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Gallup Pakistan Analysis of Literacy Between the 2017 and 2023 Censuses



PRESS RELEASE

Gallup Pakistan Analysis of Literacy Between the 2017 and 2023 Censuses

Pakistan Records Modest Literacy Gains — Women and Rural Areas Drive Gradual Improvement

Islamabad, December 3rd, 2025

Gallup Pakistan, as part of its *Big Data Analysis Series*, presents a detailed review of literacy trends in Pakistan based on findings from the 7th Population and Housing Census 2023, conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS). The data reveal that while literacy continues to inch upward nationwide, progress remains uneven — shaped by gender, geography, and social structure. The 2023 Census marks a pivotal moment in understanding how access to education has evolved since 2017, particularly as the country’s youth population expands and schooling opportunities deepen in both public and private sectors.

What is the Big Data Analysis Series by Gallup?

Gallup Pakistan’s Big Data series was started by Bilal I Gilani, Executive Director of Gallup Pakistan. Bilal explains the rationale of the series: *“Pakistan does not suffer from a lack of data,” notes Bilal Gilani, “but from limited accessibility and weak translation of numbers into understanding. Gallup Pakistan bridges this gap by analyzing large, often under-used datasets — from PSLM and Labour Force Surveys to Economic Surveys, Election Commission data, and now the National Census 2023 — so that these statistics can inform development priorities and public discourse.”*

What data points this current edition covers:

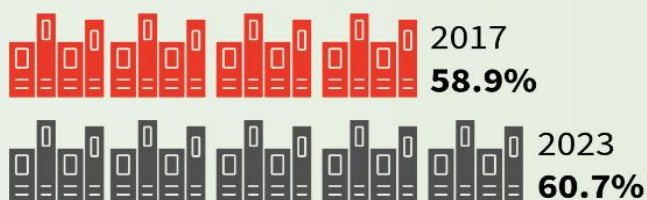
This edition of *Gallup Pakistan’s Big Data Analysis* draws on data from the 7th Population and Housing Census 2023, conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS). It examines changes in literacy and education since 2017, highlighting national and provincial progress, gender disparities, and the urban–rural divide. The analysis also reviews district-level gender parity and educational attainment to assess how far Pakistan has moved toward universal literacy. All figures are based on Tables 4.20–4.24 of the *National Census Report 2023*.

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National literacy:

National literacy improved modestly, from **58.9%** (2017) to **60.7%** (2023) — a 1.7-point gain.



Gender parity:

The Gender Parity Index (GPI = **77.7%**) shows progress nationally but deep district-level divides — **Karachi** districts exceed **95%**, while **Torghar** and **Orakzai** remain below **30%**.

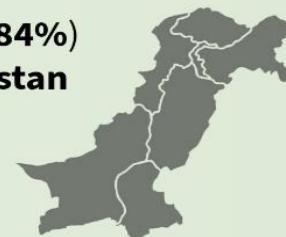


Women drove most of the increase:

Female literacy rose **3.1** points (**49.7** to **52.8%**), narrowing the gender gap from **18.1** to **15.2** points.



Punjab (**66.3%**) and **ICT** (**84%**) continue to lead; **Balochistan** (**42%**) remains lowest, highlighting provincial inequality.



Urban literacy:

Urban literacy (**74.1%**) remains far ahead of rural (**51.6%**), though rural areas showed slightly faster improvement.



Nearly two-thirds (**67.5%**) of educated Pakistanis are still below the **matric** level, signaling weak retention and limited higher-education access. Literacy gains are incremental but uneven, shaped by geography, gender, and socio-economic status; sustainable progress depends on targeted rural and female-education investment.

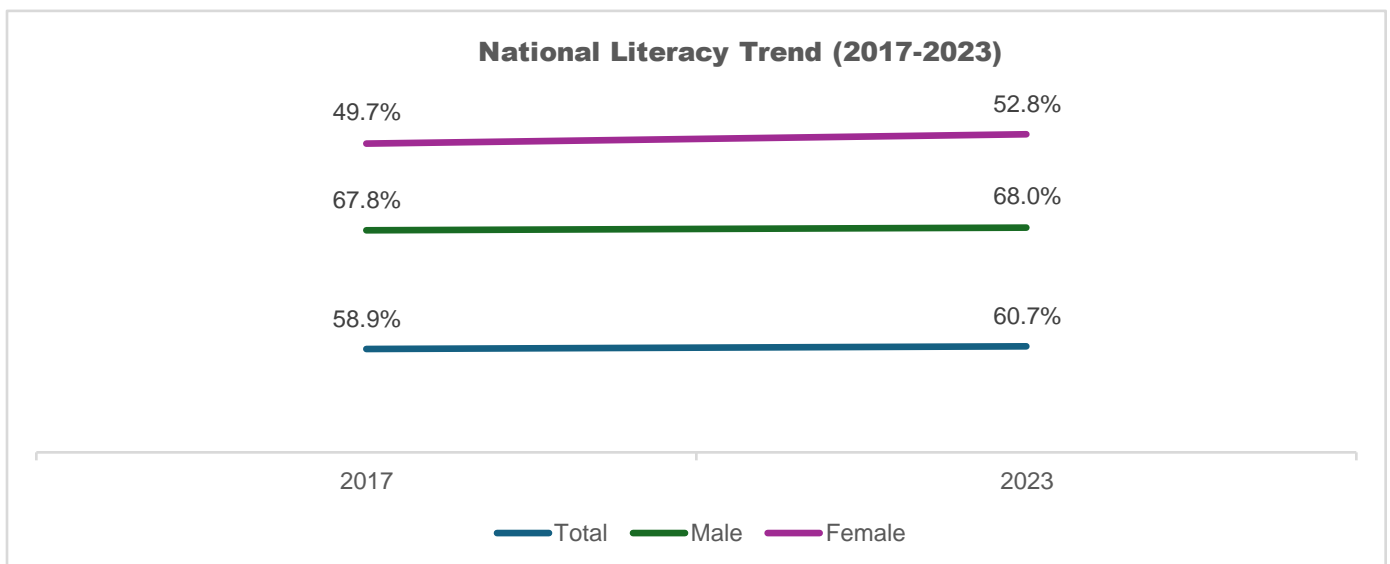
Key Findings:

1. National literacy improved modestly, from 58.9 % (2017) to 60.7 % (2023) — a 1.7-point gain.
2. Women drove most of the increase: female literacy rose 3.1 points (49.7 → 52.8 %), narrowing the gender gap from 18.1 to 15.2 points.
3. Urban literacy (74.1 %) remains far ahead of rural (51.6 %), though rural areas showed slightly faster improvement.
4. Punjab (66.3 %) and ICT (84 %) continue to lead; Balochistan (42 %) remains lowest, highlighting provincial inequality.
5. The Gender Parity Index (GPI = 77.7 %) shows progress nationally but deep district-level divides — Karachi districts exceed 95 %, while Torghar and Orakzai remain below 30 %.
6. Nearly two-thirds (67.5 %) of educated Pakistanis are still below the matric level, signaling weak retention and limited higher-education access.
7. Literacy gains are incremental but uneven, shaped by geography, gender, and socio-economic status; sustainable progress depends on targeted rural and female-education investment.

1. National Literacy Progress

Nationally, Pakistan's literacy rate has risen from 58.9% in 2017 to 60.7% in 2023, showing a 1.7 percentage point increase in six years. While this gain may appear modest, it represents the continuation of a long-term positive trajectory despite economic and pandemic-related disruptions to schooling during the early 2020s. Encouragingly, the data show that female literacy increased from 49.7% to 52.8%, a larger jump than the male increase from 67.8% to 68.0%. This narrowing gender gap — from 18.1 points to 15.2 points — highlights gradual but meaningful progress in women's education.

Such gains point to broader access to schooling for girls, particularly through NGO-supported community schools, conditional cash transfer programs, and government-led literacy campaigns. However, the persistence of a near 15-point gap shows that equality in education remains an unfinished agenda.



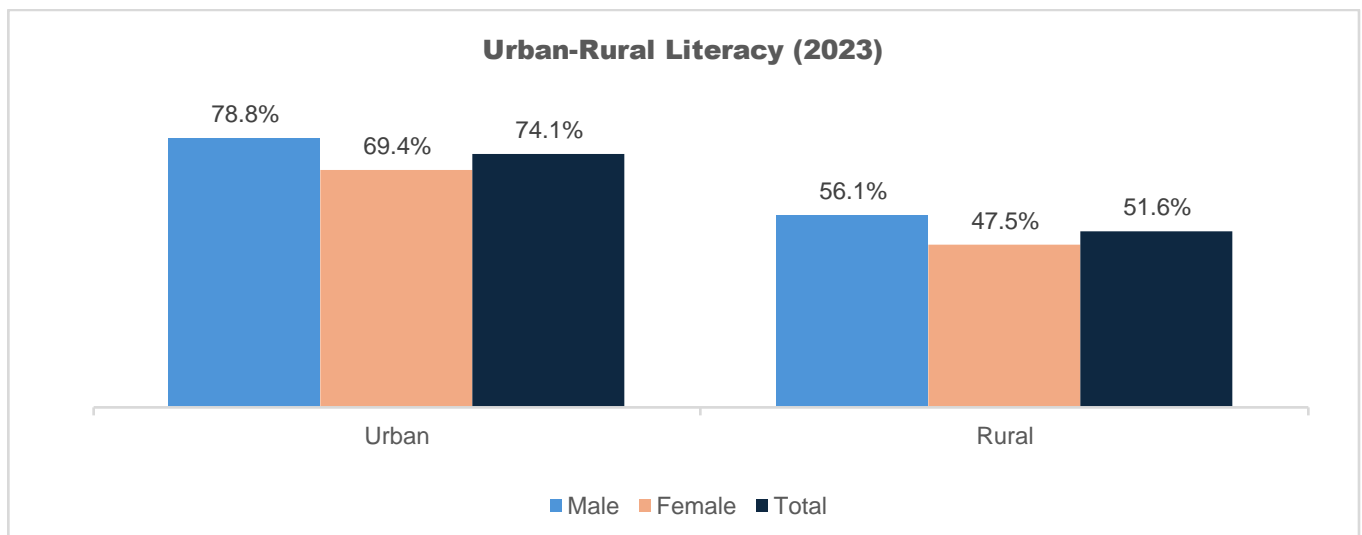
Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.

2. Urban–Rural Divide Persists

Despite improvements, Pakistan’s literacy remains sharply divided along urban–rural lines. Urban areas report a literacy rate of 74.1%, while rural areas lag behind at 51.6% — a staggering 22.5-point gap. This divide underscores not only infrastructure gaps but also socio-economic barriers, including limited school availability, high dropout rates, and early entry into the labour force in rural districts.

While rural literacy rose slightly faster than urban literacy (+1.5 vs +0.9 points), the improvement has been too gradual to bridge the structural divide. Urban regions benefit from higher teacher–student ratios, better school retention, and parental literacy spillovers — all of which sustain higher outcomes for both genders.

Gallup’s analysis indicates that rural women continue to face the greatest disadvantage: with female literacy hovering around 47.5% compared to 69.4% in urban women, their opportunities for participation in formal employment and civic engagement remain limited.



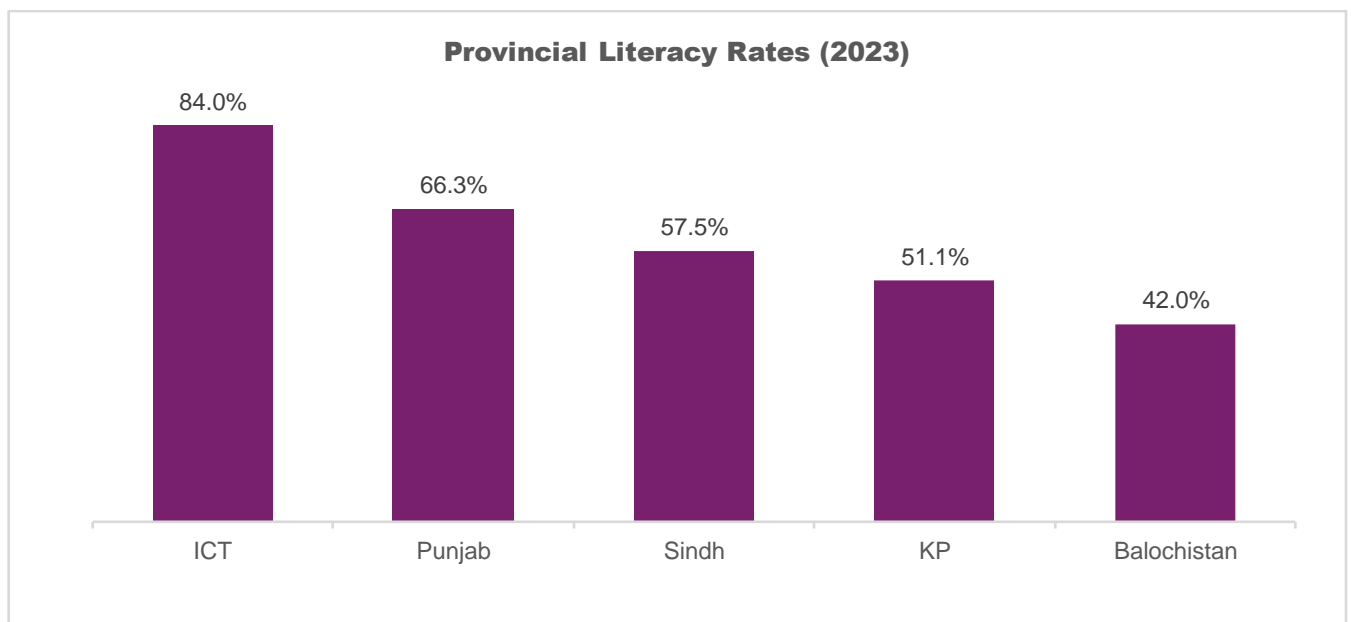
Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.

3. Provincial Literacy Profile

Across provinces, education mirrors Pakistan’s economic geography. Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) leads with an impressive 84% literacy rate, benefiting from near-universal school access and a high concentration of educated professionals. Punjab follows with 66.3%, sustained by an extensive public education network and private-sector schooling growth.

In Sindh, literacy stands at 57.5%, but the divide between Karachi (urban) and interior districts (rural) remains among the country’s widest — with rural literacy near 38%, almost 20 points below the national rural average. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), at 51.1%, has shown notable progress since 2017, thanks to improved enrollment and post-merger education programs in newly integrated districts. Meanwhile, Balochistan remains Pakistan’s least literate province at 42%, a level that has changed little over the decade. Sparse population, weak infrastructure, and low female participation continue to hinder educational expansion there.

These patterns confirm that Pakistan’s literacy progress is geographically concentrated — driven by its more urbanized and institutionally strong provinces, leaving peripheral regions in need of targeted literacy initiatives.



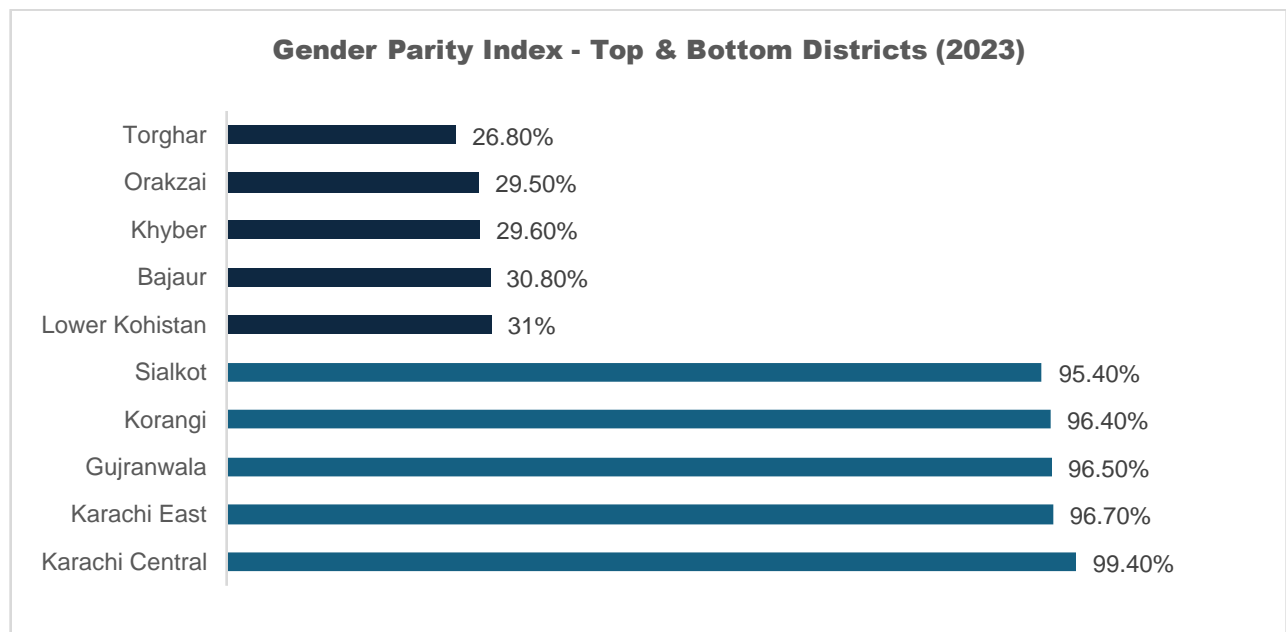
Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.

4. Gender Parity and District-Level Variation

Nationally, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for literacy has climbed to 77.7%, indicating slow but steady convergence between men and women. Yet this national figure conceals wide spatial inequalities.

District-level data reveal that 27 districts surpass the national GPI, while 109 fall below. Urbanized districts such as Karachi Central (99.4%), Karachi East (96.7%), Gujranwala (96.5%), Korangi (96.4%), and Sialkot (95.4%) are nearing full parity. In contrast, mountainous and tribal regions including Torghar (26.8%), Orakzai (29.5%), Khyber (29.6%), Bajaur (30.8%), and Lower Kohistan (31.0%) remain heavily male-dominated in literacy attainment.

This stark difference underlines how geography and gender intersect in shaping opportunity. Urban education systems have achieved gender balance, while rural and tribal areas continue to struggle with early marriage, limited school availability, and cultural restrictions that curtail girls' education beyond primary level.



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.

5. Educational Attainment

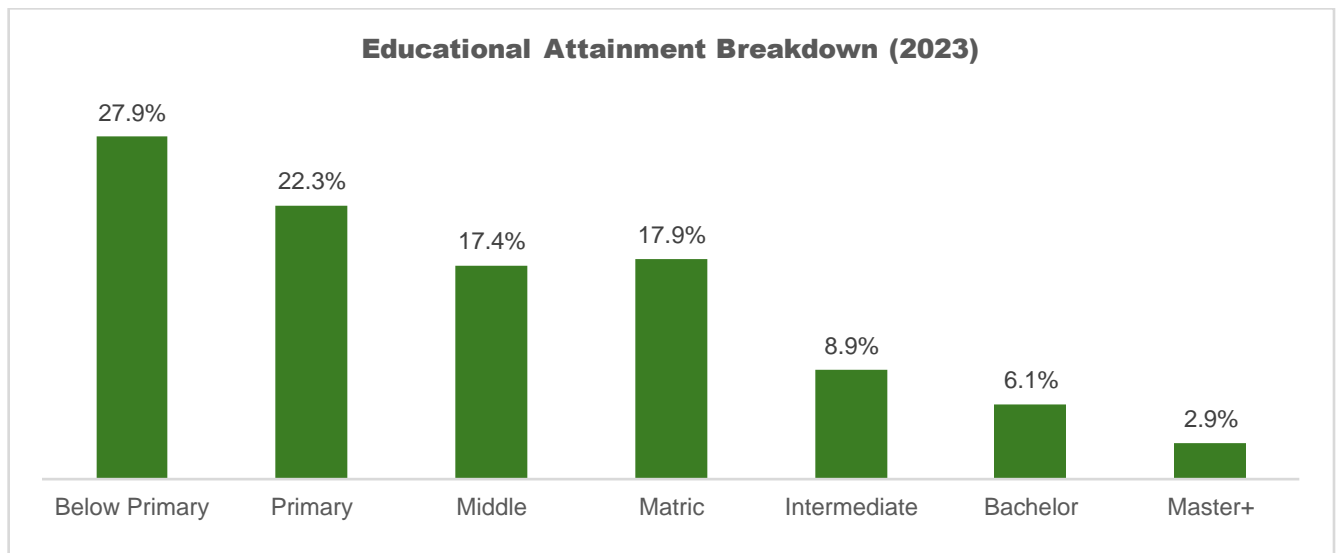
The Census further shows that 59.4% of Pakistanis aged five years and above have attended school, while 40.6% have never enrolled. Among those educated, a large majority remain below matriculation level — highlighting low educational retention and limited transition to higher education.

Breakdown of attainment levels:

- Below Primary: 27.9%
- Primary: 22.3%
- Middle: 17.4%
- Matric: 17.9%
- Intermediate: 8.9%
- Bachelor's: 6.1%
- Master's & Above: 2.9%

These figures reveal that nearly two-thirds (67.5%) of those educated remain below matric, pointing to early dropout patterns that restrict human capital formation and skill development.

While Punjab and ICT show greater representation in higher education categories, other provinces lag, underscoring how educational expansion has yet to translate into equitable skill-building across the federation.



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.

6. Implications

Pakistan's literacy profile tells a story of slow but steady progress. Gains have come largely from female inclusion and rural schooling expansion, yet inequalities persist by geography and income.

Without a decisive focus on retention, quality, and gender equality, the country risks plateauing below the literacy levels of peer nations in South and East Asia.

Targeted investments in rural schools, teacher training, and digital literacy programs — particularly for women — can accelerate Pakistan's trajectory toward universal literacy.

Such progress is not merely a social imperative but also an economic necessity, underpinning workforce readiness, innovation capacity, and inclusive national growth.

About the National Census (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics)

The 7th Population and Housing Census 2023, conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) under the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, marked a historic milestone as the first-ever digital census in Pakistan. Guided by the decisions of the Council of Common Interests (CCI), the Digital Census was carried out nationwide from March to May 2023, employing cutting-edge technology to ensure transparency, accuracy, and efficiency in data collection.

For the first time, the census adopted a digital data collection model, supported by over 120,000 tablets, a secure software solution, and a real-time monitoring framework. Technical collaboration with NADRA, NTC, and SUPARCO enabled high-resolution mapping, data transmission, and centralized synchronization, while a dedicated Census Support and Call Center ensured timely troubleshooting and field coordination.

The report presents a comprehensive picture of Pakistan's demographic, social, and housing characteristics — covering indicators such as population growth, density, literacy, migration, education, housing materials, utilities, and digital access. It forms the foundation for national planning, resource allocation, electoral delimitation, and policy formulation at all levels of governance.

PBS expresses gratitude to all partners, provincial governments, enumerators, and citizens for their cooperation in making Pakistan's first digital census a success. The National Census Report 2023 stands as a landmark achievement, embodying innovation, transparency, and data-driven policymaking for the country's sustainable future.

Editor's Note

This edition examines how Pakistan's literacy landscape has shifted between the 2017 and 2023 Censuses, offering a clear look at where progress has been made — and where gaps persist. The data show modest national gains, driven largely by improvements among women and rural communities. Yet these advances remain uneven, with deep divides between provinces, districts, and socio-economic groups. While urban centers and regions such as ICT and Punjab continue to move steadily forward, parts of Balochistan, KP, and rural Sindh lag far behind.

The Census also reveals that Pakistan's education system remains heavily skewed toward lower grades, with the majority of educated citizens still below matriculation. This underscores the challenge ahead: improving not just access, but retention, quality, and pathways to higher learning.

By translating these patterns into an accessible narrative, this edition of the Big Data Analysis Series aims to support evidence-based dialogue on how Pakistan can accelerate literacy, close gender and geographic gaps, and build a more skilled and equitable society.

— **Aisha Aamir**

Research Executive, Gallup Pakistan



Wish to Contribute to Gallup Big Data Analysis?

Gallup Pakistan is looking for collaboration with researchers to expand the Big Data Analysis project. If you have any ideas, please write to Bilal I Gilani, Project Director, Big Data Analysis at Gallup Pakistan.

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