



## A Sociological Exploration of Institutional, Sociocultural, and Economic Barriers to Women's Higher Education Aspirations in Balochistan


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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History:</b>            Received: December 26, 2024            Revised: January 15, 2025            Accepted: January 16, 2025            Available Online: January 19, 2025</p>	<p><i>A developing approach to economic and social empowerment is higher education. It enables people to acquire the knowledge and abilities they need to pursue their career goals and make significant contributions to society. The socio-cultural, economic, and institutional constraints pose a large number of issues for female students in Balochistan. This study adopted a qualitative research methodology by using purposive sampling to gather information from 73 female students and female teaching faculty across three major universities in Quetta. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and FGDs, which were then analyzed thematically. The study contextualizes the findings in broader social contexts through the application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Connell's Framework of Gender Relations. Five core themes were comprising sociocultural barriers, economic limitations, institutional deficiencies, academic pressures, and opportunities for empowerment, were discussed. Findings from the study suggest the issue of continued patriarchal thought domination, weak institutional setup, and economic hardship in the region; besides them, alternatives like women's universities, scholarships, and mentoring are highlighted. Proposed reform includes gender-inclusive reform, financial help, and community involvement toward making a conducive higher education environment all around Balochistan, that would turn out to be women-friendly, gender-equitable, and woman-inclusive.</i></p>
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## **Introduction**

Society fundamentally depends on education since it facilitates the development and prosperity of individuals and nation-states as a whole. Education constitutes a fundamental human right, to which every individual is entitled. The growth of both people and society depends on education, which is essential for a prosperous and successful future. Future generations benefit when comprehensive, egalitarian, and high-quality education is provided (Government of Pakistan, 2024).

According to (Szanto & Barsky, 1998), education needs to have self-fulfillment as a component characteristic. At its finest, education may provide an atmosphere that is both rich and rigorous, allowing the person to explore in their unique manners. Helliwell & Putnam, (2007) in their study emphasize the value of education in addressing issues related to families, politics, the economy, and culture. Education fosters self-awareness, confidence, and the ability to tackle complex challenges. Education has the potential to enhance democratic processes, cultivate active citizenship, and encourage civic engagement.

Education, especially higher education has the power to accelerate economic growth and the fight against poverty. It is essential to novelty, modernity, and innovation (Mengal & Karim, 2023). The right to get an education is a fundamental right that every woman deserves. A major contribution to the advancement of the nation can potentially be made by well-educated women. When it comes to the development of a sophisticated and well-ordered society, education for women can be of vital importance. On the other hand, Pakistani women confront a multitude of challenges when they attempt to seek higher education. Formal education for women is either strictly forbidden or heavily condemned in many parts of Pakistan. Since the United States began its war on terror following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan has also been home to religious extremist organizations. The Islamic extremist organizations that took control of Pakistan and imposed their laws are mostly found in KPK, Fata, and the Swat Valley (Laiqat, 2022). In a suicide bomb attack, fourteen female faculty members and students were murdered at Quetta's Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University on June 15, 2013. Scholars in Balochistan are in danger due to targeted killings, disappearances, and abductions of university employees and students. Every student has the right to pursue higher education without fear of violence. In addition to violating the human rights of the female students who are directly assaulted, targeted killings and suicide attacks at educational institutions broadcast a violent and discriminatory message to other young women in the area and beyond (SAR's, 2013).

As the biggest province in Pakistan, Balochistan is confronted with significant obstacles in the realm of higher education. These hurdles stem from insecurity, socio-cultural issues, economic difficulties, and institutional challenges (Manzoor, 2018a). The current state of affairs indicates that the province's populations as a whole suffer from a broad lack of access to essential services. Nevertheless, it is still undeniable that women are the most marginalized group in society overall. Balochistan has some of the lowest rates of female literacy worldwide. The majority of girls are prohibited from receiving an education. The literacy rate in Balochistan is 37%, much lower than both the national average of 53% and the rates in all other provinces of Pakistan. The anticipated female literacy rate in Balochistan is 20%, with just 10% of women living in rural areas (Kakar et al., 2019).

One of the biggest problems facing Pakistani women, particularly in Balochistan, is access to higher education. For women, obtaining professional and technical degrees and continuing education is more challenging (Mengal & Karim, 2023). Cultural norms, early marriages, and the

need to provide girls with dowries all hinder women's access to higher education. The belief that women should only be involved in managing their homes, bearing, and raising children is widely held. Investing in girls' education is hence considered a futility of time and resources (Kareem, 2018; Luqman et al., 2017). These issues are rendered much more severe in patriarchal cultures like Balochistan, Pakistan, where restricted norms, poor infrastructure, and financial restraints all contribute to a reduction in the academic capacity of women (Irum et al., 2015; Mustafa & Khan, 2018; Ullah et al., 2019).

In Balochistan, women have historically faced difficulties in their educational pursuits. The political and economic problems that afflict the entire province and remote regions, in particular, have historically prevented the female community from obtaining an education. A lofty desire for many people is to create social and cultural barriers in their path and view it as a challenge to female education. Gender discrepancy is deeply rooted in Pakistani societies owing to this woman in Balochistan face several challenges in pursuit of their higher education. Sociocultural expectations, economic constraints, domestic responsibilities, and institutional gaps intensify these challenges for women in Balochistan (Manzoor, 2018). In light of this, the present research study seeks to explore the factors that have a major effect on women's higher education, as well as to find out the enabling aspects that motivate women to pursue higher and the opportunities that are available to the women in Balochistan.

### **Purpose of the study**

When it comes to women's access to higher education in Balochistan, we have a comprehensive understanding of the negative consequences that are caused by discrepancies in material conditions and broad cultural gender norms. These patterns continue to be common and require more investigation. Furthermore, there is a lack of understanding regarding the elements that assist women in overcoming these challenges and enrolling in higher education. In the province of Balochistan, the scrapes, destitution, and prejudice that women face as female students in higher education are particularly poorly recognized. Therefore, the present research study aims to investigate the obstacles, challenges, and difficulties that women in Balochistan experience when they are enrolled in higher education and to determine the factors that contribute to the success of women in higher education in Balochistan.

### **Research questions**

1. What challenges and obstacles did women students in Balochistan encounter in pursuit of higher education?
2. What makes women able and motivated to go above these obstacles and succeed as higher education students?

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To investigate barriers and challenges faced by women in Balochistan in higher education.
2. To investigate the enabling factors within higher education that facilitate the successful establishment of women in Balochistan in the studies.

### **Significance of the study**

There is an insufficient amount of sociological academic literature on this research topic. Besides, there have been no comprehensive studies carried out on this indispensable aspect, particularly in

this context. To fill that gap, this research will be the first of its kind to examine the opportunities and obstacles affecting women's higher education in Balochistan. Further, the results of this study can draw attention to important issues that policymakers should address in order to improve women's access to higher education in Balochistan. These issues include academic, social, economic, cultural, religious, and gender stereotype factors.

Moreover, it is anticipated that by demonstrating, how to get beyond these barriers and succeed in the educational system, the study would motivate women in Balochistan. This study would help women since it will demonstrate how some women overcome challenges. The researcher selected participants for this study from a sample of university students engaged in advanced academic programs. The study participants articulate the obstacles they have encountered and the strategies they employed to surmount them. This study will consequently act as a source of inspiration for women in Balochistan, shedding light on their methods of articulating their concerns, asserting their voices, and advocating for their right to education.

### **Statement of the problem**

Higher education offers women the opportunity to challenge gender conventions and advance gender equality in addition to fostering personal growth. However, throughout the greater part of Pakistan, including Balochistan, there are numerous obstacles to women's higher education. Balochistan faces a number of educational challenges, especially in the area of women's higher education. In contemporary society, opportunities for women have expanded significantly; however, the importance of prioritizing women's education poses deeper consideration. The problems, encountered by women are intricately linked to socio-economic, cultural, and familial spheres. All of these factors have a greater impact in Balochistan, where women's access to higher education is still greatly restricted by traditional gender norms, a lack of resources, and inadequate support systems. Nevertheless, the existing literature indicates a significant gap in understanding the obstacles. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend and highlight those issues.

### **Review of Literature**

Higher education possesses the capacity to empower women, catalyze social transformation, and promote economic independence. Higher education significantly improves women's understanding of their legal rights. The stipulations surrounding inheritance rights and divorce hold significant importance for women. Women persistently face considerable obstacles that hinder their capacity to exercise their rights, even though understanding these laws constitutes a significant preliminary advancement (Malik & Courtney, 2011).

Further, in terms of personal independence, women with education tend to experience a greater sense of control compared to those lacking education. They possess greater authority and influence regarding familial resources. They receive a societal acknowledgment, which enhances their comprehension of the unfavorable and undesirable aspects of their present circumstance. Educated women possess the insight to envision a more promising future and the capability to realize it. She retains the ability to discern her own potential and the necessary actions required to effect meaningful change (Shetty, 2021).

According to Addy, the difficulties on both the supply and demand sides of education, noting the multitude of women who are deprived of educational opportunities due to cultural norms,

insufficient funding, limited financial incentives, unmet bureaucratic commitments, safety issues, and a lack of qualified female educators (Sutherland-Addy & World Bank, 2008).

A qualitative study conducted in Lahore, Pakistan on challenges women face in higher education found that the pursuit of higher education among Pakistani women is predominantly driven by the encouragement and aspirations of their parents and relatives. Within the context of Pakistani culture, it is observed that women often depend on their parents for financial assistance as well as guidance in decision-making processes. They require the financial and emotional backing of their parents to engage in the pursuit of higher education. Various factors, including a woman's aspiration for advanced education, the pursuit of employment, the quest for greater respect, the reduction of gender discrimination, and the desire for independence, serve as motivating influences in this context (Laiqat, 2022).

According to Maqsood et al., (2012), a successful woman who pursues employment and more education will set a standard for other women. Her achievements convey a powerful message to society and cultural barriers, asserting that women can make substantial contributions to the progress of their families and nations when guaranteed respect and opportunity. A woman who leads by higher goals and models will inspire other women in her family and community to do the same, and eventually, the others will be successful. In light of various cultural challenges, it is clear that there has been a notable enhancement in the enrollment rate of females in higher education in Pakistan in recent years. This tendency would help Pakistan's social and economic development (Khan et al., 2023).

Moreover, other socioeconomic factors enable a woman to overcome social and cultural obstacles and change her status in society with the help of higher education. When women consider various factors, including their self-esteem, the pursuit of higher education, and the drive for success and independence through proactive measures to address obstacles and gender bias, achieving their goals becomes attainable. Individuals with advanced education possess a heightened capacity to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of various circumstances, thereby exerting greater control over their personal choices, encompassing areas such as marriage, career, and legal entitlements (Mehmood et al., 2018; Shaukat & Pell, 2015).

Additionally, the notion that educated women possess a greater capacity to support their families compared to their uneducated counterparts serves as an additional rationale for advocating women's access to higher education in urban environments. Women with education contribute financially to their families, manage household responsibilities, and demonstrate greater self-sufficiency in terms of mobility. Therefore, the financial assistance and support of an educated woman leads to greater prosperity for her family. Likewise, the shared responsibilities shared by an educated woman will reduce the stress for the male member of the family. But, in Pakistan, the matter of women's education remains a perplexing challenge, rooted in many different kinds of social economic, cultural, and political inequality and complexities (Khalid & Khan, 2006).

Studies revealed that higher education in Pakistan faces significant societal and cultural challenges, particularly for women. Maqbool et al., (2021) in their study emphasized the necessity to increase awareness about the potential effects of higher education on women. Similarly, societal norms, economic constraints, and safety issues often influence parents' decisions to discontinue their daughters' education. This underestimation limits the ability of highly educated women to fully benefit from their fundamental rights, particularly in education (Ahmed et al., 2021; Iqbal et al., 1998; Jamal, 2015; Mahesar, 2024).

The traditional social structures and established norms within the Islamic state of Pakistan pose significant challenges to obtaining higher education for women. The hijab and purdah, integral elements of the Islamic State's strong Muslim history, significantly restrict women's opportunities for education (Shayan, 2015). In Pakistan, the pursuit of higher education for women is impeded by the prevailing organizational structure of coeducational universities, leading to parental concerns regarding the safety of their daughters in these environments (King & Winthrop, 2015; Laiqat, 2022). Further, the preference for sons is a practice deeply embedded in patriarchal frameworks. This practice is integral to the foundational values of Pakistan. In their role as primary providers within the family structure, sons bear financial obligations toward their parents and hold the duty of safeguarding and perpetuating the family's assets (Malik & Courtney, 2011).

It is imperative that every Pakistani woman be allowed to engage in higher education, as this pursuit not only serves her individual growth but also fulfills a societal and ethical responsibility essential for the development of a sustainable community. The empowering of women is hindered by a constraining perspective. The sociocultural dynamics of Pakistan are intricate and evolve gradually, thus, the enhancement of the educational system will require a considerable amount of time. The advancement of female higher education ought to take place within all-female institutions as opposed to co-educational settings, considering the prevailing social norms (Ahmad et al., 2014; Shaukat, 2015).

The current governmental setting and strategies undoubtedly support women's educational opportunities, yet cultural attitudes toward girls' education remain significantly distorted and virtually unchanged. Due to entrenched socioeconomic obstacles, cultural rigidities, political ups and downs, limited educational budgets, and scattered geographical locations, successive administrations have been unable to execute the various initiatives they have proclaimed to promote female education in Balochistan. Consequently, the educational status of women in Balochistan, Pakistan remains significantly low, ranking among the lowest nationally and globally (Khan et al., 2023; Manzoor, 2018).

Higher education in Balochistan is still lagging behind and is unable to develop workable programs to enhance the socioeconomic standing of its citizens (Khan et al., 2023). There is a substantial gender disparity in educational opportunities, finance, and quality (Fort, Mercy Tembon & Editors, 2008). A significant number of women encounter challenges in pursuing their educational goals, with many unable to finish even their initial years of education. Females in Balochistan have a number of challenges that make pursuing education extremely challenging, including socio-cultural, economic, academic, religious, and gender discrimination. Among other aspects of life, they have fewer opportunities than men in the political, economic, and educational domains (Manzoor, 2018; Panezai, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to address the lack of investigation into the factors affecting women's access to and success in higher education within the research region, thereby contributing to the existing literature.

## **Research Methodology**

This study aimed to investigate the status of higher education for women in Balochistan, focusing on the challenges and obstacles they face, as well as their motivations for pursuing higher education. This study employed a qualitative method. A qualitative approach constitutes an empirical inquiry that examines contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts, particularly when the distinctions between the phenomena and context are ambiguous, utilizing multiple sources of evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Design et al., 2009; Neuman, 2010). This

method facilitates a comprehensive understanding of a real-world phenomenon (Mishra & Alok, 2017). In this research study, a qualitative approach was employed to investigate real-world situations, aiming to produce comprehensive data. The study participants were chosen through purposive sampling from three universities in Quetta, Balochistan: "The University of Balochistan (UOB), Balochistan University of Information Technology and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS), and SBK Women's University". Through the semi-structured interview and focus group discussions, data were collected from female students enrolled in the BS (graduate) programs, postgraduate students enrolled in M.Phil. and PhD programs across various disciplines, senior female faculty, and women holding different administrative positions within the universities. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was developed. Fifteen in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion, consisting of 7 to 9 participants at each university, were conducted. The interviews were conducted in Urdu, English, and other local languages based on the participants' preferences and comfort. All data were subsequently transcribed into English for analysis. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The research sample consisted of 73 women (from three universities) including all interviews and focus group discussions. The participants were chosen from the following faculties: Social Sciences, Islamic and Oriental Learning, Engineering and Technology, Humanities, and Natural Sciences. The age range of participants was 23 to 55 years.

A distinct standard for assessing qualitative research was proposed by (Bryman, 2012; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004) and is known as "Trustworthiness." It frequently substitutes terminology such as validity, reproducibility, and reliability, which are more appropriate for qualitative research. Participants' identities and personal information were maintained confidential during the study process to keep their anonymity pseudo names were used while the researcher collected and presented the findings. The research participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary, and they signed a consent form affirming this. The consent form clearly outlined the purpose of the study, its objectives, and the participants' interviews. By employing "Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (1979) and Connell's four-dimensional gender relations theory" this research study investigates the hindrances of women's higher education in the context of Balochistan's multicultural landscape. This model serves as a foundation for the current study.

## **Theoretical framework**

"Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (1979) and Connell's four-dimensional gender relations theory" are employed in research to analyze the influence of sociocultural, economic, and gender stereotypes on women's access to higher education. The research seeks to explore relations, classify, represent, generate, and strengthen frameworks within these paradigms.

### **Connell's four-dimensional gender-related model**

This theoretical model by Connell offers a comprehensive framework to analyze and understand how the social structure perpetuates gender inequality. This framework delineates the four interconnected dimensions that shape gender relations within society. Each dimension offers a framework for comprehending how structural and sociocultural economic variables affect women's access to education and constrain their opportunities for advancement.

#### **1. Power relations**

Examine how the male position, power, and authority are socially formed in society. The concept of 'patriarchy' represents a dominant masculine class, highlighting the

relationship between power and gender dynamics as some complex relationships. The women's liberation movement recognized the dual nature of patriarchal power: the overt control exercised by men over women and the more obvious influence reflected in social institutions.

**2. Production relations**

Social scientists were early advocates for recognizing the relationship between gender and the division of labor based on gender, a topic that has emerged as a central theme in current debates regarding gender in the realms of economics and social inequalities. In various cultures and contexts, a clear differentiation can be observed in the nature of work performed by men and women. Men are often viewed as the main income earners, while women are positioned in subordinate roles, typically engaging in unpaid domestic labor.

**3. Emotional relations**

The emotional relationship includes the connections and standards found in the institutions and social structure that uphold gender norms. The impact of mothers on their children's emotional growth seems to be notably stronger than that of fathers, and women often take a larger portion of household responsibilities. The ongoing responsibilities of women in caregiving roles for their families restrict their independence, development, and potential opportunities for advancement.

**4. Symbolic connections**

Symbolic relations include the cultural beliefs, practices, and attitudes that define gendered differences. Societies develop through the collective acceptance of social customs and the integration of shared principles. The symbolic frameworks embedded in cultural contexts function to validate persistent gender disparities and perpetuate the division of roles along with the corresponding stereotypes within a societal structure. The society offers a rich patterns of varied interpretations. 'Meanings', on the other hand, display the influence of the social processes that produced them (Connell, 1987)

According to Connell (1987), gender affects accumulation, consumption, and production. Gender issues in anthropology and economics revolve around the sexual division of labor, which was the first gender concept recognized in social science. In many societies, men and women are assigned different positions. The present research study accentuates this perspective, this research study investigates how men and women do different jobs.

**Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner**

This theoretical framework proposes that an individual's development is shaped by a multitude of life circumstances, including biological, personal, sociological, and cultural factors (Kendra Cherry, 2023). This theory employs an ecology model with five interrelated systems in communities and interpersonal interactions to explain how environmental factors affect women's higher education in Balochistan. Bronfenbrenner identified five environmental systems: "microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem".

The microsystem represents the theory's immediate level. It encompasses family, friends, religious, and educational institutions, which all influence individuals. The microsystem is critical to an individual's long-term development. The exosystem includes parents, extended family, and neighbors. Macrosystems challenge cultural ideas.

This research study focused on microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems. Present research assessed women's access to higher education based on their

surroundings, culture, and society. These intricate ecological systems influence every aspect of women's lives. Further, this research study proceeded through the microsystem's personal ties with a woman's parents, classmates, and instructors. Women connect their homes, educational institutions, family, and community in a mesosystemic way. This connection is microsystem-based. A woman gains advantages if her parents pay for her education today. If her parents and family do not support her, she will stop attending higher education.

Exo-system involves an indirect influence on women's higher education goals, despite their detached nature. Women are affected by their surroundings and extended family, whether or not they are acquainted with them. If neighbors, acquaintances, and relatives do, they will convince her parents not to send their daughters to higher education. Although her parents can afford it, she will not complete her education. As a result, her family's finances and perspective hinder her from pursuing more education.

Furthermore, social and cultural values shape the theory's macro system. This study focuses on social and cultural components since they are significant in Balochistan's multicultural society and women's higher education. The literature review demonstrated how educated women face social and cultural constraints. Certainly, if women in Balochistan, are given higher educational support, this may inspire women to continue their studies and evolve progressively and so women succeed in their life endeavors. The chronosystem discusses the social evolution, the change over the period of time. The concept of evolution recognizes that environments are not static but rather changing throughout time. The transitions and challenges brought about by such changes have a significant influence on an individual's development (Kendra Cherry, 2023).

## **Findings and Discussions**

The formal education system within society represents a fundamental component of the social structure, serving as both an institution and a vital function in the ongoing process of socialization (Noreen & Khalid, 2012). The current research offers compelling evidence that education significantly impacts women's lives, with their level of education directly affecting their experiences and opportunities. This research also shows how participants view the challenges, problems, and factors that help them succeed in higher education. Participants also discussed gender stereotypes women have experienced throughout their education and careers. Connell (1987) asserts that gender, speech, culture, and symbols are socially constructed. Society is meaningful, the social processes that produce meanings change them. Social activities and interests shape cultures. This study found how societal and cultural norms influence women's higher education. Massive cultural production occurred throughout society. Further women in Balochistan will be benefited if society accepts its cultural shifts and increases access to higher education for women. Participants were asked various questions, about their family background, community norms, institutional and educational support, ambitions and goals, current educational level, and what made higher education feasible for them. Themes were derived from participant responses to understand the status of women's higher education, challenges, facilitators, and motivation. Further, male as family decision makers, explores father and brother's role in women's higher education in Balochistan. In another theme, the gendered division of labor is perceived as a barrier and assumes that men do some tasks and women do others. The rural-urban gap and women's social and cultural subordination highlighted higher education's obstacles for women. To promote women's education, motivational and enabling circumstances, educational institutions, and the government's role were discussed. Despite hurdles, female students enroll in higher education. This research addressed all of the elements that motivated, enabled, and hindered higher education for women in Balochistan. The findings and discussion will continue in the following sections.

### **Father as the main authority within the family unit**

Previous studies indicate that the family system in Balochistan is patriarchal. Likewise, one major finding of this study is that households in Balochistan exhibit patriarchal structures. Consequently, the male figure assumes the role of the home leader like a father, since the elderly person in the family is the head of the family and is the main authority within the family unit, often the father, followed by his son, who also bears responsibility for the household since they are normally the primary income providers. Meanwhile, the woman is tasked with managing the household and caring for her children and family. In Balochistan, women continue to be viewed as subordinate. They are prohibited from making decisions about their own life and their familial relationships. Many households continue to enforce the segregation of women. Women are prohibited from moving freely within society, and in middle-class families, a male relative needs to travel with them for protection. Women are regarded as subordinate and weaker individuals within the family structure. The patriarch of the family, the father, dictates all choices about the ladies in his household including sustenance, education, expenditure, and marriages. Consequently, most women in Balochistan rely on a male family member to determine their lives. This function is performed by her father and brother prior to marriage, and following marriage, women depend on their husbands for decision-making. Naila, one of the participants enrolled in the BS program expressed that;

*My dad selected my subjects and field of study because he believes it will help me in the future and since he believes that even after higher education, girls are more likely to handle household responsibilities. Me and my brother have been receiving good schooling from the start, I am thankful that my parents have always encouraged and supported us.*

According to another participant enrolled in the M.Phil. program;

*Farzana: My father has often been advised not to send their daughter to university by my grandfather and other relatives, who oppose my pursuing a higher education. My father, however, doesn't pay any attention to their suggestions; he always advises me and encourages me to continue my studies. His encouragement has enabled me to pursue further education and break societal gender preconceptions that discourage women from pursuing higher education.*

Participants' answers might be interpreted as indicative of the power dynamics inherent in gender relations, as articulated by Connell, (1987) that the authority of husbands over spouses and fathers over daughters is a significant element of gender dynamics. The study findings align with the study of Saima (2022). This concept remains widely accepted globally, such as the view of the father as the 'head of the family'. The father promotes higher education for women. Participants credited their father with helping them get educated. Fathers influence their daughters' educational goals and serve as role models. Fathers' views on higher education have shaped their daughters' educational leadership roles. The paternal figure's authority in the household makes higher education accessible for women. The father supports his daughters' education, unlike other Pakistani men who view women as inferior and assume their right to control. Additionally, women are seen as inferior in society. Connell's paradigm shows how fathers affect their daughters' education. Fathers influence women's education individually and societally. As in Balochistan, the male heads the home and makes decisions for the women. Power will have both positive and negative, effects on women's education. Despite power disparities in Balochistan's culture, parents support their daughters' education.

## **Gender and Contemporary Educational Strategies**

According to Rahiman (2023), who examines the discussions around women's higher education and gender. Gender is divided by social institutions. He asserts that society exhibits prejudice against women, as social institutions such as family and education maintain gender inequity through both official and informal socialization. The choices that men and women make in their lives are limited by societal norms. The analysis of gender fundamentally involves the analysis of inequality and social disparities, which are essential for comprehending women's academic choices and preferences. The gap between science and the arts at the educational level has been one of the major challenges. The participant Rahila, enrolled in the BS (graduate) program shared:

*Rahila: To answer your question, yes, my parents persuaded my brother to enroll in an engineering program at a self-financing university that demanded extremely high tuition fees and other expenses. However, despite the fact that I had a strong desire to pursue a career in engineering, I was compelled to enroll in social science. It was challenging for me to convince my parents about my preferences for studies. It was difficult for me to argue to my parents that my selections for academic pursuits were worthy of consideration.*

Likewise, another student Bibi Zar Jan, enrolled in BS program expressed that:

*Bibi Zar Jan: The decisions that my brother makes are always valued by my parents, but they restrict me from placing such a high priority on the various educational opportunities available to me. After completing my ICS, I intended to pursue a BS in Computer science. I made an effort to persuade my parents that I was interested in this subject but..... all went in vain. To continue my education, they compelled me to focus on literature.*

When it comes to professional, technical, and advanced degree programs, women face significant barriers. Because of this, gender imbalance in educational settings is a persistent problem. The majority of the participants support modern education for women, stating that it is essential for everyone to acquire knowledge to empower themselves and engage with society. However, women in Balochistan still face constraints from religion, family, and community, hindering their access to modern higher education, employment, and public participation. Despite increased rates of women's education, the promise of equality has not been realized, with women facing worse socio-educational conditions and socioeconomic mobility. Despite this, the number of women completing courses, pursuing higher graduation, and pursuing career opportunities is significant.

## **Patriarchy Embedded in Societal and Cultural Standards.**

However, despite the fact that the constitution of Pakistan explicitly promotes equal treatment for both genders, Balochistan is still subject to social bias. Males are seen to be superior in Balochistan's patriarchal society, which prevents women from achieving social mobility and economic independence to the same extent. As a consequence of this, women in the multicultural society of Balochistan are seen to be citizens of a lower social class. In Pakistani society, women often face subservience and patriarchy, as male family members often prohibit them from activities that could damage their family's reputation, highlighting the subservience of women in society (Laiqat, 2022). A respondent who is a senior professor expressed that;

*Zarina: The culture in our society prioritizes men's need for higher education, limiting women's access. This belief often leads to middle-class and low-income families not seeing the need to send their daughters to universities, college not even elementary school, despite knowing the significant need for women's education.*

Another participant enrolled in M.Phil. with tears in her eyes shared:

*Ayesha: Never once did my brothers approve of me going after my dreams. After my father's death, they stopped me from getting admitted into the university. They are of the opinion that women who are educated and focused on their careers are not recognized by society because they lack any feeling of ability to operate a business. But my mother supported me a lot in my higher education although she is not very educated she is the only torch bearer in my life.*

According to Connell (1987), gender influences emotional attachment. Women nurture their children and have a stronger emotional relationship with them than males. Fathers (male) have a different emotional bond with their children and family members since they are the breadwinners. In the same way, another student shared that:

*Salma: My father told me that he could not afford our study expenses as my brother is also studying on self-finance in Lahore, and his fees are quite higher than mine. Living in another city away from home is not easy; it needs more money. My parents wanted me to quit my studies, but rather than quitting my studies, I started a part-time job and home tuition. My efforts saved my dream... the dream of getting a higher education.*

The findings of the study show similar results to (Kakar et al., 2019) study conducted in rural Balochistan. Cultural attitudes associated with patriarchy have worked against women having access to formal education by creating a hostile atmosphere and competing for scarce resources. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) exosystem theoretical lens the present study found that women in Balochistan face challenges in higher education due to extended family, economic situation, and cultural conventions. These factors often disadvantaged women as subordinates, denying them equal opportunities. Women who achieve higher education and careers usually fight for their status, avoiding cultural criticism.

### **Institutional challenges**

The participants of the study conferred several institutional-based problems which affect their academic performance. Including, scarce academic facilities, lack of female faculty, and unsafe campus settings, besides this certain social taboos and prejudices, keep parents away from letting their daughters attend coeducational institutions. These misconceptions and taboos may stem from concerns about safety, self-respect, or established gender stereotypes. The majority of the participants showed consensus on the issue of lack of female teachers in universities. Shaiza, a graduate student highlighting the gap said:

*Shaiza: In my department, there is no single female lecturer, all the professors and lecturers are male, although they all are very knowledgeable but we cannot discuss certain things with them as we could share with a female teacher, you know having a female teacher could make the whole environment supportive and comfortable.*

Reforms for gender-sensitive set-up and safety were the major concerns the study participants emphasized upon. Rabia, the participant enrolled in PhD narrated:

*Rabia: Postgraduate courses are always scheduled for the second time in university, and mostly the corridors and departments are dark because of no proper lighting, and hallways feel vacant as graduates return home. Going to class in such settings always makes us feel insecure, and discussing subject topics with male professors after class can also be risky. Because of this, we constantly compromise and sacrifice our studies and try to leave early.*

The way their families saw the idea of coeducation was another cultural hurdle that female students had to go beyond. Apprehensions regarding the potential risks to familial dignity emerged as a common thread among the participants of this study. Likewise, an M.Phil. student Asma, shared that:

*Asma: I'm the first female in my family to go to university. I came into co-education after finishing my master's at Women's University. since M.Phil. programs in several subjects haven't begun yet there. My paternal relatives often inquire, expressing dislike. I may get letters, calls, messages from my male fellows, and lectures from male teachers, which is unacceptable for my paternal family and their culture. The coeducational structure of our institutions prompts such thoughts.*

Colleges and universities in Balochistan, both public and private, practice co-education, all things considered, not many places cater solely to females and males. The fact that urban areas are more likely to recognize and implement co-education indicates a more progressive mindset. But the traditional and religious mindsets, are often less tolerant of male educators and co-ed programs due to their more traditional values. The community's reluctance to accept co-education and its destitution toward male teachers both play a role in this.

The findings of the study are similar to the Daudt & Salgado (2005) study emphasized the implementation of institutional reforms to make the environment women-friendly. Here Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem reflects the correlation between social standards and institutional setups, and how these relationships affect women's learning experiences. Reforms within the institutions that are diligent to gender issues are required in order to guarantee that women will have access to higher education.

### **Family and Academic pressures**

Almost all respondents of the study showed great consent on facing difficulty in balancing both family and academic tasks. Many of the study respondents said that household responsibilities always took precedence over education which resulted in mental stress and exhaustion. A postgraduate student's statement summarized the views of the majority of the participants:

*Faiza: It is very tiresome and stressful, especially during exams to manage family, home chores, and studies. All things can be put aside but children need time and care. Even sometimes I cannot sleep well. Instead of doing full-time work my in-laws do not want me to continue my studies but my husband is supportive here he encourages me.*

The participant Maria, a postgraduate student enrolled in M.phil. Program shared:

*Maria: My parents placed a lot of pressure on me to get married when I was twenty years old, even though I was eager to complete my degree. In our society class and cast matter a lot, the importance of my husband's family background, high status, and financial situation were highlighted and they hinted that I may pursue my education after marriage. My whole family has arranged for my marriage without asking me before. But after marriage, it took me a lot of time to convince my in-laws to continue my higher studies. They allowed me to get admission only to women's universities not to co-education. Here the facility of day care centers for kids also facilitated me a lot in my studies.*

The research findings support the study by Rahman and Shah (2021) highlights the challenges faced by women in Balochistan, in balancing educational goals with family responsibilities,

highlighting their emotional interactions. Here “Connell's emotional interactions” offer insight into her responsibilities, relationships, and unequal status, providing a lens to understand her experiences and challenges.

### **Enabling factors in higher education**

Many of the participants even with sociocultural, economic, and academic problems also shared their success stories and agreed that women's universities, counseling and mentorship programs, HEC and BEEF scholarships, and other provincial scholarships, grants had helped them a lot in accomplishing their dream of higher education. Sonia, a postgraduate student enrolled in the PhD program and also working as a visiting faculty in the university, while sharing her academic journey and success story, narrated:

*Sonia: My family is financially not that strong to support me for higher studies. Since my master's I have received various scholarships for my best academic performance. Without scholarships, I wouldn't be able to pursue higher education.*

Palwasha, another graduate student's statement reflected the views of many students, by stating:

*Palwasha: Here at women's university I and my parents feel safe and secure since it's the place where I will not be questioned and held accountable for anything. My family and relatives are very traditional and religious they did not allow girls to coeducation. All the teaching faculty and staff are women here and we confidently participate in games and different university events.*

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System (1979) is closely related to the enabling factors that facilitate women's establishment of supporting networks. The microsystem posits that an individual's behavior is influenced by their family, peers, and educational environment. These results of the research study are similar to the study of Bhattarani (2019), which was conducted in Nepal explaining that the sociocultural, structural, and economic obstacles could be eliminated by the provision of counseling, mentorships, and scholarship opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

Despite having a large female population, women in Balochistan are severely underrepresented in universities. Women in Balochistan confront frequent challenges, including financial limitations and parental or familial opposition, even though the opportunity for higher education has risen worldwide.

Women in Balochistan are dedicated to their careers and have high hopes for the future, but family obligations and marriage prospects limit their opportunities. They face substantial obstacles to their educational advancement due to gender prejudices, societal norms, and patriarchal structures. Despite their educational achievements, they are often viewed as subordinate. The narratives of women highlight the importance of strong support networks in overcoming cultural and societal barriers.

The research findings demonstrate that entrenched gender stereotypes and societal biases constrain women's equal access to higher education opportunities. Despite these obstacles, the determination of female students, and focused measures like scholarships and mentorship programs show how higher education in Balochistan has the power to change people's lives. Balochistan is witnessing a transformation in gender rights and relationships, with empowered women contributing significantly to their families and society. Urban families are showing a growing commitment to

women's advancement, sending daughters to university despite obstacles, demonstrating a notable change in societal interactions and gendered cultural norms. Connell (1987) asserts that gender, speech, culture, and symbols are socially constructed. Society is meaningful, the social processes that produce meanings change them. Social activities and interests shape cultures. This study found that how societal and cultural norms influence women's higher education. Massive cultural production occurred throughout society. Women in Balochistan will benefit if society accepts its constructive cultural shifts and increases access to higher education for women.

The study suggests that in order to better understand the obstacles that women face in higher education, it would be helpful to compare these challenges across different educational levels and environments, to identify the common and unique obstacles, to look at success stories as a way to overcome these challenges, and to conduct quantitative research on the topic more generally. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that every community has its own unique set of cultural and social norms, to better understand the current situation in each province, comparative studies can be carried out across them.

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