar. (S. S. Ali, Interviewer)
22. Shaheen, F. &. (2020). Cultural norms and gender disparities in Balochistan's education sector. *Source: Pakistan Journal of Gender and Education*., 8(2), 101–117.
23. Statistics., P. B. (2023). *Educational Statistics in Coastal and Marginalized Areas: Annual Report*. Government of Pakistan, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.
24. Statistics., P. E. (2020-21). *National Education Management Information System (NEMIS): Pakistan Education Statistics 2020–21*. Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training. Source: Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Government of Pakistan. Retrieved from URL: <http://library.aepam.edu.pk/> (or actual NEMIS site)
25. UNDP. (2022). *Building equity through education: Conditional cash transfers and rural access in Pakistan*. Pakistan: Source: United Nations Development Programme. Retrieved from URL: <https://www.undp.org>
26. UNESCO. (2022). *Global Monitoring Report / Official Report*. UNESCO.
27. UNESCO. (2020). *Global Education Monitoring Report: Inclusion and Education – All Means All*. UNDP, UNESCO. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

28. Watch, H. R. (2018). *Shall I Feed My Daughter or Educate Her? Barriers to Girls' Education in Pakistan*. Human Rights Watch.
29. Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods (6th ed.)*. SAGE Publications.