



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

# “Shall I Feed My Daughter, or Educate Her?”

Barriers to Girls' Education in Pakistan



## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## If we don't get education, our nation won't progress.

—Rabiya, 23, single mother of a daughter,  
Karachi, July 2017.

### SUMMARY

Pakistan was described as “among the world’s worst performing countries in education,” at the 2015 Oslo Summit on Education and Development. The new government, elected in July 2018, stated in their manifesto that nearly 22.5 million children are out of school. Girls are particularly affected. Thirty-two percent of primary school age girls are out of school in Pakistan, compared to 21 percent of boys. By grade six, 59 percent of girls are out of school, versus 49 percent of boys. Only 13 percent of girls are still in school by ninth grade. Both boys and girls are missing out on education in unacceptable numbers, but girls are worst affected.

Political instability, disproportionate influence on governance by security forces, repression of civil society and the media, violent insurgency, and escalating ethnic and religious tensions all poison Pakistan’s current social landscape. These forces distract from the government’s obligation to deliver essential services like education—and girls lose out the most.

Girls attend lessons at a school on the outskirts of Islamabad. Poor facilities at many schools make it difficult for children to study, with a lack of safe and adequate toilets particularly affecting girls who have commenced menstruation.

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There are high numbers of out-of-school children, and significant gender disparities in education, across the entire country, but some areas are much worse than others. In Balochistan, the province with the lowest percentage of educated women, as of 2014-15, 81 percent of women had not completed primary school, compared to 52 percent of men. Seventy-five percent of women had never attended school at all, compared to 40 percent of men. According to this data, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had higher rates of education but similarly huge gender disparities. Sindh and Punjab had higher rates of education and somewhat lower gender disparities, but the gender disparities were still 14 to 21 percent.

Across all provinces generation after generation of children, especially girls, are locked out of education—and into poverty. In interviews for this report, girls talked again and again about their desire for education, their wish to “be someone,” and how these dreams had been crushed by being unable to study.

Lack of access to education for girls is part of a broader landscape of gender inequality in Pakistan. The country has one of Asia’s highest rates of maternal mortality. Violence against women and girls—including rape, so-called “honor” killings and violence, acid attacks, domestic violence, forced marriage and child marriage—is a serious problem, and government responses are inadequate. Pakistani activists estimate that there are about 1,000 honor killings every year. Twenty-one percent of females marry as children.

Pakistan’s education system has changed significantly in recent years, responding to an abdication by the government of responsibility to provide, through government schools, an adequate standard of education, compulsory and free of charge, to all children. There has been an explosion of new private schools, largely unregulated, of wildly varying quality. A lack of access to government schools for many poor people has created a booming market for low-cost private schools, which in many areas are the only form of education available to poor families. While attempting to fill a critical gap, these schools may be compromised by poorly qualified and badly

**Students walk to school in Behar Colony of Karachi. A shortage of government schools, especially for girls, leaves many girls walking long distances to school during which they often face sexual harassment. Shortage of schools or sexual harassment may lead to girls being shut out or dropping out of education entirely.**

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(above) Students check the attendance register at Behar Colony Government Secondary School for girls in the Lyari neighborhood of Karachi, Pakistan.

(right) Students at Behar Colony Government Secondary School for girls in the Lyari neighborhood of Karachi, Pakistan. Only 13 percent of girls in Pakistan are still in school by ninth grade. While there is an overall shortage of schools for girls, the shortage becomes worse as girls progress beyond primary school.

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paid teachers, idiosyncratic curricula, and a lack of government quality assurance and oversight.

Secondly, there has been a massive increase in the provision of religious education, ranging from formal madrasas to informal arrangements where children study the Quran in the house of a neighbor. Religious schools are often the only type of education available to poor families. They are not, however, an adequate replacement, as they generally do not teach non-religious subjects.

Pakistan’s highly decentralized structure of government means that many decisions regarding education policy are made at the subnational level. The result is a separate planning process in every province, on a different timeline, with varying approaches, levels of effectiveness and commitment to improving access to education for girls. This leads to major differences from one province to the next, including on such basic issues as whether children are charged fees to attend government schools, and how much teachers are paid.

In every province, however, there is a serious gender disparity, a high percentage of both boys and girls who are out of school, and clear flaws in the government’s approach to education.

Students at Behar Colony Government Secondary School for girls in the Lyari neighborhood of Karachi, Pakistan.  
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(above) Laiba, age eight, with Shazia, the founder of the Lyari School. The Lyari School is a free school in Karachi, Pakistan providing classes for local children who otherwise have no access to education. Activists and community groups have created such informal schools in a number of areas without access to government schools.

(right) Laiba, age eight, a student at the Lyari School. Laiba’s older sister is not able to study at all because she is responsible for housework and caring for her younger siblings.

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## Barriers to Girls’ Education Within the School System

Many of the barriers to girls’ education are within the school system itself. The Pakistan government simply has not established an education system adequate to meet the needs of the country’s children, especially girls. While handing off responsibility to private school operators and religious schools might seem like a solution, nothing can absolve the state of its obligation, under international and domestic law, to ensure that all children receive a decent education—something that simply is not happening in Pakistan today. Moreover, despite all the barriers, many people interviewed for this report described a growing demand for girls’ education, including in marginalized communities.

### *Lack of Investment*

The government does not adequately invest in schools. Pakistan spends far less on education than is recommended by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in its guidance on education. Many professionals working in the education sector described a situation in which the government seemed disinterested, and government disengagement on education is evident from the national level to the provincial and local levels.

One result is that there are not enough government schools for all children to have access to one. Government schools





(above) The area outside the classroom at the Lyari School, a free non-government school in Karachi, Pakistan serving children who otherwise do not have access to education.

(left) A girl studying at the Lyari school.

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are in such short supply that even in Pakistan’s major cities many children cannot reach a school on foot safely and in a reasonable amount of time. The situation is far worse in rural areas, where schools are even more scarce, and it is less likely that private schools will fill the gap. Families that can access a government school often find that it is overcrowded.

An “upward bottleneck” exists as children, especially girls, get older. Secondary schools are in shorter supply than primary schools, and colleges are even more scarce, especially for girls. Schools are more likely to be gender segregated as children get older, and there are fewer schools for girls than for boys. Many girls are pushed out of continuing studies because they finish at one school and cannot access the next grade level.

### *High Cost of Education*

Poor families struggle to meet the costs of sending their children to school. Government schools are generally more affordable than private education, but they sometimes charge tuition, registration or exam fees, and they almost always require that students’ families foot the bill for associated costs. These include stationery, copies, uniforms, school bags, and shoes. Text books are sometimes provided for free at government schools, but sometimes families must pay for these as well.

The many poor families who cannot access a government school are left with options outside the government school system. The range of private schools, informal tuition centers, nongovernmental organization (NGO)



(above) Bushra, second from the right, a 10th grader at Behar Colony Government Secondary School for girls, at home with her family. Bushra’s mother, far left, never studied; she married at age 14. Like an increasing number of parents who also did not have the chance to attend school, she sees the value of education, including for girls, and hopes for a better life for her daughters.

(right) Bushra, a 10th grader, sews to help earn money for her school expenses. Her mother is a seamstress. Education costs often increase as children advance in grades, and while many poor families go to great lengths to access education for their children, too many find it impossible given the lack of schools and expense.

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schools, and madrasas creates a complex maze for parents and children to navigate. Many girls experience several—or all—of these forms of study without gaining any educational qualifications.

### ***Poor Quality of Education***

Many families expressed frustration about the quality of education available to them. Some said it was so poor that there was no point sending children to school. In government schools, parents and students complained of teachers not showing up, overcrowding, and poor facilities. At private schools, particularly low-cost private schools, concerns related to teachers being badly educated and unqualified, and the instruction being patchy and unregulated. Teachers in both government and private schools pressure parents to pay for out-of-school tutoring, an additional expense. In both government and private schools, use of corporal punishment and abusive behavior by teachers was widely reported.

### ***No Enforcement of Compulsory Education***

One reason so many children in Pakistan do not go to school is that there is no enforced government expectation that children should study. Pakistan’s constitution states, “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to





Bushra, a 10th grader in Behar Colony Government Secondary School for girls, at home. While Bushra has access to a quality education at her school, many parents and students raise serious concerns about other government schools where they say teachers often do not show up, classes are often overcrowded, corruption is prevalent and corporal punishment is a problem.

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all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law.” However, there is no organized effort by government in any province to ensure that all children study. When children are not sent to school, no government official reaches out to the family to encourage or require that the child study. When a child drops out of school, individual teachers sometimes encourage the child to continue studying, but there is no systematic government effort to enroll or retain children in school. This violates international standards Pakistan has signed up to which re-

quire that education be free and compulsory at least through primary school.

### *Corruption*

Corruption is a major issue in the government school system and exists in several forms. One of the most pervasive is nepotism or bribery in the recruitment of teachers and principals. Some people simply purchase teaching positions, and others obtain their jobs through political connections. When people obtain teaching positions illicitly, they may not be qualified or motivated to teach, and they may not be expected to. Especially in rural areas, some schools sit empty because corruption has redirected the teacher’s salary to someone who does not teach, according to education experts.



## Barriers to Girls’ Education Outside the School System

Aside from the barriers to education within the school system, girls also face barriers in their homes and in the community. These include poverty, child labor, gender discrimination and harmful social norms, and insecurity and dangers on the way to school.

### *Poverty*

For many parents, the most fundamental barrier to sending their children to school is poverty. Even relatively low associated costs can put education out of reach for poor families, and there are many poor families in Pakistan. In 2016, the government determined that about 60 million Pakistanis—6.8 to 7.6 million families—were living in poverty, about 29.5 percent of the country’s population.

Bushra and her younger brother sit on their rooftop doing their homework. Her brother goes to a private school and is taught courses in English while Bushra goes to a government school and learns in Urdu. Bushra’s mother said she wishes she could send all her children to private school, but she cannot afford it.

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Many children, including girls, are out of school because they are working. Sometimes they are engaged in paid work, which for girls often consists of home-based industries, such as sewing, embroidery, beading, or assembling items. Other children—almost always girls—are kept home to do housework in the family home or are employed as domestic workers.



Saba is one of the almost 22.5 million children in Pakistan who are out of school, the majority of whom are girls. She sells potatoes on the street outside a private school and longs to attend school herself. Poor families often prioritize boys’ education, as grown sons are expected to support their parents in the future while girls marry and join their in-laws’ household.

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### **Social Norms**

Some families do not believe that girls should be educated or believe girls should not study beyond a certain age. Attitudes regarding girls’ education vary significantly across different communities. In some areas, families violating cultural norms prohibiting girls from studying can face pressure and hostility. When families violate norms against girls’ education, the girls themselves may face harmful consequences. Many people, however, described growing acceptance of the value of girls’ education, even in conservative communities; the government should be encouraging this change.

Girls are often removed from school as they approach puberty, sometimes because families fear them engaging in romantic relationships. Other families fear older girls will face sexual harassment at school and on the way there and back.

Harmful gender norms create economic incentives to prioritize boys’ education. Daughters normally go to live with, and contribute to, their husband’s family, while sons are expected to remain with their parents—so sending sons to school is seen as a better investment in the family’s economic future.

Child marriage is both a consequence and a cause of girls not attending school. In Pakistan, 21 percent of girls marry before age 18, and 3 percent marry before age 15. Girls are sometimes seen as ready for marriage as soon as they reach puberty, and in some communities, child marriage is expected. Some families are driven to marry off their daughters by poverty, and others see child marriage as a way of



preempting any risk of girls engaging in romantic relationships outside marriage. Staying in school helps girls delay marriage, and girls often are forced to leave school as soon as they marry or even become engaged.

### **Insecurity**

Many families and girls cited security as a barrier to girls studying. They described many types of insecurity, including sexual harassment, kidnapping, crime, conflict, and attacks on education. Some families said insecurity in their communities worsened in recent years, meaning younger children have less access to education than older siblings.

Families worry about busy roads; the large distance many girls must travel to school increases risks and fears. Many girls experienced sexual harassment on the way to school, and police demonstrate little willingness to help prevent harassment. Girls sometimes hesitate to complain about ha-

Saba, age 11, who does not attend school, with her mother. Saba’s mother cooks potatoes and Saba sells them on the street. Almost 13 percent of Pakistani children aged 10 to 14 years are in paid employment, rising to 33 percent among children ages 15 to 17—and work, also including housework or child care, often keeps girls out of schools.

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arrassment out of fear they will be blamed, or their parents’ reaction will be to take them out of school.

Girls and families also fear kidnapping, another fear exacerbated by long journeys to school. This fear is heightened when girls are older and seen as being at greater risk of sexual assault. Attacks on education are disturbingly common in Pakistan. When violence happens in a school or in a neighborhood, it has long term consequences for girls’ education. Families across different parts of the country described incidents of violence in their communities that kept girls out of school for many years afterwards.



### *Armed Conflict and Targeted Attacks on Schools*

Many parts of Pakistan face escalating levels of violence related to insurgency, and ethnic and religious conflict. This is having a devastating impact on girls’ access to education, and ethnic conflict often spills into schools.

One of the features of conflict in Pakistan has been targeted attacks against students, teachers, and schools. The most devastating attack on education in recent years in Pakistan was the December 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar city, where militants killed 145 people, almost all of them children. This attack was far from isolated, however. Between 2013 and 2017, hundreds of schools were attacked, typically with explosive devices, killing several hundred students and teachers, and damaging and destroying infrastructure. One-third of these attacks specifically targeted girls and women, aiming to interrupt their studies.

Pakistan can, and should, fix its school system. The government should invest more resources in education and use those resources to address gender disparities and to ensure that all children—boys and girls—have access to, and attend, high quality primary and secondary education. The future of the country depends on it.

A mother takes her daughter to school in Islamabad. Government schools generally offer free tuition, but parents and students are still obliged to pay for uniforms, school supplies, and exams fees. These costs put education out of reach for many poor families.

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## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN

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- Increase expenditure on education in line with UNESCO recommended levels needed to fulfill obligations related to the right to education.
- Strengthen oversight of provincial education systems’ progress toward achieving parity between girls and boys and universal primary and secondary education for all children, by requiring provinces provide accurate data on girls’ education, monitoring enrolment and attendance by girls, and setting targets in each province.
- Strengthen the federal government’s role in assisting provincial governments in provision of education, with the goal of ending gender disparities in all provinces.
- Work with provincial governments to improve the quality of government schools and quality assurance of private schools.
- Raise the national minimum age of marriage to 18 with no exceptions and develop and implement a national action plan to end child marriage, with the goal of ending all child marriage by 2030, as per Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3.
- Endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration, an international political agreement to protect schools, teachers, and students during armed conflict.

### TO PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS

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- Direct the provincial education authority to make girls’ education a priority within the education budget, in regard to construction and rehabilitation of schools, training and recruitment of female teachers, and provision of supplies, to address the imbalance between the participation of girls and boys in education.
- Strengthen enforcement of anti-child labor laws.
- Instruct police officials to work with schools to ensure the safety of students, including monitoring potential threats to students, teachers and schools, and working to prevent harassment of students, especially girls.
- Ensure that anyone encountering corruption by government education officials has access to effective and responsive complaint mechanisms.

### TO PROVINCIAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES

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- Rehabilitate, build, and establish new schools, especially co-ed and girls’ schools.
- Until government schools are available, provide scholarships to good-quality private schools for girls living far from government schools.
- Provide free or affordable transport for students who travel long distances or through difficult environments to get to a government school.
- Abolish all tuition, registration, and exam fees at government schools.
- Provide poor students with all needed items including school supplies, uniforms, bags, shoes, and textbooks.
- Instruct all principals to identify out-of-school children in their catchment areas and work with families to get them into school.
- Explore options for increasing attendance by girls from poor families through scholarships, food distribution, or meal programs at girls’ schools.
- When children quit school or fail to attend, ensure all schools reach out to determine the reasons and re-engage the student in school.
- Require each school to develop and implement a security plan with attention to concerns of girls including sexual harassment.
- Develop a plan to expand access to middle and high school for girls through the government education system, including establishment of new schools.
- Strengthen the system for monitoring and quality assurance of all schools, not only for government schools but also private schools and madrasas.
- Prohibit all forms of corporal punishment in schools; take appropriate disciplinary action against any employee violating this rule.
- Ensure that all schools have adequate boundary walls, safe and private toilets with hygiene facilities, and access to safe drinking water.



## “Shall I Feed My Daughter, or Educate Her?”

### Barriers to Girls' Education in Pakistan

The Pakistan government is failing to educate a huge proportion of the country's girls. Nearly 22.5 million Pakistani children are out of school and the majority of them are girls. 32 percent of primary school age girls are out of school in Pakistan, compared to 21 percent of boys. By ninth grade, only 13 percent of girls are still in school.

“*Shall I Feed My Daughter, or Educate Her?*” documents the many barriers girls face accessing education. It discusses the government's long-term lack of investment in education that leaves many children unable to access a school, a problem disproportionately affecting girls. Other problems in the education system include failure to implement compulsory education, poor quality within both government and low-cost private schools, corruption, and corporal punishment. Girls are also out of school because fees and other costs make it unaffordable for many families, as well as because of child labor, gender discrimination, child marriage, sexual harassment, insecurity, and attacks on education.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Pakistan government to undertake urgent reforms to the education system, particularly regarding girls' access to education. Pakistan's new government, elected in July 2018, has pledged major education reform, including for girls. The government should increase investment in education to the level recommended by international standards, establish more schools for girls, and implement a system of compulsory education. The government should make education free in practice not just in theory, including free of associated costs for poor families; work to improve the quality of both government and private schools; and tackle forms of gender discrimination that keep girls out of school.

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*(above) Two students at a free non-government school for poor children in the Lyari neighborhood of Karachi, Pakistan. The school provides a few hours of classes per day to children who otherwise have no access to education.*

*(front cover) Students at morning exercises at Behar Colony Government Secondary School for girls located in the Lyari neighborhood of Karachi, Pakistan.*