

## THEORISING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN KHYBER PUKHTUNKHWA (PAKISTAN)

Shabana SG. Khattak \*

### Abstract

*This paper summarises some findings of my doctoral study that explored various factors affecting women participation in higher education in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa Pakistan. Qualitative (semi-structured and focussed-interviews) and quantitative (semi-structured questionnaires), mixed-methods research and data collection tools were used. My respondents were from 4 colleges of Pukhtunkhwa; 40 (initial survey) and 172 (Audit survey). Subsequently, in Post survey, 4 in-depth focussed-interviews were held with one each randomly selected student of the colleges. However this study is based on some of my qualitative data analysis only. The sample women highlighted economic status, medium of instructions of our dual education system and misunderstanding of religion Islam were the main stumbling blocks in their way to higher education. A major finding is the paradoxical role of men in the life of women to encourage them for higher education. My study recommended women only higher education institutes throughout the country for increased women participation in higher education.*

### Key words

Higher education, Pakistan, Pukhtunkhwa, gender, feminism, empowerment

### Introduction

This study explored some perceptions and experiences of Pukhtunkhwa women about their common barriers that block their way to access higher education. This feminists' study further theorises higher education as a mean of women emancipation against the patriarchy and cultured dominated society of Pukhtunkhwa to empower them. This theme is unique as it has never been explored in the region that breaks the silences of Pukhtun women to give them voice for their higher educational opportunities and empowerment.

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\* School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK.

The province of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa has a culture, language, traditions and patriarchal values that are substantially different from the rest of the country (Pakistan). With a total population of approximately 23,971,000 (estimated 2008-09), of whom 11,279,000 are males and 12,693,000 are female<sup>1</sup> the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa previously known the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) is a very important and well-known province of Pakistan<sup>2</sup>.

Since I began my doctorate, the issue of female education has extended around the world, showing that gender marginalization that not limited to Pakistan only, but vary from society to society and culture to culture. Gender inequality is a longstanding and unsolved issue in Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan has signed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with a solid promise of eliminating gender disparity in all levels of education by 2015.<sup>3</sup> commented that 'Pakistan, a country with people of different social, financial, and ethnical backgrounds, expressed varied results for different targets and indicators of MDGs. Data presented in Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) surveys revealed high gender disparity in the favour of boys in primary, elementary and higher education in tribal districts of the country. They further quoted various studies,<sup>4</sup> which exposed the pathetic position of girls' education in rural and tribal areas with special reference to PSLM surveys where girls have extremely low literacy and school enrolment rates in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, Qureshi, et al.,<sup>6</sup> reveals a high dropout rate of girls in rural areas, in all levels of education across the country. Thus, higher education is a tool for women empowerment.<sup>7</sup> They further highlight;

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.<sup>8</sup>

My sample women defined their own agency of empowerment in Pukhtunkhwa setting, where male-domination is prevailing in the Pukhtunkhwa society. Such as women only universities but women are in a disadvantaged position to bring change in the society. However, they were hopeful that these women-only higher educational institutes may give them a platform for their struggle of empowerment.

The Pukhtuns are a traditional community; the social and cultural context of the society is predominately strict and patriarchal, men and women are conceptually separated by their gender role allocation.<sup>9</sup> Lall further argues that:

Instead of looking at Pakistan in a homogenous way when it comes to gender and education, provincial and ethnic differences have to be taken into account and ... ethnic differentiation is important when looking at traditional perceptions of girls accessing and participating in education.<sup>10</sup>

I agree with the above argument that Pukhtunkhwa has culturally more multifaceted structural society than other provinces, because there are number of different Pukhtun tribal groups (Afridi, Khattak, Yousafzai, Momand etc). The tribal setting of the society makes them traditional lovers demarcate men (Public) and women (private) spheres with their allocated stricted roles. This created massive gender gaps and traditional socially constructed role for both gender in the Pukhtunkhwa society. For instance, while the overall literacy rate is 50%, this figure hides the disturbing reality that the literacy rate for men is almost double that of women.<sup>11</sup> Just as concerning, this figure is mirrored in participation figures in higher education, where female participation is chronically low at 33% compared to male participation at 68%.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of this gender empowered study is to explore the various explanations for this low percentage of women participating in higher education. By selecting to focus on women who have succeeded in higher education in Pukhtunkhwa despite the cultural and social impediments -- it is envisaged that this study will provide deeper understanding of the topic to inform future research as well as education policy in Pakistan.

### **Structure of Higher Education in Pakistan**

Higher education in western countries is structured slightly differently than higher education in Pakistan, because Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Science (BSc) degrees area part of college education, although their examinations are conducted by the university but are not considered a part of higher education. The University Grants Commission's (UGC) allocation of funds to degree colleges is another problem that affects students' efficiency.<sup>13</sup> Many of the degree colleges are in miserable condition because of poor infrastructure, lack of equipment, furniture and modern library books and laboratories. Student dormitories are also poorly maintained and insecure.

In such situations, parents do not encourage their daughters to enter higher education, although, in contrast, they send their sons to private colleges or other semi-government colleges with good facilities to other cities or provinces.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the diversity of optional subjects and different subjects' combinations that are available at colleges produces un-economic class sizes, which have a negative effect on teacher and student efficiency. Too few teachers for too many subjects' options divide the students into small groups, which then have to be taught by a large number of faculty members. This adds to the financial and administrative muddle already in operation in higher education.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the duration of the BA/BSc. degree course (two years) has come under continual criticism. According to some sources<sup>16</sup> the National Educational Policy of Pakistan (1998) envisaged extending it to four years to keep with the international standard. However, this proposal has not been fully implemented in the country because of the low education budget and increased cost of studies for lower and middle-income groups.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, most of the private universities have introduced four years bachelor's degrees in semester system although most of the government and semi-government universities follow the old, conventional examination system.

### **The Research Methodology**

The process of data collection was implemented as follows:

The first stage of data collection was the **Initial Survey**, which contained a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The second stage of my research was the **Audit Survey**. The original structured questionnaire was distributed among larger sample of 172, 43 sample women from each college. The Initial Survey Group was not a part of this larger survey. The larger sample was helpful because there was very little reliable data available on gender and higher education in Pukhtunkhwa. The third stage, **the Post Survey**, was conducted a year later, once again, a structured questionnaire was distributed among the original 40 sample women of the Initial Survey and four Focused Interviews were conducted. The interviewees were randomly selected from each economic class (upper, higher middle, lower middle and working class) sample women. The selection of my focused group was made from my Initial Survey sample women group. However, for the purpose of this article some findings of qualitative data (semi-structured and focused interviews) are shared.

In summary the original study used; **Time triangulation**; examining factors of change in a cross sectional study. The survey of

2009 triangulated the findings of the initial questionnaire. Thus, the processes of triangulation have been used to check out the responses of 40 in the initial survey, by re-administering the initial sample questionnaire to 172 students a year later). **Combined triangulation** using more than one level of materials analysis, for example, census materials, interviews, questionnaires, documentary and archival evidence derived from various sources. **Methodological triangulation** was achieved by using the same method on different occasions (the questionnaire in the initial and post-survey). Moreover, different methods were used to explore the same object of study (the post questionnaire and focused interview) explore the themes of women and work in Pukhtunkhwa.

### **Data Analysis and Discussions**

The questionnaire and interviews findings are presented together in this study. The study revealed that women are struggling to access higher education to number of causes women's are wedged in patriarchal society of Pukhtunkhwa. A complex and paradoxical role of men were explored. Women were aware of their legal rights, particularly in relation to inheritance and bride money that has been given by the religion Islam to empower them (economically) to make decisions about their lives.

### **Economic Status or Economic dependency**

The traditionalist society of Pukhtunkhwa will not change without women participation in all spare of life. Therefore, it is very important to increase the higher education and career opportunities throughout the country for all women. Currently, most women are relying on their father monthly income because there are no scholarships available for average students and no work opportunities in the job market of Pukhtunkhwa. They are engaged in unpaid domestic work. In other words, women are dependent on their family men.

The analysis of economic status in this study revealed a transition from traditional to modern women's education, because across the sample, all classes favoured women's education. They emphasised that *'higher education is the only means of women's increased opportunities, but alas! We are still struggling for primary education in the new millennium'* (A sample woman). However, the realities of access to higher education were varies across the groups: higher education is accessible to upper and higher middle classes only because as mentioned earlier there are no scholarships or other financial support schemes available for the students in the local

universities that cater for the lower socio-economic groups. All the sample women have to rely on their parents' financial resources, and indeed some poorer students are forced to take a few years out from their studies to earn enough money to enable them to resume studying at a later date. Women from low-income groups are often encouraged to undertake distance education<sup>18</sup> as a cheaper solution for access to higher education. The socio-economic status of parents seems to be the critical factor in deciding whether girls go to school/college/university or not. Poverty has been and remains the main hurdle of women education and empowerment.

### **Paradoxical role of men in the Pukhtunkhwa Society**

This study found that men played a complex role in women's lives. A group of men that are educated and broad-minded who allow their women for higher education and support them in all fields of life. Another group of men who [might] educated/uneducated but narrow-minded. They do not allow women to access to higher education and encouraged the traditional role of women within the family. These traditionalist men are highly influenced by the culture and society; they ignore the essence of Islamic teachings. They misinterpret the teaching of Islam to subordinate, because education is obligatory for man and women both in Islam. The difference between these two opposite attitudes of men is a product of education and religious family background. Male support was important in women's lives, across all economic strata in the sample. The consequences of going against the wishes (permission) of men were severe enough to deter the respondents from entertaining thoughts of independent decision-making. This was evidenced by the sample data which showed that male family members exerted considerable control over a woman's freedom to decide about higher education and work. Therefore, women perceived themselves as operating within the conceptual parameters of dependence on and support by fathers, brothers and husbands. Male control is exercised with the promise of male support. Thus, the loss of family support generates special vulnerabilities for women. Deprivation of women from higher education is due to the men of her family or if a woman succeeds against all odds is also with the support of men (or a member of her family). Women live at the mercy of men in Pukhtunkhwa society.

### **Influential Role of Brothers than Fathers**

The respondents' brothers appeared more influential than the fathers when it came to making decisions about their sisters' education

and working live. One reason might be that they would have to ferry their sisters to and from college or university when their father was unable to do so. According to the Pukhtun society women must be accompanied by someone when they go outside their house. This tradition is commonly practiced in middle and working class households. There is a difference in the decision-making power of a daughter and son. A daughter may not think to go against the decision of her father or family but a son can go beyond his father decision or force his parents to accept his decision. Sometimes old aged fathers encourages his sons to impose their decisions on family as after the father they will be the supporter of the entire family. According to my perception it is a practice of this culture that fathers give preference to their sons' opinions instead of daughters. An analysis of the attitudes of the families of the respondents to women and higher education revealed that the families of students those attending upper economic classes were slightly more likely to encourage their daughters to go on for to higher education. However, some elements of discouragement existed across the colleges and economic class for respondents in this respect. Women belonging to educated and financially secure families can make decisions regarding their higher education and work. In these families, brothers have little influence over these decisions as they are not considered to be responsible for their sisters. Affluent families usually have a car with a driver who can fetch and carry their daughters to and from school and college. They can also afford for their daughters to stay in college hostels (which are the most expensive accommodation in the cities). Money is a source of power for them; they can hire tutors to teach the girls at home so they can facilitate their daughters by any means of education.

In the sample women's families, male attitudes towards female participation in higher education were in the process of change; there was said to be a generally favourable attitude towards education for the sample. However, some male members of a family (particularly brothers) were opposed to the female pursuit of higher education in co-educational institutions. The desire for segregation in higher education was mainly a middle class and working class phenomenon. One of my sample women said: *'My father is willing but my brother says only finish your BA no more! because there is no post-graduate college'*. Frontier Women University (a single women university in Pukhtunkhwa) does not offer MA in my subject. *'I hope, I will be able to convince him than it would be possible, otherwise no'...* (a sample woman)

The sample women have the feelings that they are bound to their family men decision and their attitude or opinion has no value in front of them because one of the sample women irritatingly shouted;

*I love my father and brother and I respect them a lot but they are deciding everything about me and my life.....so sometime I am thinking where am I? in all this... (a sample woman)*

It is evident that respondents wanted their opinions should be valued but they were silent in front of their men due to their culture.

### **Capitalist education system (Class system, Dual language of instruction)**

The women in sample for the research were mixed so far as the socio-economic background was concerned. The upper class women have more opportunities to study in private English medium schools, which is a key for accessing higher education. Because their parents' strong financial position, they can afford the high fees and other expenses of attending private English medium schools. The working class women go to Urdu medium state schools because their families cannot afford the high fees of private schools because they have not been educated in English, they may experience difficulties in accessing further in higher education (where the medium of instruction is English for all students).

The upper class women exhibited a relatively higher degree of confidence and poise in their interaction with the researcher. The sample women were attentive and comfortable with the process and discussed their intended plans at length. During the course of the interview, they preferred to converse in English and seemed quite fluent in the language. One of the sample women said;

*We all (my brother and sisters) went to English medium schools since our childhood and are very fluent in English. Therefore, they had no difficulty to get admission in good colleges.*

The reactions of the sample women from the lower economic classes was evident from the style and nature of the speech of the students that their earlier schooling had perhaps not been from the better schools in the country. This fact was corroborated by the details of their inadequate knowledge and lack of confidence; these students were speaking in their first languages, Urdu and Pukhtu. Moreover, their use of syntax was poor and their vocabulary was limited, a fact that appeared to put them at a disadvantage in reading, decoding and communication skills. Students referred to the researcher for



clarification of questions while filling out the questionnaire instruments. This need for clarification rarely occurred with the students in the sample of upper class. A sample woman said;

*English medium schools were very expensive and were far away from my home therefore, my parents send me to Urdu medium school and later on it was impossible to get admission in English medium college. But now my brother is going to an English medium school.*

While another sample woman said with a sad smile...

*My parents are hardly affording the expenses of my study in Urdu medium school. I never thought about studying in English medium school or college (long breath and then closed her eyes for a while)'.*

There seemed to be a link between the students' socio-economic status and the language in which they were taught; a factor which could have serious academic and economic implications for the sample women in their future. Advanced learning in the country requires proficiency in English. Therefore, students who had not studied in English private schools are at a considerable disadvantage in gaining admission to premier educational institutions on the one hand and if successful, then they do have enormous difficulty in understanding the resource material, as most of the resource materials for higher education are only available in English.

### **Education System is producing educated *Jahils* (ignorant/s)**

The standard of education in Pakistan is very poor; education is producing paper degrees holders which did not entail much learning. Moreover, a feeling existed amongst the sample that courses in education in the country were not applicable to real life and would consequently not necessarily culminate in a job for them. The sample women were dissatisfied with the prevailing education system of Pakistan.

The country adopted the English education system from their colonial masters, which is only suitable to make the colonised more superior slaves. The British were successful in their motive: people are still slaves mentally.

One of the sample women commented that '*lack of funds and infrastructure made our education system the worst in the South Asian region*'. They felt education for the sake of education is prevalent in society. Paradoxically, they were not interested in gaining a job or a career in the first place and yet thought that Pakistani education does

not open their minds towards creativity and betterment of their gender role:

*'I think the problem is with our education system, because we are reading the same course work that our parents studied 15-20 years ago. Loads of things you have to learn by heart (rote learning or memorisation text)...this is how you can get good marks here. The stress is on memorisation rather than creativity and practicality of it. Our education system is increasing educated jahils (ignorant) in society'* (a sample woman).

Ironically, the sample woman did seem to be critical of the way education is organized with reference to gender in education.

There were also strong feelings amongst the sample women that education would not necessarily ensure a job for them in the future and 'does not play an important role in society'.

*'Not much I think, because our education system is not accurate in my opinion. You have to learn things by heart (rote learning or memorization text)....this is how you can get good marks here. The stress is on memorization rather than creativity and practicality of it. Our education system is increasing educated jahils (ignorant/s) in the society'* (a sample woman).

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study concludes that higher education could be used as an instrument for women empowerment and emancipation. Women are portrayed as passive being in social and societal reconstruction. Higher education in Pukhtunkhwa is available for economically sound families. The prevailing cultural norms and practices discourage societal change. Women always seek the support of their family man because they are bound to them morally and financially. I argue that unless a woman knows her rights, strengths and weaknesses, then she would be able to compete in this superficial world of men. However, it is not a solution to leave the ground to men; the best way is to persistently struggle and do not give up. However, seclusion of women and men in all fields of life is not possible in Pukhtunkhwa society, because women cannot make their own education, their own rules, and their own society. Nevertheless, this is problematic in the male-dominated society of Pukhtunkhwa: women are impelled to support this male domination by keeping them silent because, without male support and agreement, a woman cannot move on in this society. The male is

the head of the family unit, so all the family members are bound to obey and respect him.

Women are facing inequality in nearly every sphere of life and domains of power such as economic, legal, political, socio-cultural, educational status. Male control in women's lives is a social reality, since males constitute the central authority in all fields. Care-giving and household roles are the main responsibilities of a woman rather than a man. Men are the bread earners for the entire family and have a right to make decisions about their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. Social and economic status plays a vital role in the decision making power of women within the family. However, the percentage of women working in professions associated with the upper classes is not necessarily higher than of women occupying working-class roles.

Nevertheless, some sample women expressed their determination to find out a way where they can get higher education without violating the cultural and traditional norms of the society that is one of the aims of the study to give voice to the Pukhtuns' women voice to speak for their rights, which I succeeded to some extent.

Economic status correlates with English medium of instruction in private schools came affront and make higher education in access of upper class families only. Therefore the government has to introduce scholarships for working class women students as their limited resources they neglect women education. Education quality is addressed, with a focus on creativity and transformation of individual insight and pedagogical knowledge. The current study suggests that here lies a further opportunity for addressing the importance of investment in women higher education rather than dowry: education should raise awareness and build confidence among the students that after BA/BSc. they have the ability to make their decisions about their education, work and marriage.

Thus the issues of gender in Pakistan include poverty, economic dependency, lack of a social security system and a poor education system. Gender empowerment is limited to slogans, as women's access to education and her rights of Islamic inheritance are altered by cultural discourses. Therefore to narrow down this gender gap effective educational policies are indispensable.

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- <sup>18</sup> The procedure for distance learning in Pakistan is as follows: students get admission to the university as a private candidate (at a lower fee than the regular students). They do not need to attend lectures and seminars at the university; instead they study and prepare themselves for the final examination at home and take part in the examination after a year. Such students have limited knowledge and most of them rely on rote memorization by using prepared notes that are commercially available. This system of examination and study is a serious issue in the education system of Pakistan.