THE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY AND REFORM IN PAKISTAN: AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article critically examines the persistent educational inequalities in Pakistan and analyzes the structural, administrative, and socio-cultural barriers that hinder equitable access and quality learning. Drawing upon national statistics and global reports, the study highlights challenges such as gender disparity, rural-urban divides, outdated curriculum, low public investment, and weak governance. It explores how these factors contribute to exclusion, learning poverty, and regional disparities. The paper also proposes evidence-based reforms including curriculum innovation, teacher training, budget restructuring, and promotion of technical education. Emphasis is placed on inclusive strategies and community engagement to ensure long-term improvement. The analysis suggests that addressing these issues is essential for national development, gender equity, and the fulfillment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

Keywords: *Educational Inequality, Policy Reform, Gender Disparity, Pakistan Education System.*

1. Understanding Educational Inequality in Pakistan

Educational inequality remains a significant challenge in Pakistan, deeply rooted in social, economic, and political disparities. Despite numerous reforms over the decades, access to quality education continues to be unevenly distributed across regions, genders, and socio-economic groups. This analytical perspective explores the multifaceted nature of educational inequality in Pakistan, examining historical patterns, policy interventions, and structural barriers that hinder equal opportunities for all learners. By critically analyzing these dimensions, the study aims to highlight the urgent need for comprehensive and context-sensitive reforms to promote equity and social justice within the Pakistani education system. Access to quality education is essential for building a peaceful and prosperous global society. It plays a key role in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), which promotes inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Education provides individuals with the knowledge and skills needed for better health, employment, and social harmony. This study examines how geographical differences impact academic performance by identifying the key factors that lead to unequal educational outcomes. It also offers practical and cost-effective solutions to address spatial disparities in education. The findings can guide policymakers in developing targeted strategies to reduce educational inequalities (Mishra et al., 2023).

Nikolai et al. (2022) note that regional disparities in education have long been studied, especially in OECD countries since the 1960s. While efforts to expand education reduced some rural-urban gaps, location still affects access. Inequities arise from uneven program availability, admission policies, weak rural infrastructure, and limited support for marginalized groups. Cultural, historical, and policy factors remain overlooked. Addressing these gaps requires balancing equity with cost and local needs.

2. Spatial and Structural Disparities in Access

Despite all the efforts made by the government, there are still significant disparities in the education system of Pakistan. Educational inequality leads to high illiteracy rates, unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. Helbig and Sendzik (2022) examined reasons behind regional disparities in educational access. Using panel data and policy records, they found that changes in school laws alone don't explain rising university entry rates. Instead, shifts in social structure and general modernization have a stronger influence. Educational policies respond to these changes but may still reinforce inequality.

Adeel and Mustafa (2023) highlight strong educational disparities across and within provinces of Pakistan. Urban areas, especially capitals, have higher literacy than rural regions. Using the Gini Coefficient (2001–2015 data), the study finds rural areas face more inequality. Disparity trends are improving overall, but the rural-urban gap remains. KPK and Balochistan show less gap; Punjab and Sindh show more. Education inequality rises with poverty and unemployment, but falls with gender parity and more institutions. The study suggests reducing gender bias, improving access, and increasing school availability to lessen disparity.

Rashid et al. (2025) identify factors behind student preferences for public over private colleges, including poor facilities, low teacher availability, and limited awareness. Shah (2025) highlights major issues in higher education such as inadequate funding, outdated curricula, and weak management. Bashir, et al., (2025) explore how socioeconomic factors like income gaps, parental education, and rural-urban divides limit university access in Pakistan. The study shows that low-income students face financial and academic hurdles. It calls for inclusive policies, scholarships, and support programs to improve equity in higher education. Siddiqui et al. (2025) used a qualitative approach to assess how well education policies support marginalized communities in South Punjab. Interviews with public and NGO education officers revealed gaps between policy and practice due to weak systems, poor monitoring, and limited accountability. The study highlights the need for stronger community involvement and better coordination to improve quality education for disadvantaged groups.

3. Socioeconomic and Gender Barriers

Ali et al., (2025) reveal that girls from mountainous regions face significant access barriers due to economic and cultural factors. A mother's education and household income greatly influence whether daughters pursue higher education. Rehman et al. (2023) analyzed gender disparities in school enrollment and secondary completion across Pakistan using official education statistics and PSLM data. The study compared provinces and districts to explore how regional factors affect girls' access to education. Results show significant gender gaps, especially in rural areas, and highlight the need for targeted interventions to improve female education outcomes.

Batool and Liu (2021) investigated how socioeconomic status affects higher education enrollment in Pakistan. The study used 15 years of national data and applied statistical methods like correlation analysis, PCA, and regression. They found a strong positive relationship between enrollment and indicators such as government expenditure on education, while unemployment had a negative impact. Male and total enrollment were closely linked to both government spending and unemployment, whereas female enrollment was mainly influenced by public expenditure. The findings highlight those socioeconomic inequalities are a major barrier to access, and targeted policies are needed to improve higher education participation, especially for disadvantaged groups.

Niaz and Rose (2025) examine national programs like Waseela-e-Taleem, noting their potential to improve educational access. However, they stress the importance of inclusive strategies that go beyond enrolment and ensure meaningful learning for marginalized groups.

4. Governance and Policy-Level Challenges

Sain et al. (2025) emphasize the need for improved teacher training, technology integration, and financial investment in higher education. Naqvi et al. (2025) highlight how virtual learning, when interactive, enhances student engagement and learning flexibility. Khushik (2021) discussed how education supports sustainable development in Pakistan through social, economic, and environmental dimensions. The study reviewed policies, concepts, and challenges of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), focusing on SDG-4. Using a multidisciplinary approach—such as content analysis, system modeling, and scenario building it found that good policies alone are not enough without proper implementation. The research highlights the need for curriculum reforms, teacher training, and community involvement to address sustainability challenges, especially climate change, and to better meet national and global SDG goals.

Ali et al. (2025) investigate how political elite control negatively affects school education in Balochistan, Pakistan. Using elite theory, the study highlights how elite dominance deepens inequality, hinders meritocracy, and limits access to quality education. Key issues identified include poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, absenteeism, and favoritism. The authors recommend a grassroots policy approach that ensures fair resource distribution, strengthens teacher training, and promotes accountability. They also suggest public-private partnerships to reduce elite interference and support inclusive education reform.

5. Curriculum and Pedagogical Relevance

Castelli and Kennedy (2025) argue for a shift from behaviorist and test-based education toward models that promote critical thinking, emotional development, and cultural awareness. Real learning should be connected to students' lived experiences. Nisar and Din (2025) analyze how Pakistan's education system compares with global benchmarks. They assess curriculum, teaching methods, assessments, and technology use. The study shows that Pakistan lags in key areas like critical thinking and creativity. Socio-economic issues and poor infrastructure also affect quality and access. The paper stresses the need for curriculum updates, teacher training, and policy reforms to align with international standards.

Akram and Rasool (2025) link technical education to economic growth, emphasizing the need for practical alignment with industry. Rehman et al. (2025) stress the role of family and society in shaping public perceptions of vocational training and propose reforms to strengthen TEVTA's role in national development. Khalid et al. (2025) explore the influence of the pandemic on online learning. They find that teacher-student preparedness and institutional type significantly affected e-learning experiences, suggesting better training can improve future implementation.

6. Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Influences on Education

Khan and Iqbal (2025) show that Pakistan's use of cultural diplomacy, Islamic arts, and religious values improves global perception and promotes peace. Qadri and Begum (2025) emphasize interfaith harmony through inclusive academic initiatives. Ali (2025) critiques English-centred language policies that marginalize regional languages, reinforcing social and class disparities. Ullah et al. (2025) explore the role of education in developing human capital in underdeveloped regions of Pakistan. The study focuses on improving skills through technical education and institutional reforms. Using literature reviews of formal and religious education systems, it highlights the need for quality and accessible education, especially in rural areas. Findings show that education linked with well-being can uplift marginalized communities and support sustainable development. The paper emphasizes the importance of targeted efforts to strengthen educational institutions and training systems.

7. Localizing Global Education Commitments

Dingwall and Hall (2025) demonstrate how international education policies like UNESCO's Inclusive Education Policy are reinterpreted within Pakistan's socio-political framework. Ethnicity, kinship, and geopolitics complicate successful reform implementation. Nasir et al. (2025) explore how globalization influences educational leadership in Pakistan. Using a qualitative review method, the study examines leadership challenges, reform implementation, and adaptation strategies. Findings highlight the need for strong governance, policy alignment, leader training, and reduced political interference. The authors stress targeted support for underdeveloped regions through better funding and infrastructure.

8. Public vs. Private Education and Inclusion Challenges

Bhutta and Muzaffar (2025) identify barriers to inclusive education in both public and private sectors, including insufficient training, poor infrastructure, and unsupportive social attitudes. Implementation gaps in inclusion policies remain a key issue. Ali et al. (2025) explored the effects of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) on education, culture, and diversity in Pakistan. Using surveys and interviews with educators, the study found that while SNC promotes unity and equal education, it overlooks regional languages, cultural diversity, and minority representation. Teachers face implementation challenges due to limited training and local content. The study recommends making the curriculum inclusive, flexible, and regionally relevant to ensure broader acceptance and effectiveness.

9. Research Gap and Conclusion of the Study

The reviewed literature provides substantial insight into the multifaceted nature of educational inequality in Pakistan, highlighting issues such as regional disparities, gender-based exclusion, socio-economic limitations, governance failures, and curricular inadequacies (Adeel & Mustafa, 2023; Batool & Liu, 2021; Rehman et al., 2023; Rashid et al., 2025; Siddiqui et al., 2025). While many studies address these challenges individually focusing on access, equity, quality, or policy inefficiencies there remains a significant research gap in systematically linking educational inequality with the practical outcomes of recent policy reforms. In particular, there is a lack of empirical investigation into how initiatives like the Single National Curriculum (SNC), TEVTA reforms, and strategies aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) have impacted marginalized communities or reduced disparities in actual school settings (Ali et al., 2025; Khushik, 2021; Nisar & Din, 2025).

Additionally, most existing research tends to be descriptive and lacks a strong theoretical foundation. The application of critical educational frameworks such as Social Reproduction Theory (McFadden, 2025), Human Capital Theory (Leoni, 2025), and Critical Pedagogy (Seal et al., 2025) is limited, even though these perspectives can offer valuable insights into how educational systems may continue to reinforce structural inequalities. These globally recognized theories are rarely adapted or explored within the unique socio-political and cultural landscape of Pakistan (Dingwall & Hall, 2025; Nasir et al., 2025).

Furthermore, although regional and gender disparities are well documented, there is a noticeable absence of localized and participatory reform models that can be realistically implemented in underserved regions like South Punjab and Balochistan (Ali, Khan, & Ali, 2025; Ullah et al., 2025). Very few studies have explored the lived experiences of students, teachers, and communities most affected by inequality, which restricts the ability to design holistic and inclusive policy solutions that address ground-level challenges effectively.

Future research should, therefore, prioritize empirical assessments of the effects of educational reforms on inclusion and equity. It should incorporate culturally responsive theoretical approaches suited to Pakistan's diverse context and explore grassroots-level barriers to reform implementation using qualitative and mixed-methods research (Shaikh & Benedetti, 2024; Sain, Aziz, & Serban, 2025). Filling this gap is essential to bridge the

disconnect between education policy and classroom realities and to ensure that educational reforms contribute meaningfully to social justice and national development.

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