

## EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND ON ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the complex relationship between socioeconomic background and access to higher education in Pakistan. To get a range of perspectives on this crucial subject, 500 people—including parents, educators, legislators, and students—were involved in the study. The study's introduction highlights the importance of understanding the challenges faced by students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds in their pursuit of higher education, given its impact on social mobility and economic growth. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were among the many qualitative data sources gathered for the study using a multi-method approach. By employing a deliberate sample of participants to ensure coverage across genders, socioeconomic categories, and geographic places, the study's depth and breadth were expanded. Data analysis led to several significant findings. Seventy-five percent of participants cited expensive tuition as a key obstacle, suggesting that financial constraints posed a significant hurdle. Cultural and societal attitudes had a major role in shaping participants' educational decisions, with women being the majority affected by these attitudes at 65%. Further barriers to higher education were identified as information shortages, institutional policies, and disparities in secondary school quality. The study's conclusion highlights how urgently these barriers need to be addressed through policy changes. Recommendations include developing options for accessible postsecondary education, expanding financial aid programs, and promoting gender equity and cultural inclusivity in order to ensure that all Pakistanis have fair access to higher education.

**Keywords:** socioeconomic background, higher education, legislators, social mobility, economic growth.

### INTRODUCTION

Many believe that obtaining a higher education is essential for progress in one's own right as well as that of the community. But attending college is not without its difficulties, especially for those from less

affluent families. The issue of equitable access to higher education has garnered increased attention recently in Pakistan, a nation known for its diverse population and rich cultural heritage. Inequalities

continue to exist despite notable advancements in the expansion of educational possibilities, hindering the advancement of the country and sustaining social inequity (Ahmad, Afzal, Jamshaid, & Rahman, 2022). The complex subject of how socioeconomic background affects access to higher education is influenced by a wide range of factors, such as parental education, family income, geographic location, and cultural beliefs. These elements combine in intricate ways to create obstacles that frequently discourage people from going to college or restrict their options. Moreover, institutional practices and educational policies may hasten or worsen these inequities (Batool & Liu, 2021). Due to the complexity of these issues, a thorough assessment that goes beyond statistical analysis and quantitative data is necessary. The perspectives, experiences, and narratives of people traversing Pakistan's higher education system can be uniquely observed through qualitative research. This research attempts to identify the fundamental factors that influence educational disparities and access to higher education by looking at the unique experiences and perspectives of students, parents, educators, and politicians (Batool & Liu, 2021). With a population of more than 220 million, Pakistan has a number of obstacles in the field of education, from social and cultural disparities to a lack of resources and infrastructure. Pakistan has a 60% literacy rate, according to UNESCO, with significant differences between males and girls as well as between urban and rural areas. The government has made attempts to raise enrollment and enhance educational achievements, but they have not been constant, leaving underprivileged neighborhoods behind and perpetuating social isolation (Sharafat & Nasreen, 2022).

One of the most important factors influencing educational opportunities and results is socioeconomic background. Because lower-income families sometimes find it difficult to pay for tuition, books, and other educational expenses, family

income frequently plays a crucial role in deciding access to high-quality education. The educational background of the parents also has a big influence since parents with higher levels of education are more likely to appreciate and prioritize their kids' education and to give them the direction and encouragement they need to do well in school (Tighe & Davis-Kean, 2021). Differences in access to postsecondary education are made worse by geographic location. Due to a lack of resources and educational institutions, opportunities in rural areas are frequently lower than those in metropolitan areas. In addition to making access to higher education more difficult, this geographic difference promotes a brain drain, as bright people from rural areas move to cities or overseas in quest of better job and educational possibilities (Sorensen & Hwang, 2021). The way that people can enter higher education is largely determined by cultural attitudes and societal expectations. Lower enrolment and completion rates among female students can be attributed to cultural norms and traditional gender roles, which suggest women should prefer household obligations over education in many industries. People's options for their educational journey are further limited by social stigmas connected with particular professions or fields of study, which deter people from following their passions and abilities (Chang, Wang, Mancini, McGrath-Mahrer, & Orama de Jesus, 2020). In the past, Pakistan's institutional procedures and educational guidelines have not been sufficient to solve these issues. In an attempt to broaden access to education, initiatives like the Prime Minister's Education Reform Program and the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) have been implemented; however, they frequently fail to address the underlying causes of educational disparity. Furthermore, efforts to increase access to higher education have been hampered by problems including institutional corruption, unstable political environments, and a lack of openness. These problems have also undermined public confidence

(이르판, 2021). Research that closely examines these topics is urgently needed, as there are numerous factors that interact to influence higher education in Pakistan. Focus groups and in-depth interviews are two instances of qualitative research techniques that are useful for comprehending the viewpoints and life experiences of people from various socioeconomic backgrounds (Yaylacı, 2020).

This study aims to identify the opportunities and underlying barriers that affect Pakistani individuals' access to higher education through interviews with stakeholders at various levels of the educational system. A major study effort that will have a big impact on social fairness, economic growth, and national advancement is looking at how socioeconomic background affects admission to higher education in Pakistan. This study aims to advance academic debate, support a more inclusive and equitable higher education system in Pakistan, and have an impact on practice and policy by illuminating the subtleties of this topic.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do socioeconomic factors, such as family income and parental education level, influence access to higher education among individuals in Pakistan?
2. What are the lived experiences and challenges faced by students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in navigating the higher education system in Pakistan?
3. How do cultural perceptions, societal expectations, and institutional practices contribute to disparities in access to higher education based on socioeconomic background in Pakistan?

### **Research objectives**

1. To look into the relationship between Pakistani citizens' access to higher education and socioeconomic factors (parents' educational attainment, family income, and location).

2. To look into the opinions, challenges, and practical experiences of Pakistani students pursuing higher education from various socioeconomic backgrounds.
3. To investigate how institutional procedures, societal expectations, and cultural norms influence how Pakistani students' access to higher education varies according on their socioeconomic level.

### **Significance of the study**

This qualitative study is significant because it can illuminate the complex relationships that affect Pakistan's access to higher education—a country beset by social and educational inequity. By focusing on the impact of socioeconomic background, the study closes a big vacuum in the literature and contributes meaningful information to the ongoing discussion on social justice and educational parity. An awareness of the challenges and limitations experienced by individuals from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds can help guide targeted initiatives and legislative changes intended to guarantee equitable access to higher education. Furthermore, by exploring the lived experiences and narratives of educators, parents, students, and legislators, the study humanizes the subject and gives voice to those who are usually marginalized or overlooked in discussions on educational access. Policymakers, advocacy groups, and educational stakeholders may find the research's conclusions helpful in developing policies and activities that address the root causes of educational disparity. This could result in Pakistan's higher education system becoming more egalitarian and inclusive.

### **Literature Review**

It has long been understood that a person's ability to pursue higher education has a significant role in defining their chances and socioeconomic mobility. Scholars and politicians have shown a great deal of interest in Pakistan, as well as in many other

developing nations, regarding the impact of socioeconomic background on access to higher education. The lived experiences, difficulties, and viewpoints of people from various socioeconomic backgrounds as they navigate the higher education system can be clarified by conducting a qualitative study on this subject (Reinders, Dekker, & Falisse, 2021). A person's socioeconomic background includes a variety of elements, such as the income of their family, the educational attainment of their parents, and their line of work. A person's ability to access resources, educational opportunities, and support networks—all essential for pursuing higher education—can be greatly impacted by these circumstances. The socioeconomic divide in Pakistan is sometimes pronounced, with a sizable section of the populace living in poverty and without access to even the most basic utilities, let alone advanced education (Glass, Streitwieser, & Gopal, 2021). Studies have indicated that those in Pakistan with higher socioeconomic status frequently have easier access to high-quality primary and secondary education in addition to extracurricular activities, coaching centers, and private tutors, all of which can improve their academic performance and get them ready for college. Conversely, students hailing from less affluent families could encounter several obstacles, such as insufficient educational facilities, insufficient funds, and insufficient guidance and support from relatives who might not be familiar with the university system (Jamshaid, 2020). The expense of a college education is one of the main obstacles that Pakistani students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds must overcome. Because public universities are less expensive than private ones, entrance to them is sometimes competitive and limited, making it challenging for students from underprivileged families to get accepted. Furthermore, many families may not be able to afford the indirect expenditures of a college education, which include study materials, lodging, and transportation (Glass et al., 2021). Access to

higher education may be significantly influenced by cultural and societal issues. Traditional gender norms and expectations may restrict women's access to education in many parts of Pakistan, especially for those from lower socioeconomic origins. Furthermore, cultural, regional, and religious variables can have a significant impact on societal views about education, particularly higher education, which in turn can affect a family's inclination or capacity to support a child's academic goals (Far, Ali, & Shuja, 2021). In Pakistan, there are significant differences in secondary school quality between Pakistan's various socioeconomic groups. Richer families typically send their children to private schools, which provide superior facilities, highly qualified instructors, and a more demanding academic program than government schools, which serve lower-class families. The long-term effects of this discrepancy in educational quality may include negative effects on pupils' academic performance and readiness for postsecondary education (Khalid, Mahdi, Khawaja, Allana, & Amenta, 2020). Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may find it more difficult to obtain higher education if they are unaware of the chances and scholarships that are accessible. It's possible that a large number of students and their families are unaware of government scholarships, financial aid opportunities, or other forms of assistance that could lessen the cost of attending college (Jabeen, Siddique, Mughal, Khalid, & Shoukat, 2022). Access to higher education can also be influenced by the priorities and expectations of one's family. Families that are having financial difficulties may choose to put immediate employment ahead of further education in certain situations. Students from poorer socioeconomic origins may feel under pressure to support their family financially rather than pursue higher education, and this might be especially true for them (Akram, 2020). Students from lower socioeconomic origins may have academic obstacles that can limit their access to higher education, in addition to

financial and cultural hurdles. Insufficient preparation in essential courses, insufficient study materials, and restricted availability of recreational and enrichment activities might collectively lead to poorer academic outcomes and decreased prospects of being accepted into respectable postsecondary educational establishments (Ali, Yaseen, Makhdum, Quddoos, & Sardar, 2021). Students may find it challenging to see themselves thriving in higher education if they do not have mentors and role models from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds. It can be immensely inspiring to see people from comparable backgrounds pursue higher education and succeed in their endeavors, and it can also help dispel the belief that higher education is unattainable for them (Kausar, 2020). Access to higher education may also be influenced by social networks and connections. Higher socioeconomic background students could have access to networks of friends, family, and acquaintances who can help with the college application process by offering direction, counsel, and support. Students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, on the other hand, might not have these connections, which makes it harder for them to deal with the intricacies of the higher education system (Murtaza & Hui, 2021). A variety of economic, cultural, intellectual, and social elements interact to influence the impact of socioeconomic background on access to higher education in Pakistan. The inability of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to pursue higher education can be attributed to a variety of factors, such as lack of support and direction, cultural and societal expectations, financial limitations, and educational possibilities that are scarce. In order to address these issues and build a more accessible and equitable higher education system for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, collaboration between policymakers, educational institutions, families, and communities is necessary (Tabassum & Akhter, 2020).

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study employed a multi-method approach to explore the impact of socioeconomic background on access to higher education in Pakistan. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students, parents, educators, and policymakers to capture diverse perspectives and experiences related to higher education access. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across different socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, and regions. Data analysis involved in thematic analysis, where patterns and themes related to socioeconomic factors, cultural perceptions, institutional practices, and challenges faced by individuals in accessing higher education were to be identified and interpreted. Ethical considerations adhered to throughout the research process, ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and respect for participants' rights and privacy. The qualitative approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the complex dynamics shaping access to higher education, offering valuable insights that can inform policy, practice, and future research in this area.

### **Data Analysis**

The research carried out a qualitative study with 500 participants, comprising parents, educators, legislators, and students, to investigate the impact of socioeconomic status on the accessibility of higher education in Pakistan. The large number of participants allowed for a thorough analysis of the several factors affecting access to higher education across genders, socioeconomic groups, and geographic locations. Financial limitations have a significant influence on access to higher education; 75% of participants cited expensive tuition as a major barrier. The majority of affected students came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and 85% of them expressed concerns about the expense of a college education. These findings highlight the vital need for



affordable postsecondary education options and robust financial aid programs to support students from low-income backgrounds.

Cultural and societal attitudes also had a substantial influence on access to higher education; 65% of interviewees said that their choice of study was influenced by gender roles and cultural expectations. Women in particular faced significant challenges; 70% of female participants said that social and cultural standards kept them from pursuing opportunities for higher education. The data presented above emphasize how important it is to address cultural barriers and promote gender equity in higher education accessible. The standard of secondary education was shown to be a significant determinant of access to higher education, with 80% of participants citing variations in instructional methodology and available resources between public and private educational institutions. Because they had access to higher-quality instruction, students from richer homes reported feeling more prepared and competent to navigate the higher education system than their counterparts from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The study found that differences in access to higher education are mostly caused by institutional practices and regulations. More specifically, sixty percent of the participants voiced worries about the limited number of spots available in public colleges, the fierce rivalry for admission, and the lack of financial aid and scholarship opportunities. Furthermore, a lack of outreach and support services for students from marginalized communities is perceived by 55% of participants as exacerbating the inequities in access to higher education. Seventy percent of participants frequently cited informational gaps regarding accessible educational opportunities and support services. Many parents and students feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the higher education system and the lack of guidance and support from lawmakers and educational institutions. This ignorance sometimes meant missing out on

opportunities to apply for scholarships, financial aid, and other programs designed to lower the cost of higher education.

Participants from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reported having access to networks of friends, family, and acquaintances who provided emotional support, guidance, and advice during the college application process. This suggests that social networks and connections have a significant impact on access to higher education. Because they felt isolated and had limited access to similar networks, the 60% of participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds found it more challenging to successfully navigate the higher education system. In terms of how the study might affect policy, the findings highlight the need for significant adjustments meant to eliminate the systemic barriers that keep Pakistani students from worse socioeconomic backgrounds from going to college. It is suggested that governments give priority to increasing access to financial aid and scholarship possibilities, expanding the number of reasonably priced and excellent options for higher education, and improving outreach and support services for disadvantaged communities.

In addition, efforts should be made to raise awareness of the educational possibilities and support services that are available to parents and children from a variety of socioeconomic situations. Educational institutions can play a crucial role in this area by implementing outreach programs, workshops, and counseling services to help students navigate the complexities of the higher education system. It is critical to address cultural and societal perceptions about gender roles, marriage, and family responsibilities in order to create an environment that is more accepting and supportive of women and other marginalized groups who wish to pursue higher education. The deeply embedded attitudes and ideas can be challenged and transformed with the help of community engagement and awareness campaigns.

The results of this qualitative study provide valuable information regarding the complex issues affecting Pakistani students' access to higher education. By analyzing the interplay between socioeconomic factors, cultural perspectives, institutional guidelines, and individual experiences, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by students from various origins. Future research projects that seek to create a more equal and accessible higher education system in Pakistan, as well as policy and practice, can be guided by the insights obtained from this study.

### **Conclusion**

This comprehensive qualitative study's findings offer a perceptive perspective on the intricate problems surrounding Pakistani students' access to higher education. The study provides a thorough and intricate insight of the obstacles and differences that arise from various genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic locations. Among the 500 individuals in the wide study sample were parents, teachers, lawmakers, and students. The findings repeatedly demonstrate that socioeconomic status significantly affects one's ability to pursue higher education. Eighty-five percent of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds expressed worries about the affordability of higher education, with seventy-five percent of participants seeing financial restrictions as a significant hurdle. These findings underscore the urgent need for lawmakers and educational institutions to place a high premium on the development of affordable postsecondary education options and comprehensive financial aid packages tailored to the needs of low-income students.

Cultural and societal views also play a crucial role in determining access to higher education. Surprisingly, 65% of individuals claimed that gender roles and cultural norms influenced their choice of study. Women in particular face unique obstacles, with 70% of female participants stating that societal and

cultural norms prevented them from pursuing opportunities for higher education. It is critical that these cultural hurdles be addressed and gender equity is fostered in order to ensure that all social groups have equitable access to higher education. The quality of secondary school has a major impact on access to higher education as well. Notably, eighty percent of the participants highlighted how public and private schools differ in terms of resources and teaching approaches. Students from wealthy households, who have access to higher-quality education, reported feeling more competent and able to navigate the higher education system than their colleagues from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This highlights the need for equitable access to high-quality secondary education as a prerequisite for tertiary education. Institutional policies and procedures also contribute significantly to the disparities in access to postsecondary education. Sixty percent of the participants expressed concern about the lack of available seats at public colleges, the fierce competition for admission, and the lack of opportunities for financial help and scholarships. In addition, a majority of 55% expressed that the lack of outreach and support services is making it harder for students from marginalized communities to get higher education. Information gaps about easily accessible support services and educational opportunities were frequently cited by 70% of interviewees as a significant challenge. Many parents and students feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the higher education system and the lack of guidance and support from lawmakers and educational institutions. This ignorance sometimes meant missing out on opportunities to apply for scholarships, financial aid, and other programs designed to lower the cost of higher education. Social networks and ties have been shown to have a substantial impact on access to higher education. Participants with higher socioeconomic backgrounds reported having access to support networks that provided guidance, emotional support, and advice

throughout the college application process. People from lower socioeconomic origins found it more challenging to navigate the higher education system because they felt alone and had less opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals.

In terms of how the study might affect policy, the findings highlight the need for significant adjustments meant to eliminate the systemic barriers that keep Pakistani students from worse socioeconomic backgrounds from going to college. Expanding the number of affordable and excellent options for higher education, improving outreach and assistance to impoverished communities, and enabling more people to apply for financial aid and scholarships should be top priorities for governments. Educational institutions can also play a crucial role in addressing these concerns by setting up outreach programs, workshops, and counseling services to help students and parents navigate the complexities of the higher education system. Parents and children from various socioeconomic backgrounds should also be informed about the available educational options and support resources. Changing cultural and societal perceptions of gender roles, marriage, and family responsibilities is also essential to creating an environment that supports and encourages women and other marginalized groups who want to pursue higher education. The deeply embedded attitudes and ideas can be challenged and changed with the help of community engagement and awareness campaigns.

To sum up, this qualitative study's findings provide valuable insights into the complex factors affecting Pakistani students' access to higher education. By exploring the relationships between socioeconomic factors, cultural perspectives, institutional guidelines, and individual experiences, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by students from a variety of backgrounds. Future research projects that seek to create a more equal and accessible higher education

system in Pakistan, as well as policy and practice, can be guided by the insights obtained from this study.

### **Recommendations**

The comprehensive findings of this qualitative investigation resulted in the development of several significant suggestions intended to address the challenges and barriers Pakistani students encounter when seeking higher education. For legislators and educational institutions, providing affordable financial aid packages that are tailored to the needs of low-income students together with easily accessible options for higher education should be a primary concern. Overcoming institutional and cultural norms that discourage women and other marginalized groups from pursuing higher education is another important step in advancing gender equity and inclusivity. Raising the bar for secondary education in both public and private schools and bolstering outreach and support programs for disadvantaged communities are also necessary to guarantee equitable access to higher education. Institutions of higher learning ought to implement outreach programs, workshops, and counseling services to help parents and students understand the complexities of the postsecondary education marketplace. Last but not least, community service and awareness initiatives can contribute to the establishment of a more equitable and accessible higher education system in Pakistan by challenging deeply rooted cultural prejudices and raising public awareness of available educational opportunities and support services.

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