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An Exploratory Investigation of Out of School Children. A Study focuses on the Enrolment And Retention Of Children at secondary level

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Abstract

This study explores the pressing issue of out-of-school children (OOSC) in West Karachi, Pakistan, focusing on the factors influencing their enrollment and retention in formal education. Despite policy interventions and initiatives to enhance access to education, many children in the region remain excluded from schooling. To address the enduring issue, this research employs a qualitative exploratory study using the case-study approach to investigate the phenomena. Data were collected using 28 in-depth interviews with teachers and school leaders to explore the reasons contributing to the issue. Using purposive sampling, the school was chosen with a high ratio of dropout and retention issues. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings show that the main factors responsible are early marriages, financial strain, and limited access to educational facilities. Furthermore, the results also highlight the role of socioeconomic and cultural factors impacting school attendance. Findings offer recommendations to address these barriers and support inclusive education policies.

Keywords: Out-of-Schoolchildren, Retention Issues, Drop-out Students, Karachi, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Global strategic and technological approaches during the last two decades to reduce the number of Out-of-school Children (OOSC), such as Education for All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals (MGD), Sustainable Development Goal-4 (SDG-4), and One Laptop per Child (OLPC), have not yielded adequate results in many low- and middle-income countries, including Pakistan. Also, COVID-19 is the largest pandemic and global health crisis the world has confronted in the past one hundred years. It has also generated sudden and unexpected educational adversities, where formal learning has been interrupted in as many as 194



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countries, thus affecting 1.6 billion globally enrolled learners (91.3%, as recorded on 01 April 2020).

Pakistan has the highest number of out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth within the ages of primary and secondary school in the world, and most of them live below the poverty line in low socioeconomic rural and remote areas. It makes them vulnerable to being left out in traditional demographical calculations, as many of these families are not even registered within the national databases. According to the latest available estimates, Pakistan continues to have the second-largest number of OOSCs in the world, which accounts for 22.8 million children aged 5-16 years as out-of-school, comprising 44 percent of the total population of this age group. This translates into 5 million children in the age group of 5-9 not enrolled in schools, and after the completion of primary school, it goes up further because 11.4 million adolescents aged 10-14 years are not getting formal Education. The disparities are enormous by gender, socioeconomic background, and geography; in Sindh, 52 percent of the poorest children-58 percent are out of school, while in Balochistan, 78 percent of girls are out of school. As many as 10.7 million boys and 8.6 million girls are enrolled at the primary level, up to 3.6 million boys and 2.8 million girls at the lower secondary level. The estimated percentage of out-of-school children represents about 44% of the total population aged 5-16 years (Rizwan et al., 2022). The condition of education in Sindh, Pakistan, faces a grave challenge in terms of the quality and effective delivery of this fundamental right. Regardless of the governmental measures taken, including the Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2013, the province faces a few severe issues regarding a high dropout rate and a shortage of proper educational facilities, especially in rural areas, even nowadays (LaRocque & Sipahimalani-Rao, 2019). Moreover, there are gender disparities in Sindh's academic arena.

Moreover, girls, particularly in rural areas, bear more barriers while accessing Education due to the distance to schools and the fact that society always prioritizes the Education of boys over girls (Tabassum, 2023). The rate of dropout among girls is higher and reflects a systemic problem that needs interventions by the authorities for the promotion of gender equity in Education (Manzoor et al., 2024). Apart from that, the quality of learning also suffers. Most schools in Sindh lack basic facilities, trained teachers, and enough learning materials, negatively impacting students' learning achievement (LaRocque & Sipahimalani-Rao, 2019). Generally, the educational infrastructure is insufficient, with overcrowded children in classrooms and poor hygiene conditions that may further disincentivize attendance (Ahmed et al., 2019).

It also emerges from the studies that new policies are introduced occasionally, but nothing is done to fulfill those promises, and all that happens is a spiral of unfulfilled pledges (Habib, 2013). While there is acknowledgment for educational reforms to be done, the actual outcomes relating to school going as well as completion of school have remained abysmally low, with around 73% of children withdrawing before completing secondary schooling (Mughal et al., 2019; Mughal & Aldridge, 2017).

In light of this discussion, it is now a fact that the issue of OOSC in Pakistan is multi-dimensional and has roots in demand and supply-side barriers. Some demand-side factors, which relate to household poverty, gender-based discrimination, and the existing social norms that favor boys' Education over girls',



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serve as deterrents to going to school (World Bank, 2022). In this context, It is important to note that child labor, usually a necessity for low-income families to generate income, further limits time and the potential for children to attend formal schooling (Idrees & Sarwar, 2023). Some supply-side issues that address the lack of accessible schools, insufficient teaching facilities, inadequate number of qualified teachers, low school attendance rates, and high dropout rates among students, particularly in rural areas (Mughal, 2018). Several economic and cultural factors have been cited to explain the persistence of OOSC in making Education a subsidiary choice. For instance, though the government of Pakistan has made free and compulsory Education for all children between the ages of 5 to 16 years under Article 25-A of the Constitution, implementation remains challenging due to limited resources and weak institutional frameworks (Mughal, 2018). Recent data from the World Bank shows that although the country currently spends 2.5% of its GDP on educative spending, this falls way below the internationally recommended standard of 4.4% in developing countries. Without proper investment in Education, universal enrollment and retention are not self-evident (World Bank, 2022).

Although such a burning issue, out-of-school children have received surprisingly little attention from academics in Pakistan. Some studies have investigated the views of educational policymakers and provincial and federal authorities, who blame each other for the OOSC in their respective provinces (see Mughal & Aldridge 2017). In this respect, the voices of Headmasters, principals, and teachers close to students' lives are not heard. The current study, therefore, situates the perspectives of these critical stakeholders in understanding the reasons for OOSC in their respective schools, particularly emphasizing enrollment and retention issues. This study is expected to help policymakers with the ground realities that may lead to developing reforms and revising practices addressing the issue. The chapter's next part details the relevant literature review, followed by the study methodology, results, and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) and Relation with SDGs

Most of the research on out-of-school children considers those who have never enrolled or dropped out before completing primary or secondary Education. Indeed, according to Mughal (2018), categorization is deemed necessary for understanding the OOSC population to design targeted interventions. It includes those children who have never enrolled, dropped out of school due to economic or social pressures, or experienced educational barriers because of disabilities or geographic locations. In addition, out-of-school children remain a problem in many countries worldwide, seriously affecting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Despite international efforts, around 263 million out-of-school children remain worldwide; many stay in low-income regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (UNESCO, 2020).

2.2. Factors Contributing to Out-of-School Children in Pakistan

Indeed, issues related to out-of-school children are in a very complex web of



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socioeconomic, cultural, structural, and policy-related barriers. Each of these factors influences a child's access and retention in school. From understanding these elements, a clear picture of challenges emerges, informing appropriate policy intervention.

The study finds that the primary factor causing a high rate of OOSC in Pakistan is poverty, especially in rural and poor communities. Low-income families view Education as a luxury and compromise on the potential long-term benefits of short-term income generation. According to data from the World Bank, the share of education expenditure in Pakistan's GDP is approximately 2.5 percent, less than half of the recommended 4.4 percent for developing countries (World Bank, 2022). This low spending translates to less resource allocation to public schooling, increasing a family's out-of-pocket cost in public schools. Faced with choosing between sending a child to school or allowing them to earn an income, financially constrained families often opt for the latter. Increased dropout rates are recorded among the school-going-age children.

Regarding poverty, there is the emergence of child labor. It is both the cause and effect of poverty, which leads many children to work instead of attending school. Different researches indicate that in rural areas, most children help their families in agriculture; hence, they may support their families in farming or work as laborers (Idrees & Sarwar, 2023). Children may work as domestic servants in urban areas, in small shops, and on the streets as vendors. The opportunity cost of schooling is very high for households under desperate economic pressures; even a meager amount that a child may bring in could be crucial to household survival. For this reason, such children do not get to see the inside of a school and end up living their lives in vicious circles of poverty with limited economic opportunities.

2.3. Cultural and Gender-Based Constraints

2.3.1. Gender Disparities and Societal Norms

A large fraction of Pakistani society believes that Education in boys is more vital than in girls. The cultural expectation due to traditional gender roles often dictates that girls should pay more attention to household responsibilities or get ready for early marriages rather than pursue formal Education (Mughal, 2018). This kind of attitude is prevalent in rural settings where investing in girls' Education is perceived to bring less benefit to the family. As a result, girls may be taken out of school early for house chores or marriage if they do not attend school at all. Girls' dropout rates are very high regarding secondary Education, especially in traditionally conservative provinces like KP and Baluchistan, where traditional practices such as purdah further hinder mobility and access to girls' Education (Idrees & Sarwar, 2023).

2.4. Lack of Access to Quality Education

2.4.1 Distance to School

Another major factor in high dropout rates is a lack of accessible schools. In rural parts of Pakistan, minimal school infrastructure exists. For example, in rural settings, students often travel miles just to get to the nearest school. To young children, the distances are unsafe for travel, and parents might not be willing to let their children make the journey due to the possibility of harassment or accidents (World Bank, 2022). This is one of the significant factors limiting educational opportunities to many children, as schools are not available within a feasible



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commuting distance; low-income families don't have options for private means of transportation.

2.4.2. Inadequate School Facilities

Most schools, especially those in far-flung backward areas, lack proper infrastructure like purified water, toilet facilities, electricity, or even decent classrooms. Such insufficiencies in the physical environment make it hard for an effective learning process, increasing absenteeism and dropout rates. For instance, the deficit of separate toilet facilities for girls and boys predominantly affects the attendance of girls at school, particularly at an adolescent age. The school settings are unsupportive, lacking basic facilities, and failing to promote regular attendance, thus making formal schooling less rewarding.

2.4.2. Insufficient Funding and Resource Allocation

Low budget allocation for education, which is roughly 2.5% of GDP, is one of the major setbacks in addressing the crisis of OOSC in Pakistan (World Bank, 2022). Moving forward, inadequate financing at this level prevents necessary improvements in school infrastructure, teacher training, and learning materials. Particularly in rural areas, the inadequacy of resources becomes manifest in visibly low-budget government schools and the large-scale failure to observe minimum standards. More investment is needed to ensure that the education system in Pakistan can support meaningful reforms; inequality in access and quality will persist across different regions.

2.5. Community Perceptions and Parental Involvement

The importance of formal Education at community levels is highly variable across the country due to the role of local beliefs, socioeconomic status, and past educational experiences. In some of these communities where the rate of poverty is relatively high, formal Education is perceived by parents as something that is not required or is beyond their attainment. The limited parental Education can manifest in a lack of realization about the long-term gains due to schooling, which may cause parents not to prioritize sending daughters to school (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, low parental involvement- primarily because of work pressures or an inability to read and write- means that children do not get the required motivation to pursue further Education and are at a higher risk of dropping out.

2.5.1. Influence of Local Leaders and Community Norms

Community leaders and local influencers also have a significant share of influence in terms of attitude toward Education. In many rural areas, community elders or religious leaders may consider secular Education unnecessary or counterproductive, as it builds resistance within society toward formal schooling (Mughal, 2018). For example, in some parts of KP and Baluchistan, preference for religious education over secular education impacts school enrolment and retention. Few efforts at engaging leaders in the community and educating them on the advantages of formal Education exist to help transform attitudes, especially those around girls' Education; these programs are primarily under-resourced or simply non-existent.



3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative research study, conducted within an interpretive paradigm, was designed to identify complex, context-based reasons for being out-of-school children in Karachi, Pakistan. Qualitative research is especially suited for studying educational and social phenomena such as OOSC because it provides depth regarding participants' experiences, beliefs, and motivations (Creswell, 2013). This approach would, therefore, enable the collection of rich, descriptive data regarding the factors contributing to children being out of school, set within the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which these factors are situated.

3.2. Case Study as a Research Approach

A case study methodology was adopted to explore OOSC in Karachi, which enabled the exploration of this phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2018). A case study approach offers an ideal approach to studying complex issues, such as OOSC, whereby many factors interactively relate, enabling an in-depth understanding of the various social, economic, and cultural dynamics that influence school attendance. It represents a unique case in Karachi, the largest urban centre in Pakistan, with variation from high to low economic status, followed by cultural practices and educational infrastructure. The findings from this case study can usefully contribute to urban educational policy relevant to other large urban centers in Pakistan.

3.3. Population and Sample Strategy

The study population involves teachers, headteachers, and principals in schools' significant proximity to students, including those in West Karachi. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used, and participants were chosen from different schools in Karachi to get a good mix of various socioeconomic backgrounds. This kind of sampling ensured that information was gathered from schools belonging to multiple sections, including schools from less privileged areas of Karachi. In such neighborhoods, local school teachers, headmasters, and principals were chosen as respondents due to their profession and leadership roles, which significantly provide information regarding constraints and deficiencies in the education system. (Patton, 2017).

3.4. Data Collection Instrument and Process

A total of 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. This method provided the flexibility needed for depth in probing specific themes while ensuring that essential questions were covered consistently across interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interviews with teachers and school leaders were conducted to examine their experiences of student enrolment, attendance challenges, and perceptions regarding why children drop out of school. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Participants were assured that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence (Creswell, 2013)

Data collection was initiated by identifying schools in various neighborhoods of Karachi. Selection will be made while keeping in view areas reported to have a high rate of OOSC. Schools were selected from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds; both public and private schools were included in the research to develop a



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comprehensive perspective regarding educational challenges. The selection criteria included low-income area schools since such schools would likely have many dropouts and non-enrolments due to economic and social reasons. An official letter of introduction and study outline was prepared and sent to the heads of schools, including principals, principals, and headmistresses, to access the selected schools. The letter emphasized how the investigation of this study may prove beneficial in informing the policies and interventions that can help improve school attendance and retention and mitigate the issue of OOSC in schools in West Karachi City of Province Sindh.

4. Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's 2006 thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the interviews. The transcripts were first prepared in Urdu and then translated into English. The transcription process was initiated when the data collection process was completed. These were then imported into NVIVO for analysis using TA.

5. Results

In total, 33 participants, including teachers, headteachers, and principals, were approached on the set-inclusive criteria. Five of the 33 participants did not wish to participate due to their commitments. Therefore, 28 participants, 22 teachers, and six school leaders were interviewed. Table 1 shows the demographic of the study participants.

Table 1. Participant and Chosen Schools

Participants	Frequency
<i>Senior Teachers</i>	22
<i>School Leaders (Headmasters/principals)</i>	6
	28
Schools (Located in West Karachi)	
<i>Government-run Schools</i>	4
<i>Private Schools</i>	9

6. Findings

Results show that all interviewees expressed concern that OOSC is an emerging challenge in Pakistan and demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing the growing challenge. However, they identified several issues they could not control and needed immediate attention from policymakers to resolve the problem. Against this backdrop, Table 2 depicts emerged themes and sub-themes, and the elaboration is further presented below:

Table 2. Emerged Themes

S.No	Theme	Sub-Theme 1	Sub-Theme 2
1	Early Marriages	Cultural Pressure for Early Marriage	Gender Roles and Family Expectations
2	Poverty and Financial Strain	Inability to Afford School Expenses	Need for Child Labour Income



3	School Distance	Lack of Nearby Educational Facilities	Safety Concerns During Commute
4	Parents Are Not Educated	Lack of Awareness of Education Value	Limited Support for Academic Growth
5	Low Educational Priority	Focus on Immediate Economic Needs	Gender Bias in Education
6	Lack of Schools in Remote Areas	Limited Government Support	Infrastructure and Resource Shortages

Table 2 shows the analysis that identifies six significant themes: Early Marriages, Poverty and Financial Burden, Distance of travel to school is lengthy, the Parents' Education Levels, Low Priority for Education, and the Absence of Schools in Far-flung areas. Each theme shall be discussed under sub-themes to explain the reasons for the high incidence of out-of-school children.

Theme 1 Early Marriages

Early marriages emerged as one of the significant reasons for dropouts in schools, mainly among girls, due to traditional pressures and dimensions of gender roles.

Cultural Pressure for Early Marriage: Teachers shared that cultural norms affect decision-making around the Education of girls immensely in rural areas where early marriages are common.

A teacher explained, *"In many cases, it's the social expectation that a girl is to be married young. Families worry more about finding a good match for her than about her Education."* Such cultural gravity of marriage over Education puts young girls on the back burner, hence hindering their Education either partially or altogether. (T12)

Gender Roles and Family Expectations: The interviewees also pointed out that girls often have assigned roles within the family, which are seen as far more significant than Education.

One headmaster explained, *"Finally when girls get to their teenage years, they are expected to help at home or prepare for marriage. In some cases, they are withdrawn from school just for these reasons."* (T18)

These family expectations drastically lower the chances of girls attending school and show how strict gender roles reduce their educational experiences.

Theme 2. Poor Financial Conditions

The other dominant themes were economic hardships. Poverty drills families to use survival as the focal point rather than Education.

Inability to Afford School Expenses: Teachers reported that even basic school expenses are unaffordable by many low-income families, who either do not send their children out for fear of being asked to pay such costs or drop out early. A headteacher explained, *"Families here live day to day, barely making enough to cover basic needs. Even the cost of a uniform can deter them from sending their child to school."* (T1)

This financial burden keeps them from sending their children to study as Education goes to the rear seats.

Need for Child Labor Income: In most cases, the children are observed as having some contribution to family income; therefore, Education may look practically useless. One teacher shared, *"When parents face severe financial*



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issues, they view their children as potential earners rather than students. Sending them to work helps support the family, and unfortunately, schooling becomes a luxury they cannot afford." (T4)

This is a highly recognized scenario in low-income families where every family member needs to contribute.

Theme 3. School Distance

physical distances from children's homes to schools are also one of the barriers that emerged to access to Education, whether in rural or non-rural areas.

Lack of Nearby Educational Facilities: Many teachers in rural areas identified that children from many families live far away from the nearest school, and attending school is quite unfeasible and inconvenient.

A teacher stated, *"For some families, it takes miles to reach school. Parents would not want to make their children travel for miles due to the scarcity of transport."*

This inaccessibility to local schooling facilities is barring many children in distant areas from getting an education.

Safety Concerns During Travelling. Safety is another concern keeping parents from sending their children, especially girls, to far-away schools. One headmaster explained, "Parents worry about their daughters' safety, especially if they must walk a long way alone. Some prefer to keep them home rather than take the risk." It indicates that both factors of school distance and safety together contribute to high dropout rates.

Theme 4. Parents Are Not Educated and Low Educational Priority

Parents' educational background plays an essential role in children's school attendance. Most uneducated parents usually lack awareness of the importance of Education, which impacts their children's schooling.

Lack of Awareness of Education Value: Teachers feel that a parent who has never been to school might think that Education is unnecessary. A primary school teacher shared, *"Education is not seen as essential for many parents here. If they never went to school, they may not understand its benefits for their children."* (T21). This ignorance leads to a vicious circle where Education is least valued and prioritized within families.

Limited Support for Academic Growth: Parents with limited education might feel that they will not support their children's studies, which is one of the reasons that they do not even encourage them from home. A headmaster mentioned, *"Parents who struggle to read or write themselves feel ill-equipped to guide their children academically, so they tend to view education as unnecessary."* This limited support from parents makes many children not want to attend school even when they feel no encouragement from home.

Education's role within the family also contributes to children's school attendance, as many families consider other needs of higher priority.

Focus on Immediate Economic Needs: Many families consider education less important than other basic needs such as food and shelter. A teacher shared, "Parents here are concerned with daily survival. They don't see Education as something that will immediately help them meet those needs, so it gets pushed aside." A preoccupation with such a short-term struggle for survival creates a culture where Education is considered non-essential.

Gender Bias in Education: The most significant determinant in priorities



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related to education favors typically boys over girls.

A headmaster noted, *"In some families, boys are prioritized when it comes to education. Girls are often not given the same opportunity, as parents feel that education is less useful for them."* (T5) this reflects the prevalent gender-related bias in cultural attitudes against girls in accessing Education.

Theme 5. Lack of Schools in Remote Areas

Deficiencies in educational infrastructure are considered to be a significant challenge for most children in rural and remote districts.

Limited Government Support: Teachers complained about the government's minimal investment in rural schooling. Consequently, they said, there is a shortage of schools and academic resources in rural areas. A teacher explained, *"Our village has one primary school, and children must travel far to continue their studies beyond grade five. With so few options, many families decide it's not worth the trouble."* The little support received in the institutions by the government reduces their ability to render Education to more areas in rural settings.

Infrastructure and Resource Shortages: The principals and teachers also pointed to a deficit of essential internal resources and infrastructure regarding qualified teachers and adequate facilities.

A headmaster described, *"Even when we have a school, it is often poorly equipped, with few teachers and minimal resources. Parents see this and feel that sending their children is pointless."* (T7) .

These infrastructural inadequacies can be consistently related to poor enrollment and high dropout rates as the quality of Education suffers in the backward areas.

These findings are an indication of the complex set of social, cultural, and economic barriers that exist in preventing children from accessing Education in Pakistan. Some emerging themes, such as Early Marriages, Poverty and Financial Strain, School Distance, Parents' Educational Levels, Low Education Priority, and a Lack of Schools in Remote Areas, incorporate critical challenges to achieving access to Education through targeted interventions. Teachers and headmasters indicated that these are fundamental elements in making education inclusive and sustainable for all children, irrespective of their backgrounds.

7. Discussion of Findings

The first theme seeks to present early marriages as one of the significant contributors to dropout rates among girls, particularly in rural communities where cultural pressures and traditional gender expectations are high. Evidence from several studies supports this view, which suggests that early marriage has adverse effects on girls' educational careers since most are compelled to make numerous choices between marriage and Education. The cultural pressure shapes girls' decisions about Education. In the rural setup, societal norms indicate that girls can only marry at a tender age; on various occasions, families have shown priority for finding suitable husbands for daughters rather than having their daughters pursue Education. For instance, one teacher exclaimed that families are often more anxious about finding suitable matches for their daughters than providing enough ground to get ahead in Education (Sampa et al., 2018; Rani & Akmam, 2022). Similarly, a study conducted in Afghanistan reported that early marriage is the most common reason girls drop out of school, which further shows the spread of this problem across diversified cultural backgrounds (Rani &



Akmam, 2022).

Furthermore, the role of gender and expectations placed by the family also contribute to increasing the level of difficulties for girls in accessing Education. Education leaders affirm that as girls approach their teenage years, they often expect them to start doing household chores or get ready for marriage, and being taken out of school (Rani & Akmam, 2022). This corresponds to the findings by Sekine and Hodgkin, who indicated that social pressures to maintain family honor sometimes lead to families retaining married girls at home, absenteeism, and dropout (Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017). Rigorous gender functions imposed on girls not only restrict educational opportunities but also give credence to their primary worth based on domesticity rather than academic performance (Arafat et al., 2021). The lack of support and autonomy, coupled with feelings of isolation, adds to anxiety, further hindering their interest in Education and personal development (Yadav et al., 2024).

The major economic factors include poor financial conditions that make sending children to schools burdensome and emerging school distances as serious barriers to educational access. These impacts are felt most seriously in the case of low-income families and rural areas. Economic hardship, further compounded by the need for child labor, has aggravated this situation. Moreover, the expense of sending children to school has become a very critical factor for low-income families. Teachers mentioned that even the most negligible fees related to uniforms or school materials may be enough to keep families from sending their children to school. If this were not enough, in many cases, a child is expected to contribute to the family income as well; as one teacher noted, "*When parents face severe financial issues, they view their children as potential earners rather than students*" (Zelníčková et al., 2023). This view is supported by evidence that economic deprivation increases the likelihood of children having to drop out of school to seek work, thereby returning to poverty so that these children cannot take advantage of better prospects later in life. Apart from financial problems, physical access to schools- the distance between a child's residence and the nearest school- remains one of the most significant barriers to school enrollment, particularly in rural areas. Teachers in far-flung areas have pointed out that many children reside far enough from the nearest school and that regular attendance is hard for them. A teacher's observation that "the closest school is miles away" underscores the logistical difficulties families face (Scandurra et al., 2022). This is compounded by the fact that parents face limited options for transportation and, more often than not, keep their children home rather than risk the challenges associated with long-distance travel (Ekblom-Bak et al., 2018). Safety concerns during travel also play a significant role in parents' decisions about school attendance. It is also because of fear for the children's safety, especially if girls have to walk alone, that keeps them from going to a school far away from their residence. Besides, economic hardship forces many families to put survival first, often at the expense of their children's education, not to mention the distance to school on foot and unsafe conditions that further complicate the problem. These specific issues need targeted interventions vis-à-vis economic support, besides geographical access to educational facilities.

Parents' educational background thus seems to play an essential role in shaping their children's school-going experience. During the interviews, teachers mentioned that uneducated parents appeared ignorant about the benefits of



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formal Education. As one primary school teacher noted, "For many parents here, education is not considered important" or "undefined" (2018). On the one hand, this keeps the particular cycle running wherein Education receives low regard and priority in certain families. This notion is supported by research, which shows that the levels of Education among parents are highly correlated with those of children, that children from educated parents end up pursuing and completing their Education (Zhang et al., 2020; España-Eljaiek, 2023). Such parents barely have the confidence to help their children with academic development; hence, they do not get encouragement at home. For example, a headmaster commented, "Parents who struggle to read or write themselves feel ill-equipped to guide their children academically" (Mayo et al., 2015). Such dynamics set a situation where education is not highly valued, to the extent that it discourages children from attending school.

Preoccupation with Immediate Economic Needs: Prioritizing immediate economic needs over Education is another critical barrier. Families usually focus on basic needs like food and shelter; Education is a luxury. This fact is nicely captured in a teacher's comment: "Parents here are concerned with daily survival." This struggle for short-term survival contributes to the culture where Education is de-emphasized in families unable to access these basic needs. The studies also captured how economic deprivations influence educational outcomes, where typically families cannot invest in their children due to pressing financial constraints (HandehKhaleh et al., 2020; Byun et al., 2012).

Access to Education is further complicated by gender bias since many families still favor boys' access to Education over girls. It became clear from the headmaster's utterances that "in some families, boys are prioritized when it comes to education" due to cultural attitudes that put girls at a disadvantage. This bias reflects broader societal norms that often view girls' Education as less valuable, thus perpetuating disparities in educational attainment between genders. Most cultures do have considerable differences in access to Education, as explored in research, between boys and girls; this leads to significant differences in educational outcomes (Akabayashi et al., 2020). Moreover, access to education is shaped by a scarcity of proper educational facilities within most areas that are classified as rural and remote. Some teachers reflected that the lack of government investment in rural schooling translates into insufficient schools and educational resources. Indeed, one teacher projects, "Our village has one primary school"; this shows the minimal choices families have to make for their children (Zhang, 2024). This makes the infrastructure not only limit the number of schools but also lower the quality of Education. Even in cases of schools' existence, principals identify schools' incompetence as the scarcity of qualified teachers and proper resources. Because of such situations, parents believe that sending their children to school would be pointless, influencing the low enrollment and high dropout rates.

8.1. Research Limitations

This study faced several limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings. First, the research was conducted in Karachi, so the insights were confined to only urban and peri-urban settings as opposed to rural areas where challenges to access educational opportunities might have been very different. The second is that this is again a qualitative interview technique with a target



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population of teachers, headmasters, and principals, which, though in-depth, may have lacked the broader scope of statistical data needed to quantify particular issues such as dropout rates or economic impact. Again, there might have been the possibility of people's responses being influenced by social desirability bias, with teachers and principals focusing on systemic issues beyond their control and minimizing those factors they can affect. A focus on Karachi also means that findings cannot capture the educational barriers in other provinces, given their distinct cultural or socioeconomic dynamics. Examples include Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

8.2. Study Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to address the high rates of out-of-school children in Pakistan:

1. **Targeted Financial Support Programs:** Introducing scholarships or financial aid to low-income families can alleviate the economic reasons that drive students to drop out. Providing free uniform school attire, books, and transportation may also incentivize children to continue with their school.
2. **Community Awareness Campaigns:** Raising awareness in the parents' minds regarding the long-term benefits of Education amongst girls serves to help change such negative cultural perspectives. Community leaders, both religious and local, should actively speak out about the need for education.
3. **Expansion of School Infrastructure:** The government needs to increase spending on construction and improvement of schools, especially in far-flung areas. This involves providing transport options or adding more schools near the population in rural settings to reduce dropouts caused by traveling challenges.
4. **Implementation of Early Marriage Education Programs:** Collaborating with community organizations to educate families on the impact of early marriages on girls can encourage delayed marriages to take place and allow girls to stay in school longer.
5. **Parental Education Programs:** Programs aimed at orienting parents towards the importance of formal education and how they can contribute to their children's academic pursuits can create a learning-conducive home environment. Adult education or literacy programs can also contribute to parents' more active involvement in their children's education.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation of Education Policies:** Bringing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate available policies on Education and their implementation will highlight the gaps to bring reforms and accountability in the educational system.

8.3. Future Research Avenues

It is also important to note that the reasons for out-of-school children in rural areas of Pakistan may be even worse than the rest of the country due to geographical and infrastructural constraints. Quantitative studies on large-scale data of OOSC could provide broader economic, social, and cultural factors affecting school enrollment and dropouts across different provinces. Longitudinal studies that trace the enrollment of children from early childhood through primary and secondary Education may also reveal critical stages when children are most



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vulnerable to dropping out. Moreover, identifying specific interventions attempted in particular studies, such as financial aid, transportation facilities, and community awareness programs, is even more applicable to determining how these strategies have effectively contributed to increasing school enrollment and retention. Last but not least, studies focusing on the role of governmental policies related to regional educational disparities might highlight policy-driven ways in which the OOSC crisis can be reduced across Pakistan.

7.1. Conclusion

This study has identified multi-dimensional barriers that have led children out of school or not remaining in Pakistan, emphasizing Karachi. Major deterrents include poverty, gender biases, and poor educational infrastructure—all significant contributors to the high dropout rate. While education is understood to be necessary, parents and practitioners continue to face persistent socioeconomic and cultural barriers that deter school attendance and completion. These issues call for directed policy on increasing school infrastructure, providing more support for the teaching staff, and offering fiscal assistance to low-income families. Success here will be a team effort by the government and communities working with schools to develop sustainable solutions to ensure access and quality in education. Removing these barriers would yield positive results toward achieving parity in Education, which would strengthen Pakistan's social and economic fabric.

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