

Rural-Urban Divide in Education - Inequities Reinforcing Inequities

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Education is the answer to most of the woes of our country. It is one of the key instruments that can bridge the gap between the under-developed country that Pakistan currently is and the developed one that it can be. To that end, it is important to understand what 'education' in this perspective, means. Is increase in enrolment the answer? Most of the South Asian countries, including Pakistan, have followed this model of just concentrating on enrolments over the last decade, but have still not been able to achieve all of their MDG and EFA objectives. Therefore, in addition to 'how long a child stayed in school?' question, the 'what a child learns while in school?' question is also critical.

Access and learning is crucial for development but 'equitable' access and learning is vital for 'sustained' development. The various dimensions of inequality (for example gender, socio-economic, rural-urban), if not taken into account, can result in lop-sided growth that has the potential to do more harm than good to the society. Such development stands the risk of strengthening the current power structures and relegating the already marginalized, further down the abyss. These inequalities do not exist in isolation - one form reinforces the other. This means that there are common causes, functioning through multiple mechanisms, inflating the inequities in the education sector.

Taking the case of rural-urban imbalance, we find that a rural child is 32% less likely to go to school and 50% more likely to be illiterate than an urban child¹. Looking at these figures through the gender lens, we see that, as compared to their urban counterparts, rural males are 19.5% while rural females are 47% less likely to attend school. Out of those who do attend schools, for every two urban females only one rural female completes primary or higher level of education; this ratio for urban and rural males is 1.4:1. Therefore, there is substantial gap between rural and urban localities, which magnifies in terms of gender disparities (the gender parity index is 1.01 in urban areas and 0.68 in rural areas)².

The rural-urban divide hence also exacerbates the gender inequity. The rural landscape and lifestyle, which limits the set

up of educational infrastructure on one hand and the access to that infrastructure on the other, works to the particular disadvantage of the females of that community. From the demand side, rural poverty and demand for child labour, and supply side factors like limited number of schools, greater distances from residence to school, low quantity and quality of teachers and inadequate public expenditure in rural areas, leads to restricted access to basic education. These dynamics have a multiplier effect, as it is more or less the same factors that fuel the gender gap.

Given the dismal picture painted by the disparities in enrolment figures, an interesting image comes to light when the 'learning' part of the story is taken into account. In term of learning outcomes (measured by Punjab Education Commission report 2011) for the province of Punjab, the urban students do only marginally better than the rural students in grade 5 and grade 8 exams. In fact, for a few subjects rural students score higher marks than the urban students. Measuring relative scores though allows us to rank different categories, does not show the true picture on the absolute scale. Learning levels are very poor all across the board, as ASER 2011 depicts: for the rural areas, on a test based on grade-2 level curriculums for Urdu and English, only 57% and 40% of grade 5 students (for Urdu and English language respectively) passed; similarly on a grade-3 level test for mathematics, only 37.3% passed. These numbers were around 10-15 percentage points better for the three urban districts included in ASER 2011. The issue of low absolute scores remains, but substantial expected disparity between rural and urban does not exist³. According to PEC, females score somewhat higher than males in both rural and urban areas and the differential is much higher for urban localities. This is also corroborated by ASER (2011) findings for the urban districts of Lahore and Karachi. However, ASER 2011 for rural locations, shows that for both languages and mathematics, boys perform better than girls, albeit only slightly.

Before we read too much into the learning outcomes narrative from disparities point of view, it must be noted

¹ Ministry of Education. (2011). Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey PSLM 2010-11. Islamabad: Federal Bureau of Statistics.

² Data on literacy is for population aged 19 or above.

³ Academy of Educational Planning and Management. (2008). Pakistan Education Statistics 2007-08. Islamabad: Ministry of Education.

⁴ Gendal, M. B. (2010). Secondary Analysis of Examination Results 2010: Performance of 5th and 8th Grade Students in Punjab, Pakistan. Lahore: Punjab Examination Commission.

that the net enrolment rates (NERs) in the rural areas fall substantially as the level of education increases. The difference between urban and rural NER is 20% for primary, 41.4% for middle and a sizeable 50% for the Matric level (16%, 38.7% and 47.6% respectively for Punjab)⁴. For all of these levels this difference is greatest for females. The absolute net enrolment rates for girls are also particularly low; only 14% rural females are enrolled at the middle and 8% at the Matric level⁵. For that reason, self-selection might be the determining factor behind the high learning levels for rural students (may be it is only the smartest children that are sent to school, and more particularly, allowed to complete primary or higher education). Here again, is another powerful evidence of greater gender disparities in rural, as compared to urban locations.

Therefore, access and gender disparity is worse in rural while learning shows a relatively better (though highly suspect) picture. While on the one hand the differences between rural and urban are quite alarming, particularly given their potential of feeding into gender disparities, on the other hand this means that if steps were taken to remove the rural-specific factors causing lack of access, the affect would again be multiplied, but this time positively, by improving the gender differences too. Therefore, a location-just policy plan will also serve as a gender-just (and income-just) plan.

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