

Public Private Partnerships and Educational Outcomes in Pakistan: A gendered perspective

Sharmeen Irfan
Development Studies, University of Cambridge

Abstract:

As one of the eight Millennium Development goals, education has increasingly become a priority for the international community and the governments in developing countries alike. The growing involvement of the private sector in providing educational services has been hailed as an important determinant in the move towards achieving the goal of universal primary education. However, in countries where there is still a significant gender gap in access and intra-household expenditure and where the private sector accounts for an increasing proportion of enrolments and institutions, the significance of public-private partnerships, needs to be looked at through a gendered perspective.

The policy brief uses insights from a detailed qualitative study to examine the issues surrounding access to quality education for boys and girls especially at the middle school level. It highlights the importance of involving all stakeholders, the parents, community, school and the government in developing educational policies that take into account local aspirations and cater to the needs of the people.

Background of the Education System in Pakistan

Pakistan has a faltering education system with more than half the population illiterate and the government nowhere near achieving the goals of providing universal and good quality education to the children. According to the Ministry of Education's National educational Policy, almost one-third of primary school age children remain out of school, a proportion that rises to about three-quarters for secondary school children (NEP, 2009). However, there has also been a remarkable change in

the educational landscape with the number of private schools increasing at a dramatic rate in the country. Contrary to popular perception, these schools not only cater to the urban-elite but are also utilised by the poor in both rural and urban areas (Andrabi, Das & Khwaja, 2002). This mushrooming of low-cost private schools has provided a much-needed choice to parents who had to send their children to low quality government schools because that was the only option in the village. According to the LEAPS report, in rural Punjab, parents can choose between six or seven schools in their village. The emergence of private schools has also seen enrolment levels rise, although deficiencies remain. Data from various household and establishment surveys points to a consistent increase in enrolment from 21.36 million in 2001 to between 27.67 million (National Education Survey, 2005) and 28.84 million (PSLM, 2005) across the four provinces. Net enrolment has also increased from 51% in 2001 (Pakistan integrated household survey) to 61% in 2005 (PSLM, 2005). There have also been studies where private schools are seen to reduce gender gaps as parents are willing to send their daughters to these schools as well (Andrabi et al, 2002).

Private schooling in Pakistan is being actively encouraged by the government as it decreases the costs of schooling that the government bears and because they are seen as providers of the necessary competition that may help revive the stagnating government schools. Choice of schooling, however, has a strongly gendered dimension that needs to be addressed in relation to the public private partnerships in the schooling system in Pakistan. The following section demonstrates some of the existing disparities that exist in this regard.

The Gender context of schooling in Pakistan

Historically, there have been a significantly larger number of girls out of school than boys at all educational levels. For every 100 enrolled boys (aged 5-9) only 82 girls were enrolled in primary school in 2004 (Aslam, 2007). In 2006, the Gender Parity Index (GPI)

for primary education was below the parity level. The Gross Enrolment Ratio for girls was 0.82 and the Net Enrolment Ratio was 0.85.¹ Although this index has slightly increased during the years, it is still quite low for secondary school education. Despite improvements, it is evident that girls continue to face significant disadvantage in access as they reach adulthood. In poorer households, the boy's education has always been a priority and problems regarding distance, transportation and security have generally been used as excuses for not sending girls to school. There is also an intergenerational aspect to the gender dimension. Mothers and fathers have quite different views on what they want from schools and their choice of schools for their sons and daughters are influenced by these views.

The research conducted by the PPPs project, Public Private Partnerships and the Educational Outcomes of the Poor (P³EOP) investigated the decisions made by parents in relation to the school choice for sons and daughters. The project examined the choice of school in relation to knowledge of parents regarding schooling, quality of schooling, schooling experience, and aspirations regarding education. Interviews were conducted with parents, youths, teachers and head teachers to learn about how these schooling choices and experience the context of a local community. The findings below focus on the implications of PPPs for the educational outcomes of girls in the community.

Findings and observations from the data-set in Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa

The findings are based on the interviews conducted in two districts in the provinces of Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP); Sargodha in Punjab and Charsadda in KP. The data-set includes families from both rural and urban areas and from low-income backgrounds.

Based on the individual interviews conducted by the RECOUP survey, the proportion of people who could read and write was 57.2 per cent. As expected, the proportion of literates in rural areas (51.9 per cent) was lower than urban areas (70.5 per cent). The data also indicated wide sex differentials in literacy: literacy rate of men (72.5 per cent) was significantly higher than that of women (41.4 per cent) i.e. for every 100 literate men there were only 57 literate women. The situation for rural women was remarkably disappointing: only around

one-third of women in rural areas were literate and the literacy rate of rural women was only half that of rural men.

The interviews conducted with parents and youths in Sargodha and Charsadda indicated that a majority of parents wanted their children to receive some form of education, wherein those who had the means preferred to send their children to private schools. Despite the fact that government schools are free, parents unanimously agreed that they would rather pay (where feasible), if that meant getting better education for their children. Within households that were constrained financially, it was inevitably the boys who were shifted to private schools if government schools were not regarded as satisfactory. Although enrolment of girls in private schools has been increasing, it is mostly seen at the primary level. As fees start to increase at middle school level, girls are more likely to be shifted back to government schools. As regards girls' education, issues of distance to school and the security that is provided play a big part in parents' decisions to send their daughters to a particular school. They also prefer segregation in schools – although this more of a concern at secondary than at primary level. Finally, while more girls are going to school than before, and the quality of education that the majority of them access is lower than that experienced by boys, they do not appear to be benefitting as much from private schooling as boys in relation to educational outcomes.

There are no functional institutional mechanisms through which parents can participate in the workings of schools. While there was an operational system of feedback and information by way of verbal communications or notes on diaries there was no active space or system through which parents can participate. This lack of access to participatory spaces is in sharp contrast to the ability of parents to articulate the reasons why they regarded education as important and what they wanted out of the educational system. It became evident that mothers were more informed about the educational experience of their children than fathers, although both parents had very set views about what they were looking for in a school. Time and again, in most interviews, parents reiterated the importance of having forums through which they could relate to the school authorities. The lack of functional PTAs where they could keep track of their child's progress and also lodge grievances against any problems their children had at school was almost universally decried.

The lodging of complaints also revealed gender differences where fathers were reluctant to take individual complaints to schools where teachers were

¹ *Education for All: Mid-Decade assessment, Country Report: Pakistan*, Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, 2007.

primarily female. As most schools have female teachers, it was thus the responsibility of the mother to take complaints to the teachers. Mothers, on the other hand, were more concerned about with whom to lodge the complaint - the fear was that teachers who belonged to the local area and were known to the mothers might victimise children as a consequence of a complaint.

While the need for a committee or a forum was apparent in the solutions suggested by mothers and fathers, they were not aware of any current mechanism (PTA or SMC) through which they could get themselves heard. This disjuncture was also evident from the youth interviews in relation to the lack of institutions to ensure a coherent interaction among parents and the people in the wider community with the school and the local government. The interviews indicated that the creation of such an institutional mechanism might also be useful in addressing the problems faced by girls- the lack of schools offering higher education within the area, transportation and security problems.

The importance of local institutions that can help in providing the parental generation with avenues for greater participation as well as mechanisms that will permit an improvement in the quality and delivery of education will facilitate a reduction of gender inequality. At present, the increase in good quality private schools, though appreciable, does not provide an answer to the economic and social issues faced by girls in pursuit of education, especially middle to high level schooling. Given that there are still more girls going to government schools than boys, there is a particular need to bring in mechanisms of gender empowerment in government schools. Additionally, while there are now girls who do manage to complete secondary education through these schools, the chances of them competing in a highly competitive market with boys coming from higher quality private schools is very slim.

The establishment of functional committees for both public and private schools, to revive parent-teacher associations and to involve the local community in matters of children's education would help to improve existing mechanisms to bolster demand and supply. There is already a strong concept of 'demand' within communities, which does not seem to have been addressed in the policy discourse on public-private education. Ignoring these issues is contrary to the government's and the international community's commitment to empowering the women of Pakistan.

Policy points:

- The project outlines the important role played by the private sector in increasing the quality and

access of education to people from lower socio-economic households. The increase in enrolment for both boys and girls in primary education is a positive indication of achieving the MDGs. However, it has been observed that instead of private schools competing with government schools, they are being projected as viable alternatives to the government education system. Policies need to be redirected so that public-private partnerships can work to improving education for all the children in poor communities.

- In relation to gender equality, public-private partnerships have not yet addressed the fact that there are still a large number of parents who do not use the system for all their children (especially girls), due to socio-economic conditions as well as concerns about sexual and morality codes. Girls have not been allowed to access education at the same level or quality as boys even when they attend private schools. Initiatives that target the enrolment of girls in middle and higher levels of schooling are necessary as that is seen to be the point where most girls either drop out or move to government schools after initially attending a private one.

- At present many parents in the community prefer to send their girls to those schools with women-only teachers. Gender empowerment can be improved through setting up teacher training courses so that existing teachers in government and private schools are able to upgrade their skills in relation to gender equality.

- The involvement of parents and the larger community in the workings of schools has been one of the key findings of this project. It has not only been reiterated by parents, but students themselves also feel that their educational experience could be enhanced if such forums and committees were to exist. Although most government schools have parent-teacher associations (PTAs), they are dysfunctional and most parents are not even aware of their existence. Parents are therefore unable to voice concerns and struggle to gain additional information regarding their children's schooling experience. This lack of interaction between parents and teachers also affects the quality of youth education and the schooling experience.

- All local schools should be required to put institutional mechanisms in place that also work to improve the supply side of educational services. The provision of targeted funds for improving the access and quality of education for girls in the middle and high school, and so improving their educational outcomes, could be a mechanism that would work through the School Management Committees (SMCs) and would guarantee that services meet needs whilst also ensuring accountability of public funds.

- The case of Pakistan, in terms of the gendered implications of public-private partnerships is useful for other developing country contexts. It helps to clarify how the educational experience of the poor can be improved by the regulation of school provision to ensure better educational outcomes. This has linked implications for the access and quality of girls' education through increasing the involvement of parents and communities in educational policy making.

Views expressed here are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by DFID or any partner institution.

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