

BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN GIRLS' EDUCATION: PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS IN PEF SCHOOLS OF SOUTHERN PUNJAB

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The research focuses on the ongoing challenges and new prospects for girls' education in Southern Punjab, Pakistan. A survey was conducted with 522 teachers of PEF schools in 8 districts. The study employed Descriptive Statistics in understanding respondents' perceptions regarding the barriers and opportunities. The findings revealed that there are still several barriers to girls' enrollment in schools, particularly beyond the primary level, due to poverty, early marriages, nutrition, lack of safe transport, and gender discrimination. However, there were high levels of optimism about opportunities, including literacy, TVET, non-formal education, and public-private partnerships. The study concludes that although there is a framework, there are gaps in implementation, socio-cultural issues, and resource issues, which need to be addressed in a sector-specific manner. The recommendations include infrastructure, provision of safe transportation, scholarships, and challenging socio-cultural issues with a community awareness program.

Keywords: *Girls' Education, Barriers, Opportunities, Teachers, School*

INTRODUCTION

All individuals have an inalienable right to be educated. Women, however, are being deprived of this basic human right in different parts of the world, including Pakistan. The Pakistan Education Statistics Report 2019-20 has reported that the literacy rate for women in Pakistan is merely 59%, while for males, this figure is as high as 71%. Some factors for this disparity are cultural, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities. The importance of women's education in Pakistan has been increasing over the past few decades. There has been a question mark over the slow and delayed development in women's education opportunities in Pakistan. The importance of women's education in Pakistan has been increasing due to the increase in knowledge regarding this particular issue. In fact, Pakistan has one of the lowest percentages of female literacy in all of Asia (25%), just slightly higher than the world average of 24%. Women's education can be one part of the solution, but it may not be enough to solve this particular problem in Pakistan. The current state of women's education in Pakistan is alarming and disheartening (Askari et al., 2022).

Education System of Pakistan

According to Akhtar et al., (2024) in any nation's progress, education is essential. No country can endure and become a reputable member of the international community without education. Every nation strives to improve its educational system because of this. Pakistan's education system lacks procedure as a result of the country's unstable political system. Pakistan's economy is weak, and it is a developing nation. A stable educational system helps the nation's economy and makes its citizens rich (Ahmad, 2014). Hussain (2001) states that Pakistan's economic problems include rising rates of unemployment and poverty, significant domestic and foreign debt, a large fiscal deficit, and low investment. Since the minister in charge of Pakistan's education system is a politician rather than an educator, politics and education are inextricably linked (Sultana, 2018). Many issues surround Pakistan's educational system, and each one must be addressed individually. Ahmad, Ali, Khan, and Khan (2014) examined many problems with Pakistan's educational system, such as lack of consistency, education without guidance, out-of-date curricula, a shortage of qualified teachers, a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers, concerning dropout rates, inadequate supervisory standards, interference in the educational system, and a low budget. This essay aims to draw attention to various challenges with the Pakistani educational system.

Delivering Quality Education Projects in Pakistan to Support SDG-4

According to Shahid et al., (2023) many of the SDG-4-related quality education initiatives in Pakistan are being carried out by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are defined as "a not-for-profit entity whose members are citizens of one or more countries (members) and whose activities are determined by the collective will of its members in response to the needs of members of one or more communities with which the NGO operates" (Simmons, 1998). The term has been used since at least the eighth century (Davies, 2014). Private, nonprofit, civil, and society-based organizations are all included in this definition of NGOs. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF) are a few examples of well-known NGOs. NGOs can have a variety of missions; some are local (national or regional) in terms of their specific focus, while others are multinational and adopt a global holistic viewpoint. In terms of fostering social values and an ethical culture, the number of NGOs functioning in Pakistan has grown to such an extent that it is currently rated third, behind the government and corporate sectors (Teegen et al., 2004).

Research Questions

1. What are the key barriers preventing girls from accessing education in Southern Punjab?
2. What opportunities exist within Southern Punjab that could help improve the Educational experience and outcomes for girls?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Barriers to Female Education

In the majority of tribal regions in developing nations, girls' unequal access to education is a major problem. Due to various barriers, about 29 million girls in lower secondary school and 32 million girls in primary school are denied an education (Ali, 2022). In Pakistan, 73% of children between the ages of 5 and 16 drop out of school before finishing their secondary education. Pakistan has the second-highest rate of out-of-school children worldwide (Ullah, 2020; UNICEF, 2019a). Approximately 8.6 million females and 10.7 million boys are receiving primary education. Following that, 2.8 million girls and 3.6 million boys dropped out at the lower secondary level, which includes classes 9 and 10 (UNICEF, 2019).

Early Marriage of a Kid

According to Ojong (2025), a major violation of girls' human rights, child marriage also known as early or forced marriage has detrimental repercussions on their social, health, and educational well-being (UNFPA, 2012; UNICEF, 2014, as referenced in Paul, 2019). According to Jensen and Thornton (2003), girls in many developing nations are married young and frequently have no say over when or who they marry. Girls are typically expected to drop out of school and assume adult responsibilities after marriage, which puts a stop to their education. With some of the highest rates in the world, child marriage is still a significant problem in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite an increase in efforts, there has been mixed progress in reducing child marriage. A study examining trends across 31 Sub-Saharan African countries found that marriage before age 18 has declined over time, but this decline is mainly among older adolescents. For more than 20 years, marriage before the age of 15 has not altered in many nations, and in certain instances, it has even increased. Strong opposition to change is evident, particularly among the youngest and most vulnerable girls (Koski, Clark, & Nandi, 2017). According to recent studies, early marriage still harms girls' education in the area. In Sub-Saharan Africa, gender disparities persist despite recent global advancements in female education. Girls' access to and completion of school are still hampered by early marriage, cultural norms, and financial constraints. Early marriage restricts future possibilities, increases school dropout rates, and perpetuates poverty cycles. In order to safeguard girls' rights and promote their education, our findings emphasize the necessity of more robust legal reforms, better enforcement of current laws, and raised public awareness (Zhou, 2024).

Poverty

According to Askari et al., (2022) another major obstacle to women's education in Pakistan is poverty. Many families need their daughters to work and contribute to their income, so they cannot afford to send them to school. In rural areas, where poverty rates are higher, this is particularly true.

Household Responsibility

According to Atakpo et al., (2024) families and individuals in society are differentiated, and the factors that determine this distinction include the family's income, occupation, and degree of education. He emphasized once more how a family's position influences its attitudes and ideals throughout life (Ezewu, 1983). As noted by Uweru and Monye in Peretomode (2001), a feature

shared by nearly all societies is the way they may be divided into layers or strata. As we grow up in society, we quickly learn that not everyone is treated equally; money, prestige, privilege, and all the things that seem most desirable are distributed very unequally. These can be termed as household characteristics and can, according to Akpotu (2013) affect the education of a child in many ways.

Travel and Transportation Issues

Gender-based issues in travel behavior in developing nations, especially in Asia, such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, are more common. Women in developing nations do not have enough freedom to travel to other parts of the country without male companionship. Because of poverty in Pakistan, women are compelled to travel long distances using public transportation. Second, the religious experts advise women not to travel alone in ordinary circumstances. Due to their low incomes and limited resources to purchase a personal vehicle, rural women cannot afford transportation (Adeel, 2016). According to Ayaz et al., (2024), due to sociocultural norms, restricted access to school and the workforce, and harassment experiences, women in Pakistan confront substantial obstacles to urban mobility. Women are literate at a rate of about 48%, with greater rates in metropolitan areas. The 25% female labor force participation rate is impacted by workplace harassment and safety issues. Initiatives like the Benazir Income Support Program and laws like the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010 seek to improve women's economic security and safety while encouraging inclusivity in public transit and other areas. Women in developing nations confront a variety of mobility obstacles. These issues are sustained by inadequate access to sustainable, reasonably priced, and safe public transit.

Opportunities for Female Education

Dealing with Child Marriage

Strong legal enforcement and community-level initiatives are necessary to put an end to child marriage. Laws that set the minimum age of marriage at eighteen should be strengthened, upheld, and enforced by governments, who should also make sure that infractions are penalized.

Community education initiatives should also highlight the detrimental impacts of child marriage on girls' prospects, health, and education. Schools must work with local leaders to identify girls who are at risk of marrying young by providing mentorship, safe boarding facilities, and scholarships. The best way to delay marriage is to keep girls in school. To ensure that the rights of girls are protected, awareness campaigns regarding constructive alternatives to child marriage, like education and skill development, must be conducted (Ojong, 2025).

Reducing the Significant Cost of Education

Governments should increase free education programs that eliminate school fees and associated expenses in order to lower financial barriers. Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs should be implemented to support low-income households, particularly to improve female education and attendance. The initiatives are beneficial in the long run because they promote investments in health and education, which reduce poverty in the country. Women's control over financial resources improves girls' education and decision-making (Ojong, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

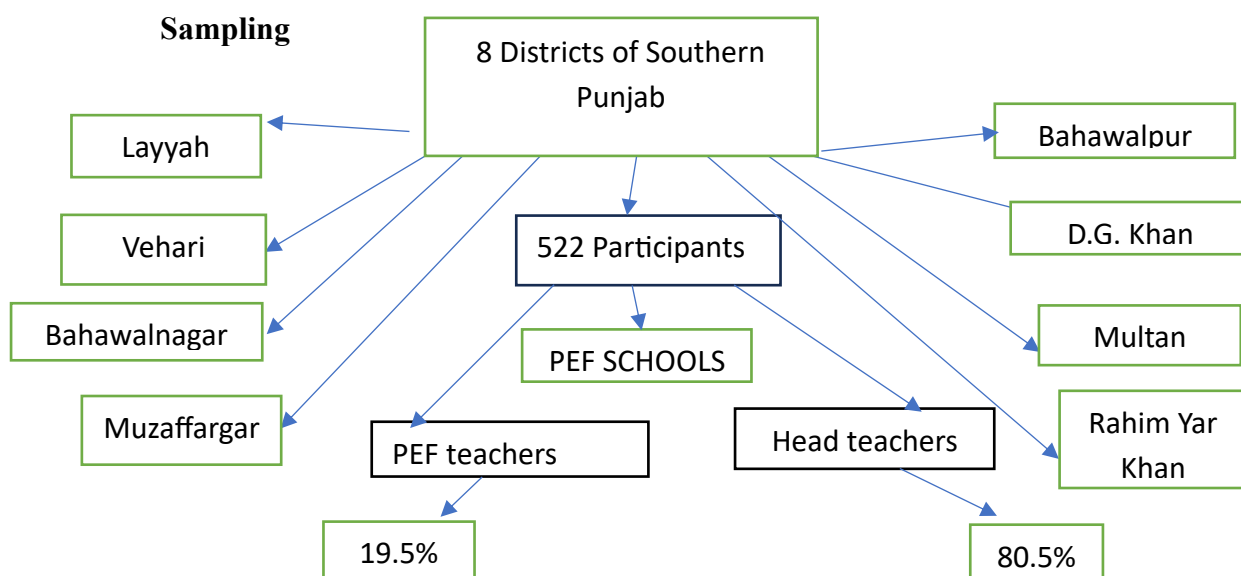
Research Design

The quantitative approach entailed surveying school teachers at Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) schools about the barriers and opportunities for girls' education.

Population

The population for this research comprised principals and teachers who were working in schools affiliated with the PEF in eight districts of Southern Punjab, which include Multan, Layyah, Muzaffargarh, Dera Ghazi Khan, Rahim Yar Khan, Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar, and Vehari. A total of 2,773 partner schools were selected in these districts according to the PEF records.

Sampling



For conducting research among various areas in Southern Punjab, the researchers randomly selected eight districts, which included: Multan, Layyah, Muzaffargarh, Bahawalnagar, Bahawalpur, Vehari, Rahim Yar Khan, and Dera Ghazi Khan. These districts were selected so that the socio-economic and educational conditions could be accounted for in the study. The total no of participants is $N = 522$, of which 80.5% were Head teachers, and 19.5% were PEF teachers.

Instrumentation

In this research, primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire that followed the five-point Likert scale, which ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The questionnaire was developed by researchers to analyze the barriers as well as the opportunities concerning girls’ education. Among the barriers considered were Health & well-being, Shortage of female teacher, Low Quality of teachings, Lack of Government support, Poverty & Economic problem, Early marriage, Inadequate infrastructure, Gender discrimination, Transportation and mobility issues, Environmental and Natural disaster, Household responsibility for girls, Safety issue and school distance. Furthermore, among the opportunities were the foundation literacy and

Numeracy (FLN), Public-Private partnerships, recruitment and training of female teachers, Sanitation, out-of-school children, promoting girls' empowerment and leadership skills, scholarships, non-formal education, and TVET skills.

Reliability & Validity

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experienced and educational experts. Their feedback was incorporated to enhance relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study objectives. In addition, in the biography part, elements such as gender and the various selected districts were considered for better analysis of the respondents. Pilot testing was conducted with 150 teachers. The instrument's reliability was ensured by Cronbach alpha and its value was .86, and the completed questionnaire proved appropriate for data collection.

Data Collection

The primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire that used the five-point Likert scale with options of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The online google form was generated and the link was shared to teachers and head teachers in the chosen districts since they are important stakeholders who have firsthand knowledge of the education system and can offer perspectives on the issues and prospects related to girls' education.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). In descriptive statistics frequency, mean and SD were computed. The findings were related to the perceptions about barriers and opportunities that affect girls' education. The use of descriptive statistics made it possible for the researcher to determine major trends in the data.

Ethical consideration

The researcher adhered to ethical guidelines during the entire research process. The participants were made aware of the purpose of the study as well as their ability to leave the study at any point in time without facing any kind of consequences. Voluntary participation was ensured while collecting data after obtaining the consent of the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were upheld by ensuring that the identity of the respondents was not revealed in any publications generated from the study.

ANALYSIS

Table 1

Barriers Preventing Girls from Accessing Education (N=522)

Barriers	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)		
Health & well-being	Poor nutrition	1.0	3.6	5.7	54.4	35.2	4.19	0.77

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Barriers	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)		
	Lack of proper menstrual hygiene	.8	5.2	11.7	55.6	26.8	4.02	0.81
	Limited health awareness	1.5	3.1	31.0	47.1	17.2	3.75	0.82
Shortage of female teacher	Shortage of trained female teachers	1.7	11.7	34.5	36.6	15.5	3.52	0.94
	Parents feel uncomfortable when girls are taught by male teachers	14.9	22.4	31.0	25.3	5.2	2.83	1.12
Low Quality of teachings	Poor-quality teaching and a lack of relevance	2.9	12.8	37.2	34.9	12.3	3.40	0.95
Lack of Government support	Weak governance and fragmented control	.8	5.0	18.4	56.1	19.7	3.89	0.79
	Weak government policies and low political support	.6	4.2	28.5	45.4	21.3	3.82	0.83
Poverty & Economic problem	financial pressure leads parents to prefer boys' education over girls	.4	3.1	23.6	47.9	25.1	3.94	0.80
	Poverty	.6	1.5	22.8	43.5	31.6	4.04	0.81
Early marriage	Early marriages or family responsibilities	.6	6.7	11.3	52.9	28.5	4.02	0.84

Barriers	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)		
	Married at a young age	.8	6.1	29.3	44.8	19.0	3.75	0.85
Inadequate infrastructure	Lack of proper buildings or facilities	2.7	17.0	16.1	47.7	16.5	3.58	1.03
	School facilities and safety conditions	1.9	9.0	40.6	35.1	13.4	3.49	0.90
	Lack of clean toilets	2.7	19.9	35.4	32.4	9.6	3.26	0.97
Gender discrimination	Boys should get an education while girls should stay at home	1.9	10.5	32.0	40.8	14.8	3.55	0.93
	Girls face unequal treatment in families and society	1.9	9.4	33.7	41.0	14.0	3.55	0.91
Transportation and mobility issues	Absence of safe transportation makes it difficult for girls to reach school	.6	4.2	24.3	48.3	22.6	3.88	0.82
	Long distance to school	.8	4.2	24.9	49.2	20.9	3.85	0.82
	Parents fear for their daughter's safety when they walk alone to school	1.0	6.7	28.5	46.6	17.2	3.72	0.85
Environmental and Natural disaster	Floods, storms, or other disasters damage schools	.4	4.2	28.2	51.0	16.3	3.78	0.77

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Barriers	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)		
	and disrupt girls' education							
	Climate-related displacement forces girls to drop out of school	.4	3.3	33.3	48.1	14.9	3.73	0.76
Household responsibility for girls	Poor girls are often asked to work at home or earn money	.4	6.5	37.4	42.5	13.2	3.61	0.80
Safety issue and school distance	No school building or nearby educational facility	.8	5.9	35.1	41.6	16.7	3.67	0.84
	lack of schools, especially for girls	1.3	5.6	33.9	42.3	16.9	3.67	0.86
	schools are far away, families feel it is unsafe for girls to travel	1.3	5.0	25.5	48.9	19.3	3.79	0.85

Table shows that the responses clearly indicate that multiple barriers still exist. The most significant barriers are Poverty (M=4.04), early marriage (M=4.02), poor nutrition(M=4.19), lack of safe transportation (M=3.88), and gender discrimination (M=3.55).

Table 2

Opportunities for Female Education(N=522)

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	S. D
	%	%	%	%	%		
Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) program	1.1	4.8	40.0	42.5	11.5	3.58	0.79

Statements		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	S. D
		%	%	%	%	%		
Expanding Non-Formal Education (NFE)		1.0	7.1	38.5	43.9	9.6	3.54	0.80
Strengthening public-private partnerships		1.0	2.7	31.2	47.9	17.2	3.77	0.79
Prioritizing the recruitment and training of female teachers		.8	2.3	32.4	46.2	18.4	3.79	0.79
Aligning TVET skills with labor market		.2	2.3	30.1	48.9	18.6	3.83	0.75
Accelerated learning models can rapidly bring out-of-school children		.4	3.1	36.2	46.9	13.4	3.69	0.75
Schools have clean, functioning toilets and water facilities		1.1	6.9	33.3	45.2	13.4	3.62	0.84
Vocational skills taught to women		1.0	5.9	36.8	44.8	11.5	3.59	0.80
School lessons and activities promote girls' empowerment and leadership skills		1.0	3.6	36.0	46.2	13.2	3.67	0.78
Girls are encouraged and given good opportunities to join technical and job training (TVET) programs		1.1	4.4	33.0	46.7	14.8	3.69	0.81

Table shows that respondents also strongly agreed on several opportunities to improve girls' education. These opportunities are promoting Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (M=3.580), Public-Private Partnership (M=3.77), Training of female teachers (M=3.77), TVET skills demands (M=3.83), Accelerated learning models can rapidly bring out-of-school children (M=3.69), Schools have clean, functioning toilets and water, sanitation for females (M=3.59), and given opportunities to join (TVET) program (M=3.69), and school promote girls empowerment and leadership skills (M=3.67).

DISCUSSION

The study investigates the multiple barriers and opportunities for female education in Southern Punjab. The most significant barriers include poverty, early marriage, poor nutrition, lack of safe transport, and discrimination against girls. These results are consistent with previous research conducted in the developing region. The most significant barrier is poverty. This is in accordance with the previous research conducted in the region.

According to Saleemi (2025), urban safety is plagued by gender-based assault and harassment on public transit, especially in developing nations where legislative protections, Urban design initiatives, and enforcement measures are still insufficient. In addition to being a question of personal freedom, safe and dependable mobility is essential for women's economic empowerment, social engagement, and general well-being. Women's access to school, work, and civic engagement is severely limited when public transportation systems fail to provide a safe environment, undermining both individual potential and broader socioeconomic development. Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest metropolitan city and a significant center for trade, education, and culture, is a prime example of this problem. Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest metropolitan city and a significant center for trade, education, and culture, is a prime example of this problem. Women still frequently experience physical abuse, harassment, and "eve-teasing" despite recent expenditures in urban transit infrastructure, including as the Orange Line Metro Train and Lahore Metrobus. Research shows that 85% of women in Lahore have been harassed when using public transportation, and a security audit conducted by UN Women and the Aurat Foundation revealed that 90% of female respondents reported feeling unsafe when traveling. These surveys demonstrate the scope of the problem. These encounters, which frequently take place in packed cars, dimly illuminated stations, or during first- and last-mile travel, include verbal, physical, and nonverbal harassment.

According to Zafar et al., (2025), there are almost 1.3 billion teenagers between the ages of 10 and 19 worldwide, and 90% of them live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where they make up more than 16% of the global population. It is concerning to note that almost half of teenagers in several nations are at risk of undernutrition, endangering their developmental paths during this crucial stage. People grow up to 20% of their adult height, 50% of their peak bone mass, and 50% of their mature body weight during adolescence. An estimated 21 million pregnancies among adolescents aged 15 to 19 in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) occurred in 2019. Of these pregnancies, about 50% were unplanned, resulting in about 12 million births. These pregnancies put a great deal of strain on the adolescents' bodies, endangering both their own development and the health of their offspring. Particularly in low- and middle-income nations with weak health systems, adolescent pregnancy feeds the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition, especially undernutrition, which leads to high rates of mother and child death as well as an ongoing cycle of poor health and poverty. Compared to their older counterparts, adolescent moms are more vulnerable to nutritional inadequacies and have higher risks of death and morbidity after childbirth.

Adolescent girls' health and nutritional status have a significant impact on both their own wellbeing and the likelihood of unfavorable delivery outcomes. Delaying marriage and pregnancy, offering comprehensive nutritional support, and ending the generational cycle of undernutrition must all be priorities. In addition to nutrition, economic, educational, social, and environmental elements are crucial for adolescents to grow to their full potential and for their future well-being. During this stage, social determinants of health have a big influence on future generations' nutritional condition. Adolescent health is significantly impacted by addressing food insecurity, offering access to healthcare and education with a focus on dietary counseling and dietary diversity, as well as by family and social networks.

In addition, opportunities like public-private partnerships, training of female teachers, TVET programs, and improved facilities like water and sanitation were positively acknowledged. These are opportunities that can help mitigate the existing barriers and create a more enabling environment for girls.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that many barriers to female education are still faced in Southern Punjab, particularly in PEF schools. The main barriers identified are poverty, unsafe transportation, early marriage, gender discrimination, and poor nutrition. The results indicate that, despite the government's best efforts through scholarships and school safety enhancements, the interventions have remained effective only to a limited extent, specifically at the primary level. However, a large void exists in the continuation of girls' education beyond that level. In conclusion, it is evident that attaining gender equality in education is a policy goal, but it is also a transformation process. To achieve this, schools, communities, and organizations such as PEF will be required to ensure that all girls learn in a safe, inclusive, and empowering environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government can increase scholarship and financial assistance through EVS (Education Voucher Scheme) and FAS (Foundation Assisted Scheme) programs to help manage expenses for fees, books, and uniforms.
- The government, in collaboration with the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), should launch school-based nutrition and health programs in PEF schools, FAS (Foundation Assisted Scheme), NSP (New School Program), and PSRP (Public School Recognition Program) to address the problem of poor nutrition.
- The government should align the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector with the market requirement, which could also be done in collaboration with PEF-supported schools, NSP (New School program), and FAS (Foundation Assisted Scheme) for the education of girls.

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- Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) through PEF need to be strengthened to improve the quality of education, accessibility of education, and innovation in the underserved districts of Southern Punjab.
- The government, in collaboration with the Punjab Education Foundation, under programs such as the Public-School Reorganization Program (PSRP) and the Education Voucher Scheme (EVS), can arrange transportation facilities for female students to reduce parental concerns regarding transportation over long distances.
- The government should ensure the provision of clean, functional, and girls-only toilets as well as water facilities in FAS (Foundation Assisted Schools), EVS (Education Voucher Scheme), and NSP (New School Program) schools to cater to the needs of girls during their periods.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest between the two authors.

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