

Weekend Read | Edition 54

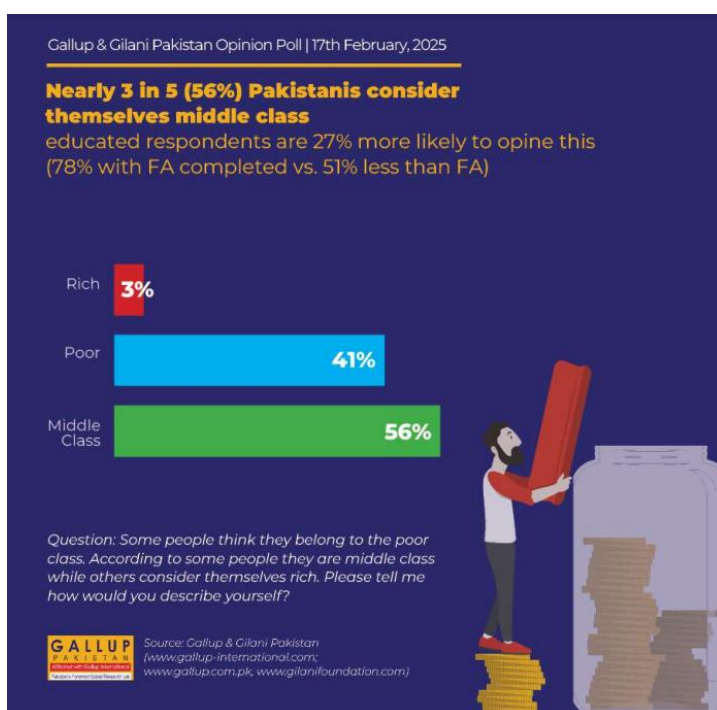
Education and Middle Class in Pakistan: A Crucial Connection



Education and the Middle Class in Pakistan: A Crucial Connection

Education has long been regarded as a pathway to social mobility, transforming individual lives and shaping national progress. In Pakistan, where socioeconomic structures are rapidly evolving, education plays a particularly critical role in defining class identity and aspirations. But how exactly does education influence perceptions of the middle class? And does an increase in educational attainment necessarily translate into economic stability?

Recent data from Gallup & Gilani Pakistan provides valuable insights into the link between education and the middle class. According to their findings, nearly **56%** of Pakistanis consider themselves middle class. However, this self-identification is significantly influenced by educational attainment. A striking **78%** of individuals with at least an intermediate-level education (FA) perceive themselves as middle class, compared to just **51%** of those with lower levels of education. These figures suggest that education fosters not only intellectual growth but also aspirations, self-perception, and expectations for upward mobility.



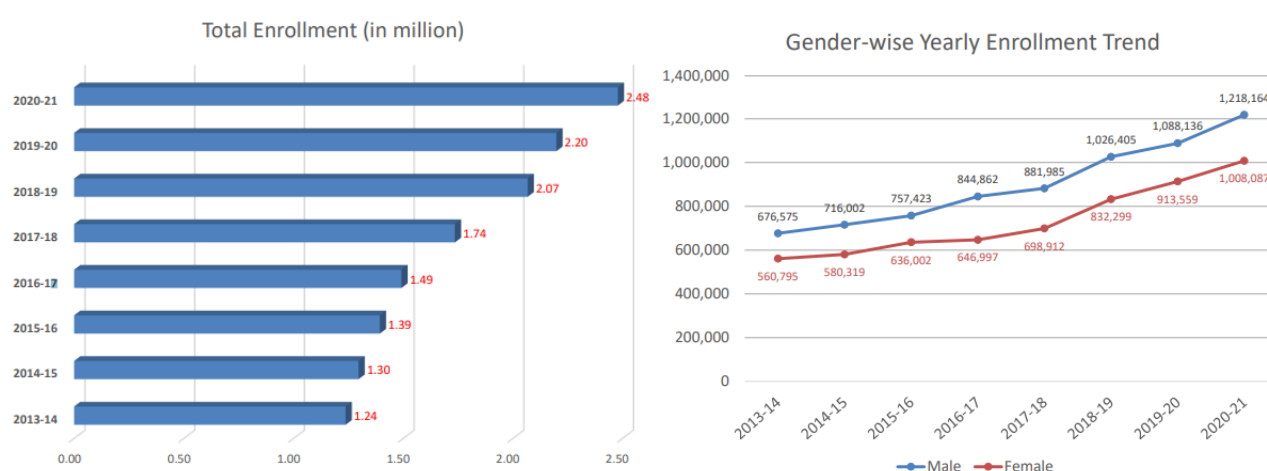
(Fig. 1) Source: Gallup & Gilani Pakistan, 2025¹

¹ <https://gallup.com.pk/post/38086>

The Expansion of Education in Pakistan

Over the past two decades, Pakistan has witnessed considerable advancements in education. Primary school enrollment rates have improved, and the national literacy rate has risen above **60%**². In urban centers and among male populations in Punjab, literacy rates have soared to over **80%**, highlighting a steady progression in educational attainment³.

Higher education has also seen remarkable growth. In the year 2000, university enrollment stood at approximately 200,000 students. By 2025, this number has surged past **2.4 million**. A particularly encouraging trend is the increasing participation of women in higher education, reflecting broader societal shifts towards gender inclusivity and empowerment through education.



(Fig. 2) Source: Higher Education Data Repository, HEC Pakistan⁴

Despite these positive trends, however, the fundamental question remains: Does increased access to education necessarily translate into economic mobility?

Education, Aspirations, and Economic Realities

While education raises aspirations and enhances self-perception, economic realities often tell a different story. In many cases, household incomes do not align with global benchmarks of middle-class status. Many Pakistanis who consider themselves middle class do so based on their educational qualifications and aspirations rather than actual financial stability.

This disconnect between perceived and actual economic status is particularly evident in the labor market. Although more people are earning university degrees, the job market has not expanded proportionately to absorb these graduates into well-paying, stable employment. Many degree holders struggle with underemployment, working in jobs that do not match their qualifications or failing to secure employment altogether. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "degree inflation," can lead to frustration and social unrest, particularly among the youth.

² Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Government of Pakistan

³ Gallup and Gilani analysis of the 7th Population Census; <https://gallup.com.pk/post/37337>

⁴ Higher Education Commission of Pakistan

The Role of Economic Structures in Supporting Educational Aspirations

For education to serve as a true engine of social mobility, economic policies must evolve to support the ambitions of Pakistan's growing educated population. The private sector, government, and academic institutions must work together to create a system where higher education leads to tangible economic opportunities. This requires targeted reforms in several key areas:

1. **Strengthening Access to Quality Education:** While enrollment rates have improved, the quality of education remains inconsistent across regions and institutions. Investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and infrastructure is essential to ensuring that students receive a meaningful education that prepares them for the job market.
2. **Bridging the Gap Between Education and Employment:** There is a pressing need to align educational programs with market demands. This includes expanding vocational training, enhancing STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education, and fostering stronger collaboration between universities and industries to create internship and apprenticeship opportunities.
3. **Economic Policies that Translate Aspirations into Reality:** The government must adopt policies that encourage job creation, entrepreneurship, and innovation. This could include providing incentives for businesses to hire young graduates, supporting start-ups, and investing in sectors with high employment potential, such as technology and manufacturing.

The Middle Class, Political Stability, and Social Change

The economic struggles of Pakistan's aspiring middle class have broader implications beyond individual frustrations. A growing number of educated individuals find themselves unable to achieve the financial security and lifestyle that their qualifications promised. This has fueled discontent and contributed to political instability. Many of the political and social movements in recent years have been driven by a sense of economic disenfranchisement, particularly among the youth.

The concept of the middle class in Pakistan is increasingly defined not just by income but by education and expectations. People believe that acquiring a degree should naturally lead to a comfortable standard of living, but when economic structures fail to support these expectations, dissatisfaction grows. This has led to calls for more serious research and policy interventions to address the disconnect between educational aspirations and economic realities.

A Path Forward

If Pakistan is to fully harness the potential of its expanding educated population, a holistic approach is required. This means ensuring that education remains a reliable ladder for social mobility rather than a source of frustration and economic stagnation.

Key steps toward achieving this goal include:

- **Enhancing the quality and relevance of education** to better prepare graduates for the workforce.
- **Fostering economic policies that create sustainable employment opportunities** for degree

holders.

- **Encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation** to diversify the economy and provide alternative career paths.
- **Addressing regional disparities in education and employment** to create a more inclusive middle class.

Pakistan stands at a crossroads where education has the potential to be a transformative force for individuals and the country as a whole. However, without corresponding economic reforms, the aspirations fostered by education may remain unfulfilled. By addressing these challenges head-on, policymakers, educators, and business leaders can work together to build a future where education genuinely leads to upward mobility, economic security, and a thriving middle class.

Only through sustained efforts in education and economic reform can Pakistan ensure that its growing middle class is not just an illusion of self-perception, but a tangible reality backed by financial stability and opportunity.

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