

THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATING GIRLS IN PAKISTAN: RE-THINKING THE ROLE OF THE NON-STATE SECTOR?

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The conversation on girls' education is fast becoming rhetoric. Those working on girls' education in academic and policy circles know the value of educating the girl child. We know it confers economic benefits; the returns to education literature convincingly shows the wage benefits over the lifetime of acquiring an education for women. We also know that education confers lifetime and social benefits – improved health, reduced fertility, greater empowerment - many of which we cannot even quantify. And yet, girls' education remains a challenge in Pakistan.

The persistence of gender gaps in educational outcomes has been repeatedly highlighted by ASER data over the last few years. A comparison of ASER enrolment data for 6-16 year olds across government and private schools indicates some improvements in girls' enrolments over the 3 year period. For example, girls' enrolment in government schools appear to have improved at the national level from 35% in 2014 to 38% in 2016 and from 37% to about 40% over the same period in private schools. This 3% increase is not a small feat when focusing on absolute numbers – there are 4,877 more girls in school in 2016 in both government and private schools (69,295) than there were in 2014 (64,418). This national picture, whilst masking some differences across the provinces and regions, overall depicts a pattern of small improvements in enrolment across the board with some differences across the government and private sectors.



Unfortunately, these small (but significant) improvements in enrolment numbers are not necessarily reflected in corresponding improvements in learning outcomes. Tables 2-4 depict learning outcomes for 5-16 year olds over the 3 years (2014-2016) and illustrate the percentage of boys and girls able to read Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto sentences, read at least words in English or be able to at least do subtraction in Arithmetic across the provinces/regions and at the national level. The tables depict a dire picture – of worryingly low levels of learning as measured through the ASER domains and a persistence of poor outcomes over the years. There are wide disparities across the provinces/regions, with some areas faring far better than others and being well above the national average. The broad patterns, however, remain of persistently low and, in some instances, deteriorating learning outcomes.

Table 1: Percentage, Enrolment by Gender & Type of School 2014, 2015 and 2016 (6-16 year olds)

Territory	Government						Private					
	2014		2015		2016		2014		2015		2016	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boy	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boy	Girls
National	65	35	65	35	62	38	63	37	62	38	60	40
Balochistan	70	30	70	30	69	31	67	33	70	30	64	36
FATA	72	28	74	26	68	32	82	18	81	19	78	22
GB	62	38	62	38	56	44	57	43	60	40	57	43
ISB	57	43	45	55	57	43	58	42	51	49	57	43
KP	67	33	67	33	62	38	68	32	68	32	63	37
Punjab	59	41	60	40	57	43	58	42	58	42	57	43
Sindh	65	35	64	36	62	38	62	38	62	38	64	36
AJK	56	44	55	45	53	47	55	45	56	44	53	47

Table 2: % of children aged 5-16 able to read at least a sentence in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto

Territory	2014		2015		2016	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
National	46	39	49	41	43	36
Balochistan	34	23	35	19	32	16
FATA	48	28	51	30	42	17
GB	53	48	57	52	47	44
ISB	65	61	61	64	55	64
KP	51	40	58	46	46	36
Punjab	55	52	56	54	51	48
Sindh	36	29	40	33	34	25
AJK	61	60	68	67	73	71

Table 3: % of children aged 5-16 able to read at least words in English

Territory	2014		2015		2016	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
National	49	42	51	43	40	33
Balochistan	33	22	35	18	30	15
FATA	57	34	57	35	43	18
GB	63	57	63	60	48	45
ISB	77	75	62	66	51	59
KP	60	48	64	53	45	34
Punjab	59	56	57	55	47	44
Sindh	31	25	36	31	26	19
AJK	67	67	73	71	71	69

Table 4: % of children aged 5-16 able to do at least subtraction in Arithmetic

Territory	2014		2015		2016	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
National	45	38	49	41	44	36
Balochistan	29	19	36	18	32	15
FATA	53	29	55	33	46	20
GB	56	51	59	54	51	47
ISB	69	68	59	61	51	60
KP	55	43	61	49	49	37
Punjab	54	50	54	51	51	48
Sindh	32	25	37	31	32	24
AJK	59	59	67	66	77	75

What tables 1-4 also depict are the large and persistent pro-male gaps in learning outcomes over the years across the domains assessed using ASER instruments. These gaps are illustrated further in Tables 5-6 below.

Table 5: Pro-male gaps in enrolment (6-16 years), by school type

Territory	Pro male gaps in G school access (% boys enrolled in G school - % girls enrolled in G school)			Pro-male gaps in P school access (% boys enrolled in P school - % girls enrolled in P school)		
	2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016
National	30	30	24	26	24	20
Balochistan	40	40	38	34	40	28
FATA	44	48	36	64	62	56
GB	24	24	12	14	20	14
ISB	14	-10	14	16	2	14
KP	34	34	24	36	36	26
Punjab	18	20	14	16	16	14
Sindh	30	28	24	24	24	28
AJK	12	10	6	10	12	6

Table 5 illustrates the wide gender gaps in access to government and private schools across Pakistan. The table indicates that male children aged 6-16 are more likely to go to government and private schools as compared to girls but that these gaps in enrolment have been narrowing broadly over time. Whilst enrolment gaps in favour of boys are persistently wide and sticky in some regions (FATA and to some extent Balochistan), the fact that we see a narrowing over time is welcome news in a country facing challenges to girls education. Nevertheless, the fact remains that far fewer girls continue to enrol in schools in the country as compared to boys.

Table 6 further illustrates the challenge facing the country. Not only is Pakistan far from achieving parity in access to education, there are also wide gaps in learning outcomes (though significantly less than in enrolment), with boys almost always performing better than girls. These gaps are also persistent over the 2014-2016 period with almost no noticeable improvement. Some regions continue to depict alarmingly wide gaps in favour of males – FATA in particular (followed by Balochistan and KP) stand out as regions with extremely high pro-male gaps in learning outcomes that are persistently wide in favour of males.

Table 6: Pro-male gaps in learning outcomes, ages 5-16 years

	% boys - % girls (able to read at least sentence), Urdu			% boys -% girls (able to read at least word), English			% boys - % girls (able to do at least subtraction), Arithmetic		
	2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016
National	7	8	7	7	8	7	7	8	8
Balochistan	11	16	16	11	17	15	10	18	17
FATA	20	21	25	23	22	25	24	22	26
GB	5	5	3	6	3	3	5	5	4
ISB	4	-3	-9	2	-4	-8	1	-2	-9
KP	11	12	10	12	11	11	12	12	12
Punjab	3	2	3	3	2	3	4	3	3
Sindh	7	7	9	6	5	7	7	6	8
AJK	1	1	2	0	2	2	0	1	2

Such discrepancies in enrolment and learning outcomes and the persistence of them over time are perturbing. Pakistan's Right to Education Act guarantees every child aged five to sixteen the right to free and compulsory education. How this right will actually be guaranteed to each and every child, however, remains elusive. How best to overcome the financial constraints and limitations to not only get more children – and more girl children – into school and to ensure the provision of a quality education to them? I would argue that there is a real and serious need for the role of the private and non-state sector to be reconsidered. The data from ASER repeatedly highlight the significant presence of the private/non-state sector across the country. And simple descriptive statistics (such as those in Table 5 above) also appear to suggest that whilst there are pro-male gaps in accessing private schools, these gaps are not any wider than those in the government sector (and in some instances are less): girls are also sent to fee-charging private schools and to the non-state sector by parents. Does the private/non-state sector, then, provide a potential solution to the educational woes of the country? Perhaps, but with several caveats. One of the key ones being that the non-state sector needs to be effectively understood and successfully regulated to ensure it delivers a quality education.

Pakistan's approach to the non-state sector has been "incrementally opportunistic": the government has mobilised the private sector in explicit and diversified ways for example through the establishment of semi-autonomous bodies (e.g., education foundations) in all

provinces, and more recently, the use of core funding to support per child, management and compliance costs under the PPP Acts (2010) and / PPP (Amendment) Act 2014 but made other policies without fully understanding the diversity of the sector. Moreover, it appears that the implications of legislation and ordinances on the diverse providers on the ground in meeting the educational needs of millions of children, both boys and girls, and the achieving of equity of access and opportunity for both genders, are not often considered. This is partly due to a lack of understanding of the

nature of the role of the private sector in Pakistan. For example, educational legislation and policy for private schools in the country has typically been framed with the more 'visible' urban high-fee private schools in mind. This is unmindful of the huge diversity of private schools at varying fee levels, including a large number charging relatively lower fees. Furthermore, educational legislation and policy for private schools has often been made in the face of serious knowledge gaps: e.g., lack of information about the true extent of private provision/enrolment even at the primary level, and even more so at secondary levels; many schools are not even registered so there is very little, if any, research on the fee/costs/teacher salaries of private schools and the value for money they offer; or on the impact of private schools on the gendering of enrolment and retention rates in both private and government schools etc. It is in these lacunae that government policies are often made to the detriment of the child.

The girl child in Pakistan needs to be in school and needs to be learning. Gender equality in education goes far beyond parity in participation – something Pakistan is yet to achieve – to include a whole range of factors. These include, and are not limited to, the need for a safe and non-discriminatory school environment, non-discriminatory teaching and girl friendly schools and well trained teachers able to effectively impart learning to all etc. Whether this is achieved through government schools, through fee-charging private or non-state schools or a mix of both is a serious consideration for policy makers. The key is to ensure the right to education for each child is not just guaranteed in rhetoric and political discourse but actually implemented in reality.