

Gallup Pakistan History Project - Weekend Read 5 ‘A Perennial Educational Crisis’: by Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

The rise of the modern nation state gave birth to an organized system of education designed for the polity. Education is seen as a critical intervention, or alternatively, a pathway. Education has been deemed crucial in enabling and empowering individuals to expand their mental faculties and become thinking, rational, and conscientious members of their society. Furthermore, it is widely accepted as an underlying policy assumption that education permits recipients a shot at upward social mobility. Crucially, the modern education system is also a closely-associated corollary to the modern industrial and neo-liberal economies. Built upon specialization in economic production and activities across different sectors, the modern economic machine demands an “educated” labour force. The specialized structure of the modern economic production patterns is mirrored in the education system, which prepares students to choose and build careers by choosing academic disciplines and training.

In the development saga of states from around the world, education has emerged as a vital instrument for triggering and sustaining development – material, social, and institutional. Developed nation states have used education to move into services, and advanced modes of economic production that rely heavily on the availability of quality and competitive labour force. In this experience, education unlocks the tremendous potential of the human mind, thereby making human capital the vital ingredient in ensuring sustainable growth. For many developing countries, like Pakistan, the significance of education has been emphasized on two levels. On the social level, gradual development and upward social mobility for some classes has highlighted the importance of getting an education as a route to moving ahead in life. On the national level, policymakers too have understood and accepted that Pakistan’s development and growth is closely intertwined with the standards and penetration of education in the country. However, this collective contemporary realization is a relatively recent development. For several decades after independence, education, while making an occasional appearance in rhetoric and discourse, remained largely ignored and forgotten.

Gazing back into Pakistan’s complex history shows how social attitudes towards education have changed piecemeal. Gallup Pakistan’s extensive archive of social research allows this unique

exercise, which also charts national, social, and cultural changes in the country. On the subject of education, a 1980 Gallup public poll engaged a nationally representative sample of adults to excavate the polity's attitudes towards and understanding of education. More specifically, the question posed to the public was structured to identify any gendered differences in educational approaches and expectations. The question asked Pakistanis, "How far do you think boys and girls should be provided education?" Respondents were provided different levels of education to choose from. The results indicate a fascinating landscape of social attitudes towards education in Pakistan in the year 1980.

The results reveal a perennial and obdurate gendered social attitude in Pakistan: a boy's education must be preferred to a girl's education. This difference is captured in the remarkable difference in the top-level educational attainment target for boys and girls. 67% of all Pakistanis in 1980 believed that boys should be sent into the higher education level i.e. Bachelors, Masters, and Higher Qualifications etc. This high proportion shows that by 1980, Pakistanis were beginning to understand the importance of getting an education. However this understanding was refracted through a highly gendered lens. Only 21% of the respondents chose the same level of education for girls i.e. Bachelors, Masters, and Higher Qualifications. The remarkable difference between male and female educational attainment targets here show the strength and hegemony of patriarchal social systems and norms in the country. While one cannot be entirely certain (of the following claim), this time period in Pakistan's national history was also underlined by a nationally orchestrated religious resurgence. Traditional religious institutions, agents, and their normative interpretations have supported gender divisions and differences, extending in education. The salience and resurgence of these barriers might have reinforced the attitude that women's education is not as significant or desirable as a man's education.

The gendered nature of educational attitudes in Pakistan in 1980 is further captured in the recorded proportions for all levels of education for girls in Pakistan. While firmly convinced that a boy's education should be preferred to a girl's education, Pakistanis seemed unsure about how far girls ought to be getting an education. A quarter of all Pakistanis (25%) believed that girls should only be educated below the Matric level, which corresponds to the primary and secondary level education. Given the state and quality of public education in the country, this implies that a quarter of all Pakistanis believed that women should only have basic level, functional literacy.

Most Pakistanis in this survey (29%) chose Matric as the level of educational qualification that should be provided to a girl. In comparison, only 15% Pakistanis chose the same level of education for boys.

Critically, 11% of all Pakistanis also believed that girls should only be getting religious education, while only 1% of all Pakistanis chose the same qualification for boys. This result is interesting in that it sets up a gendered irony prevalent in Pakistan in 1980. While religion is a highly significant formulating variable in Pakistan's sociocultural universe, only a tiny proportion of Pakistanis believed that religious education should be provided to boys. More Pakistanis believed that religious education ought to be provided to girls, thereby highlighting the highly gendered division of educational norms and expectations in the country.

Perhaps the most significant implication of this insightful data is the reflection of the socioeconomic structures and practices that have variously been observed and commented upon by scholars and analysts. The division of labour and social roles between men and women in Pakistani families is such that a boy is viewed differentially than a girl in terms of his social function and economic value. For many Pakistani families, investing in a boy's education presents a worthwhile investment because he is supposed to stay with the parents and support them and the household when he enters adulthood. In contrast, a girl is expected to get married off into another family as soon as she reaches the cusp of adulthood. In this socioeconomic cultural calculus, investing and preferring a boy's education brings back a handsome return in long-term dividends, while a girl is expected to become a part of a different family after marriage – where she is further seen mostly as a homemaker, destined to raise children for her future husband. Therefore, a girl's education pays diminished returns, as her future is socially and economically distinct from that of her parents. This unique division of social roles and labour could explain as to why most Pakistanis preferred supporting boys' education to that of girls in 1980.

Another key dimension of this survey result, outside of its highly captivating gendered implications, is the overall approach towards education. Only a very tiny minority of Pakistanis (2%) believed that boys should get professional education, thereby indicating that educational attainment in Pakistan during that era was not sophisticated and specialized. A negligible proportion of Pakistanis (<1%) chose the same level of advanced professional education for girls.

This result could be taken as an indication of the economic structure, modes of production, and opportunities in the country. In 1980, Pakistan's economy was still highly agrarian, with a growing industrial sector in its nascent stages. This structural situation did not create the demand for highly specialized education in the country, which is captured in people's preferences in this result.

Pakistan's society and culture are structured on a gendered understanding and approach towards most issues. Over the last seven decades, the country has evolved slowly, with education only recently becoming an important addition to social, cultural, economic, and political priorities. However, even in 2014, while attitudes towards female education might have changed, women's educational and literacy attainment levels are still significantly below that of men. This highly obdurate gendered imbalance in education has to be viewed and analyzed through multiple lenses to deconstruct the normative foundations of gender attitudes in general and in education in particular.