

For more than 60 years Pakistan has had a constitutional commitment to providing all children with free and compulsory education. In 1947, M. A. Jinnah stated that “the importance of education and the type of education cannot be over-emphasised”¹, and it was agreed that free and compulsory education would be achieved within a decade, and universal primary education (UPE) by 1967. Ever since, governments have repeatedly come up with policies that claim to be aimed at achieving UPE. The government now expects the target for males to be achieved by the year 2015².

Primary education, lagging behind



Following the 2005 earthquake Plan Nederland established a school in a tent camp in Dharyal village in Pakistan's Siran Valley.

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Despite this government commitment, the number of out-of-school children in Pakistan remains significantly high. UNICEF estimates almost 13 million, out of the 27 million children of primary school age (5-9), remain out of school. 7 million of these out-of-school children are girls (SPARC 2004). Furthermore, Pakistan's adult literacy rate of 50 is considerably below the South Asian regional average of 58 (UNICEF 2007). Pakistan's low ranking on the world Human Development Index (HDI) scale (number 136) is due to Pakistan's poor performance in education and in child health care (Lieten 2004; Khan 2005; UNDP 2007). In addition to gender disparities and a low adult literacy rate, education in Pakistan is characterised by urban-rural inequalities, low enrolment, and a high dropout rate. Many institutions within Pakistan, including the government, recognise the poor condition of Pakistan's education system. The Social Policy and Development Centre (SDPC) describes the state of education in Pakistan as “deplorable” (Social Policy and Development Centre 2003).

How can this poor state of education in Pakistan be explained? Experts usually cite the high costs of education, parental disinterest due to social and cultural norms (especially for girls), and the low quality of education due to disinterested teachers, lack of proper physical infrastructure, over-

crowded classes and irrelevant curricula. An additional curse in Pakistan's education system, as Ghuman and Lloyd (2007) have argued, is the fact that teachers are often absent; in their sample from Northwest Frontier Province and Punjab about 35 percent of teachers in government girls' schools and 22 percent of teachers in government boys' schools were absent during unannounced school visits.

Escaping the cycle of poverty

In 2006, the Foundation for International Research on Working Children (IREWOC) conducted an anthropological study at household and village level in rural Pakistan concerning non-enrolment, non-attendance and/or dropout (De Groot 2007). One of the research settings was a fishing village on the coast of Karachi-West in Sindh province. Anticipating a troublesome future, many villagers here believe education to be important, and a means with which their children will be able to break free of their current style of livelihood, and to gain access to other occupations. A worried mother of two young boys explained:

I do not want my son to be a fisherman like his father. The job is very hard. When a fisherman is young and strong, he has to do hard work. When he gets old and weak, he cannot work and will be without a source of income.

However, even though education is perceived by parents and children alike as a way to escape current poverty, many children are still found out of school. The first explanation relates to the child's own calculations. Another explanation relates to the expected future opportunities. Ever since education until class 10 (secondary level) has been available in the village, a significant number of young men and some girls have completed secondary school, but do not seem to be able to escape the cycle of poverty. If they found a job, it was at an abysmally low salary. As a fisherman's wife explained: “Many boys in this village passed class 10, but there are no jobs available to them. In this way education is not good.” Some boys therefore chose to become fishermen after all: “It is better to fish, than to be jobless! But now I work as a fisherman. We are from a poor family, so we cannot afford to go to the city for further education.”

Quite a number of villagers, however, do perceive education as relevant for everyone, including those involved in traditional occupations. They value how educated men know how to take fish to the market and how to sell it with profit and how they can control all the counting. They realise the benefit of learning Urdu in school, which makes it easier to communicate with people from outside their Balochi village, and they also believe that school teaches them to respect others. Also, the villagers recognise how reading and writing will reduce their dependency on others, and help them to learn

about the world. Reading and writing skills are thus perceived as important by the majority of the village population. Basic skills such as knowing what is right and wrong are perceived as useful for everyone. However, these skills can already be attained with just a few years of schooling, and do not necessarily require ten years of education.

Boys and girls who are not enrolled in school believe that jobs in the city are out of their reach, and they expect to become like their fathers and mothers. They would rather spend time on the beach with friends and relatives, than in a school environment which they find unattractive, and where they cannot learn what they learn in real life.

Most parents have never been to school and they quite often fail to grasp the importance of regular attendance, particularly if teachers are often absent. In a village where men are out at sea, sometimes for more than

Nonetheless, a large number of young girls, not yet old enough to assist in any household work, are still out of school. Some parents consider the distance from their house to the school an unsafe walking distance for their children, and some children are afraid that other children will bully them. Girls themselves also express a fear of punishment by teachers. Others do not know what school is, and are simply not interested in going; especially if none of their siblings, nieces, or friends go to school. Thus, educating girls has not yet established itself as a social norm.

Parents explained that in Balochi culture there should be at least a separate school for girls, which at the time of research was not available in the village. This school should have female teachers only, which is especially essential once a girl grows up. Girls who are out of school replied that the skills they need for the future include cooking, stitching, embroidering,

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Notes

- 1 Statement made during the First National Education Conference, 1947.
- 2 Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2006.

Further Reading

De Groot, A. 2007. *Deprived Children and Education in Pakistan*. Amsterdam: IREWOC.

Ghuman, S & CB Lloyd. 2007. *Teacher Absence as a Factor in Gender Inequalities in Access to Primary Schooling in Rural Pakistan*. New York: Population Council. Poverty, Gender and Youth Working Paper 1



Dharyal school. Photograph courtesy of Kristoffel Lieten.

20 days, and where the women tell their children to go to school in the mornings, but then leave the village to fetch water and wood for fuel, who makes sure that the child actually goes to school? In the absence of supervision, the children are somewhat free to decide for themselves what they do all day. If a boy would rather be on the beach, many parents do not concern themselves with his choice. It is therefore also relevant to consider the perspectives of the children themselves. Why do they, or do they not, go to school?

The boys who are normally found on the beach rather than in school can be divided into two groups. First of all there are a number of boys who are asked by their caregivers to help earn money for the household. These boys often show an interest in school, but have come to terms with the fact that school is not an option for them. Secondly, there are the boys who are not interested in school and who generally come from households that do not require them to work or to earn money for their daily needs. These children can be found playing on the beach, or trying to catch some fish from the shore. In their eyes this is a much more exciting activity compared to attending classes where teachers scold or even beat them.

The girl child

Women are not expected to be involved in the fishing profession. The importance and relevance for the girl child in this fishing village has to be seen in a different context. Educating girls is a relatively new concept and it has less priority than the education of boys. Many villagers share the view that it is okay to educate younger girls until they become teenagers and are old enough to help their mothers in the household; from that point onwards they should prepare for their futures as a mother and housewife. Nevertheless, even though educating women is a relatively new concept in the village, the number of girls enrolled in school is increasing. A 16-year-old girl who recently passed class 10 and who was then appointed as a teacher served as an example to others. Unfortunately, many people still disapprove of this trend, as they believe that women belong within the household. Having reached the age of 12, girls are considered to have grown up and are expected to help their mothers with work such as cleaning, fetching water and wood, and taking care of younger siblings. A household with around eight children is normal and it is considered the eldest daughter's duty to assist her mother until she herself gets married and has her own household to maintain. In the case of younger girls, however, it is often easier to just send them to school. Elder girls complain about their younger siblings: "They should go to school, because they have no work and are now just in our way: hanging around the house, and playing!"



Photograph courtesy of Kristoffel Lieten.

Muslim school girls in Pakistan.

washing, and cleaning, which they can learn at home from their mothers. A minimum level of education would be sufficient for a girl to learn how to read and write. Such education might be helpful for girls of all ages, "but not for a job", as was often stated. However, traditions can give way and women's liberation has its advocates, such as Haqim, a father of small children, who considers education as important for his girls as it is for boys:

Now women do not know anything. They do not speak Urdu. Urdu would help them, for example when people from Karachi come here for a picnic, or when they have to go to Karachi for shopping or to see a doctor. Now they are like animals. They can only speak Balochi.

The considerations among poor people in a poor community in Pakistan help to explain why, in addition to all other constraining factors, the country is far from achieving Millennium Development Goal-2 (achieving universal primary education), which in Pakistan has been a constitutional commitment for more than 60 years.

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