

Mother's education and child development understanding the importance of this relationship

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Improving women's education in general and mother's education in particular is often considered one of the most powerful policy tools for improving a variety of individual and life outcomes. More literate mothers are believed to have healthier children. More educated mothers are also understood to in turn have more educated children whose lifetime outcomes including earnings, occupational choices, cognitive and other skills etc. among others are believed to improve as a consequence. There is now also considerable evidence that confirms strong positive links between the human capital level of a generation and the production of human capital of future generations as emphasized in modern growth models. These intergenerational aspects of education at the micro and macro level have been the subject of much study across the developed and developing world.

Despite recent progress, women's education in Pakistan continues to be abysmally low. According to UNESCO (2008) figures, the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in primary schooling in 2008 was 93 percent for boys and 77 percent for girls yielding a gap of 16 percentage points. Net Enrolment Rates (NER) are even lower 72 percent for boys and 60 percent for girls¹. While enrolments have increased over the past few decades, the overall gender gap remains high. Gender gaps also prevail in other development indicators such as empowerment, voice, health and mortality.

These gender gaps are indicative of deep-rooted barriers to access and are especially worrying because of their persistence over time. They are also particularly perturbing because while both parent's education can play a critical role in a child's development, a mother's education has the potential to have a larger effect mainly because mother's continue to play the traditional role of caretakers in childhood development. There are several channels through which this relationship may operate on a child's progress and they are all interlinked. One of the first channels is through the 'income' effect. More educated mothers are more likely to actively participate in the labor market and in doing so contribute to household income. The resultant changes in household income affluence and disadvantage - may impact children in several ways including their overall health, schooling attainment and even their academic achievement. There is now evidence from several parts of the world that substantiates the claim that children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds emerge from schools with lower levels of attainment and achievement i.e. poorer human capital.

Theory also suggests that parent's investment and consumption choices, the home environment, presence or absence of positive role models etc. all play critical roles in childhood development. Among the two parents, mother's education possibly influences a child's outcomes more. This is consistent with a division of labour within the household in which child-care is the larger responsibility of the mother. Indeed, studies in several developing countries demonstrate that there is no 'threshold' level of maternal education that needs to be reached before the benefits of maternal education on child outcomes such as health and education materialise and even small levels of education improve child survival and child educational outcomes. More educated mother's fertility choices are also expected to be different. Educated women marry late and often have fewer children. This quantity-quality trade-off is expected to influence existing children's development in many ways. Moreover, more educated mother's bargaining power and empowerment within the home may change. This has the potential to impact decision-making especially in intra-household allocation decisions. There is now a substantial evidence-base that points to the role women's empowerment can play in enhancing gender equality in educational and other outcomes for instance through mother's allocating more resources towards the girl-child hence closing some of the large gaps that prevail in favour of males.

While more educated mothers (and indeed parents) positively influence childhood development, many researchers have noted that the educational attainment of a child's parents is a reasonable predictor of the academic achievement of a child. More educated parents (and mothers) could be better equipped to help their children with their homework for instance and understanding concepts. Evidence suggests that parents often exert a more direct and powerful influence on children's attainment and academic achievement than teacher's or the school environment. Part of this effect operates through the time parents spend with children. More literate parents may spend more time, or the quality of time spent on activities could be more productive and effective on children's development. Educated parents are also likely to be more supportive of learning.

¹ http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=5860

They provide their children with greater learning opportunities, assistance, and pressure for learning. Indeed, parent's own perception of how effective they can be in developing their child's future may be determined by their own education levels.

Whatever the channels of effect, there can be no doubt that children of more educated parents potentially face a better future compared to those with less education. Because children spend more time with mothers and mothers are the key caregivers, mother's education becomes more critical. Mother's with even very low levels of literacy are better placed than those with no education and literacy to aid their children's development in more positive ways. Despite the importance of this relationship, it has hardly been studied in Pakistan. There are a few exceptions in recent years. Andrabi, Das and Khwaja (2009) find that more educated mothers in Pakistan spend more time on educational activities with their children at home. Children of more educated mothers also have higher achievement scores in mathematics, English and Urdu language. Aslam and Kingdon (2010) find that more educated mothers have healthier children and suggest that this is because educated mothers have more health knowledge and are more empowered within the home.

These studies are in the right direction not only because they help understand the education-childhood development relationship but also because they identify the key channels through which effects are likely to operate. However, these studies are also constrained by the fact that they are limited in terms of data. Both studies are based on data from a few districts covering either one or two provinces of the country (Andrabi et.al's study covers 112 villages in 3 districts from Punjab and Aslam and Kingdon's study is based on data from 9 districts across Punjab and the-then North West Frontier Province). Thus, the coverage from both studies is hardly 'national'.

One of the main deterrents to understanding the potential linkages between child achievement and parental education in the past has been the lack of quality data. Studying this relationship requires data on child achievement levels, information on characteristics such as child age, gender, household demographics and critically on mother's own education. For the first time, the ASER-Pakistan team has undertaken this mammoth task with the view to be able to address this relationship. While no claims are made about determining causal relationships, the very first step to understanding this critical relationship is to be able to provide a descriptive view of the association between mother's and father's education and child achievement. ASER-2010 helps provide this descriptive view for the very first time. While the ASER data is not as nuanced and rich as that used in Andrabi et.al's study (2009) or Aslam and Kingdon's study (2010), the very fact that it covers a huge number of districts and allows a descriptive view of critical relationships is a step in the right direction. It allows us to understand the associations between child achievement levels and parental education and even mother's own 'achievement' (as measured through her own literacy when tested in the language test) while controlling for socio-economic status (captured through household asset ownership) and other factors such as household size. More importantly, we are able to look at all these relationships by gender to see if there are any differing patterns of relationships emerging i.e. is mother's education differentially associated with girls' achievement compared to boys' and so on. This rich data set allows us, for the first time, to establish correlations and patterns that not only depict the critical parental-education-child-achievement nexus, but also allow us to come closer to understanding some other correlations that hint at the possible pathways through which these relationships may possibly work.

References:

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