



Mapping Evidences: Exploring the Factors behind Out-of-School Children in South Punjab

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Abstract

This study investigates the multifaceted factors contributing to the persistence of out-of-school children (OOSC) in South Punjab, Pakistan. Despite numerous governmental and non-governmental initiatives to enhance educational access, the region continues to exhibit one of the highest rates of educational exclusion in the country. Using qualitative approach, qualitative interviews with parents—the research identifies key socio-economic, cultural, and institutional determinants of school non-enrollment and dropout. Findings reveal that the persistent issue of out-of-school children in South Punjab is primarily rooted in a complex interplay of economic, cultural, and familial educational background factors. Economically, widespread poverty, child labor, and limited household income compel many families to prioritize short-term survival over long-term educational investment. The cost of schooling—including uniforms, books, and transportation—further discourages enrollment and consistent attendance, especially among children from low-income households. Culturally, deep-seated traditions and gender norms continue to hinder children's access to education, particularly for girls. Early marriages, domestic responsibilities, and conservative attitudes toward female mobility perpetuate educational exclusion. In many rural areas, education is still not perceived as a necessity but as a privilege reserved for the few, reflecting a broader societal undervaluing of formal schooling. Moreover, the family's educational background plays a decisive role. The evidence generated aims to inform policymakers, educators, and development partners in designing effective strategies to reduce the number of out-of-school children in South Punjab.

Keywords: Out-Of-School Children, South Punjab, Educational Exclusion, Poverty, Gender Disparity, Education Policy, Spatial Mapping



Introduction

Education remains a fundamental right and essential pathway for social and economic development. Yet in regions such as South Punjab in Pakistan, a significant number of school-age children remain outside the formal school system. In fact, it is estimated that over 25 million children in Pakistan aged 5 to 16 are out of school, with rural and underserved regions bearing a disproportionate burden. Within the province of Punjab, the situation is particularly acute: one report states that some 7.6 million children in Punjab are out of school. Education and technology are the basic ingredients for the development of any economy. Because education and technology produce efficient human capital which improves the overall welfare of the society. Education is the basic tool for the development of any nation, society, and the individuals at large. Education is also associated with high economic growth rates, enrich the productivity of labor, social welfare, and sustainable development of the nation. Education can reduce poverty, because it reduces unemployment, improves female labor force, and regulating expenditure for the most valuable usage (Alcaraz, 2020).

Focusing on South Punjab—an area characterized by poverty, weak infrastructure, socio-cultural conservatism, and frequent natural disasters—studies identify several interrelated factors that impede school enrolment and retention. These include low socio-economic status of households, child labour or domestic work obligations, parental illiteracy or lack of awareness of education's value, poor school infrastructure (such as teacher shortages or dilapidated buildings), long distances to schools, gender barriers especially for girls, and environmental challenges such as floods that repeatedly disrupt schooling. For instance, in a sociological study of Southern Punjab, economic constraints emerged as the most prominent factor forcing parents to exclude their children from school (Zulfiqar et al., 2019). A qualitative study in rural Punjab (including districts in South Punjab) found poverty, familial migration, unemployment, low social status and the negative attitude of teachers among the key reasons for children missing school (Butt et al., 2020).

The role of human capital in the form education is imperative in the pace of national economic development of any country. In Pakistan, several children are not going to school, which is a matter of great concern. Therefore, this study aims to explore factors determining children not going to schools in Pakistan. This study is based on secondary data taken from the World Bank (2019), for the period 2002 to 2017. The results show that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and population growth are significantly correlated with child labor, while GDP per capita is negatively and population growth is positively correlated with child labor. There is insignificant and positive correlation of inflation with child labor. The study concludes that poverty is the root cause of out of schoolchildren in Pakistan. The study suggests that government should play its role in controlling population growth by adopting various appropriate measures. Inflation should also be controlled especially in case of those commodities used by poor people. Government intervention is also necessary to raise GDPPC by adopting various measures such as free education, vocational training, and provision of loans to poor families. Government can also adopt awareness campaign through media (Rehman & Khan, 2021).

A previous study reveals that child disability is a significant determinant of out of school children. Female children are mostly likely to be out from the school as compare the male children; poverty also plays the pivotal role to keep children away from school.



Children whose mothers are more educated and are living in the richer quintiles, have low risk of being out of school. Difficulties in child functioning domains such as seeing, self-care, communication and making friend are found significant determinants of out of school children (Jafri et al., 2024). Sindh has the second-highest number around (6 million) of OOSC. More than 50 percent of children drop out at the primary level, and 27% drop out while transitioning from primary to elementary. This Paper investigates segregation across different fields of study. The provincially representative data and literature are used to understand the situation. Analysis showed a positive correlation between access and basic facilities. The research conclusively proves that improving access to education, infrastructure, allied services, and provision of teachers will decrease dropouts, hence a reduction in OOSC. It is also essential to address other challenges (Sheikh, 2023).

The issue of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) presents a significant policy challenge in Sindh, Pakistan, where 44% of 5-16-year-olds are not attending school. This study examines how different leadership strategies in government and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) schools address this crisis. Drawing on transformational leadership theory and institutional theory, this research investigates the influence of school governance structures—specifically government schools, Education Management Organizations (EMOs), and Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) schools—on school leaders' abilities to increase student enrollment and retention. Through a multiple case study design, this study collects qualitative data from three school heads, augmented by perspectives from vice principals and teachers. The findings indicate that leadership agency is constrained in government schools due to centralized decision-making, while PPP schools, particularly SEF schools, offer more autonomy, enabling more adaptive and community-centered leadership strategies. This study concludes that decentralized governance in SEF schools is more effective in addressing the OOSC issue, particularly in marginalized areas. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers seeking to enhance educational access in regions with similar socio-economic challenges. The implications of this research underscore the need for flexible, context-specific leadership models to combat the OOSC crisis (Rind, 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Despite numerous government initiatives and educational reforms in Pakistan, a significant number of children in South Punjab remain out of school. This persistent issue undermines both provincial and national goals for universal primary education and socio-economic development. The problem is particularly severe in South Punjab, where poverty, social inequalities, gender disparities, and inadequate educational infrastructure continue to limit children's access to and retention in formal schooling. While national statistics highlight general trends in educational exclusion, there is limited empirical understanding of the specific factors—social, cultural, economic, and institutional—that contribute to the high incidence of out-of-school children in this region. Many children are forced into labor, early marriages, or household responsibilities, while others are discouraged by poor quality of education and lack of awareness about the importance of schooling. Without a comprehensive exploration of these underlying causes, policy interventions risk being ineffective or misdirected. Therefore, this study seeks to identify and analyze the key factors responsible for keeping children out of school in South Punjab, providing evidence-



based insights that can inform targeted strategies for achieving equitable access to education.

Rationale of the Study

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone for social and economic development. Despite Pakistan's commitment to achieving universal primary education, a significant proportion of children in South Punjab remain out of school. This persistent issue reflects deep-rooted socio-economic, cultural, and structural challenges that hinder educational access and equity in the region. South Punjab, being one of the most underdeveloped areas of the province, faces high poverty rates, limited educational infrastructure, gender disparities, and social norms that often discourage schooling—especially for girls. Additionally, issues such as child labor, lack of parental awareness, political neglect, and inadequate government policies exacerbate the problem. Understanding the specific local factors contributing to school exclusion in this context is therefore critical for designing effective interventions and policy responses. This study seeks to explore and analyze the multifaceted causes of out-of-school children in South Punjab, providing an evidence-based understanding of the problem from social, economic, and cultural perspectives. By identifying the root causes and barriers to education, the research aims to inform policymakers, educators, and development practitioners about targeted strategies to increase enrollment and retention rates. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to the broader national goal of achieving inclusive and equitable quality education as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the economic factors contributing to children being out of school in South Punjab, including household income levels, employment status of parents, and the affordability of educational expenses.
2. To analyze the influence of cultural norms and practices on school enrollment and attendance, focusing on gender roles, early marriages, and community attitudes toward formal education.
3. To assess the impact of parents' educational background on children's school participation, exploring how parental literacy, awareness, and educational aspirations affect decisions regarding schooling.

Significance of the Study

This study holds substantial importance both academically and socially, as it seeks to uncover the underlying factors contributing to the high number of out-of-school children in South Punjab—a region characterized by poverty, social inequality, and educational disparities. By identifying the economic, cultural, and institutional barriers that prevent children from accessing education, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how local contexts influence educational participation. From a policy perspective, the findings of this research can provide evidence-based insights for government authorities, educational planners, and non-governmental organizations to design targeted interventions aimed at increasing school enrollment and retention in marginalized areas. Addressing the problem at its roots can help in formulating inclusive education policies aligned with national and international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). From a community and social perspective, this study is significant because it gives voice to the lived realities of families and children who are often excluded from formal education systems. Highlighting these perspectives can



encourage greater community awareness, advocacy, and engagement in promoting education for all. Finally, the study contributes to academic literature by filling a research gap concerning regional disparities in education within Pakistan, particularly in South Punjab. It will serve as a valuable reference for future researchers, educators, and development practitioners interested in tackling the multifaceted challenge of out-of-school children in underprivileged areas.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically an exploratory phenomenological approach, to understand the underlying factors contributing to children being out of school in South Punjab. A qualitative approach is suitable for exploring the subjective experiences, perceptions, and socio-cultural contexts of parents, which cannot be captured through quantitative data alone. The phenomenological design allows the researcher to capture parents' lived experiences, attitudes, and beliefs regarding education, socio-economic barriers, and cultural factors influencing their children's schooling.

Population and Sampling

The target population consists of parents of out-of-school children residing in selected rural and semi-urban areas of South Punjab, Pakistan. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify parents who meet the study criteria—specifically, those who have one or more children of school-going age (5–16 years) who are currently not enrolled in formal education. This sampling method ensures that participants have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The study included 50 parents (both fathers and mothers). This sample size is considered sufficient for qualitative research as it allows for data saturation while enabling in-depth analysis of diverse experiences.

Data Collection Method

Semi-Structured Interviews

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with the parents. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes. The interviews explored the following key areas: Socio-economic background of the family. Parental attitudes toward education. Cultural and gender norms influencing schooling decisions. Financial and logistical barriers to school attendance. Perceptions of school quality, teacher behavior, and safety. Government or NGO initiatives (if any) known to participants. Each interview was last approximately 30–45 minutes, conducted in the local language (Saraiki, Urdu, or Punjabi), depending on the participant's preference. Interviews were **audio-recorded** (with participants' consent) to ensure accuracy and completeness of data. Field notes will be taken to capture non-verbal cues, contextual factors, and researcher reflections.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach will be used following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

1. Familiarization: Transcribing interviews and repeatedly reading the data to gain a comprehensive understanding.
2. Coding: Identifying meaningful units and assigning codes to significant statements.
3. Generating Themes: Grouping similar codes into broader themes that reflect common patterns.



4. Reviewing Themes: Refining and merging themes to ensure they accurately represent participants' views.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Clearly describing each theme and its relevance to the research question.
6. Reporting: Synthesizing the findings with supporting quotations from participants. Manual coding techniques was used to organize and analyze the data systematically.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection. The following ethical principles will be maintained:

- **Informed consent** was obtained from all participants.
- **Confidentiality and anonymity** was assured; pseudonyms was be used in reporting.
- **Voluntary participation** was emphasized, and participants may withdraw at any stage.
- **Cultural sensitivity** was maintained throughout data collection and interaction with participants.

Limitations

The qualitative nature and relatively small sample size limit generalizability; however, the study aims for depth over breadth. Data depend on participants' willingness to share their experiences openly, which may influence richness and diversity of responses.

Results

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Themes – Factors behind Out-of-School Children in South Punjab

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Description / Examples
1. Socio-Economic Factors	Poverty and Low Household Income	Families cannot afford educational expenses (uniforms, books, transport). Children may work to support the family.
	Child Labour	Many children engage in agricultural or domestic labour, especially in rural areas.
	Parental Education Level	Low literacy rates among parents reduce the value placed on education.
	Economic Prioritization	Preference for short-term financial gains over long-term education benefits.
2. Cultural and Gender Norms	Gender Discrimination	Preference for boys' education; girls often kept at home.
	Early Marriages	Particularly affects girls' continuation in school.
	Social Restrictions on Mobility	Cultural limitations on girls traveling to distant schools.
3. Family and Community Attitudes	Low Awareness about Education	Parents unaware of long-term benefits of education.
	Traditional Roles	Belief that education is unnecessary for girls or certain social classes.
	Community Support	Weak local advocacy for education initiatives.



1-Economic Factors

Poverty and Low Household Income

"We can hardly afford daily meals; how can we pay for school books or uniforms?"

"Education seems like a luxury when we are struggling to survive." "Even government schools require some expenses, and we simply don't have enough."

Poverty and low income directly limit access to education. Families prioritize basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter over schooling expenses. Even minimal costs related to education—transportation, stationery, or uniforms—become unaffordable. Consequently, children from poor households are more likely to stay at home or engage in work to support the family income.

Child Labour

"My son helps in the fields; without his help, we can't manage the crops." "Sending my daughter to work at homes helps us pay our bills." "Education won't feed us today, but his work can."

Economic pressures compel families to engage their children in labour to supplement household income. Parents view child labour as an immediate solution to financial hardship. This not only reduces school attendance but also normalizes child labour as a survival strategy. In rural South Punjab, where agricultural and informal labour opportunities are abundant, children's earnings are considered essential.

Parental Education Level

"We never went to school, so we don't see much use in it." "I can't read or write, so I don't know what benefits education brings." "I didn't study, and I still manage; why should my children need it?"

Low parental education often leads to a lack of awareness about the long-term benefits of education. Uneducated parents may undervalue schooling, seeing it as unnecessary or unproductive compared to immediate work. Their inability to assist with schoolwork or navigate educational systems further discourages them from sending children to school. This perpetuates an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy and poverty.

Economic Prioritization

"If we have extra money, we use it for dowry savings, not schooling." "We prefer to invest in livestock rather than education." "Education doesn't give quick returns; we can't afford to wait years."

Families in South Punjab often prioritize short-term economic gains or traditional expenditures (such as dowry, land, or livestock) over education. Education is viewed as an investment with delayed returns, which clashes with their immediate economic needs. The perception that schooling does not guarantee employment further lowers its priority in household decision-making.

2-Cultural and Gender Norms

Gender Discrimination

"Boys must get an education because they will earn for the family, but girls don't need to study much; they will get married anyway."

This reflects the prevailing gender bias in South Punjab, where boys' education is prioritized due to their expected economic role, while girls' education is undervalued. Cultural norms dictate that women's primary role is domestic, limiting their access to schooling and perpetuating the cycle of female illiteracy.



Early Marriages

"We married our daughter at 15 because it is better for her future, and waiting longer may bring dishonor to the family."

Early marriage is both a cultural practice and a social expectation. Parents often view marrying daughters at a young age as protecting family honor or ensuring security. This practice directly interrupts girls' education and reinforces the societal perception that their primary role is as a wife and mother, not a student or professional.

Social Restrictions on Mobility

"It's not safe for our daughter to go far for school. She should stay at home and help with household work."

Concerns about safety and propriety reflect strict mobility restrictions imposed on girls due to cultural norms around "honor" and gender segregation. These restrictions limit girls' access to educational institutions, especially if schools are distant, and enforce domestic confinement, further entrenching gender inequalities.

3-Family and Community Attitudes

Low Awareness about Education

"I did not finish school myself, so I don't see much benefit in sending my children." "We think children will learn life skills at home rather than wasting time in school."

Many parents in South Punjab have limited awareness of the long-term value of formal education. This lack of awareness can lead to children being kept at home, as families may prioritize immediate income, household chores, or informal learning over schooling. The cultural perception that schooling is not essential for success contributes directly to higher rates of out-of-school children.

Traditional Roles

"Girls need to stay at home to help with household work and look after their siblings." "Boys must work to support the family; school is a luxury."

Deeply rooted gender and family roles strongly influence educational access. Traditional expectations often dictate that girls manage domestic responsibilities while boys enter the workforce early. This social norm restricts children's opportunities for education, especially in rural communities where adherence to conventional roles is more pronounced.

Community Support

"Even if I want my child to study, there is no encouragement from neighbors or relatives." "In our village, education is not seen as a priority, so we just follow what everyone else does."

Community attitudes reinforce family decisions regarding education. Limited community support or positive role models can discourage parents from sending children to school. Peer and social pressure within the community often normalizes school dropout, perpetuating cycles of illiteracy and low educational attainment.

Discussion

Socio-economic factors

These refer to issues of poverty, household livelihood strategies, cost of schooling, labour demands on children, and infrastructure/access constraints. Poverty and low income directly limit access to education. Families prioritize basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter over schooling expenses. Even minimal costs related to education—transportation, stationery, or uniforms—become unaffordable. Consequently, children from poor households are more likely to stay at home or engage in work to support the family income. Economic pressures compel families to engage their children in labour to



supplement household income. Parents view child labour as an immediate solution to financial hardship. This not only reduces school attendance but also normalizes child labour as a survival strategy. In rural South Punjab, where agricultural and informal labour opportunities are abundant, children's earnings are considered essential. Low parental education often leads to a lack of awareness about the long-term benefits of education. Uneducated parents may undervalue schooling, seeing it as unnecessary or unproductive compared to immediate work. Their inability to assist with schoolwork or navigate educational systems further discourages them from sending children to school. This perpetuates an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Families in South Punjab often prioritize short-term economic gains or traditional expenditures (such as dowry, land, or livestock) over education. Education is viewed as an investment with delayed returns, which clashes with their immediate economic needs. The perception that schooling does not guarantee employment further lowers its priority in household decision-making. A previous study concludes that poverty is the root cause of out-of-schoolchildren in Pakistan. The study suggests that government should play its role in controlling population growth by adopting various appropriate measures. Inflation should also be controlled especially in case of those commodities used by poor people. Government intervention is also necessary to raise GDPPC by adopting various measures such as free education, vocational training, and provision of loans to poor families. Government can also adopt awareness campaign through media (Rehman & Khan, 2021).

Cultural and Gender Norms

This reflects the prevailing gender bias in South Punjab, where boys' education is prioritized due to their expected economic role, while girls' education is undervalued. Cultural norms dictate that women's primary role is domestic, limiting their access to schooling and perpetuating the cycle of female illiteracy. Early marriage is both a cultural practice and a social expectation. Parents often view marrying daughters at a young age as protecting family honor or ensuring security. This practice directly interrupts girls' education and reinforces the societal perception that their primary role is as a wife and mother, not a student or professional. Concerns about safety and propriety reflect strict mobility restrictions imposed on girls due to cultural norms around "honor" and gender segregation. These restrictions limit girls' access to educational institutions, especially if schools are distant, and enforce domestic confinement, further entrenching gender inequalities. Education can reduce poverty, because it reduces unemployment, improves female labor force, and regulating expenditure for the most valuable usage (Alcaraz, 2020).

Family and Community Attitudes

Many parents in South Punjab have limited awareness of the long-term value of formal education. This lack of awareness can lead to children being kept at home, as families may prioritize immediate income, household chores, or informal learning over schooling. The cultural perception that schooling is not essential for success contributes directly to higher rates of out-of-school children. Deeply rooted gender and family roles strongly influence educational access. Traditional expectations often dictate that girls manage domestic responsibilities while boys enter the workforce early. This social norm restricts children's opportunities for education, especially in rural communities where adherence to conventional roles is more pronounced. Community attitudes reinforce family decisions regarding education. Limited community support or positive role models can discourage parents from sending children to school. Peer and social pressure within the community



often normalizes school dropout, perpetuating cycles of illiteracy and low educational attainment. A previous study reveals that child disability is a significant determinant of out of school children. Female children are mostly likely to be out from the school as compare the male children; poverty also plays the pivotal role to keep children away from school. Children whose mothers are more educated and are living in the richer quintiles, have low risk of being out of school. Difficulties in child functioning domains such as seeing, self-care, communication and making friend are found significant determinants of out of school children (Jafri et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The study concludes that the persistent issue of out-of-school children in South Punjab is primarily rooted in a complex interplay of economic, cultural, and familial educational background factors. Economically, widespread poverty, child labor, and limited household income compel many families to prioritize short-term survival over long-term educational investment. The cost of schooling—including uniforms, books, and transportation—further discourages enrollment and consistent attendance, especially among children from low-income households. Culturally, deep-seated traditions and gender norms continue to hinder children's access to education, particularly for girls. Early marriages, domestic responsibilities, and conservative attitudes toward female mobility perpetuate educational exclusion. In many rural areas, education is still not perceived as a necessity but as a privilege reserved for the few, reflecting a broader societal undervaluing of formal schooling. Moreover, the family's educational background plays a decisive role. Parents with little or no education are often unaware of the long-term benefits of schooling and are less likely to support or guide their children's educational journey. This creates an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy and limited socio-economic mobility. Conversely, households with educated parents show higher rates of school enrollment and retention, underlining the transformative power of education within families. In conclusion, addressing the problem of out-of-school children in South Punjab requires a multi-dimensional approach—one that not only provides financial support and accessible schooling but also challenges cultural barriers and strengthens parental awareness. Sustainable change will emerge only when education is recognized as both a right and a shared social responsibility, supported by targeted economic interventions, inclusive cultural reforms, and community-level educational advocacy.

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