

Gender Gaps in Educational Access and Learning

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Pakistan has long been an international outlier in gender gaps in education. Girls lag behind boys in education access, in the quality of schooling available, and in the outcomes of education. Far from narrowing over time, the gender gap in primary enrollment rose by 30 percentage points between 1985 and 1995, superseding even Afghanistan where the corresponding gap rose by 18 percentage points over the same period (computed from Conly 2004).

In recent years Pakistan has made real progress towards achieving the education Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of universal education and to some extent achieving gender equality. Enrolment is on the rise the net primary enrolment rate (NER) has increased from 57 % in 2001 to 66 % in 2008 according to UNESCO figures (www.worldbank.org). More girls are in schools today than ever before. Youth literacy rate (for the 15-24 year olds) stands at 69% (UNESCO, www.worldbank.org). Even at 66%, the NER at the primary level is far from close to 100%. This overall figure however, masks large gender disparities. According to some estimates, female literacy in tribal areas is as low as 3%. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) that measures poverty using ten indicators (including nutrition, schooling, housing etc.), more than 50% of Pakistan's population is below the poverty line. Despite this, public education expenditure as a percentage of GDP has declined from 2.2% in 2005-2006 to about 2.0% in 2009-2010 (Ministry of Education). Among governments in the South Asia region, Pakistan appears to be giving the lowest priority to education.

Given the magnitude of education disparities, it is unsurprising to find stark gender differences in adult labor market outcomes, too: Pakistani women lag far behind men in labor force participation, are concentrated in a much narrower set of occupations, perform mostly unskilled jobs, and have substantially lower earnings in employment than men, as we will show later. Low education levels trigger a vicious cycle, wherein poorly educated women are left ill-equipped to obtain well-paid jobs and this, in turn, reduces incentives for parents to invest in girls' schooling.

Latest ASER 2010 data gives a more nuanced view on gender gaps in educational access by allowing a comparison of enrolment in government versus private schools. Among those children enrolled in school, there are striking gender differences in the types of schools attended. For instance, for all Pakistan, among all children aged 6-16 years enrolled in government schools, about 38% are girls compared to 62% boys. A larger proportion of girls (about 41%) are enrolled in private schools. While this suggests that parents send their girls to fee-paying private schools, the worrying aspect of this picture is that far fewer girls are enrolled in both government and private schools compared to boys, a pattern we observe in other data sets from Pakistan as well. There are interesting differences in gender patterns across regions. For instance, a slightly higher proportion of girls are enrolled in government schools compared to boys (52% compared to 48% boys) while in Balochistan the gender gap in government (private) school enrolment is as high as 34 (37) percentage points. The interesting point to note is that while gender gaps in government school enrolment are high, the gaps in private school enrolment are often not as high across the different regions in Pakistan. The fact that parents are increasingly sending their daughters to fee-charging schools is a noteworthy trend. On the one hand it may be indicative of persistent poor access to government schools in rural areas and parents corresponding reluctance to send their daughters to far-away schools. They may prefer to send them to near-by private schools instead. Alternatively, it may reflect growing awareness of the need to educate their daughters.

While Pakistan still struggles with issues of gender gaps in educational access, it is now widely recognised worldwide that it is not just the years of schooling that matter to life and economic outcomes but the quality of schooling attained. It is what is learnt in school that matters to earnings, occupational choice, fertility, mortality, women's empowerment and economic growth. What do we know about the quality of schooling available to Pakistan's children today? There are numerous reports that continue to focus on 'inputs' and not enough about the 'outputs' of our education systems. According to the Economic Survey 2009-2010, there are still about 60% government schools in Pakistan without electricity, 33% schools without water facilities, and 11% without physical buildings. These figures are surely shocking. They paint a despondent and dreary picture indeed and while they give us a clue, they still don't tell us much about the question we really should be asking: what are Pakistan's children actually learning in schools?

ASER 2010 data is unique in that it allows us to paint a picture not just of educational access but also delve into details of the quality of schooling acquired. There are some striking findings with respect to what children aged 6-16 years know across rural areas in the 33 districts covered and also in the gender differences in learning levels across Pakistan. Overall, learning levels across Pakistan are relatively poor. For instance, only slightly more than 50% of children in class 5 across Pakistan can read a story in any language and only about 35-36% children in class 5 can do subtraction or division. In terms of gender differences, the key findings reveal that while there are no striking gaps in reading or learning levels for all Pakistan, the regional differences leave much to be desired. For instance, only 14% girls aged 6-16 in rural Balochistan compared to about 20% or so boys can read at least a sentence or subtract with 2 digits carrying. Compare this to Punjab where about 38% girls (33%) can read a sentence (do subtraction) compared to 41% (37%) boys. Thus while overall learning quality is relatively poor for both boys and girls across Pakistan, girls in rural areas fare far worse than boys in reading and arithmetic learning levels.

The ASER 2010 data gives us a snapshot view of the large gender gaps in access and schooling quality that still persist across Pakistan today. The 2010 Global Gender Gap report has ranked Pakistan 132nd out of 134 countries suggesting that Pakistan has a tremendously long way to go to achieve equality in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. As it stands, the report measures gender indices only in terms of educational access (i.e. enrolment gender gaps at the primary, secondary and tertiary level). Data constraints prevent estimations that include measures of gaps in schooling quality. Only recently, educationists, policymakers and researchers have recognised the importance of measures of quality. It is crucial for Pakistan to improve gender indicators not just in terms of educational access but also in terms of quality if real progress and growth has to be achieved and if Pakistan wants its gender-gap score to improve in the near future.

