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Patriarchal Norms and Community Support for Female Education: Evidence from Rural Larkana, Sindh, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Female education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of social development, economic growth, and gender equality. However, despite national and international efforts to improve girls' educational participation, socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder educational attainment in many rural communities of Pakistan. Previous studies have predominantly focused on structural constraints such as poverty, infrastructure, and school accessibility, while limited attention has been given to the perceptions of local decision-makers who directly influence educational opportunities for girls. This study investigates rural residents' perceptions of female education and examines the socio-cultural factors shaping support for girls' educational advancement in Larkana District, Sindh, Pakistan. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed involving 250 household decision-makers selected through a multistage cluster sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of demographic variables, perception scales, and behavioral indicators. Descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests, Pearson correlation analysis, and one-way ANOVA were performed using IBM SPSS version 28. The findings reveal a pattern of conditional support for female education. While 48.8% of respondents agreed that girls' education is equally important as boys' education, 46.8% simultaneously maintained that women's primary role remains within the household. Safety concerns emerged as a significant barrier, with 62.0% perceiving distant educational institutions as unsafe for girls. A significant gender disparity was observed, as female respondents demonstrated substantially higher support for education beyond matriculation than male respondents ($\chi^2 = 17.84$, $p < .001$). Correlation analysis indicated that support for female education was positively associated with perceived economic utility ($r = .62$) and negatively associated with traditional gender norms ($r = -.71$) and safety concerns ($r = -.58$). Furthermore, respondents' educational attainment significantly influenced support levels ($F = 24.73$, $p < .001$), suggesting that education plays a transformative role in shaping attitudes toward female education.

This study contributes to the literature on gender and education by demonstrating that patriarchal norms remain the strongest predictor of resistance to female education, while economic perceptions and educational exposure can facilitate attitudinal change. The findings highlight the need for policy interventions that simultaneously address cultural norms, community perceptions, and institutional barriers to improve girls' educational participation in rural Pakistan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Female education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a critical driver of social, economic, and sustainable development. Beyond its intrinsic value, education empowers women to improve their quality of life, participate actively in decision-making processes, contribute to economic productivity, and promote social transformation across generations (Murphy-Graham, 2024; Unterhalter, 2023). Numerous studies have demonstrated that increasing girls' access to education contributes significantly to poverty reduction, improved maternal and child health, delayed marriage, reduced fertility rates, and enhanced labor force participation (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018; Edwards et al., 2024). Consequently, achieving gender equality in education has become a global priority and a central target of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 5), which emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education for all while promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Despite substantial global progress in expanding educational opportunities, gender disparities remain prevalent in many developing countries, particularly within rural and socially conservative communities. Research indicates that educational inequalities are shaped not only by economic limitations and inadequate infrastructure but also by deeply embedded socio-cultural norms that influence household decision-making regarding girls' education (Stromquist, 2022; Kabeer, 2021). In many traditional societies, educational opportunities for girls are often constrained by expectations regarding domestic responsibilities, gendered social roles, and concerns related to family honor and social reputation (Li, 2024; Cornwall, 2021). These barriers frequently limit girls' educational participation beyond primary and secondary levels, resulting in persistent educational disparities between males and females.

The importance of female education extends beyond individual outcomes and contributes significantly to broader societal development. Human Capital Theory suggests that investments in education enhance individual productivity and generate substantial economic returns for both households and nations (Becker, 1993). Educated women are more likely to participate in economic activities, invest in their children's education, access healthcare services, and contribute to community development (Mubarak & Waseh, 2025). Furthermore, research consistently demonstrates that female educational attainment serves as a powerful mechanism for reducing social inequalities and promoting inclusive development (Asadullah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the realization of these benefits depends largely on local perceptions and attitudes toward female education, particularly within rural communities where traditional norms continue to influence educational decisions.

Pakistan represents one of the most challenging contexts for achieving gender equality in education. Although educational participation has improved during recent decades, significant disparities persist across provinces and between urban and rural populations. Previous studies have documented that girls

in Pakistan remain less likely than boys to enroll in school, complete secondary education, and pursue higher education (Latif, 2009; Malik, 2025). Rural girls experience additional disadvantages associated with poverty, geographical isolation, inadequate educational infrastructure, shortages of female teachers, and restrictive cultural norms that discourage educational participation (Panezai et al., 2024). These challenges collectively contribute to lower educational attainment among females and reinforce existing gender inequalities.

Among Pakistan's provinces, Sindh continues to experience substantial challenges in promoting female educational participation, particularly in rural districts characterized by traditional social structures and strong patriarchal values. Previous studies conducted in rural Sindh have shown that educational decisions are frequently influenced by cultural beliefs, gender expectations, and concerns regarding family honor (Maqbool, 2024; Askari et al., 2022). Families often perceive girls' education as secondary to domestic responsibilities, while educational investments are prioritized for sons who are expected to become future economic providers. Consequently, support for female education tends to be conditional and highly dependent on prevailing social norms and household decision-making structures.

Within Sindh Province, Larkana District represents a particularly important context for examining perceptions of female education. Larkana is characterized by strong tribal affiliations, an agrarian economic structure, and persistent adherence to traditional gender norms. Educational decisions within this context are frequently shaped by social expectations regarding appropriate female behavior, family reputation, and community acceptance. While educational policies have sought to improve access to schooling for girls, socio-cultural factors continue to influence the extent to which families support female educational advancement. Understanding these local perceptions is therefore essential for designing effective educational interventions that are culturally responsive and socially sustainable.

Although previous studies have generated valuable insights into female educational inequalities in Pakistan, several important gaps remain in the existing literature. First, most studies have focused primarily on structural barriers such as poverty, educational infrastructure, school accessibility, and institutional constraints (Latif, 2009; Maqbool, 2024). While these factors undoubtedly influence educational participation, they provide limited understanding of the socio-cultural processes through which educational decisions are made within households. Second, existing research has predominantly examined female education from the perspectives of policymakers, educational institutions, teachers, or students, whereas the perceptions of household decision-makers remain relatively underexplored. Given that parents and family elders frequently determine whether girls continue their education, understanding their perceptions is critical for identifying the social mechanisms that facilitate or constrain educational participation.

A further limitation of existing research is the scarcity of empirical studies focusing specifically on rural Larkana. Despite the district's distinctive socio-cultural characteristics and educational challenges, relatively little empirical attention has been devoted to understanding how local residents perceive female education and how these perceptions influence support for girls' educational advancement. Consequently, important contextual dimensions of educational decision-making remain insufficiently understood.

From a theoretical perspective, previous studies have largely adopted descriptive approaches that identify barriers to female education without adequately explaining the mechanisms through which socio-cultural beliefs influence educational support. Existing scholarship often examines traditional gender norms, safety concerns, and economic considerations as separate factors rather than investigating their interconnected influence on educational attitudes and behaviors. As a result, limited understanding exists regarding how these factors collectively shape support for female education within rural household contexts.

Drawing upon Social Construction Theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), this study conceptualizes perceptions of female education as socially constructed beliefs that influence behavioral intentions and educational decision-making processes. Social Construction Theory emphasizes that social realities, including beliefs regarding gender roles and

educational expectations, are produced and reproduced through social interactions and cultural norms. Meanwhile, the Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence individuals' intentions and behaviors. Integrating these perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how socio-cultural beliefs shape support for female education in rural communities.

The novelty of this study lies in its simultaneous examination of traditional gender roles, safety concerns, perceived economic utility, and support for female education within the context of rural household decision-making. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on structural barriers, this research investigates the socio-cultural determinants that influence educational support among local residents who directly shape educational opportunities for girls. Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence from Larkana District, a context that remains underrepresented in the existing literature on female education in Pakistan.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate rural residents' perceptions toward female education in Larkana District, Sindh, Pakistan. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) examine prevailing attitudes and perceptions regarding female education among rural residents; (2) analyze the influence of traditional gender roles, safety concerns, and perceived economic utility on support for female education; and (3) contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural determinants of girls' educational participation in rural Pakistan. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and development organizations seeking to develop culturally responsive strategies that promote gender equality and educational opportunities for girls.

2. METHODS

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative survey design to systematically investigate the perceptions of rural residents toward female education in Larkana, Sindh. The design was selected for its efficacy in measuring attitudes, norms, and self-reported behaviors from a representative sample at a single point in time, allowing for the identification of associations between demographic variables and key perceptual constructs. A structured questionnaire served as the primary instrument, facilitating the collection of standardized data amenable to statistical analysis. The design is grounded in a post-positivist paradigm, recognizing that social realities such as gender norms are measurable through carefully operationalized variables, while acknowledging the influence of the local socio-cultural context on respondents' interpretations. This approach provides a robust empirical foundation for examining the complex interplay between individual attitudes and broader structural factors influencing educational gender disparities.

2. Sampling Method and Sample Size

A multi-stage cluster sampling technique was implemented to ensure a representative sample of the target population heads of households or primary decision-makers in rural union councils of Larkana district. In the first stage, five (5) rural union councils were randomly selected from a complete list provided by the local administration, ensuring geographic dispersion. In the second stage, two villages were randomly chosen from each selected union council. In the final stage, using a household roster obtained from local community leaders, a systematic random sampling method was applied to select 25 households per village. Within each selected household, the primary adult decision-maker (male or female) was interviewed. This yielded a total sample size of N = 250 respondents. This sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for a finite population, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, and is deemed sufficient for conducting the planned descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

3. Questionnaires and Instruments

Data were collected using a structured, close-ended questionnaire developed in three sequential languages (English, Sindhi, and Urdu) to ensure conceptual accuracy and local comprehension. The

instrument was designed based on an extensive review of literature on gender, education, and social norms, and was structured into three sections:

- Section A: Demographic Profile. Collected data on gender, age, education level, occupation, household type, and number of children.
- Section B: Perception and Attitude Scales. Comprised 15 core items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). These items operationalized four key constructs: Support for Female Education (e.g., "Educating girls is an investment in the family's future"), Perceived Traditional Gender Roles (e.g., "A woman's education should primarily prepare her for household duties"), Safety and Honor Concerns (e.g., "Travel to school threatens a girl's reputation"), and Perceived Economic Utility (e.g., "Educated daughters can contribute financially").
- Section C: Behavioral and Normative Indicators. Included binary (Yes/No) and frequency-based (Often, Sometimes, Rarely) questions on decision-making practices, observed community norms, and perceived barriers.
- The questionnaire's validity was established through review by three experts in sociology and gender studies. A pilot test (n=30) in a non-sampled village confirmed clarity and reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha scores for the multi-item scales ranging from 0.78 to 0.84, indicating good internal consistency.

4. Data Collection Process

Data collection was conducted over four weeks from September to December 2025. A team of four enumerators (two male, two female), fluent in Sindhi and Urdu, were rigorously trained on research ethics, questionnaire administration, and gender-sensitive interviewing techniques. The face-to-face interview method was chosen to overcome literacy barriers and ensure high response fidelity. Enumerators approached selected households, explained the study's purpose, ensured informed consent, and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in private settings, often within the household compound, to ensure respondent comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 25-35 minutes. Completed questionnaires were checked daily by a field supervisor for completeness and consistency. The process yielded a 100% response rate from contacted households, with no refusals, attributed to the cultural respect accorded to direct interaction and the support of local community gatekeepers who were briefed prior to the survey.

5. Data Analysis

The collected data were coded, entered, and cleaned using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Analysis proceeded in three tiers:

- Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics (Table 1), attitude distributions (Table 2), and behavioral responses (Table 5).
- Bivariate Analysis: Chi-square tests of independence were employed to examine associations between categorical variables, such as support for higher education and respondent gender (Table 3). One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to compare mean scores on the Support Index across different demographic groups (e.g., education level, occupation), with post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) identifying specific group differences (Table 6).
- Inferential/Relational Analysis: Pearson’s correlation coefficient (r) was computed to assess the strength and direction of linear relationships between the continuous composite scales for the key perceptual constructs (Table 4). All tests of significance employed a p-value threshold of < 0.05. The results of these analyses are presented in the subsequent section, providing a comprehensive statistical profile of the factors shaping perceptions of female education in the research setting.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the Study

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=250)

Demographic Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	168	67.2%
	Female	82	32.8%
Age Group	18-30 years	45	18.0%
	31-45 years	112	44.8%
	46-60 years	78	31.2%
	Above 60 years	15	6.0%
Formal Education Level	No Formal Schooling	89	35.6%
	Primary (1-5)	67	26.8%
	Middle (6-8)	48	19.2%
	Matriculate (9-10)	32	12.8%
	Intermediate or Above	14	5.6%
Primary Occupation	Agriculture/Farming	142	56.8%
	Daily Wage Laborer	58	23.2%
	Small Business/Trader	28	11.2%
	Government/Service Job	12	4.8%
	Housewife/Homemaker	10	4.0%

Table 1 details the socio-demographic composition of the 250 surveyed household decision-makers in rural Larkana, establishing the study's context of a traditional, agrarian society. The sample is predominantly male (67.2%), reflecting the patriarchal structure of household authority. A large majority (73.6%) are aged 31-60, representing the core adult generation responsible for educational decisions. Critically, 62.4% of respondents have a primary education or less, and 35.6% have no formal schooling, indicating low baseline educational attainment within the population. Economically, 80% are engaged in agriculture or daily wage labor, situating the study within a context of economic precarity. This profile is essential for interpreting subsequent perceptions, as attitudes are framed by low personal education, economic reliance on traditional sectors, and male-dominated decision-making norms.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Key Perception Statements

Statement: "I believe that..."	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)
1. ...educating girls is as important as educating boys.	32 (12.8%)	41 (16.4%)	55 (22.0%)	89 (35.6%)	33 (13.2%)	3.20	1.24
2. ...a girl's primary role is to manage the	25 (10.0%)	47 (18.8%)	61 (24.4%)	82 (32.8%)	35 (14.0%)	3.22	1.20

home, not pursue a career.							
3. ...higher education makes girls better mothers and wives.	18 (7.2%)	29 (11.6%)	77 (30.8%)	96 (38.4%)	30 (12.0%)	3.36	1.08
4. ...sending girls to distant schools/colleges is unsafe and risky.	15 (6.0%)	38 (15.2%)	42 (16.8%)	110 (44.0%)	45 (18.0%)	3.53	1.15
5. ...female education is a financial burden with no return for the family.	55 (22.0%)	72 (28.8%)	60 (24.0%)	48 (19.2%)	15 (6.0%)	2.58	1.18

This table presents the central attitudinal constructs toward female education, revealing a landscape of contradiction and conditional support. While a combined 48.8% agree that educating girls is as important as boys (M=3.20), there is simultaneously strong agreement (46.8%) with the statement that a girl's primary role is domestic (M=3.22). This paradox is resolved by the high agreement (50.4%) that education enhances a girl's value within traditional roles as a better mother/wife (M=3.36). The most potent barrier is safety, with 62% agreeing that distant schools are risky (M=3.53). Notably, the overt economic argument is weakest, with 50.8% disagreeing that education is a financial burden with no return (M=2.58). The data in table-2 depicts a community that does not outright reject female education but severely circumscribes its purpose and practicality within existing patriarchal and safety norms.

Table 3. Cross-Tabulation: Support for Girls' Higher Education by Respondent's Gender

Question: "Do you support girls in your family pursuing education beyond Matriculation (Grade 10)?"

Response	Male Respondents (n=168)	Female Respondents (n=82)	Total (N=250)
Yes	78 (46.4%)	59 (72.0%)	137 (54.8%)
No	62 (36.9%)	13 (15.9%)	75 (30.0%)
Depends on Circumstances	28 (16.7%)	10 (12.2%)	38 (15.2%)
Total	168 (100%)	82 (100%)	250 (100%)

Table 3 analyzes the critical behavioral intention of supporting education beyond matriculation, disaggregated by respondent gender. It reveals a profound and statistically significant gender gap ($\chi^2 = 17.84$, $p < 0.001$). While a majority of female respondents (72.0%) express clear support, less than half of male respondents (46.4%) do so. Conversely, opposition is concentrated among males (36.9% vs. 15.9% of females). This stark divergence underscores that the primary constraint on female education may not be a monolithic "community" opposition, but specifically the attitudes of male gatekeepers who control resources and decisions. Female residents demonstrate a significantly higher valuation of advanced education for girls, a preference currently subordinated within the prevailing power structure.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix (Pearson's r) for Key Perception Scales and Support Score

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Support for Female Education (Outcome)	1.00			
2. Perceived Economic Utility	**0.62**	1.00		
3. Concerns for Safety & Honor	**-0.58**	-0.31	1.00	
4. Adherence to Traditional Gender Roles	**-0.71**	-0.45	**0.65**	1.00

(Note: Each construct is a composite scale score from multiple questions. Higher scores indicate stronger agreement with the construct.)

The correlation matrix quantifies the strength and direction of relationships between latent constructs. The Support for Female Education index shows a strong positive correlation with Perceived Economic Utility (r = 0.62), indicating that viewing education as an investment is a key driver of support. Conversely, support has strong negative correlations with Concerns for Safety & Honor (r = -0.58) and, most powerfully, with Adherence to Traditional Gender Roles (r = -0.71). This latter finding suggests that patriarchal ideology is the single strongest psychological and normative barrier. Furthermore, the strong positive correlation between Traditional Gender Roles and Safety Concerns (r = 0.65) indicates these are not isolated anxieties but are ideologically intertwined safety narratives are often mobilized to enforce restrictive gender norms.

Table 5. Frequency Distribution of Behavioral and Normative Responses (N=250)

Question	Yes	No	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Don't Know / N/A
1. Would you allow your daughter to attend a co-educational college?	67 (26.8%)	158 (63.2%)	8 (3.2%)	12 (4.8%)	5 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)
2. Do you consult female family members on education decisions for girls?	82 (32.8%)	168 (67.2%)	-	-	-	-
3. In your community, are educated girls more respected?	45 (18.0%)	121 (48.4%)	22 (8.8%)	38 (15.2%)	24 (9.6%)	0 (0.0%)
4. Do families in your circle prioritize sons' education over daughters'?	134 (53.6%)	37 (14.8%)	-	-	-	79 (31.6%)
5. How often do local religious leaders speak in favor of female education?	28 (11.2%)	105 (42.0%)	-	-	-	91 (36.4%)
6. Is lack of female teachers a major barrier in your area?	203 (81.2%)	47 (18.8%)	-	-	-	-

This table transitions from attitudes to reported behaviors and observed norms, providing concrete evidence of restrictive practices. Structural and institutional barriers are overwhelming: 81.2% cite a lack of female teachers as a major obstacle, and 63.2% would not allow daughters in co-educational colleges, severely limiting practical access. Decision-making is exclusionary, with 67.2%

not consulting female family members. Normatively, son preference is entrenched, with 53.6% confirming it is "often" practiced. The role of religious institutions appears non-supportive; 42.0% report leaders rarely advocate for female education, and another 36.4% are uncertain, indicating a failure to provide consistent counter-narratives. These data collectively illustrate an ecosystem where restrictive norms are enforced through daily practices and institutional failures.

Table 6. Mean Comparison of Overall Support Score by Demographic Groups (One-Way ANOVA Summary)

Grouping Variable	Categories	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	F-statistic	p-value
Education Level	No Formal Schooling	2.1	0.89	24.73	<0.001
	Primary	2.8	0.92		
	Middle	3.4	0.87		
	Matriculate	3.9	0.76		
	Intermediate+	4.3	0.71		
Occupation	Agri./Laborer	2.5	0.95	9.45	<0.001
	Business/Trader	3.3	1.02		
	Service Job	3.8	0.89		
Have School-Going Daughters?	Yes (n=110)	3.7	0.98	15.62	<0.001
	No (n=140)	2.8	1.04		

Dependent Variable: *Overall Support for Female Education Index* (Scale: 1-5, higher=more supportive).

This final table identifies the key socio-demographic cleavages in support levels using ANOVA. Support demonstrates a strong, significant linear relationship with the respondent's own **Education Level** ($F=24.73$, $p<.001$), rising from a mean of 2.1 (opposition) among the uneducated to 4.3 (strong support) among those with intermediate education or higher. This highlights education's transformative role in shifting perceptions. **Occupation** also matters significantly ($F=9.45$, $p<.001$); individuals in service or business roles (M=3.3-3.8) are more supportive than those in agriculture/labor (M=2.5), suggesting that exposure to non-traditional economies fosters progressive attitudes. Most pragmatically, having **school-going daughters** (M=3.7) significantly increases support compared to those without (M=2.8), indicating that direct experience can challenge and change entrenched biases.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape of perceptions regarding female education among rural residents of Larkana, Sindh. While there is a notable degree of nominal support for the idea of educating girls evidenced by nearly half of respondents agreeing it is as important as boys' education this support is heavily conditional and circumscribed by deep-seated patriarchal norms and practical concerns [15]. The data indicate that female education is largely valued instrumentally, primarily for its perceived role in enhancing a girl's efficacy within traditional domestic spheres as a better mother and wife, rather than as a pathway to personal autonomy, economic independence, or civic participation as envisioned in global frameworks [16]. This instrumental view is further constrained by potent safety concerns, with a majority viewing travel to distant institutions as a significant risk to familial honor (*izzat*), a finding consistent with norms documented in other traditional agrarian settings [17]. The stark gender divide in support for higher education is perhaps

the most critical finding; male gatekeepers, who predominantly control household resources and decisions, exhibit significantly lower support compared to female respondents. This suggests that the primary barrier is not a homogenous community rejection but a specific resistance embedded within the patriarchal power structure, a dynamic that interventions often overlook [18]. Furthermore, the strong negative correlation between support for female education and adherence to traditional gender roles, and the intertwining of these roles with safety narratives, underscores that patriarchal ideology is the foundational barrier, a concept central to social constructionist theory [19]. The reported behaviors and norms such as the overwhelming lack of female teachers, resistance to co-education, exclusion of women from decision-making, and entrenched son preference paint a picture of an ecosystem where restrictive norms are reinforced by daily practices and institutional failures, aligning with documented structural barriers in Pakistan [20]. However, the analysis also identifies significant levers for change in line with the theory of planned behavior [14]: the respondent's own education level and occupational exposure to non-agrarian economies are strongly and positively associated with higher support, as is the direct experience of having school-going daughters. This indicates that perceptions are not static but can evolve with increased exposure to education and alternative socio-economic models, offering a pragmatic entry point for policy and programmatic intervention.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study empirically demonstrates that perceptions of female education in rural Larkana are not characterized by outright rejection but by a constrained and patriarchal reinterpretation of its value and purpose. Support exists but is filtered through a lens that prioritizes the preservation of traditional gender roles and familial honor, while practical barriers related to safety and institutional deficits severely limit access. The significant perceptual gap between male and female residents highlights a critical tension within the social fabric, where women's aspirations for advancement are systematically subordinated by male-dominated decision-making authority. Ultimately, advancing female education in this context requires moving beyond simplistic enrollment drives to engage with the complex socio-cultural architecture that shapes household decisions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, a multi-pronged and culturally nuanced strategy is recommended. First, interventions must directly engage male gatekeepers through targeted community dialogues and awareness campaigns that reframe female education as a source of familial honor and collective socio-economic uplift, rather than a threat. Second, addressing practical barriers is paramount; this includes investing in safe transportation, establishing more local secondary schools and colleges for girls, and urgently recruiting and training female teachers to build trust and alleviate safety concerns. Third, educational curricula and messaging should strategically align with locally valued outcomes, such as improved maternal and child health, while gradually introducing narratives of economic contribution and empowerment. Fourth, partnerships with local religious and community leaders are essential to garner consistent public support and provide counter-narratives that reconcile female education with cultural and religious values. Finally, economic incentive programs, such as conditional cash transfers for girls' education, could help offset perceived short-term costs for low-income families.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time, limiting insights into causal relationships or perceptual shifts over time. The reliance on self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly on sensitive topics like gender norms. While the sample is representative of rural Larkana, findings may not be fully generalizable to other regions of Sindh or Pakistan with different tribal and socio-economic dynamics. Future research should employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to trace how perceptions evolve with specific interventions or life experiences. Qualitative, in-depth ethnographic work is needed to unpack the nuanced logics, negotiations, and intra-household dynamics behind the survey responses. Comparative studies across different rural districts in Sindh could identify context-specific versus

universal barriers. Finally, intervention-based research is crucial to test the efficacy of the recommended strategies, such as male-engagement programs or the impact of increasing female teacher presence on enrollment and community attitudes.

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