



## **Education as a Significant Factor in Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges Case Study of South Punjab (2008-18)**

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### **Abstract**

*Empowerment means to give an opportunity to strengthen someone's position in the society. The women empowerment refers to weaken the inequalities to ensure equality without any discrimination of gender and create possibilities to enable women to attain skills for their progress. Socio-economic empowerment of women expounds the equitable prospects for women to enhance their capacity to bring change in their life. This procedure assists women to make choices, to develop compatibility with their social setting and alteration of their self-image. In this perspective education is the paramount factor to uplift womenfolk largely in underprivileged areas. Women access to education enhances their capacity and provides maximum opportunities for socio-economic growth. This research focuses on the prospects and challenges of the policies by Shahbaz Sharif's government from 2008-2018 regarding socio-economic empowerment of women in South Punjab. Data is collected and analysed qualitatively.*

### **Keywords**

Women Empowerment, Socio-economic, South Punjab, Education.

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Women are half the population of the world and yet they are presumably marginalized largely in less-developed states. The phenomenon of women empowerment refers to the rights of woman by giving them recognition, understanding their valuable and distinguishing participation in society. Women empowerment is a multifaceted as well as multidimensional concept. It is typically defined as “rights, resources, agency and achievements” and a process of gaining control. Women’ empowerment can be indispensable for socio-economic development of any society and women are presenting and participating very actively in national as well as global development.

Pakistan has embraced numerous international pledges to women empowerment to safeguard their rights including “Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR,1948)<sup>2</sup>, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW,1979)<sup>3</sup>, Beijing Platform for Action (1995)<sup>4</sup>, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs,2000)<sup>5</sup> and the Sustainable Development

<sup>1</sup> This article is extracted from Ph.D. dissertation by Saba Lodhi under the supervision of Dr. Aisha Shahzad in the department of Political Science, LCWU.

<sup>2</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an international document adopted by the United Nations General Assembly that enshrines 30 rights and freedoms of all human beings.

<sup>3</sup> The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly.

<sup>4</sup> The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action highlighted 12 key areas where urgent action was needed to ensure greater equality for women and men.

Goals (SDGs, 2015)<sup>6</sup>. Constitution of Pakistan guarantees protection of women. Many policies were introduced to enhance women empowerment since the concept popularized within state structure. In past, Pakistan commenced two major policy verdicts in this regard i.e. “National Plan of Action for Women” in 1998 and “National Policy on the Development and Empowerment of Women” 2002.

### **Objectives of Research**

1. To examine the phenomenon of women empowerment with respect to socio-economic dimension.
2. To analyse the prospects of educational policies introduced by Shahbaz Sharif’s government during 2008-2018 with their implications for South Punjab.
3. To identify the challenging factors during implementation of policies by Punjab government.

### **Literature Review**

The empowerment as a word was crafted in the 17th century and has meanings like ‘authorize’, ‘delegate’, or ‘enable’ but the contemporary idea of empowerment would not have been even possible 200 years ago to reflect about it. Empowerment is a comprehensive idea. However, it suggests and infers transmission of power in a vibrant manner (Rappaport, 1981). Nevertheless, the word ‘empowerment’ got popularity in 1960’s and was treated as a “buzzword”, yet literature kept it aside and did not rush to it till 1980’s. United Nations stated 2001 as the “International Year for Women’s Empowerment” to highlight the importance of the phenomenon. Long before, in 1975, UN announced “Women’s Decade” to highlight the issue. The term “empowerment” applied abundantly by researchers and aid workers from the late 1970s. Now this word is even more in trend; from psychology to self-help, the fascination of the word appears boundless.

The feministic goal is the struggle for earning equal prestige for women in society. The idea outlines society’s organization which is essential to re-design, in order to give space to women’s rights. Prevailing structures articulating economic, political and social structures are unfavourable to women. Numerous scholars offered diverse thoughts to cater issues and have endorsed altered expressions to remedy this issue (SIDA, 1997). Many of the theorists anticipated it that power exists in equal state on both sides, if one gets more power, the other loses its power, and it is called zero-sum theory. Empowerment, as a term, means in a different way for diverse persons. To the feminists, neo-liberals, and neo-Marxists, it conveys a practical notion. The term empowerment denotes a transformation of life of the women in terms of getting the higher social position in society (Hooks, 2000).

Furthermore, their substantial sanctuary, self-assertiveness and confidence illustrate their empowerment. According to neo-liberal’s women emancipation and their access to all resources in society is mandatory to ensure women empowerment. Similarly, Marxists perceive that women are supposed to have security in terms of their employment, working hours and health. Moreover, the goals of feministic movements were diverse from country to country drastically. The feministic drive was the strongest in US during 1970’s. Recent feminist scholars proposed three feminism waves. The feminism’s 1st wave was covering two centuries ranging 17th to 19th, incorporated influences of those who didn’t deviate from the prevailing systems and struggled hard to attain fairness and egalitarianism for women.

The second wave ranged from 1960’s to the 1980’s in which multiple schools of thought produced who were different not only in terms of defining their goals of feminism but also in the ideal ways of accomplishing these goals. Four major schools of thought linked with this wave are socialist, liberal, cultural and radical schools of thought. Next wave coincided with previous one and designed amplifications and evaluates the aforementioned schools of thought (Sen, 1994). Feminism has further become popularized in the start of the 21st century. Feminists are more focused on legal bindings for assurances of equal practices for both genders. Now the focus is on removal of customary practices which are gendered in nature and discourages women just on the basis of their biological sex. The malpractices in the name of customs, religions, castes, creeds etc. which marginalized women are need to be reformed by reforming law and formal judicial institution (Chaudhry et al, 2012).

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<sup>5</sup> The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which range from halving extreme poverty rates to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education.

<sup>6</sup> The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015.

Feminism is attracted by Islamic status of women which is not only equal in most of the terms but also superior or prestigious to men in some and special circumstances. Islam has given empowerment to women for making contracts, for administrating commerce and for owning assets individually. Islam has no objection on women's social, political, and economic rights. Moreover, Islam lays stress on education rights and allows women's work as well. The Holy Prophet's first wife Hazrat Khadijah was the elite business lady of the town and managed her business independently. This leads us towards permission of economic independence of women under the teachings of Islam. This has mentioned in Quran as well<sup>7</sup>. Not only women can own their resources personally but also, they can spend it on their own as well. Consequently, women empowerment is a multi-dimensional phenomenon where economic aspect is very significant element in determining the social status of female strata of country's population.

Nonetheless, all other non-economic aspects are similarly significant. Similarly, social dimension of empowerment deals with societal relationships of and with women. Islam also has given the rights to enter into a marriage contract with will of the woman. Woman can also initiate divorce if she is not satisfied with her marriage. The woman of mature age cannot be given in marriage contract without getting permission of hers. If they were left unheard, they would become the aggrieved force within the society, relatively tough to handle. Socially, too, women are reflected more respectful according to Islam.<sup>8</sup> Different groups of society compete for more power and control over resources. Because this control and power gives them chance to make better decisions in their own interest. It increases the individual's strength and consequently community's strength. Therefore, working on empowerment means that the visionary development of women and enhancing their organizational capacities as well which will definitely move their present state.

Women are living in a male dominated society where there is oppression and marginalization of women, are the customary practices not only in Pakistan but all over the world. Male members used to take all the decisions for the family and women are kept quiet. They are living life as an ordinary commodity. They are depriving from the right to education. Similarly, outside home matters are kept aside from females as they have nothing to do with outside business. They are totally dependent on their male counterparts financially, so the men of the family are independent to decide about their destiny. In this way in both spheres, women are left far behind than men in decision making. These oppressive measures need to be addressed for social uplift and empowerment of women.

A study conducted by (Naz et al. 2012) established the fact that cultural norms, here in Pakistan, are the biggest factor for isolation of women, which can be defensible through religion as well. In Pakistan, the Council of Islamic Ideology is considered the biggest institution for most authentic and reliable opinion regarding women's legal and social status. Most of the time, they present gender segregation and female seclusion as unavoidable hurdles to prosper women and access to resources. The women empowerment's history started with the political empowerment legally as Pakistani women were allowed to cast vote with the creation of Pakistan under the Pakistan Ordinance, and they reiterated this by casting vote in 1956 elections under the interim Constitution. All through the constitutional antiquity of Pakistan, from 1956 to 1973, setting up the reserved seats in the Parliament for women had been present.

As democracy guarantees empowerment of citizens, the elected rule of Z. A. Bhutto (1970-1977) ensured the practices of democracy and had showed liberal outlook towards women. Government sector services unbolted to women to ensure and guarantee economic empowerment. Political development was there in form of reserved seats in national as well as provincial Assemblies (ten percent in national and five percent in provincial assembly). Moreover, women could also contest on general seats. The article 25 of the constitution guarantees that there will be followed discrimination free practices in every field regardless of the consideration of biological sex of any

<sup>7</sup> "For men is a portion of what they earn, and for women is a portion of what they earn, and for women is a portion of what they earn, Ask Allah for His grace, Allah has knowledge of all things". (The Quran, 32:4).

<sup>8</sup> "According to Abu Hurairah, a man came to the Prophet (PBUH) O Messenger of God, who rightfully deserves the best treatment from me 'Your mother' replied the Prophet (PBUH) who is the next? Asked the man. 'Your mother' said the Prophet (PBUH) who comes next? The man asked again, 'your mother', Replied the Prophet, (PBUH) who is the after that? Insisted the man 'Your father', said the noble Prophet (PBUH)."

person.” Furthermore, it comes up with the provision of safeguarding the family unit including marriage, mother and child rights. The constitution encouraged involvement of women as well in all spheres of influence in national life.

The military coup of *Zia-ul-Haq*, likewise, took steps for women’s empowerment from 1977 to 1986. The steps included the enhancement of Cabinet Secretariat with the formation of the Women Division, and the commission on the Status of women that had been taken in his regime. Sixth (five year) Plan was first in terms of having a chapter on women development. Zia-ul-Haq initiated the induction of women (20 women) in the “Majlis-e-Shoora”. In 1985, women's reserved seats were increased up to twenty percent in national assembly. In contrary to all this, he introduced some discriminatory laws. He also proscribed them from partaking and from being viewers of sports. Benazir’s Government, in 1988, pronounced its distress over women issues. She was enthusiastic for women development and pronounced the need of women development banks, women's police stations and courts. She was also in favour of repealing the discriminatory laws. Nonetheless, from 1988-90 and 1993-96, she could not offer single legislature for the women development and betterment.

Nawaz Sharif’s government suggested fifteenth amendment which was also known as Shariah Law amendment to offer the replacement of legal structure with Islamic one and overrule the constitution. The suggestion was accepted in the National Assembly, but it was not accepted by human rights activists, women’s groups, and political opposition parties. A serious policy document, “Pakistan 2010 Program” designed in 1997 put forth women development as one of the 16 key areas once, but before finalizing, the women specific area was omitted. The same was happened with the policy document prepared for the Poverty Reduction in 1999, which stated women as a primary beneficiary group in the strategies for reduction of poverty but bear dearth of any gender responsive frame.

### **Research Questions**

1. Why education is a primary factor for women empowerment?
2. What are the prospects of educational policies introduced by Shahbaz Sharif’s government during 2008-2018 for South Punjab?
3. What are the challenging factors during implementation of policies by Punjab government?

### **Methodology**

The research is based on case-study to get an in-depth analysis. It would comprise qualitative approach. Secondary sources are utilized to gather the data comprising government statistics, census reports, books, journals, official documents of ministries, annual reports of concerned ministries, Human Development Reports, and publications of women development departments focusing 10 years of Shahbaz Sharif Government era of 2008-2018 in Punjab province. The results are interpreted through analytical and explanatory techniques to elaborate the ontology of women empowerment in the context of Pakistan with special focus on South Punjab. The study examines the significance of education for female strata in South Punjab for their socio-economic growth. Analytical description of facts epitomizes the complexities faced by women.

### **Education Sector and Status of Women in South Punjab \_\_\_\_\_Prospects and Challenges**

From 2008-2018, the government launched several initiatives to improve the quality of education and reduce the gender gap in South Punjab. Here are notable initiatives given below.

For low-income families, The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) strived hard to provide excellence in education sector to remove educational disparities between classes. For south Punjab, PEF provided a host of prospects in education sector, that can create a big difference, rather in terms of financial assistance or providing doorstep quality education to marginalized communities. This is also on PEF’s credit that they bothered to elevate the existing quality of education provided by the private schools and they hosted a lot of training and refresher courses for private school teachers of community to provide up-to-date education to students of private schools. In 2008, Punjab Government developed and run The Punjab Education Endowment Fund (PEEF) to offer scholarships to needy students to continue their studies after matriculation up to masters. Then in 2010, government assess the need for infrastructural development in schools of Punjab and launched The Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP).

The contribution of non-governmental organizations in the education sector was welcomed and acknowledged by Punjab government as well. The Citizen Foundation (TCF) can be the example, striving for providing best experiences of learning to their students in a very affordable manner and

even for free to deserving students. Likewise, *Alif Ailaan* can be the example not only to provide basic amenities in education field but also to lobbying and struggling for better educational budgets. Similarly, Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) is creating and maintaining the difference through its work in education sector.

Government through article 37 of the constitution of Pakistan binds itself to “remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory secondary education within minimum possible period”. But practically speaking, we are far behind reaching and achieving this goal. Gender disparity in education sector made it even more difficult to achieve as the literacy rate for women in Punjab positions at 48%, pointedly lower than the 67% for men (Imran, 2015). This shows that women are more far than men in achieving their educational goals. Pretentiously, education and literacy rate has become a key measure not only in terms of human development but also to report gender inequality.

Conspicuously, only 28% males never attended school in their life in comparison to 50% of females. Despite the fact that overall literacy rate of Punjab remained constant at 63%, the girl’s ratio was dropped off from 55% to 54%. Boys ‘ratio showed an increase of 1% in recent years. (PCSW, 2018). Furthermore, girls also face the enrolment issues and their enrolment is far below than men in every level of basic education in Punjab. The fact was reported by PAGE (2017) that 46.7% girls were enrolled up to primary level, 47% were enrolled at middle level and a slight increase i.e. 48.3% were enrolled at the upper-secondary level. It inclined towards the fact that how deprived the half of the female population of Punjab was, that they could not even access the basic education.

Less urbanization in South Punjab had become one of the highlighted challenges towards women empowerment. The under-spending of development budget had led to the conclusion that the administrative officers did not have any capacity building and training regarding spending of their budgets. Similarly, the adult literacy program was analysed from 2008 to 2018 and concluded that it helped a lot in increasing the literacy rate of Punjab i.e. 2% but it could not affect the female literacy rate in South Punjab. Consequently, the policy structure of education sector just like the health and employment sectors was persistently dubious.

The drop out ratio of girls is much higher than boys. There are a host of factors involved creating hinderances in the education of girl child. The survey of PSLM 2011-12 (Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement) offered a brief depiction of reasons of leaving the school in below given table.

**Table 1**

**Reasons for leaving school before completing primary 10-18 years**

Punjab	Percentage of cases	
	Boys	Girls
Parents did not allow	01	17
Too expensive	15	19
Too Far	01	06
Had to help at work	11	04
Had to help at home	02	11
Child not willing	54	27
Others	16	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: PSLM 2011-12

Gender disaggregated data also reinforced the gender differences in access to education. Patriarchal norms for girls also highlighted within the table i.e. parents did not allow 17% girls to go to school and 11% left their education because they had to help at home chores. However, Foundation Assisted School program (FAS) was an initiative by Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), started working in 2005 to provide quality education to the students through Public Private Partnership (PPP), where financial and technical support was extended to the private sector schools in both the rural as well as city areas.

Though, Shahbaz Sharif’s administration, was stretched FAS package to every district of Punjab. They had approximately 3700 schools who partnered them. FAS had a rigorous inducting criterion and the schools meeting those criteria had been the part of FAS in 11 phases throughout the province. This is especially noticeable that FAS furnished the needs of more than 1.80 million students. But the goal of achieving harmony and uniformity between the elite schools and public schools remained the same. The chauvinist attitude towards girl education sustained. In spite of these

ingenuities initiated by the Punjab government, they could not get the anticipated outcomes. And around 50% of the female population continued to be uneducated even in metropolises of South Punjab.

Sustainable Development Policy Institute is a reputed research network that published their research in 2011 regarding root causes of girls' dropout in rural communities of Pakistan. This report presented causes of drop out of girls according to their parent's insight. Conferring to the report, poverty was the prime reason with 21.7% of the girls dropped out due to poverty. Second main reason was safety of the girl child which was 19%. Third reason was lack of girls' interest in studies with 14.7% of drop outs were due to this reason. In 10.3% cases, mother's death became the reason of drop out for girls followed by 9.8% of drop out due to house hold responsibilities.

The public-private dichotomy in education sector made it even more complexed phenomenon for general population to deal with it. Mostly people perceived government schools as the last resort in cities but rural Punjab still had no choice. Private sector became unaffordable for poorer class due to its better infrastructure and amenities they provide at high cost. So, urban parts of Punjab might select private schooling for their kids. Gender discrimination is another debate, fashioned after dual educational streams practiced in Pakistan, where expensive education used to provide to boys and girls were considered to be sent to government schools.

**Table 2**

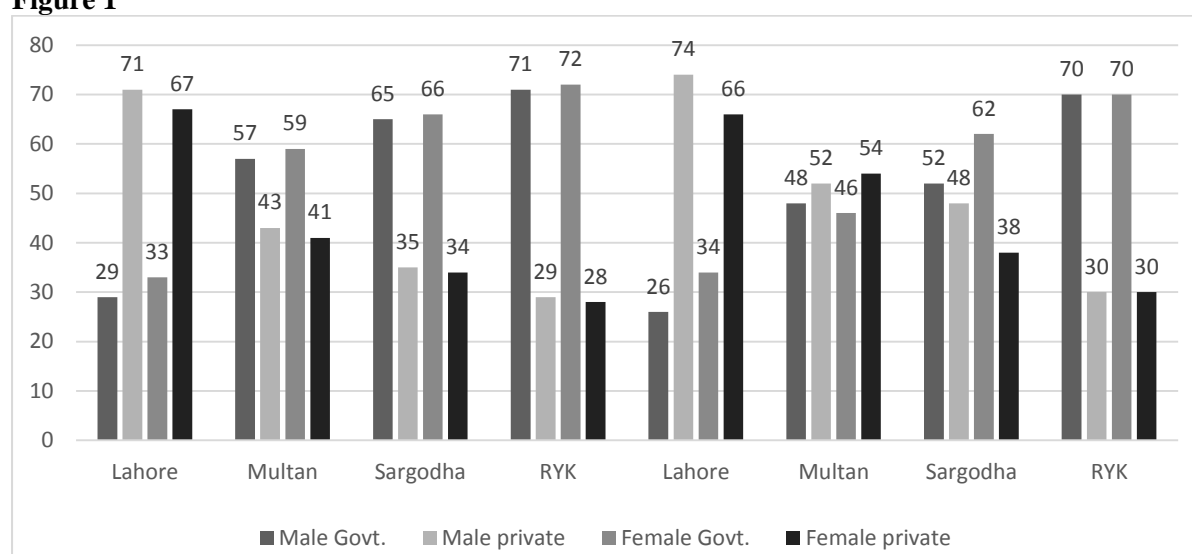
**Primary level enrolment in govt. vs private schools, District Multan and Rahim Yar Khan Vs. Lahore and Sargodha**

Gender	Primary Enrolment Ratio in Govt. Schools (2008-2009)				Primary Enrolment Ratio in Govt. Schools (2014-2015)			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	North	South	North	South	North	South	North	South
	Lahore	Multan	Sargodha	RYK	Lahore	Multan	Sargodha	RYK
Male Govt.	29	57	65	71	26	48	52	70
Male private	71	43	3	29	74	52	48	30
Female Govt.	33	59	66	72	34	46	62	70
Female private	67	41	34	28	66	54	38	30

Source: PSLM 2008-2009, 2014-2015

Report replicated the tendency to choose private sector school instead of government sector by the people who can afford the private fees. This research was significant enough in terms of sighted the same trend in rural north and urban south. The rural south seemed as the least developed in terms of access to quality education. The discriminatory practices between south and remaining Punjab could also be inferred from this study. Moreover, the data led towards the identification of gender disparity in education as a common practice in Punjab.

**Figure 1**



### Primary Enrolment in Punjab

Note: PSLM Data 2008-09 Left side, PSLM Data 2014-15 Right side

PEF hurled Education Voucher Scheme (EVS) for underprivileged community to offer improved education. From the 15 years, EVS had enumerated half million children in all over Punjab in approximately 1780 EVS schools. The project could not meet its objectives to increase significant enrolment of girls in Punjab and the dream to achieve gender equality in education could not turn out to be a reality.

**Table 3****Girls' enrolment ratio**

District	Years of Survey	Girls' Enrolment Ratio at different Levels		
		Primary	Middle	Matric
Multan	2008-09	88	46	40
	2014-15	92	55	51
	2019-20	87	56	56
Rahim Yar Khan	2008-09	60	37	31
	2014-15	67	43	33
	2019-20	75	41	31

Source: PSLM 2008-09, 2014-15, 2019-20

New School Program also called NSP steadily started new schools in the Desert of Cholistan with "111 Community Schools" and "31 Mobile Schools". Furthermore, 16 separate and specialized schools were started for the children of workers at Brick Kiln and 12 schools were converted into Model Village Schools (MVS). non-governmental organizations like Alif Ailaan and Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) had been performing in education sector to increase access to education for marginalized communities in South Punjab. But for NGOs this is a hard nut to crack due to its patriarchal culture and traditional gender norms.

Women's roles were primarily confined to the home, limiting their exposure, skills, and access to resources and opportunities (Bari, 2000). In Southern Punjab, factors like low human development, poverty, illiteracy, and male-controlled societal structures contributed to high levels of violence against women (Tanwir et al., 2019). Females are expected to be submissive in their relationships and wives are often required to acknowledge their husband's authority (Aziz & Hakim, 1999). This misogynist culture, influenced by traditional and un-civilized practices, contributed to gender inequality. Undesirably, forced marriages and "Marriage with Quran," are still continued in rural areas of Punjab which actually reassured females' suppression.

The services of PEEF are huge as it distributed a large number of scholarships of worth Rs. 28.020 billion to low-income people. Likewise, PESRP focused on refining quality of education within Punjab through multiple training and refresher courses for teachers. But, South Punjab lag behind north and centre in terms of development as well as execution of the policies due to policy hijacking by the provincial capital and uneven budget distribution. Likewise, weak local bodies could not present their effective policy input to highlight their issues.

In South Punjab, the cultural chains fastened the development regarding women empowerment whether by following the patriarchal values and gender-based solitude of females or by honour-based boundaries. This culture also hampered women's position and negotiation and bargaining power for agency and access to education and work. Dejectedly, this culture supported, in some way or the other, the silencing methods on gender-based crimes in lieu of family honour and women would be convinced not to report the incident of violence.

Mumtaz & Salway (2005) claimed that patriarchal structures and traditional norms discouraged women's mobility. Due to restrained mobility, it becomes very difficult to access the education. Leadership dearth of women as encouraging role models discouraged prospective female leadership. This resulted in minimum female representation in politics. This attitude creates a fear in women not only of politics in particular but also of society in general. No political party prioritized their female candidates from nomination to selection process which ultimately constrained their political empowerment (Lodhi, 2025)

### Conclusion

The awareness regarding socio-economic and legal rights to women of south Punjab is still a question mark. This also raises enquiries against administrative machinery of south Punjab whose capacity to implement the government initiatives regarding socio-economic empowerment of women was literally insignificant. The practice of gifting the inheritance to male family members from female family members was not only considered good but also appreciated. This practice would not even

change after the introduction of reforms in inheritance law. This continued low status of females in society is the product of patriarchal gender norms which may also state supported. So, civil society has this huge responsibility to create pressure on Government to collaborate and response to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) goal 5 of gender equality. Educational institutions can play the best role to create awareness regarding laws and human rights. Women in South Punjab are supposed to be well-connected in a present globalized world to compete with complexities with the modern time.

Moreover, problematic situations, non-supportive systems and staffs of financial services either provided by government or non- governmental institutions, put women behind their male counterparts and limits the choices and opportunities for females of south Punjab. Statistics about land ownership of women in Pakistan depicted the true story of women subjugation in our society as according to the Pakistan Demography and Health Survey, 2% women folk owned land or a house in comparison of 72% males in the region.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended to the government as well as civil society to take affirmative actions highlighted below to enhance the literacy rate of female population which in turns elevates the women empowerment in society.

- Target, build and upgrade the under-served rural areas to provide free and basic education to all with special focus on girls.
- Make school timing more flexible for working and married girls. Online mode of learning parallel to physical schooling can work wonders.
- Anti-drop-out measures should be strictly followed.
- Incentivize the secondary education to keep the girls enrolled.
- Strategize skill development programs for girls i.e. vocational and entrepreneurial trainings within the elementary and secondary curricula.
- Make schools a harassment- free spaces and create secure environment for girls within and outside.
- Provide transportation services to female teachers as well as students in remote areas.
- Use media to break conservative myths regarding girl's education.

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