

BUDGETS AND BARRIERS

RETHINKING INCLUSIVE GIRLS EDUCATION FINANCING IN PAKISTAN



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Authors: Laraib Kiani & Zehra Arshad

Editor: Saleem Khilji

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INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a catalyst for change in society, leading to progress and prosperity of the state. Yet its transformative potential remains largely untapped in developing countries, especially in South Asia. In Pakistan, the situation is not less than disappointing, where persistent education financing shortfalls continue to hinder girls and other marginalized groups' access to schools, perpetuating their systemic exclusion. Despite constitutional guarantees to free and compulsory education under Article 25-A, over 12 million girls remain out of school.¹ Keeping in view the conservative mindset of Pakistani society, many scholars believe that such a big exclusion of girls from education has happened due to socio-cultural barriers. In contrast, this approach is not fully valid as far as this study is concerned. This study finds that, apart from other factors, the inadequate and inequitable public education financing sector is responsible for this exclusion, leading to struggling girls' enrolment and retention.

According to Pakistan Education Statistics 2023-24, the gross enrollment rate (GER) for girls is 76% whereas it is 77%² for boys. The disparity further widens at the middle, secondary, and higher secondary school levels. The widening enrollment gap at higher school levels reflects the situation of insufficient public investment in girls' education and household affordability. These figures point to financing failures that compound the exclusion of girls and marginalized children from the education system. This exclusion is not limited to girls; transgender people are also the victims of the paradox of this system.

External shocks such as COVID-19 and the 2022 floods further exacerbated these pre-existing disparities. These two disasters had compounded impacts on girls' drop-outs. In such times of crisis, limited financial resources were often prioritized for boys, disproportionately affecting girls, and the absence of targeted budgeting for girls' education further eroded their ability to set foot in a school. During this time, the shift to online modalities unveiled the deep digital divide, as low-income households lacked digital devices and connectivity. Where devices were available, they were mostly reserved for boys, thus excluding girls from getting benefit of it in an equitable manner.³

Another challenge emerging from these two crises was late enrollments, leaving girls academically struggling, leading to poor outcomes and thus lower transition rates. Girls' inability to access education extends beyond learning poverty and increases risks of early and child marriages, loss of agency, and financial disempowerment.

1. Pakistan Institute for Education, "Pakistan Education Statistics 2023-24," Government of Pakistan, 2023.
drive.google.com/file/d/1N4QxStyNffAQhNW1CZTVfyy518OfdV2q/view.

2. *ibid.*

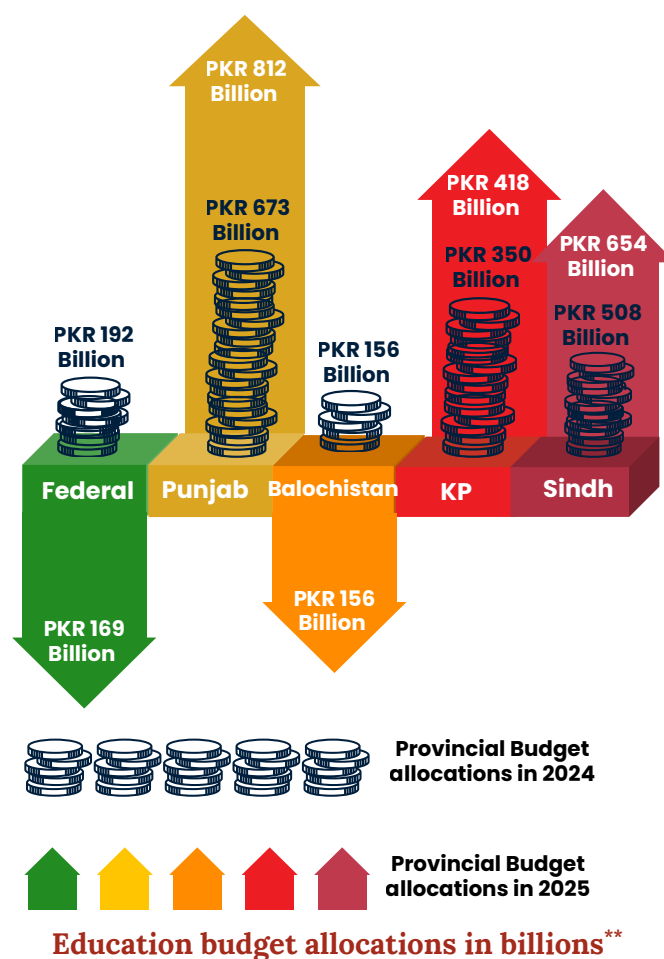
3. UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Global Education Monitoring Report Team, "SDG 4 Scorecard Progress Report on National Benchmarks: Focus on the Out-of-School Rate" (Paris: UNESCO, 2025), accessed October 20, 2025,
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393833>.

According to the Pakistan Education Statistics Report 2023-24, released by Pakistan Institute of Education, Government of Pakistan, the number of girls' public primary schools is 42,277, while there are 8067 middle schools and 6423 secondary schools for girls.⁸ The gap illustrates a pertinent dimension of access barriers leading to drop-outs. While girls start school, the decrease in the number of schools post-primary means there might not be a public school nearby, increasing cost and travel distance, and ultimately the risk of drop-outs.

According to a World Bank report titled "Spend Better, Spend More,"⁹ girls tend to enroll late, with two out of every five middle school-age girls being overage for their grade. Girls also experience a lower transition rate compared to boys. The reduced access makes the transition between education levels especially difficult, particularly, in rural areas, where increased travel time and cost are critical barriers to girls' enrollment and retention. Though boys are comparatively better able to cope, for many adolescent girls, these access barriers result in permanent drop-outs.

According to the Economic Survey 2023-24, only 79% of public schools have adequate WASH facilities as well as boundary walls,¹⁰ which are essential for privacy and safety. Governments' under-investment to ensure these basic facilities in schools heightens safety concerns, increases travel burdens, and reinforces parents' reluctance to send girls to school.

These access gaps are not experienced equally; for low-income and rural households, the compounded impacts of poverty, distance, and lack of inclusive facilities increase barriers in girls' education. Girls, especially with disabilities, bear the brunt of these layered disadvantages, where government underinvestment intersects with household-level vulnerabilities to drive exclusion. Despite these well-documented challenges, provincial governments have consistently failed to prioritize investments that would expand post-primary access for girls.



8. Pakistan Education Statistics 2023-24.pdf. Pakistan Education Statistics 2023-24.Pdf. Google Docs, 2023, drive.google.com/file/d/1N4QxStyNffAQhNWICZTVfy518OfdV2q/view.

9. Barón, et al., 2023, SPEND BETTER, SPEND MORE How to Make Education Expenditures Count for Children in Pakistan South Asia Region Education Global Practice the World Bank.

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099101209232420036/pdf/IDU-ca74c9b4-3720-48e1-bf51-415daadb8202.pdf>

10. Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24. Pcedataportal.org, 2023, www.pcedataportal.org/pakistan-economic-survey-2023-24.

** The figures have been consolidated from budget documents and speeches in 2024 and 2025

The lack of formal education and skills increases the risk of trapping them in lifelong poverty and informal labor. These outcomes not only impact girls but also weaken Pakistan's progress toward SDG-4 and broader sustainable economic development.⁴

This exclusion is not accidental but a direct consequence of chronic underfinancing, low fiscal priority accorded to social sectors, and the absence of a gender-responsive financing framework. The government's overreliance on indirect taxation and low tax-to-GDP ratio constrains fiscal space for education, shifting education costs to households, disproportionately affecting access for girls. These structural issues explain why Pakistan's enrolment and transition rates remain stubbornly low, and why crises like COVID-19 hit girls hardest.

This policy brief, therefore, explores pathways to strengthen girls' education financing, unlocking education's role in fostering resilience, equity, and growth. It builds on the foundation of the White Paper, "Education Emergency: An Urgent Call to Action," and deepens the analysis by focusing on a critical dimension: girls' education financing.

OBJECTIVES

This policy brief emphasizes that resolving Pakistan's education emergency requires strong policy commitment to allocate 16-20% of the total budget to education guided by a targeted, gender-responsive, and equity-based financing framework. It aims to:

- Explore pathways that may strengthen girls' education financing;
- Unlock education's role in fostering resilience, equity, and growth ;
- Highlight how current fiscal and policy priorities, particularly in budget allocations, tax justice, budget development, and utilization, exacerbate challenges for girls' education.

Methodology

The study is a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. The secondary data relating to financing has been retrieved from budget documents and budget speeches delivered during the budget session for the years 2024 and 2025. Besides, qualitative insights have been drawn by conducting interviews of students, parents, teachers, etc., who were participating in PCE Townhalls on education emergency in various districts across Pakistan and were directly impacted by the challenges.

4. ibid.

GIRLS EDUCATION STATISTICS AT A GLANCE

No of public girls' high schools
6423

Survival rate to Grade 10
78%

Survival rate to Grade 8
81%

No of public middle girls' schools
8067

No of public primary girls' schools
42,277

Survival rate to Grade 5
89%

Enrolled Girls (5-16 years)
22,398,332

SCHOOL

Out-of-school girls (5-16 years)
12,179,601

GIRLS EDUCATION STATISTICS AT A GLANCE

Gross Enrollment Rate (Secondary)
56%

**Effective Transition Rate
(Middle to Secondary)**
97%

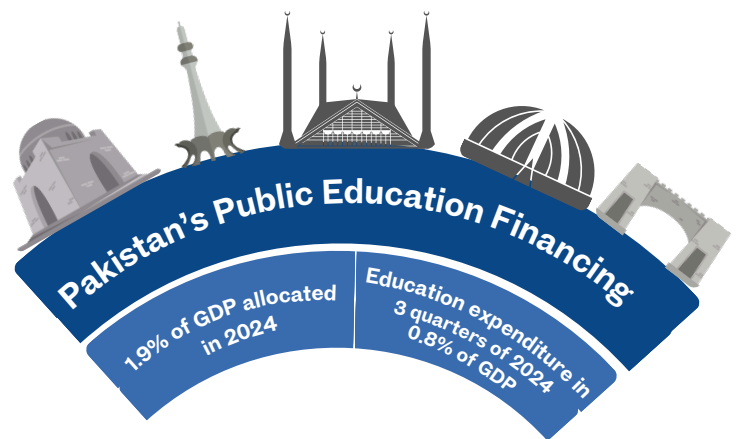
**Gross Enrollment Rate
(Middle) 58%**

**Gross Enrollment
Rate (Primary)**
76%

**Effective Transition Rate
(Primary to Middle)**
91%

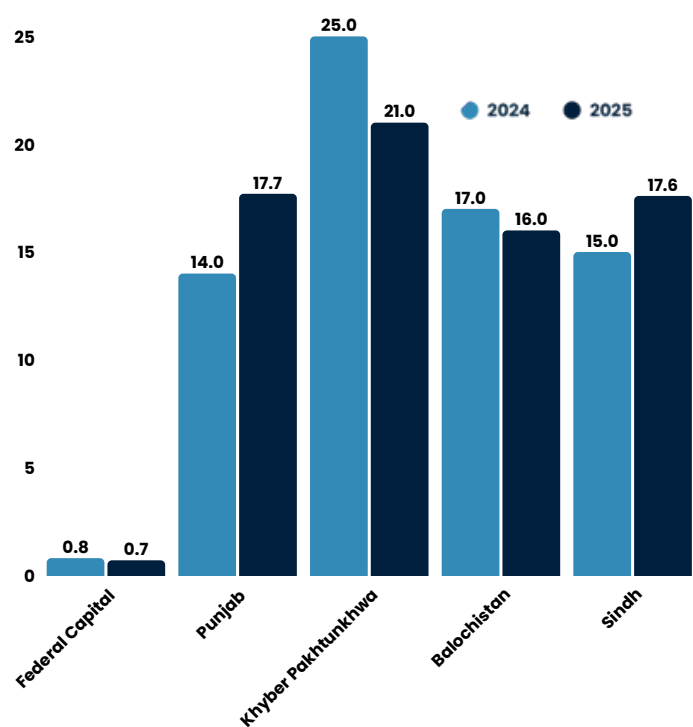
ACCESS AND INFRASTRUCTURE GAPS

Educational transformation is not possible without a sustainable and substantial increase in financing in the sector, particularly in the development budget. During the past five years, the educational budget remained less than 02% of the Grand Domestic Product (GDP)⁵, far below the UNESCO-recommended benchmark of a minimum 4-6% of GDP allocation. Moreover, Pakistan consistently remains the lowest education spender in South Asia,⁶ undermining progress towards SDG-4.



Another consistent issue is the imbalance between recurrent and development budgets. With a population growth rate exceeding 2.5% annually⁷ and recurring climate events damaging school infrastructure, there is an urgent need to expand access to schools along with infrastructure rehabilitation. However, allocation priorities skewed towards recurrent expenditures, leaving the public education system overburdened and unable to absorb new and returning students.

In 2025, several initiatives, including meal programs and age-appropriate technical skills in schools, were launched; however, persistent barriers of post-primary access, limited post-primary access and a lack of inclusive facilities continue to impact girls and children with disabilities (CWDs) disproportionately.



Percentage-wise share of education in total budget*

5. Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-25. https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_25/10_Education.pdf

6. Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP) – Pakistan, World Bank Group Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?end=2023&locations=PK&start=1971&type=shaded&view=map&year=2023>

7. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Area, Population By Sex, Sex Ratio, Population Density, Urban Population, Household Size and Annual Growth Rate, CENSUS-2023. http://pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_1_national.pdf

* The figures have been consolidated from budget documents and speeches in 2024 and 2025

Moreover, reliance on public-private partnerships has grown, which may expand access but will fail to address management gaps and improve public service delivery. The result is declining post-primary transition rates, rising drop-outs, and a growing population of girls excluded from secondary education due to service delivery failures. Unless governments shift focus from outsourcing to investing in stronger public systems, these exclusionary patterns will persist, undermining national education goals and commitments to gender equality.

DROP-OUTS DUE TO LOCATIONS OF MIDDLE & SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Speaking at a PCE's Townhall on Educational Emergency in Jamrud, a female student said: "The middle and secondary schools are situated at more distant in Shakas and no feasible transport is available. After primary education, many girls from my area and its peripheries drop out because public schools are simply not accessible and the nearest middle and secondary schools are situated at far-off distances. However, my family and I chose not to quit education. For me, it means travelling for almost an hour by public transport. It is not only an additional financial burden on my family but also a more difficult task in a conservative society like Jamrud."

10. Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24. Pcedataportal.org, 2023, www.pcedataportal.org/pakistan-economic-survey-2023-24.

REAL COST OF EDUCATION

Although the 1973 Constitution guarantees free education for every child, the real cost of education includes significant out-of-pocket expenses, that incur a substantial burden on low-income households, disproportionately impacting girls. These one-time and recurrent costs include uniforms, transportation, hygiene products for girls, learning materials, and assistive technologies for CWDs. As household budgets are stretched, girls are often the first to be withdrawn from school; low-income families frequently make gendered trade-offs, prioritizing boys' schooling. Beyond out-of-pocket costs, these financial pressures are compounded by structural barriers such as the lack of safe transport and WASH facilities, which further constrain girls' access.

SHORTAGE OF TEXTBOOKS DUE TO BUDGET CUTS

Speaking at the PCEs Provincial Conference, titled: Peoples' Agenda for Transforming System, a representative of Sindh Textbook Board, said: "Due to inadequate budget, only about 50% new textbooks in public schools are being provided. To bridge the remaining supply-demand gap, the Sindh Textbook Board has established old book banks in district education offices, where school management collects old textbooks from graduating students. However, the redistribution mechanism often fails to fulfil the demand for textbooks and students have to purchase several books out-of-pocket from market.

Though public schools charge a nominal fund, financial pressure on households remains, as only 50% of textbooks are made available to students free of cost. The remaining need is bridged through either old books or has to be purchased out of pocket. In practice, the "real costs" of participation far outweigh the minimal official fee. A longer distance increases transport expenses and increases dropout risks for rural adolescent girls. Moreover, families of CWDs face additional burdens due to the lack of subsidized assistive technology and gaps in teachers' training on inclusive education practices, and girls with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged.

The real cost of education may appear marginal to policymakers, but they are critical barriers in the way girls education. Unless the cost of participation is explicitly and adequately addressed through needs-based financing and targeted measures, such as subsidized transport, free learning materials, and assistive technologies, the constitutional promise of free education will remain out of reach of the most marginalized groups.

THE REAL COST OF EDUCATION: A FINANCIAL BARRIER FOR MILLIONS OF GIRLS

During a Key Informant Interview (KII), a female respondent said: "My brother and I studied in a low-fee private school. Our father, a retired army official, and mother, who sold milk, struggled every month to cover our fees and books, often cutting back on groceries and taking loans. Despite my good performance, we couldn't afford to continue after middle school. I then chose to walk several miles daily to a government secondary school because I refused to give up on my education."

LEARNING AND SKILL POVERTY

Struggling girls' enrolment and retention are not only affected by access barriers, but also by compromises made to ensure quality learning for those who manage to reach schools, and are shaped by unresponsive policies and underfunding. Moreover, a direct consequence is the growing parents' distrust in the public education system. Some are forced to bear higher private school costs, whereas some choose to withdraw their children, especially girls and marginalized learners, from school.

Insufficient development budgets have led to low investment in teacher training, hindering the creation of inclusive classroom learning environments. Teachers, who are pivotal stakeholders in creating safe and inclusive learning environments, remain unprepared to meet the psycho-emotional and learning needs of diverse students, especially girls and CWDs. Most public-school teachers receive no or limited training on gender-sensitive pedagogies and inclusive teaching practices for children with minor disabilities, leaving them behind and resulting in poor learning outcomes. This challenge is even more pronounced in rural and low-cost private schools, where teachers often lack training and academic qualifications.

The curriculum is poorly aligned with the 21st-century requirements, particularly in terms of skills such as life skills, Artificial Intelligence (AI), digital skills, and climate resilience. The lack of relevance creates a sharp mismatch between what students are taught and what is required in the labor market and practical life. Although several initiatives for skill-based learning have been announced, the limited development budget raises doubts about their effectiveness and sustainability.

While measures for school solarization have been implemented across Punjab, little is being done to effectively kick-start technology programs in schools or improve teaching quality to support these initiatives. At the same time, investment in science and ICT labs, teacher training and availability, and inclusive pedagogies remains strikingly low, reinforcing learning poverty.

UNAVAILABILITY OF COMPUTERS HINDERING PRACTICAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Speaking at a PCE's Townhall on Educational Emergency, a student from Special Education School, Muzaffargarh, said: "We have opted for the computer science subject during secondary school, but our school does not have a functional computer lab, so we have to rely on theoretical knowledge only. Now, we lack practical knowledge and hands-on experience with computers. Skill-based education is crucial for better employment prospects for PWDs, but the unavailability of the necessary facilities is preventing us from developing digital skills."

11. All Higher & Secondary Schools in Punjab Will Be Solarised. 24 News HD, 28 June 2025, 24newshtd.tv/28-Jun-2025/all-higher-secondary-schools-in-punjab-will-be-solarised.

Additionally, the continued emphasis on a one-size-fits-all approach, with standardized curricula for the entire country, without considering local needs and realities, widens the disconnect from modern labor market requirements. For girls and marginalized learners, who face additional challenges in mobility and access, these gaps mean missed opportunities hindering economic empowerment. However, realizing this transformation requires not only policy intent but significant resource mobilization. The chronic under-financing, coupled with misaligned financial priorities, has left little fiscal space to invest in gender-responsive and inclusive teachers training and reforms for age-appropriate skill development. Without equitable and gender-responsive financing, the learning and skills crisis will deepen, reinforcing cycles of exclusion for girls and marginalized learners. This makes the question of tax justice and education financing not just an economic debate, but a matter of rights, equity, and future national competitiveness.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION REFORM AGENDA

Speaking at the 15th Annual Convention of PCE in 2024, a representative of the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training said: “There is an urgent need for a holistic and inclusive education reform agenda that places girls and children with disabilities at the center. The parents’ mistrust in the public education system is a significant cause of school drop-outs. The growing number of out-of-school children is disproportionately impacting girls. To reverse this trend, targeted investments are required in gender-responsive curricula, inclusive pedagogies, improved WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities, and equitable access to digital infrastructure in public schools, ensuring that every girl can learn in a safe, dignified, and enabling environment.”

TAX JUSTICE FOR EQUITABLE EDUCATION FINANCING

A constrained fiscal environment, further compounded by weak political will and the absence of gender-responsive financing frameworks, has left public education in Pakistan chronically underfunded. Despite international commitments, including Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), education financing has remained below 2% of GDP in the past 5 years,¹² compared to the global benchmark of 4-6% of GDP.¹³ At the same time, Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio is only 9.2%¹⁴, and nearly 51% of the total national budget was allocated to debt servicing alone in 2024.¹⁵ The fiscal constraint significantly reduces the space for investment in social services, including education.

Revenue collection practices are also regressive. The government's over-reliance on indirect taxes disproportionately burdens low-income households. For such families, it inadvertently increases the risk of poor girls being pushed out of schools, as household budgets are stretched too thin. Almost every household contributes to direct and indirect taxes; however, low public investment in education denies the recognition of their contribution to national taxes and development.

In Pakistan, tax justice for education is essential to materialize the educational rights for every child and create additional fiscal space. Pakistan's public is heavily burdened by direct and indirect taxation, placing significant pressure on salaried individuals and low-income households. Even the poorest households, including girls, contribute through sales tax and surcharges on utility bills, effectively making them the largest tax-paying segment. Despite this, public spending on social services remains a low fiscal priority.

TAX JUSTICE FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

In a PCE's podcast, Let's Talk Education, a student at Islamabad Model School for Girls, Naughazi, Islamabad, said: Girls from low-income households often face many challenges. I've seen some of my friends leave school after primary education because the school was situated at a far-off place, and there was no safe and affordable transport to go to school. Sadly, sometimes many girls face harassment on their way to school, which causes their families to withdraw them from school. A safe transport is crucial to make sure every girl can go to school and avail the chance to learn. Women and girls contribute so much in taxes, but there is no safe transport to ensure girls can reach schools without facing these daily struggles. This is denying recognition of their contribution to national taxes and development."

12. Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-25. [Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-25](#).

13. Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal, UNESCO.org, unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656/PDF/245656eng.pdf.multi.

14. Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-25. https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_25/10_Education.pdf

15. Federal Budget 2025 -26. 2025. https://www.finance.gov.pk/budget/budget_2025_26/budget_in_brief_10062025.pdf

These two factors, regressive taxation and limited public investment, together create major barriers to girls' education, heightening the risk of dropout due to poverty and household tax burdens.

While educational stipends such as Benazir Wasila-i-Taaleem are available, less literate families, especially in underserved areas, struggle to access and effectively utilize these services. Moreover, the real costs, including transport and learning resources, add another layer of burden that is rarely accounted for in education financing frameworks.

Another avenue with significant untapped potential is strengthening sales tax collection through the point-of sale (POS) system. Nearly half of the country's population, women, pay an 18% sales tax on all feminine products, including menstrual hygiene products (considered non-essential). In 2022, nearly PKR 5.6 billion was generated through sales tax on period products purchased in Pakistan.¹⁶ Despite contributing significantly to tax revenues, girls and women see little return in the form of accessible, quality public education.

16. Tax Reforms on Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) Products in Pakistan Policy Brief.
https://clearinghouse.unicef.org/sites/ch/files/ch/sites-PD-WASH-WASH%20Knowledge%20unicef-Policy%20Brief%20_MHH%20Tax%20Reforms-2.0.pdf

THE COST OF IGNORING GENDER-RESPONSIVE & INCLUSIVE BUDGETING

The exclusion of women, children with disabilities (CWDs), and transgender students is on the rise due to various inter-sectional barriers, one of the most critical being the lack of targeted gender-responsive financing. Although the federal and provincial governments allocate funds to broader themes and heads, they rarely disaggregate budget allocations in a way that addresses the needs of marginalized learners.

According to Pakistan Education Statistics 2023–24, only 0.44% of CWDs are reported in the education system. This is the first time consolidated enrollment data for CWDs has been reported. Though gaps may exist, it presents shocking figures of exclusion of CWDs.¹⁷ According to the Census 2023 conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, there are 810 out of the 1,121 transgenders between the ages of 10 and 14 years who have never been to school. The data once again underscores the systemic exclusion and severe underrepresentation of transgender individuals from the formal public education system.¹⁸ The data exposes systemic policy driven by data gaps, non-targeted education financing, and exclusionary policy design. For CWDs, the cost of assistive technologies, mobility support devices, and transport adds barriers, often depriving them of their fundamental right to education. For girls with disabilities, the disadvantage is doubled, as financial barriers intersect with parental safety concerns, leading to many families keeping girls with disabilities at home.

Budgeting practices often lack targeted allocations for girls' education, with the most focus on education stipends to encourage enrolment and retention. The absence of gender-responsive budgeting and targeted allocations for girls and girls with disabilities makes impact tracking extremely difficult, resulting in misalignment between allocations and ground realities. At the provincial level, budget allocations are rarely gender-disaggregated or inclusively designed. Thus, inclusive education remains limited, both in theory and in practice.

As a result, inclusive education remains largely aspirational—present on paper but absent in practice. An inclusive education system is only possible by embedding gender-responsive policies and financing frameworks at the core of planning and implementation.

Speaking at a PCE's Townhall meeting on Education Emergency in D.I. Khan, a female participant said: "Majority of families whose children are enrolled in public schools in D.I Khan fall in the category of low-income group. In the aftermath of 2022 floods, public schools witnessed serious drop-outs since families could barely afford the basic necessities and their parents could not bear the cost of education. Girls were the first victim of drop-out. Many young girls got engaged in domestic chores, especially to take care of the younger siblings of the family so as to share the workload of their mothers. Some girls started contributing to household income by working as domestic workers or producing handmade embroidery."

17. Pakistan Education Statistics 2023–24.pdf., Pakistan Education Statistics 2023–24.Pdf. Google Docs, 2023, drive.google.com/file/d/1N4QxStyNffAQhNW1CZTVfy518OfdV2q/view.

18. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Population By Single Year Age, Sex and Rural/Urban, CENSUS-2023. Retrieved from: https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/Table_4_national.pdf

EDUCATION POLICY DECENTRALIZATION & PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, education became a provincial subject; however, education financing and budgetary decision-making remain highly centralized at the provincial level, with limited fiscal autonomy at the district and school levels. The top-down approach often fails to address the needs of local realities, especially girls who are marginalized, from low-income households, and with disabilities. The absence of decentralization in education financing often results in urban-focused allocations, leaving rural and remote schools under-resourced and ill-equipped to respond to local barriers to girls' education.

Decentralization and participatory budgeting can play a transformative role in advancing gender-responsive education financing. When local governments, communities, parents, youth, and especially women are involved in financial planning, funds are more likely to be directed towards locally identified priorities. Participatory budgeting can ensure that all stakeholder voices, especially those of girls, are accounted for and included.

Evidence from other countries supports this context. In Sao Paulo, Brazil, participatory budgeting resulted in 25% of the municipal resources being allocated to primary education, with a focus on equity and gender responsiveness.²¹ Ultimately, education financing decentralization is not only a governance reform but a gender equity imperative. Ensuring participatory, gender-responsive budgeting at the sub-provincial level will enable inclusive and efficient education allocations and expenditures, closing gaps that exclude girls and marginalized learners.

SCHOOL MEALS INITIATIVE IN MUZAFFARGARH

In Muzaffargarh, a representative of Education Department, said: “In Muzaffargarh, a large population belongs to low-income groups. After COVID-19 and 2022 floods, poverty had increased exponentially, resulting in drop-out of many children. However, the day the government began distributing free milk among schoolchildren, people started sending their children to schools that resulted in a significant increase in enrolments.”

19. Barón, Juan, et al. SPEND BETTER, SPEND MORE How to Make Education Expenditures Count for Children in Pakistan South Asia Region Education Global Practice the World Bank.
<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099101209232420036/pdf/IDU-ca74c9b4-3720-48e1-bf51-415daadb8202.pdf>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

SUSTAINABLE DEBT SERVICING

Developing countries, like Pakistan, are increasingly grappling with unsustainable debt burdens that severely constrain their fiscal space for government investment in education. The growing debt burden not only redirects finances but also exacerbates inflation and household poverty. Low-income families, especially in rural areas, have to strive hard to meet their basic needs; thus, girls' education is their least priority. This inadvertently increases drop-outs among adolescent girls, increases the risk of lower enrolments in primary and lower transition rates, deepening learning and skill poverty. This constitutes a violation of the right to education by the government and international financial institutions, whose loan conditionalities often severely restrict public education financing. To ensure equitable and sustainable progress towards SDG-4, debt restructuring and relief must be linked with measurable investment in education, especially for girls and inclusive education.

EDUCATION FINANCING BENCHMARKS

Although provincial governments are progressively meeting the global benchmark of allocating 15-20% of the total budget to education, the aggregate national education budget remains below 2% of the GDP. The federal and provincial governments must commit to earmarking 4-6% of GDP for education and embed this in the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award to ensure predictable, equitable, and gender-responsive financing across provinces.

GENDER RESPONSIVE BUDGETING (GRB)

GRB must be embedded throughout the budget cycle, from planning to implementation, to monitoring, and expenditure tracking, to effectively address the needs of girls and marginalized learners. Moreover, gender-disaggregated budget and expenditure reporting must be made mandatory starting at the district level. In parallel, institutionalize women and girls' voices across education policy forums and budgetary processes to ensure budget allocations reflect their lived realities and ensure that education financing is need-based, equitable, and inclusive.

DISPARITY BETWEEN RECURRENT & DEVELOPMENT ALLOCATIONS

Disproportionate allocations between development and recurrent budgets exacerbate educational funding disparities, with recurrent expenditure taking precedence and leaving little room for development initiatives. To address this imbalance, it is crucial that provincial governments sustainably increase the development budget's share, with a strategic focus on initiatives to improve learning outcomes, expand girls' access to education, safe transport, and WASH facilities, in addition to inclusive learning environments.

TAX JUSTICE FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

The principle of tax justice for girls' education should be embedded within fiscal policy by reinvesting tax revenues generated from women, particularly from gendered consumption, into initiatives to improve girls' education. Redirecting tax revenues collected from menstrual hygiene products and other essential goods purchased by women can create gender-specific finance pockets and be reinvested to improve access, retention, and learning outcomes. This establishes a solid foundation for public revenue to serve those who contribute to it fairly and equitably while strengthening gender-responsive education financing.

PROGRESSIVE TAXATION

Progressive taxation offers a sustainable approach to mobilizing additional domestic resources for gender-equitable education policies. The targeted expansion of the tax net to wealthier demographics by increasing property, wealth, and capital gains taxes can help broaden the tax base without deepening existing inequalities. These measures align with equity and social justice principles, enabling the redistribution of public funds towards underfunded areas, including girls' education in low-income and marginalized communities.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING TO DECENTRALIZE EDUCATION BUDGETING

Participatory budgeting should be institutionalized to decentralize education budgeting at the district and school levels, thereby enhancing the efficiency and responsiveness of allocations. The decentralization of education financing must be leveraged to empower school administrations and school management committees, while building their capacity in gender-responsive budgeting and expenditure tracking. Ensuring meaningful participation of women, young girls, and marginalized learners in budget forums is essential to align it with local needs.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND FACILITIES

Earmark dedicated allocations for improving access, disability-friendly infrastructure, WASH, and other essential school facilities to encourage enrollment and retention of girls and marginalized learners. Such investments are crucial for removing physical and social barriers that disproportionately hinder the participation of girls, especially with disabilities, ensuring that schools are safe, inclusive, and gender-responsive and transformative learning spaces.

GENDER RESPONSIVE & INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

There is also a need to integrate gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy into pre-service training and continuous professional development frameworks, linking these trainings with career progress and professional recognition. This will build and enhance teachers' capacity for inclusive classroom practices, including developing individualized education plans (IEPs) for CWDs, ensuring every learner's needs are addressed and schools are inclusive for all.

DATA STANDARDIZATION

There is a need ensure nationwide implementation of the Data Standardization Framework (DSF) developed by the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE). This will harmonize education data reporting across the country. It must also be ensured that data is segregated by gender, demography, and disability to encourage evidence-based education planning and budgeting.

DIGITALIZATION OF SCHOOL RECORDS

Student and teacher records, teachers' training indicators, and budget allocations, should be digitized and to enable real-time monitoring and tracking to enhance transparency and accountability. A centralized digital system, linked with provincial EMIS platforms, would improve transparency, accountability, and efficiency in education financing and planning, particularly in tracking gender-responsive and inclusive spending.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

There is a need to develop a comprehensive impact assessment framework to evaluate both the short-term and long-term impacts of budget allocations made to improve girls' education indicators. This will require that allocations should be based on a logical model with well-defined short, medium, and long-term goals, enabling the development of practical and pragmatic education policies and efficient budgetary allocations.

ANNUAL EDUCATION FINANCING REPORT

To enhance transparency in public education financing, the federal and provincial governments must publish an annual report on education financing. The report must consolidate both budget utilization and allocated budget figures. It must also highlight the disaggregated allocations to promote universal access, while focusing particularly on girls, CWDs, and other marginalized learners. This will enable improved tracking of commitments, foster public accountability, and inform evidence-based planning and equitable resource distribution.



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