

# Higher education and women's empowerment in Pakistan

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## **Higher Education and Women's Empowerment in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

This paper summarises the findings of a doctoral study by Malik (2005) which explored to what extent participation in higher education offers empowerment to women in Pakistan. A survey instrument was used to question female faculty members and female students from ten public universities in Pakistan. 1,290 students and 290 faculty members responded. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were held with ten faculty members and ten students. Respondents highlighted economic independence and an increased standing within family and society as the main benefits of higher education participation. A major finding is that participation in higher education enables women to impact on a number of discriminatory practices simultaneously and thereby effect change for the better. The main recommendation is that future educational strategies be developed with the aim of further promoting gender equality in all areas of education in Pakistan, but particularly with the aim of increasing female students' participation in higher education.

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## Introduction

This paper summarizes the findings of a doctoral study by Malik (2005) which investigated the effects of participation in higher education on women's empowerment in Pakistan. The findings relate to the prevailing cultural conditions of a patriarchal society with deep-rooted societal norms which act as powerful barriers to the introduction of change. This extends to a situation where laws designed to establish greater gender parity remain largely ineffective, due to forceful societal means of influencing women to refrain from claiming the rights granted to them by law. Results from the study nonetheless indicate that participation in higher education opens up new options for women as individuals in Pakistan and further sets up ripples with the power to initiate significant changes in the direction of greater gender parity in Pakistani society.

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a sovereign country located in South Asia. Its total population is 155.5million. It is the sixth most populous country in the world (Government of Pakistan 2005a). Pakistan is a rapidly developing country, but is facing a number of challenges on both political and economic fronts. Establishing an education system that delivers free, compulsory and high quality education even at primary level remains a target for the future (Government of Pakistan 2009). Agriculture is the mainstay of Pakistan's economy, employing about 50% of the population.

In Pakistan, socio-cultural values and norms strongly influence women's position in society (Klein & Nestvogel 1992). Though the patriarchal structure is not uniform across the whole country, in general, society is male-dominated. The gender gap is deep-rooted and violation of constitutional laws is widespread (Mehdi 2004). Men tend to hold positions of power, while women are adversely affected in all spheres of life (Madhani 2007). In South Asia, Pakistan is the country with the widest gender gap and discrimination against women continues to persist in all walks of life (UNICEF 2006).

Women's empowerment and gender equality are key objectives for the United Nations (UN) and other humanitarian organisations. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) names gender equality as one of two global priorities (UNESCO 2009). Key events in the international dialogue relating to women's empowerment and gender equality are the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations 1996), the United Nations' Millennium Declaration (United Nations 2000) and the subsequently formulated Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with targets for achieving specific levels of improvements by 2015 (United Nations 2001; UNDP 2008; World Bank 2003).

Eight MDGs are named, of which the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women is one. Others include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education for all, the reduction of child mortality and improving maternal health. The MDGs are seen as highly interdependent, while gender equality and women's empowerment are regarded as instrumental in achieving all other MDGs (UNDP 2008; UNDP 2005; World Bank 2003). In general, the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment are viewed as key contributory factors towards achieving a range of high-priority humanitarian targets (United Nations 1996; United Nations 2000), including the establishment of sustainable developments and securing conflict reduction and peace (UNDP 2008; United Nations 2000; World Bank 2003).

Providing a concise definition of women's empowerment is not easy. A definition taken from POPIN (undated) captures key elements of this complex concept:

“Women’s empowerment has five components: women’s sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.”

It is interesting to see how many of the responses offered by participants in the doctoral study echo words used in the quoted definition of women’s empowerment. The entire paper is focused on gender issues within Pakistani society, pointing to the many ways in which girls and women are disadvantaged and noting how attempts to bring about change have largely failed to produce the desired results. In drawing on the experiences, hopes and aspirations of the women who participated in the study, the paper highlights how participation in higher education is able to contribute to women’s empowerment in Pakistan and what empowerment means to these women.

Access to relevant information and opportunities to engage in education are key factors in achieving greater empowerment for women. The importance of education as a means to increase gender parity is particularly highlighted in the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO 2000), which emphasises not only the need to increased access to education for girls, but equally, the need to ensure that their retention and completion rates remain high.

In order to contextualise the findings and recommendations presented in this paper, a broad sketch of the state of education in Pakistan is provided. Clearly, for any individual, higher education can only come into play if there has been an opportunity to complete the earlier stages of education successfully.

### **The State of Education in Pakistan**

Education in Pakistan presents a patchwork picture of almost bewildering complexity and magnitude (Khalid & Khan 2006). In its structure, it shares many features with education systems in Western countries. There is a pre-school level for children aged three to five years old. This is followed by five years of primary school education (grades 1-5) and subsequently five years of secondary education (grades 6-10). Pupils then enter what is termed intermediate or higher secondary education (grades 11-12). Tertiary education begins after grade 12. In contrast to degree programmes in the UK, a substantial proportion of first degrees in Pakistan are of two years’ duration, and Masters’ degrees are typically of similar length (Saeed 2007). However, overall, the structural aspects of tertiary education are complex and continue to evolve (Saeed 2007).

Enormous differences emerge when we turn to an exploration of the way education is currently implemented in Pakistan. The first thing to realise is that in Pakistan, education is neither compulsory nor free, not even at primary level (Dean 2007a; Saeed 2007). One consequence of this is that many children never enter the education system and of those who do, large numbers drop out at various stages. The figures for 2005-06 show that as many as one-third of primary school age children remained outside the school system, a figure which increased to three-quarters with respect to children of secondary-school age (Government of Pakistan 2009:3).

A major feature of education in Pakistan is that it consists of parallel systems of government schools and private provisions. Within the latter, Deeni Madaris provide education with a religious focus. Reform initiatives have been launched with the aim of adding more mainstream subject content to these institutions (Government of Pakistan 2005c).

Private education has had something of a chequered history in Pakistan. In 1972, private educational institutions were taken over by the government, but by 1979, private provision

was once more encouraged, especially in rural areas (Government of Pakistan 2005c). The Education Sector Reform Action Plan for 2001-2005 introduced the concept of Public Private Partnerships (Government of Pakistan 2004) as a means of bridging the gap in resources and expertise for achieving the goals of universal access and quality education for all.

The introduction of Non-Formal Basic Education (NFBE), based on active community involvement (Shami & Hussain 2005), represents a further attempt at closing the gap towards educational provision for all, on the basis of providing “*free and flexible learning opportunities at the door steps of those girls who otherwise are denied the basic human right of education*” (Government of Pakistan [undated]). Figures taken from the same source show that in these less formal educational settings, girls outnumber boys four to one.

Properly resourcing the education system in Pakistan remains a major hurdle. Accounts relating to primary and secondary schools in 2003-04 in Punjab (Government of Pakistan 2005c) paint a bleak picture. Items lacking in considerable numbers include basics like buildings, drinking water, electricity, latrines and furniture. These shortcomings are more pronounced and more common in rural areas, but not entirely absent from urban ones (Government of Pakistan 2009). In addition, corruption in the public sector appears to be a significant problem (Khalid & Khan 2006; Shami & Hussain 2005; Government of Pakistan 2009). Private schools tend to be better equipped, but also vary greatly in this respect. The best amongst these are considered to be on a par with comparable institutions in the UK (Saeed 2007).

The medium of instruction adds another dimension to the complexity of Pakistan’s education system. Urdu is predominantly used in schools; some elite private institutions use English as a medium of instruction, while others teach in regional minority languages. Rahman (2008) names six major languages spoken in Pakistan, alongside some 57 minor ones. Urdu is the national language of Pakistan and an important symbol of national cohesion (Government of Pakistan 2009). A major dilemma is that whilst Pakistan wishes to preserve its rich cultural heritage and the regional languages associated with it, there is also a perceived need to promote English within the schools, which is seen as the international language dominating the global market (Government of Pakistan 2009:11).

Inequalities across education in Pakistan are widespread and include gender disparities and the urban-rural divide. Literacy rates in Pakistan have increased from 45% in 2000 (Government of Pakistan 2000) to 52.5% in 2005 (Government of Pakistan 2005b), but there still exist significant gender gaps in this area. Overall figures for 2005 place literacy rates at 64.5% for males and 40.1% for females. However, literacy remains higher in the urban areas where it is 71%, against a figure of 44% in rural areas (Government of Pakistan 2005b). Even though literacy rates are increasing, the goals of universal basic education and gender parity remain distant targets for Pakistan (Farah & Shera 2007; Government of Pakistan 2009).

Against this background of an education system full of challenges for educational planners and reformers, being additionally and further disadvantaged on the grounds of gender is of great concern. Dean (2007a:2) points out that primary school enrolment rates for girls are amongst the ten lowest in the world. Drop out rates for girls in schools are very much higher than those of boys (SPARK 2006). Gender disparities at secondary level are greater than at primary level (UNESCO 2003).

The current political environment undoubtedly promotes women’s educational opportunities, but cultural attitudes towards the education of girls remain strongly biased and largely unchanged. Although successive governments have announced various programs to promote female education, they have been unable to translate their words into action because of deep-rooted political, social and cultural obstacles. Thus, the educational status of women in Pakistan remains low and is in fact amongst the lowest in the world. Women in Pakistan do not form a homogeneous group, and their opportunities for education vary greatly, depending

on the social system of which they are a part (Khan, 2007; Stern 2001; Jayaweera 1997). In rural areas, patriarchal structures often combine with poverty to limit educational opportunities for girls (Farah & Bacchus 1999). In contrast, girls and young women belonging to the upper and middle classes in urban areas have increasingly greater access to education and employment opportunities (Khan 2007).

The role of higher education as a powerful instrument and mediator of social change has been highlighted by Herz & Sperling (2004). But higher education enrolment in Pakistan is ranked amongst the lowest in the world; in 2005, it was just 2.9 % of the population between the ages of 17 and 23. Compare this to higher education participation in other developing countries, such as India and Korea, which stand at 10% and 68% respectively (Government of Pakistan 2005b). One of the major reasons for the lack of progress may lie with the fact that in 2006-07, Pakistan was spending only 2.5% of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) on education (Government of Pakistan 2009), which is considerably below the South-Asian regional average and UNESCO's recommendation of four per cent. Other reasons include the rising cost of education and high population growth rates.

## **The Research Study**

This section describes the doctoral research carried out by Malik in 2005. Throughout the rest of the paper, this research project will be referred to as 'the study'.

### **Research Methodology**

The purpose of the study was to gain a greater understanding of the sense of empowerment achieved by women in Pakistan through participation in higher education.

The target population were female faculty members and female students drawn from ten public universities in Pakistan. Data was collected in two parts. For the initial part, a survey instrument was used to obtain feedback from female faculty and students, using a five-point Likert scale with possible responses of "strongly disagree," "disagree," "neutral," "agree," and "strongly agree" for the majority of questions. The full survey contained 98 questions, out of which 14 were selected as a basis for this paper. The questions selected relate thematically to issues of gender parity and include two open-ended questions. The survey was presented to faculty members and students on paper.

Out of 102 public universities in Pakistan, 10 were selected, two from each of the four provinces of Pakistan and two from the Federal capital of Pakistan, Islamabad. Across all ten universities, the sample comprised 1500 female postgraduate students from a cross-section of departments (5% of female students from each university) and 320 female faculty members (50% of female faculty members from each university). Participants were selected randomly.

The researcher visited five out of these ten universities to administer the questionnaire in person, while postal questionnaires were sent to the remaining universities. Out of 1500 questionnaires distributed to students, 1290 (86%) were returned, and out of 320 faculty members approached, 290 (92%) responded.

The survey was followed up with semi-structured interviews with 10 faculty members and 10 students. Interviews were organized with faculty and students willing to assist further in the research. Individuals were chosen from five different universities and in each case, the researcher visited in person to conduct the interview. Each interview took 25 to 30 minutes, and the participants' responses were recorded on audio tape. Questions were presented in

English, which is the main teaching language at higher education level in Pakistan. However, most of the interviews were conducted in Urdu.

The study therefore makes use of both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire was used to gain a broad picture of the levels and nature of empowerment achieved through participation in higher education. This quantitative data was augmented by a smaller set of qualitative data obtained through the semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were based on the themes that emerged from the analysis of the survey data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The questionnaire and interview findings are presented together in this paper. Six broad themes were identified. The study revealed that participation in higher education substantially increases women's awareness of their legal rights, particularly in relation to divorce and inheritance laws. However, it also showed that the awareness of women's rights is not matched by an ability to claim these rights, for a number of reasons. The attainment of economic independence emerged as a strongly motivating factor for participating in higher education. It was found that an increased educational and economic status by women was linked to increased levels of confidence and the experience of gaining a voice within the family and the wider community. As a result of being consulted and listened to in a variety of contexts, women are enabled to contribute to family affairs and the wider society more fully. There was an awareness that parents are more willing to finance sons to engage in higher education. Finally, a number of reasons were highlighted as accounting for the fact that current practices in the education system in Pakistan reinforce and widen the gender gap, along with suggestions for rectifying some of these sources of gender discrimination within education.

### **Increased Awareness of Legal Rights**

Women in Pakistan are affected by many factors. For the most part, their lives are governed by customs and traditions. When young, their fathers decide for them on all important matters, while after marriage, husbands and in-laws take over the reins and decide matters on their behalf. Most decisions pertaining to a woman's life are taken by the male members of the family. This includes things like who they marry, decisions regarding their education and profession, in some cases even how many children a woman should have. Weiss (2003) argues that one of the reasons for women's marginalized status in all spheres of Pakistani society is their exclusion from the decision-making process.

It is inevitable that cases arise where women are trapped in marriages which are dysfunctional and where they may suffer violence and abuse. However, the practice of discouraging women from referring cases of infringement of their personal rights to courts is pervasive. Despite the fact that the Constitution of Pakistan states that all citizens are equal before the law and that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex, there exist widespread customary practices which violate these guarantees. These traditional structures are the chief obstacles to women's equal status in Pakistan (Government of Pakistan 2005c).

A fundamental problem is the lack of awareness on the part of women of the rights granted to them under Pakistani law. Thus, a survey conducted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, 2002) established that in a sample population of females from all sections of society, almost 90 % of the women questioned did not realize that they had rights at all.

Against this backdrop, one of the main objectives of the study has been to establish to what extent participation in higher education increases women's awareness of their legal rights. Both the questionnaire and the interviews explored issues relating to this topic, with a particular focus on participants' awareness of women's divorce rights and women's inheritance rights. Faculty and students gave similar responses to questions on these topics.

Survey results indicate that awareness of women's fundamental rights as enshrined under the constitution of the country is exceptionally high amongst survey participants, with 77% of staff and 71% of students giving positive responses to questions relating to this topic in a broad sense. Many degree colleges in Pakistan are single-sex institutions. It appears that at female colleges, the legal rights of women under Pakistani law are a frequent and popular topic of informal discussion. Participants' awareness of women's rights relating specifically to divorce and property inheritance was found to be even higher, with returns of 88% for staff and 79% for students. One student expressed herself as follows:

I know what my rights are... In fact, it's the tragedy of our women that they are kept ignorant... Without education, how can they know their position? (Interview quote, student)

These are very significant figures, given the levels of unawareness established by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in 2002 (Government of Pakistan 2002). However, mere awareness of legal rights is not sufficient to change women's condition of dependence, but it is clearly an essential first step towards emancipation. Gradually, it will help free women from being trapped in dysfunctional or unhappy marriages and the rightful application of inheritance rights will strengthen women's position both economically and within the family.

### **Women's ability to claim legal rights**

One of the major findings of the study is that higher education substantially increases women's awareness of their legal rights. Of greatest significance for women are the laws relating to divorce and inheritance rights. Whilst awareness of these laws represents a significant step forward, there remain substantial hurdles which prevent women from claiming these rights.

It is the interrelatedness of different cultural and customary practices that affect women so pervasively and place them in a position of subordination and dependence. This makes it difficult for women to change one aspect of their lives without simultaneously and inevitably inviting repercussions in other spheres of life.

Divorce is seen as an act of public defiance; a woman who has sought divorce is considered disobedient. Divorce is permitted by law in Pakistan, but if a woman claims this right, she is ridiculed and rejected by in-laws, by her birth family and all of society. From early childhood it is impressed upon girls that their parents' first priority is to get them married, and that obtaining a divorce is not an option for them. For a woman to appear in court is considered highly undesirable. Women who do go to court in order to obtain a divorce are likely to be subjected to humiliating responses from members of the wider family. This is intimidating and prevents most women from exercising their legal rights (Government of Pakistan 2003).

Educated women in Pakistan may be aware of their rights as defined by the constitution, but cultural and societal pressures continue to substantially prevent them from seeking their rights. The study established that 61% of faculty and 49% of students were of the view that even educated women are socially discouraged from claiming the right to divorce. Women often do not feel that they can go against the wishes of their family, because they continue to need their support. Even where women have a comparatively substantial degree of economic independence, they may not feel secure enough to let go of the support the family provides.

My husband doesn't live with me and doesn't divorce me either ...going to court, no way ... as I have no support in this from my family. (Interview quote, faculty member)

Established attitudes are deeply entrenched and the stigma of a woman seeking a divorce affects the entire family and may entail negative consequences for other family members.

My husband and I have nothing in common any more, but my mother says that I have to compromise and refrain from getting a divorce, as she is afraid that my sisters wouldn't get good proposals otherwise. (Interview quote, faculty member)

A similar picture emerges in relation to claiming inheritance rights. In Pakistan, a woman's dowry is considered to be compensation for her inheritance. Survey results indicated that 73% of faculty and 54% of students were of the opinion that educated women are socially discouraged from claiming their inheritance rights.

Social pressures in this regard are very strong and the fear of putting kinship relations at stake prevents women from claiming their share of an inheritance. Most women do not have an independent safety net when faced with a real crisis, such as a serious illness, a violent husband or financial hardship. Women are then forced to fall back on the support of the parental home or that of a brother and hence forgo their share in property, partly as insurance for the future.

We know that our religion and constitution allow us to have our shares in property but it never happened before in my family so how could I ask for that. (Interview quote, faculty member)

I could have sought legal assistance for claiming my inheritance after my parents' death, but that would have meant giving up my family. (Interview quote, student)

Nonetheless, higher education appears to have a significant impact on women's willingness to take matters to court in order to defend their rights. 31% of students, but only 22% of faculty, stated that they feel they would have the confidence to take matters to court, should this be necessary.

### **Economic independence**

In order to substantially change women's position in Pakistani society, it will be necessary to increase opportunities for them to achieve economic independence. Currently, in rural areas, young unmarried women are likely to be confined to their parental home, where they are expected to take care of siblings and generally contribute to the running of the home. Often, they are not allowed to engage in paid employment and therefore they have no means of achieving even a small measure of economic independence. Married women may go out and engage in paid employment, for example in agricultural work. However, this is likely to be very low paid and in any case, her income will normally go towards boosting the family budget. Whilst women remain economically dependent on their families or husbands, they cannot hope to achieve equal status in society. Therefore, economic independence is a major key to the elimination of gender inequalities in Pakistan.

The study sought to establish participants' level of economic independence, their attitudes towards economic independence and their views and expectations with regard to opportunities open to them for achieving economic independence in the future. Results indicate that currently, participation in higher education is one of the few ways for women in Pakistan to achieve this elusive goal.

As many as 62% of faculty stated that they have full control over their earnings.

I'm so happy that I'm not dependent on any man for my living and I don't intend to be.  
(Interview quote, faculty member)

My earnings are my own, though I spend it mostly on household needs as my husband's income is not enough and I want to give the best to my children. (Interview quote, faculty member)

Expectations for gaining economic independence amongst students were even higher, with 71% of students indicating that they expected to have control over their future earnings.

My education means a lot to me, it is a ladder to achieving what I want in life...my income will be my own. (Interview quote, student)

More generally, a rather smaller proportion of faculty members (69%) than students (87%) saw higher education as a means to increased economic independence. The figures may indicate that students' expectations are not totally realistic in this respect. However, overall responses suggest both that student participants' optimism is justified and that economic considerations play a significant role in women's striving to engage in higher education.

Nothing is more important in life than having your own money... You can achieve this only by having a good degree and then a respectable job, which would eventually improve your social status in society. (Interview quote, student)

Survey results and interview data indicate that educated women gain considerable control over their earnings. This in turn increases their confidence and forms a basis for personal development and expression. Importantly, the results show that ultimately, women's financial independence benefits their family and especially their children.

### **Participation in civic society**

Apart from any ethical considerations motivating the drive towards eliminating the gender gap in Pakistani culture, there are other pressing reasons which argue for change in the same direction. These include the establishment of a progressive civic society and the attainment of greater economic wealth. It has indeed been shown that societies which maintain gender disparities cannot benefit economically to their fullest potential (Coleman 2005). In order to achieve such objectives, it will be necessary for Pakistan to make full use of the talents of all its citizens. Increased educational opportunities for girls and women will provide them with the skills and the knowledge base necessary to contribute more fully to society, both in an economic and a civic sense. Simultaneously, education will provide women with the confidence they need to engage at all levels in civic and economic aspects of life. Personal confidence is a key ingredient in enabling an individual's full participation in society.

The gender gap in Pakistan begins at home, with boys being valued over girls in all respects during their upbringing (UNICEF 2006; United Nations 2000a; Haque 2002). Parental attitudes limit opportunities for girls from an early age (Haque 2002). Data from Haque's (2002) study shows that in general, parental attitudes in Pakistan result in girls having limited opportunities to participate in social networks.

Women in Pakistan are subject to an array of social and psychological disadvantages that limit their mobility and prevent them from utilizing opportunities to develop their natural capabilities. Hague's (2002) study reveals how societal patterns control women's mobility to a very large extent. Because women have generally been subject to restrictions throughout their upbringing, they lack both the skill and the confidence to promote themselves in a social context where they would have opportunity to do so.

The women who participated in the study were keenly aware of the effects of their upbringing on their levels of confidence:

Going out on your own is not considered acceptable in my family ...and I believe in most families. Our parents care for us, I think this is the reason, but it is also true that this kind of protection keeps us dependent... and lacking in confidence. (Interview quote, student)

However, there are indications that as women are enabled to contribute to society in substantial and relevant ways, attitudes towards women are changing and hence societal norms which currently form the strongest barrier to change.

Women who are educated are more likely to be listened to; their views are increasingly respected, which means that they are able to make a contribution to society. This is like an upward spiral, resulting in greater opportunities for women's participation in all aspects of life. Ashraf's (2007) study, which focused on female teachers in the Northern areas of Pakistan, illustrates how women can have an impact on their community, in spite of prevailing and deep-rooted social norms. This highlights the importance of social and economic investment in the education of girls (Ashraf 2007).

Increasing girls' access to education will later empower them as women to play a greater role within the family as well as at community and societal levels. Both the survey results and interview data support this assumption. 79% of faculty members and 82% of students expressed the view that higher education had strengthened their resolve towards fulfilling multiple responsibilities in the home and in society.

Findings show that higher education enables women to have an impact at many levels. It changes their lives, but it also benefits their immediate family, the wider family, friends and the whole community. Ashraf's (2007) conclusion that educated women are given more of a voice is confirmed in the current study. One student commented:

A few years back, my opinion was not taken into consideration... my parents call me when they need advice; they share their problems with me and want suggestions to resolve them. This really gives me confidence. I feel valued...I'm not sure of the reason for this change ...but I think it's because of my education. (Interview quote, student)

This quote links back to the topic of having confidence to speak and act. 62% of faculty and 60% of students agreed with the statement that they now feel encouraged in expressing their opinions, where previously this would not have been the case.

These findings illustrate the enormous difference educational status can make to individual women, in terms of how they are being regarded and treated. Where previously they were ignored, in many cases their opinions are now actively sought and hence they are able to contribute to the well-being of their family. Inevitably, this substantially increases a woman's self-worth, which has a spiralling positive effect on her developing identity as an accepted and active member of society.

A study by Ahmad (2001) which focused on South Asian women living in the UK concludes that participation in higher education gives women of Asian origin confidence in their abilities whilst simultaneously strengthening their cultural, religious and personal identities. It is noteworthy that participation in higher education by women within Pakistan demonstrates similar results.

### **Women's access to higher education**

It has been argued (Khalid & Mujahid-Mukhtar 2002) that education is key to giving women more control over their lives. However, social norms continue to prevent women from having equal access to education. Educational inequality remains one of the major infringements of

the rights of women and an important barrier to social and economic development (UNESCO 2003).

Data from the study confirms that acute discrimination exists within the family with regard to provision for educational opportunities. Giving preference to sons is a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the patriarchal systems. In Pakistan, it is a practice enshrined in the value system. Sons are the focal part of the family; it is up to them to ensure continuity of, and protection for, the family property and they also have economic obligations towards their parents.

My parents have money to spend on my brother's education but not for me...I give tuition to cover my university expenses... but I'm still happy that they don't stop me from studying.  
(Interview quote, student)

Survey results show that 82% of faculty and 80% of students believe that parents do not spend similar amounts of money on educating their daughters as they do on sons. Furthermore, 63% of faculty members taking part in the survey and 51% of students stated that they needed the permission of their family to participate in higher education. Interview data indicates that other family members may determine key choices for the women concerned, such as what subject they study, which university they attend and the kind of accommodation they may use at university. One student relates:

Because I was not allowed to go to Lahore to study Engineering, I ended up here, studying Math.... Being able to study was really important to me... (Interview quote, Student)

The study therefore indicates that whilst participation in higher education brings women many benefits, enabling them to make important strides towards a more emancipated way of life, significant restrictions on making choices for themselves still apply. What comes across from the study is that women are keen to accept a partial package, based on their awareness of the unique advantages that participation in higher education can purchase for them.

### **The influence of current educational practice on women**

Educational institutions in Pakistan, rooted as they are in traditional culture, contribute to women's subordination rather than helping to empower them. There is considerable evidence that educational institutions in Pakistan shape boys and girls differently (Qureshi, Pirzado & Nasim 2007). The questionnaire reported on here included two open-ended questions which focused on aspects of education that perpetuate gender discrimination and possible ways of rectifying these. Responses show that gender biases in the education system are strong, even to the point where participants in the study become aware of the impulse to further perpetuate and reinforce these biases themselves in their own teaching practices. However, there is also a determination to counter these tendencies.

It is true, we place more reliance on male students, and we subconsciously turn to them for contributions. Even though I mean to treat male and female students equally, I'm aware that I'm still biased at times. (Interview quote, faculty member)

Many participants revealed that they experienced gender bias in their education. This goes back to their early school experiences, where we hear accounts of boys and girls being treated differently by their teachers.

I remember during my early schooling, our teacher always considered us girls less than boys and all main active responsibilities, like maintaining class discipline during teacher's absence, were given to boys...but this is not the case at a higher level...at least I never do this.  
(Interview quote, faculty member)

Curriculum design and the content of textbooks were seen as strong contributors to the perpetuation of gender discrimination in the education system. This has been noted in previous studies (Mutta & Hussain 2004). Dean (2007b) states that gender bias in textbooks is an important reason why existing curricula persistently fail to project women as full members of society. Participants made multiple references to the existence of a gender bias in textbooks which commonly attribute active and prominent roles to men, while associating women with passive and subordinate ones.

Our textbooks are full of references that attribute an active role to men, even though history is full of courageous and remarkable women who made tremendous contributions in different fields. But have you ever seen them mentioned in any text book? (Interview quote, faculty member)

The curriculum needs to draw attention to women's contributions to society and highlight women's activities as significant as well. (Interview quote, faculty member)

While there is clearly a strong gender bias in schools, evidence suggests that differential treatment between male and female students persists at college and university levels.

In school, at college and now at university, we are treated differently ...certainly there is nothing in our educational experience that gives us a feeling of equality. (Interview quote, student)

Gender inequalities are therefore widespread in Pakistan's education system. There is substantial evidence that the education system contributes to and reinforces this state of inequality between the sexes and that it fails to fulfil its potential as a change agent (Rarieya 2007). These findings point to the fact that there is an urgent need to address these issues in teacher education programmes (Rarieya 2007). Interview data from the current study also reiterates this point:

I believe teacher education programs need to develop classroom management strategies that encourage co-operation and respect for all students, regardless of gender... something that's missing at the moment. (Interview quote, faculty member)

Improvements in teacher training programs that promote awareness of practices which serve to reinforce prevalent stereotypes and injustices are thus seen as an important step towards bringing about societal change.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

It has been noted that education in general and higher education in particular is recognised as an instrument for social change. Throughout, it has been stressed that while substantial and noteworthy efforts are being made to address the gender gap in Pakistan, prevailing cultural norms and practices continue to mitigate against the successful introduction of change. This is particularly evident with respect to legislative efforts designed to establish gender parity in the areas of divorce and inheritance rights. In general, women do not feel able to take advantage of these laws.

Why is it that the introduction of laws designed to redress important aspects of gender discrimination in Pakistan does not bring about the expected improvements in women's lives? It is argued here that these legislative changes fail to have the intended impact because they represent an attempt to rectify *in isolation* one specific aspect of gender discrimination in Pakistan. Women who wish to take advantage of their legal rights risk alienating their immediate family and the wider community. For them, it is not just a matter of facing the risk of becoming a social outcast; they would also be losing the only protection and support network they have, that of their family. Women cannot benefit from the legislation because

their circumstances are such that they cannot afford to alienate their family and the community they live in.

This paper has made reference to a catalogue of discriminatory practices which are portrayed as interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Discrimination starts in the home, where boys are preferred over girls and continuous throughout a woman's life. Largely excluded from the decision-making process, denied an equal share of things and very importantly, denied opportunities to develop confidence in their abilities, girls are assigned a passive and subordinate role. The education system adds to these discriminatory practices and thereby reinforces the value system experienced by girls in the home. The effect of these prevailing cultural influences is that girls are not able to develop to their full potential. Having been denied opportunities to acquire confidence in their abilities, their sense of self-worth will be low. As women, they will not be equipped with either the knowledge or the skills that would give them economic independence. As a result, they cannot expect the kind of respect that would be given to an educated person. For similar reasons, they are largely prevented from assuming a rightful and responsible role within society.

Through the voices of the women who were consulted in the original doctoral study, the paper demonstrates that participation in higher education by women in Pakistan brings them many benefits. Engagement in higher education equips women with the knowledge that will form the basis of their economic independence. Attainment of these achievements brings with it an increased status and recognition from their family and the wider community. Being educated, achieving economic independence, developing personal confidence, gaining status within the community and being given a voice, are all aspects of a tightly interlinked package of benefits.

We become more and more aware of inequalities and how they are perpetuated...by gaining an education we can achieve our purpose in life... my education has given me a light, a spark, a mission.... My education is my confidence.... My whole family has benefited... I was the first woman in my family to go to university and I now serve as an inspiration to my younger cousins. (Interview quote, faculty member)

There are indications that changes towards a more just and equal society in Pakistan are possible and that these changes have already begun (Ashraf 2007). In spite of the restrictions still imposed on women, including educated women, there is hope for the future. Participants in the study expressed a determination not to perpetuate the system within their homes and to treat daughters on an equal footing with sons. The importance of these female graduates as role models within their families and communities must not be overlooked.

Thus, it appears that women's participation in higher education is able to make inroads along the multiple different dimensions implicated in hindering progress towards greater gender parity in Pakistan. The reason for the optimism voiced lies in the fact that participation in higher education appears to make an onslaught on all the identified and interwoven strands of gender discrimination raised in this paper. It is the fact that higher education can impact on multiple aspects of gender discrimination *in concert* that makes this avenue for bringing about a more just society in Pakistan one of greatest importance.

All of the education issues that have been highlighted in this study are being addressed in Pakistan's most recent National Education Policy (Government of Pakistan 2009). A key objective of the policy is to bring uniformity into the country's education system by encouraging the various strands that exist for historical reasons to blend, through the introduction of common curricula features and educational standards. The policy further aligns itself strongly with the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO 2000), a key target of which is free quality education at primary level for all by 2015.

The need for promoting disadvantaged groups is emphasised, with special mention of girls. The policy highlights that curriculum reform '*shall emphasise the fundamental rights*

*guaranteed to the citizens of Pakistan*' (Government of Pakistan 2009:39), which will raise awareness levels of legal rights for women across the country. The projected vision includes for higher education to contribute to '*the attainment of social goals of developing civic responsibilities, social cohesion and a more tolerant society*' (Government of Pakistan 2009:48). A key focus is on building up a broad educational base, so as not to leave so many young people outside the system.

Teacher quality is addressed, with a focus on sound subject and pedagogical knowledge. The current study suggests that here lies a further opportunity for addressing gender issues: teacher education should raise awareness of practices that treat boys and girls differently and suggest approaches that promote gender parity.

The study has highlighted the role that textbooks play in perpetuating gender inequalities. The quality of textbooks and other learning materials is already under scrutiny in Pakistan (Government of Pakistan 2007; Government of Pakistan 2009). While there has to be a clear focus on promoting effective learning materials, the current findings suggest that textbooks present another key opportunity for closing the gender gap. It seems desirable to commission textbooks which redress the identified imbalance. Textbooks should present women as citizens who are able to make a full contribution to society and contain accounts of women who have made exceptional contributions in various fields of action.

Most significantly, the study has highlighted the *interrelatedness* of different aspects of gender discrimination in Pakistan and hence the need for finding ways of confronting these in concert, wherever possible. Planning for educational reform in Pakistan is clearly a monumental and challenging task. In doing so, focusing on the big picture is essential. However, the findings of this paper suggest that small changes can make an important difference and opportunities for such changes should not be overlooked. Attacking gender issues on a broad front is likely to achieve results where narrower approaches may fail.

Khan (2007) has argued that political commitment in Pakistan has been 'growth oriented' rather than 'equity orientated'. The 2009 National Education Policy talks of the '*dream of a knowledge-based economy*' (Government of Pakistan 2009; Government of Pakistan 2005c), which is to be realised through graduates who are seen as the 'building blocks' of such an economy (Government of Pakistan 2009). The findings of the current study suggest that the achievement of growth and equity goals should not be seen as separate and hence can be achieved together.

This paper has argued that an effective way of narrowing the gender gap in Pakistan is to develop and implement educational policies with the aim of motivating and enabling increasing numbers of women to participate in higher education. Through participation in higher education, the women who took part in the study have gained insights into the ways gender parities are perpetuated and discovered ways of changing this. It is hoped that many female graduates will take up positions within Pakistan's education system at different levels and help accelerate its progress towards the full vision of Pakistan's 2009 National Education Policy.

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