

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN RESTRAINING
PAKHTUN PARENTS TO EDUCATE THEIR FEMALE CHILDREN**

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ABSTRACT

Islam is an integral part of Pakhtunwali. Islam significantly shapes, directs and molds the life of Pakhtuns, for example, Pakhtun directs there familial, cultural, economic, and political as well as educational life in the light of Islam. Framed under the qualitative research design, the current study investigates into the role of religion (Islam) in directing Pakhtun parents to educate their female children. This study has been conducted in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Purposive sampling technique has been utilized to select samples from the population of interest, and an interview guide and focus group discussion has been utilized to collect information from respondents. The collected information has been transcribed and analyzed thematically. Findings of the current study reveal that Pakhtun follows Islam when it comes to educate female children. However, in majority of cases the true essence of Islam regarding education specifically female education has been misinterpreted by the so-called and uneducated religious preachers and leaders (e.g. Mullahs). As a result, instead of the true essence of Islam (which promotes education equally among male and female) the belief system is misinterpreted and it works as a barrier and hurdle to female education in the study area. It is suggested that education should be promoted among religious

preachers who will understand the true essence of Islam, and will interpret the guidance properly to the followers.

Keywords: *Education; Female; Gender; Religion; Islam*

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Education is a universal, fundamental human right of every individual, irrespective of the sex, race and gender. It is recognized as such by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and time and again reaffirmed in human rights conventions (UNESCO, 2012). Education is an eminent aspect of society because of the fact that research has shown that education is an effective developmental aspect e.g. education is a hallmark for socio-economic development in any given society (Basic Education Coalition, 2004). According to social scientists (e.g. sociologists, economists, anthropologists etc.) investment in education is one of the hallmarks for socio-economic development as education is a source of creation and polishing of special capabilities (see Temple, 1999). However, despite of the fact that education (both for female and male) is linked with socio-economic development, there is significant educational gap across genders, for instance, till 2005, only 59 (about one-third) of 181 countries with data available had achieved gender parity in their (e.g. in gross enrolment rates) for both primary and secondary education (UNESCO, 2007). Although, disparities in primary and secondary enrolment rates are decreasing, they have not yet been eliminated (for further details see UNESCO, 2010, 11).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping, directing and molding parental perception towards female education. Religion is an important part of human society and is one of the structural and functional units of any given society. Similarly, it is an integral part of Pakistani as well as Pakhtun society. Traditionally, Pakhtuns are known for their devotion to Islam and its belief

system, and therefore Islamic belief became an integral part of Pakhtun culture that is also termed as Pakhtunwali.

Islam in many instances has devised parents and elders to educate their children. There is no single instance where Islamic belief system had supported boys educated and negated girls education. However, despite of the mentioned fact, it is evident that Pakhtuns use and miss-interpret the belief system as opposing to female education especially the modern formal education. Therefore, this study is an effort to identify that how Pakhtun parents in the study area miss-interpret religion to not educate their female.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study investigates into the role of religion (Islam) in directing Pakhtun parents to educate their female children and is based on the following research questions.

- How parents perceive their daughter's education in context of Islam?
- What is the perception of the religious leader (e.g. Qari or Mullah) regarding female education in the study area?
- What reasons and misinterpretations are explained by religious leaders for not educating the females in the study area?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This research activity is framed under qualitative research design.

Locale of the Study: This study has been conducted in Chamkani Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Sampling: Purposive sampling technique has been utilized to select samples from the population of interest. This article is a part of PhD research whereby, a total of 21 parents were sampled purposively. For this article a selected portion of extracts from respondents interviews are selected which are related to the role of religion in influencing perception and focus on their daughters schooling.

Tool for data collection: An interview guide was designed and Focus Group Discussion has been arranged to collect information from respondents.

Data analysis: The collected information has been transcribed and analyzed thematically.

Ethical considerations: Discussing female and their education is one of the sensitive issues among Pakhtuns. Therefore, keeping respondents anonymous was a core concern in terms of this particular study. For this purpose, a coding method has been devised in order keep the respondents anonymous to keep them safe.

DATA ANALYSIS

The current study reveals that religion and the belief system significantly shape, direct and molds parental perception towards female education in the study area. For example, a respondent illustrated that:

“...aqeeda (belief system) is important for us, and we do things in accordance to our aqeeda whether it is familial life, business as well as education. So yes, we keep in mind Islam when educating female children...” (R-3-K)

People in the study area have their own perception regarding female education in relevance to Islam. For instance, in accordance to people of the study area, female is a part of society, who should be kept safe from evils of the society. Female needs special care in order to protect them from evils of society. Thereby, people (e.g. fathers) do not like to send their daughters to schools or for education as it exposes female (daughters) to various threats and evils of society. Hence, male follow religious ideology (misperception) to keep female safe from evils of society which consequently affects their education. In this regard, an extract from an interview is:

“...our religion order us to keep women safe from the evils and threats in society, and going to school exposes female to such evils....”. The respondent further explicated that:

“...for example, I do not want to hear that some boys were staring at my daughter when she was on the way to school. You see such evils exist on our society and the religious ideology tell us to protect our daughters from such threats and evils in society....”(R-12-Z)

While investigating about parental perception about daughters’ education in context of Islam the information shows that people in the area are not aware about the true essence of Islam with regard to education and specifically female education. People in the study area follow the Qari or Mullahs when it comes to religious ideology. For instance, a respondent argued that:

“...I doesn’t know about Islamic teachings about female education, however, I follow whatever my Mullah says....”(R-7-A)

When asked about the perception and opinion of religious leader (e.g. Qari or Mullah) regarding female education, a respondent revealed that:

“...He (Mullah) says that girls should be married as soon as possible when entered to puberty age. This will keep her safe from evils of society such as pre-marital sexual relationships....”(R-4-G).

Another respondent illustrated that:

“....the Mullah of our mosque told us to focus on the marriage of daughters instead of schooling. He told us to send female to school, however, arrange their marriage as soon as possible. So we educate our daughters but marry them when there is opportunity....”(R-3-K).

Religious leaders (e.g. Mullah) provide people with many reasons for not schooling and educating females. The note able among such reasons includes protecting female from evils and threats found in outside home environment. Another core reason is protecting a girl’s sexuality and honor which becomes difficult when girls go outside home. And, the foremost factor in this regard is the Taliban version of Islam. The Taliban version of Islam is widely

accepted in the region and the interpretation proclaimed by this version includes restraints on girls' education. The Taliban version of Islam proclaims that modern education (e.g. schooling) is based on Western values and indulges Western ideologies into the minds of children. Therefore, specifically female should be restrained from attaining such schooling. In this connection, few extracts from interviews are:

"...according to Islam protection of girls' sexuality is important therefore Mullahs tell us to take steps to protect it. Hence, we do not allow our girls to go to school and to have interaction outside home. Another method for protecting girls' sexuality is to marry them as soon as possible therefore; their schooling is not of that important...." (R-10-A).

"...there are many evidences for less importance of education in accordance to Islam. For example, Taliban also didn't allow girls' to go to school. They are religious people and if don't allow it then there is something wrong about girls schooling...." (R-9-D).

Another respondent illustrated that:

"...yes, some religious leaders told us to not send female children to school as it is based on Western ideologies, and its purpose is to indulge Western values in our minds and culture...."...." (R-7-A).

Findings of the focus group discussion indicate that religious misperceptions and misinterpretations are core barriers to female schooling in the study area. During the discussions many of the respondents enumerated that the belief system hinders female education. People in the study area follow religion in doing daily life activities, familial matters, economic and political matters. Matters and decisions related to female are significantly affected by religion and the belief system. Respondents stated that they are taught by their religious leaders to marry their girls as soon as possible in order to protect them from sexual affairs or pre-marital affairs. Pre-marital affairs are sin according to belief and therefore, schooling isn't as important as that of marriage. As a result, parents in the study area have an intense focus on marrying girls instead of their schooling. Besides, the Taliban version of Islam also affects parental perception towards schooling of their female children. Many Mullahs

follows the Taliban version of Islam and tell people to marry girls and keep them in home instead of schooling them.

DISCUSSION

Religion is an important structural functional unit in any given society (Kendall, 2007). Religions play a pivotal role in shaping, directing and molding parental perception towards female education. Similarly, it is an integral part of Pakistani as well as Pakhtun society. Traditionally, Pakhtuns are known for their devotion to Islam and its belief system, and therefore Islamic belief became an integral part of Pakhtun culture that is also termed as Pakhtunwali. In this regard, see Naz et al (2011) and Odomore (2015) who asserts that religion (Islam) is an eminent component and influencing factor in Pakhtun society.

Religious misinterpretation and misperception is one the key barriers to female education in Pakhtun society. Traditional and uneducated Mullahs and religious preachers misinterpret the Islamic ideology which significantly hinders female schooling. Naz et al (2011) and Gulati (2006) argues that cultural propagation of religion has severely damaged women's educational status where the conservative and stubborn Mullahs have an eminent role. Religion has been used as a tool for justifying discrimination against women, for instance, men are taught to be owners of women, and women role has been delimited to four walls of the house. Education/schooling is an activity which enables women to be aware of their rights. In patriarchal societies, religion is used be a barrier to women education by creating misperception that education and schooling keep away women from religion.

There are many reasons and justifications provided for hindering female education through misinterpretation of Islam. First, female is a section of society who should be kept safe from evils of the society, and schooling and education exposes female to evils and threats in society. Second, is the protection of girl's sexuality and honor which becomes difficult when girls go outside home. Third, Taliban version of Islam, for instance, Taliban opposed female schooling as they were against gender equality and considered female education as against cultural and

religious norms. These findings are supported by the studies of Naz et al (2011) and Basic Education Coalition (2004) and Usman (2012). Usman (2012) states that Taliban version of Islam is basically the misinterpretation of Islam whereby one of the key aspects is discrimination against women. In Taliban version of Islam women should be kept in home, they should not be allowed to go school and to work place. Fourth, arranging marriage of girls as early as possible is one of the important reasons for not sending girls to school or leading to dropout from school. In this connection, the study of UNESCO (2012) also indicates that Mullahs misinterpret Islam as an evidence for marrying girls as soon as possible which leads to high ratio of illiteracy in Pakistan particularly among women. The mentioned factors are important components of Pakhtun society whereby Badamasuiy (2012) argues that it is a major challenge to female education and termed it as cultural discrimination disguised as religion, and many females are blocked from school and suffer inequalities due to interpretation, often misinterpretation, of religious tenets or the perceptions of such tenets by parents.

CONCLUSION

Schooling and education is one of the fundamental rights. However, in many cultures and societies men and women are dealt differently in context of availing education. In Pakistan and in particular Pakhtun society in many instances woman are not provided with an equal opportunity to avail education as compare to men. There are many reasons for it among which the religion is significant factor in hindering woman education. Religion is often misinterpreted by traditional and uneducated Mullahs and men to restrict female from schooling or education in order to maintain their superiority. This study concludes that there are many reasons and justifications provided for hindering female education through misinterpretation of Islam including protecting female from outside evils and threats, considering marriage as more important than schooling, protecting girls sexuality and Taliban version of Islam.

SUGGESTIONS

The Holy Prophet (SWA) said many quotes and has written several chapters regarding education. For example, one of his verses is:

“the pursuit of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, man and woman”.

In the mentioned verse there is no difference among men and women rather, it encourages each and every Muslim to get education. Therefore, there is need of Mullahs who can properly interpret the Islamic ideology. Further, schooling and education for Mullahs is necessary as well.

Increase in literacy and awareness among parents is also eminent. Educated parents can study the belief system and can understand the basic philosophy of Islam themselves instead of listening it from Mullahs.

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