



# Access to education in Pakistan

*Author: Emma Barnhoorn*



## Introduction

As of 2020, it is estimated that 22.7 million children are unable to go to school in Pakistan (Hunter, 2020). The situation is particularly disturbing for girls – 32% of primary school aged girls are out of school, compared to 21% for boys (Human Rights Watch, 2018). By the ninth grade, only 13% of girls in Pakistan still attend school and the rest are forced to quit due to a variety of reasons, such as when they are forced to stay home to care for their parents, or when their school is simply located too far away for the children to be able to attend (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Currently, Pakistan faces a serious challenge in ensuring that all children, particularly disadvantaged children, attend, stay and learn in school. Despite the increase in enrollment rates, overall progress has been relatively slow in improving educational attendance rates (UNICEF, 2021).

Historically, Islamic fundamentalists and moderate reformers have participated in the intense struggle for women's rights, particularly their right to education. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979)<sup>1</sup> did bring some hope, despite the fact that it was abandoned in practice over time in Pakistan. Very little, if anything, has changed for the benefit of women's education (Sudduth, 2009).



Source: Insiya Syed for Human Rights Watch, 2018.

1. For the full text of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), please follow this link: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>.

## Barriers to education

### a. Lack of funding

In Pakistan, only 2.8% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is allocated towards education (Gill, 2021). The unfortunate shortage of schools has been a significant factor in hindering children's access to education, a factor that is especially pertinent in rural areas. Herein, schools are fewer and farther away from each other or from the homes of the potentially attending children. This makes it harder for these children to get an education simply because the extent of the distance is too difficult to overcome (Gill, 2021).

### b. Social norms

On a social level in Pakistan, it is deemed unnecessary for girls to receive formal education. Especially in conservative communities, female students experience backlash if they intend to continue their education. Additionally, it is common for Pakistani girls to marry at a relatively young age, forcing them to prioritize their new family above their own education (Gill, 2021). As a result, girls are often times forced to delay or completely discontinue their education, thus contributing to gender disparity in schools (Gill, 2021).

### c. Instability

The instability of the Pakistani Government – as exemplified through the ability of extremist groups to launch attacks on schools, or school busses, – has deterred the ability of girls to attend schools. Young children, especially girls, fear for their lives, hearing the stories of school attacks. This creates a vicious cycle of instability: violence hurts economic output, which hurts the Pakistani Government's ability to fund its citizens' education (Gill, 2021).

## Applicable law

### a. National Law

The Constitution of Pakistan makes it clear that all citizens of Pakistan are equal before the law and are entitled to protection by this law. An example of such stipulation is the fact that there “shall be no discrimination based solely on the sex of a person” (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, Article 25). On top of that, the Pakistani Constitution grants educational rights to all its citizens, stating in Article 37 that:

“The State shall promote the educational and economic interests of backward classes or areas, remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory secondary education within minimum possible period; make technical and professional education generally available and higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of merit” (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, Article 37).

However, since these provisions are clearly stated in the Constitution, the question remains: why does reality reflect a different image?

As a country built on religious identity, Pakistan has defined itself in accordance with Islam and thus Sharia law and the Qur'an (Suddoth, 2009, page 570). According to verses 24:31, 33:33, 33:53 and 33:59<sup>2</sup> of the Qur'an, women are mandated to stay at home, except for when there is an emergency (Qur'an, 24:32, 33:33, 33:53, 33:59). This view is widely embraced by Islamic fundamentalists. One of them, Taliban leader Maulana Fazlullah, repeatedly warned locals in Pakistan not to send their daughters to school. He proclaimed that education for girls goes against Islam and constitutes a violation of the religiously mandated confinement that holds women away from public scrutiny (Suddoth, 2009, page 572). Islamic fundamentalists allege that when a woman is offered education, this destroys the traditional boundaries and definitions of gender roles in Muslim culture (Suddoth, 2009, page 572).

### b. International Law

In Pakistan, a woman's right to education was officially recognized with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) on 10 December 1948.<sup>3</sup> Article 26 reads: “everyone has a right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. [...] higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit” (UDHR, 1948, Article 26).

Pakistan also adopted the CEDAW in 1996, thereby committing to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and ensuring that women would get equal opportunities as men, especially concerning political, social, economic, and cultural fields (Suddoth, 2009, page 566). The CEDAW requires state parties to “take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure [...] equal rights with men in the field of education [...]” (Article 10, CEDAW, 1979). The CEDAW

2. For more information on the Qur'an, please follow this link: <https://quran.com/>.

3. For the full text of UDHR, please follow this link: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/udhr.pdf>.

established an international bill of rights for women and an agenda for action to be taken by countries to guarantee the enjoyment of the rights set out (CEDAW, 1979, Introduction). Under Article 10, State Parties to the CEDAW must provide women with access to the same curricula and exams, teaching staff and school facilities, the same career and vocational guidance, and possibilities as men (Article 10, CEDAW, 1979). Furthermore, States are obligated to eliminate any stereotypes in women's roles at educational levels via encouraging coeducation and revising textbooks and teaching methods (Suddoth, 2009, page 566).

When acceding to the CEDAW, Pakistan made a reservation, resulting in a lack of specificity when it comes to the provisions it applies or does not apply, and the extent of derogation from those provisions. Hence, there are doubts regarding Pakistan's commitment to the implementation and impact of the CEDAW (Suddoth, 2009, page 581). Several countries have argued that Pakistan's reservation is incompatible with the object and purpose of the CEDAW, and therefore undermines the basis of international law (CEDAW: Declarations, Reservations and Objections to CEDAW 1977). Pakistan's reservation is invalid under international law because it subjects the CEDAW to scrutiny under the Pakistani Constitution (CEDAW: Declarations, Reservations and Objections to CEDAW 1977). As a result, one can see why little has changed for female education in Pakistan since signing the CEDAW: oppressive policies against women are still in place, large gender gaps have formed in school enrollment and hundreds of villages still lack primary schools for girls (Suddoth, 2009, page 582).

## Solutions

To improve access to education and ensure the equitable expansion of the quality of education, UNICEF supports the Government of Pakistan and its efforts, providing possible solutions to the current issue (UNICEF, 2021).

### a. Early childhood education (ECE)

Investments in pre-primary education for young children is beneficial especially for impoverished and vulnerable families. ECE makes sure that young children are made “ready for school” and higher education, thereby having positive effects on primary school enrolment and learning ability while also being cost-effective (UNICEF, 2021).



Source: Asad Zaidi, UNICEF/Pakistan, 2021. A trained ECE teacher teaching in Government Community Elementary School in the Punjab Province.

### b. Alternative learning pathways (ALP)

While several models of alternative learning pathways exist, they remain very scarce. As such, UNICEF is currently addressing this issue by supporting the provincial sector plan development, which is a development of non-formal education and an opportunity of direct programme implementation. As a result, UNICEF is able to support both federal and provincial governments in broadening the ALPs within their education systems, specifically focusing on adolescent girls (UNICEF, 2021)

### c. School-community linkages

By focusing more closely on obstacles preventing children from attending school, such as on-time enrolment, retention, completion and transition, UNICEF continues to exert its efforts to eliminate the socio-cultural barriers to education. Examples of such an effort include placing more schools in rural areas, which can be more accessible for children living farther away, or making sure that more girls attend school (UNICEF, 2021).

### d. Equity in education

Equity-based investments made by the government are a key component in ensuring that educational systems include all children, especially the most disadvantaged girls and boys. Considering that Pakistan has insufficient and ineffective allocations of budgets, UNICEF continues to assist the Pakistani government in sector planning, in order to capitalize on opportunities which influence the decision-making processes regarding equity issues (UNICEF, 2021).

UNICEF's growing technical capacity, international expertise, and focus on the assessments of learning provide the Pakistani Government with value added to their efforts in improving their educational systems. On top of that, UNICEF promotes a healthy dialogue on education budgeting, as well as public financing, thereby highlighting areas which can be improved (UNICEF, 2021).

## Bibliography

### (News) Articles

Gill, T., (2021, January 28) "Care: Increasing Access to Education in Pakistan" via the Borgen Project <https://borgenproject.org/education-in-pakistan-2/>.

Human Rights Watch (2018, November 12) "Shall I Feed my Daughter, or Educate Her? – Barriers to Girls' Education in Pakistan" <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/11/12/shall-i-feed-my-daughter-or-educate-her/barriers-girls-education-pakistan>.

Hunter, R., (2021, February 25) "Education in Pakistan" in World Education News + Reviews <https://wenr.wes.org/2020/02/education-in-pakistan#:~:text=Education%20in%20Pakistan%20is%20free,25%20A%20of%20the%20constitution>.

Sudduth, J. T. (2009). Cedaw's flaws: critical analysis of why cedaw is failing to protect woman's right to education in Pakistan. *Journal of Law & Education*, 38(4), 563-592.

UNICEF (2021) "Education – giving every child the right to education" <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/education>.

### Legislation

CEDAW, 'Pakistan: Reservations and Declarations & Objections' [http://www.bayefsky.com/html/pakistan\\_t2\\_cedaw.php](http://www.bayefsky.com/html/pakistan_t2_cedaw.php).

Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan [Pakistan], 10 April 1973, available at: <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/> [accessed 18 October 2021].

UN General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 18 December 1979, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol, 1249, p. 13, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx> [accessed 15 October 2021].

UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III), available at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/udhr.pdf> [accessed 19 October 2021].



# Access to education in Pakistan



[www.ghrd.org](http://www.ghrd.org)