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Gendered Struggles in Higher Education: Socioeconomic and Cultural Dynamics in Rural Punjab

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Abstract

Access to higher education remains a significant challenge for rural youth in Punjab, with financial constraints, cultural norms, and gender disparities creating substantial barriers. Despite progress in primary and secondary education, rural areas continue to lag, especially in the case of higher education opportunities for girls. The study has been conducted to examine socioeconomic barriers in the way of rural youth in higher education in the State of Punjab, with a special focus on access to higher education opportunities for rural girls. It also highlights the attitude of parents toward the education of rural girls. This mixed-methods study was conducted in two colleges in Batala, Gurdaspur District, Punjab, with a sample of 180 students (90 boys and 90 girls). Structured questionnaires were used for collecting quantitative data on socioeconomic status, academic performance, and family support. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews with parents, teachers, and community members to explore cultural and gender-specific challenges. Secondary data from national surveys and studies were also incorporated for comparative analysis. The study finds that socioeconomic and gender disparities significantly limit access to higher education for rural youth in Punjab. While girls outperform boys academically, cultural norms and financial constraints hinder their educational prospects. Addressing these barriers requires targeted financial support, infrastructural development, and community-based awareness programs to promote gender equality in education.

Keywords

Higher Education, Rural Youth, Gender Disparities, Socioeconomic Barriers, Cultural Norms, Punjab.

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1. Introduction

Access to education plays a crucial role in socioeconomic development and is often viewed as a means to break the cycle of poverty. However, educational inequality remains a pressing issue in India, especially in rural areas, where youth face multiple barriers to pursuing higher education. Despite India's progress in literacy rates and education policies, rural regions continue to be disadvantaged, with limited access to quality institutions, poor infrastructure, and a lack of financial resources. Rural youth, especially girls, face significant challenges when seeking higher education. These challenges are compounded by traditional cultural attitudes, which often prioritize early marriage for girls over academic achievement.

Punjab, once celebrated for its agricultural and economic development, has seen a slowdown in educational progression, especially among rural youth. While urban centers in the state offer better educational opportunities, rural areas lag due to a lack of infrastructure, limited financial resources, and entrenched gender disparities. A report by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) in 2017 highlighted that 30% of India's rural population remains illiterate, and access to higher education for rural girls is particularly constrained by sociocultural norms that prioritize their roles as wives and mothers over their academic and professional development.

In Punjab, the literacy rate among women in rural areas is 67.43%, compared to 81.48% in urban areas, according to the 2011 Census of India. This gap reflects the ongoing challenges rural girls face in gaining access to higher education, despite their demonstrated academic potential. While various initiatives have been launched to address these disparities, including the 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' scheme, aimed at promoting girl child education, the effectiveness of these programs is hindered by deep-seated cultural attitudes that continue to privilege boys' education over girls.

This study aims to explore, the barriers to higher education for rural youth in Punjab, with particular emphasis on gender disparities. By incorporating primary data collected from two colleges in Batala, along with insights from parents, teachers, and community members, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that shape educational outcomes for rural youth in Punjab. Additionally, this study draws on data from other regions in India and international contexts to offer a comparative analysis of the issue.

2. Objectives

1. To examine the socioeconomic barriers that rural youth face in accessing higher education in Punjab.
2. To assess the gender-specific challenges, focusing on the additional hurdles faced by rural girls.
3. To investigate parental attitudes towards education and how these influence girls' access to higher education.
4. To analyze financial constraints as a limiting factor for rural students, particularly girls, in pursuing higher education.
5. To offer policy recommendations for addressing the socioeconomic and gender-based barriers to higher education in rural Punjab.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. The study was conducted in two colleges located in Batala, Gurdaspur District: Baring Union Christian College (a co-educational institution) and R.R. Bawa D.A.V. College for Girls. Primary data were collected from a sample of 180 students, evenly divided between boys and girls, to explore the specific challenges rural youth face in accessing higher education. In addition, interviews with 40 teachers and hostel wardens, along with a sub-sample of parents and community members from the surrounding villages, were conducted to understand the broader cultural and social context that influences educational outcomes.

3.1 Sample Population

Students : 90 boys and 90 girls.

Teachers : 40 teachers, including hostel wardens, from both colleges.

Parents and Community Members : A sub-sample of parents and panchayat members from villages surrounding Batala, where the majority of the student respondents reside.

3-2 Sample Profile

The following table shows the details regarding the division of the sample based on gender for both colleges:

Table-1 : Description of Sample by Gender

Respondents	Baring Union Christian College	R. R. Bawa DAV College	Total
Male	90	—	90
%	100.0	—	100.0
Female	30	60	90
%	33.3	66.6	100.0
Total	120	60	180
%	66.7	33.3	100.0

As R.R.Bawa D.A.V. College is a Girls' College, all the male respondents were taken from Baring Union Christian College. Among 90 girls, 60 were from D.A.V. College and the remaining 30 from B.U.C. College. This has given a chance to see how far the experiences, problems and attitudes of the girls in co-educational system vary from those studying in an exclusively girls' college.

3-3 Data Collection Methods

3-3-1 Quantitative Data

Structured questionnaires were administered to the students to collect data on their socioeconomic backgrounds, academic performance, family support, and access to educational resources. The questionnaires also included sections on parental attitudes towards education, particularly for girls.

3-3-2 Qualitative Data

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with parents, teachers, and community leaders. These discussions provided deeper insights into cultural attitudes towards education, the role of gender in shaping educational opportunities,

and the specific challenges in the way of the rural girls. Qualitative data were used to contextualize and support the quantitative findings, offering a more holistic understanding of the barriers to higher education in rural Punjab.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1 Socioeconomic Barriers to Higher Education

Socioeconomic constraints remain one of the most significant barriers, in the way of rural youth in higher education in the state of Punjab. The primary data collected for the study reveal that a large proportion of students come from low-income families, with financial hardships directly affecting their ability to pursue higher education. Table 1 given below provides an overview of the income distribution among the respondents' families.

Table-2 : Family Income of Respondents (Annual Income in ₹)

Income Bracket	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
₹3,00,000 and more	15.6	13.3	14.5
₹2,00,000 - ₹3,00,000	11.1	11.1	11.1
₹50,000 - ₹2,00,000	31.1	24.5	27.8
₹20,000 - ₹50,000	20.0	26.7	23.3
Less than ₹20,000	22.2	24.4	23.3

The data show that 23.3% of the students belong to families earning less than ₹20,000 per year. The inability to cover educational costs, including tuition, books, and transportation, is a significant obstacle. Students from such families often rely on scholarships, part-time jobs, or loans to continue their studies. This finding is consistent with national data from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2020, which indicated that in rural India, over 60% of students in the age group of 14-18 are engaged in some form of part-time work to support their families, thus impacting their academic performance.

In a broader context, a study by Tilak (2002) found that higher education has become increasingly privatized in India, making it less affordable for low-income families, especially in rural areas. According to Tilak, the shift towards a fee-based system in higher education has exacerbated existing inequalities, making it difficult for students from economically weaker sections to pursue advanced degrees.

4.2 Gender Disparities in Academic Performance

Despite the financial hardships, girls consistently outperformed boys in academic performance, as shown in Table 2. This is a noteworthy finding, as it challenges the traditional notion that boys are more capable or deserving of education than girls. However, societal and cultural barriers prevent many girls from fully realizing their academic potential.

Table-3 : Gender-wise Academic Record of the Respondents

Respondents	Academic Record					Total
	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	
Male	17	44	22	4	3	90
%	18.9	48.9	24.4	4.4	3.4	100
Female	45	25	20	—	—	90
%	50	27.8	22.2	—	—	100
Total	62	69	42	4	3	180
%	34.4	38.3	23.3	2.2	1.7	100.0

The data reveal that 50% of female students had an excellent academic record compared to 18.9% of male students. Despite better academic performance, girls face significant challenges in accessing higher education due to societal expectations. Many parents still prioritize boys' education, believing that girls will eventually "belong to another family" after marriage. This attitude is reflected in other rural parts of India as well. According to a UNICEF (2020) report on education in rural India, 40% of rural girls drop out of school before completing secondary education due to early marriage and family pressures.

Interviews with parents and community members in Punjab echoed these sentiments, with many expressing concerns that highly educated girls might struggle to find suitable marriage partners. The cultural emphasis on marriage as the ultimate goal for girls creates a significant barrier to their continued education. Similar findings have been reported in other regions, such as Rajasthan, where studies have shown that girls are often forced to drop out of school to be married off early, despite demonstrating strong academic potential.

4.3 Parental Attitudes towards the Education of Girls and their Marriage

Cultural norms and parental attitudes are critical factors influencing the educational opportunities available to rural youth, especially girls. The following table highlights the difference in parental priorities when it comes to spending on education versus marriage for their children.

Table-4 : Parental Preferences for Spending on Education vs. Marriage

Spending Priority	Father (%)	Mother (%)	Total (%)
Marriage of children	5.0	10.6	7.8
Family functions	0.6	2.8	1.7
Education of children	92.2	83.3	87.8
Clothes or other expenses	1.6	2.2	1.9

The table shows that 92.2% of fathers prioritize education for their children, whereas 83.3% of mothers do so. Mothers are more likely to prioritize marriage, particularly for daughters. These findings align with other research on gender roles in rural India. A study by Desai and Andrist (2010) found that in many rural families, girls' education is seen as secondary to their roles as wives and mothers. This deeply ingrained cultural belief that girls' primary responsibility is to the family, rather than to their education or career, continues to limit their educational opportunities.

Furthermore, the focus group discussions with community elders revealed a general reluctance to allow girls to travel long distances for education. Safety concerns and the fear of "ruining a girl's reputation" were frequently cited as reasons for keeping girls close to home, further limiting their access to higher education.

4.4 Access to Educational Resources

Access to educational resources, such as private study spaces, is another important factor affecting academic performance. As shown in Table-5 on next page, 60.6% of respondents had access to a separate study room, and 39.4% did not have one.

The lack of private study spaces can hinder students' ability to concentrate and succeed academically, particularly during exams. Girls were slightly more likely than boys to have a separate study space, possibly because they spend more time at home and are

expected to study there rather than in public spaces such as libraries. This finding corresponds with a study by Jha and Parvati (2019), which found that rural girls are more likely to study at home due to cultural restrictions that limit their mobility.

Table-5 : Availability of Separate Study Room at Home

Respondents	Yes (%)	No (%)
Male	57.8	42.2
Female	63.4	36.6
Total	60.6	39.4

In addition to a lack of study spaces, many students reported limited access to technological resources such as computers and the Internet, which are increasingly essential for higher education. The Digital Divide remains a significant barrier in rural India, with only 9% of rural households having internet access, compared to 66% in urban areas, according to a 2020 report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). This digital divide disproportionately affects girls, who are often discouraged from using technology due to fears of exposure to “inappropriate content” or interactions with boys online.

5. Discussions and Analysis

5.1 Socioeconomic Barriers

The financial constraints which rural families face in Punjab are consistent with broader national trends. The NSSO (2017) data revealed that nearly 40% of rural households across India live below the poverty line, which severely limits their ability to invest in their children’s education. In Punjab, the increasing privatization of higher education has exacerbated the situation, which has led to rising tuition fees and a greater financial burden on families. Many families in rural Punjab rely on agriculture as their primary source of income, which cannot be considered a stable source due to fluctuating market prices and climate-related risks. This instability makes it difficult for families to plan for long-term educational expenses.

The findings from this study also support the work of Tilak (2002), who argued that the commercialization of higher education in India has marginalized students from economically weaker sections, particularly those in rural areas. This trend has led to a widening gap

between urban and rural students, with urban students having greater access to private institutions and better educational resources.

5.2 Gender Disparities

The gender disparities revealed by this study are consistent with national and global trends. Research by King and Hill (1993) found that in the developing countries of the world, girls face greater barriers to education than boys, particularly in rural areas. These barriers are often rooted in cultural norms that prioritize boys' education and view girls' education as less important. In India, gender disparities in education are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where traditional gender roles remain strong.

The academic performance of girls in this study challenges traditional notions. Despite facing greater barriers, girls consistently outperformed boys academically, suggesting that when given the opportunity, girls can produce excellent results in education. This finding aligns with the work of Sen (1999), who argued that educating girls is one of the most effective ways to promote social and economic development in rural areas. According to Sen educating girls not only improves their life outcomes but also has a positive impact on their families and communities.

5.3 Cultural Norms and Parental Attitudes

The cultural norms and parental attitudes revealed in this study highlight the deeply ingrained gender biases that limit girls' access to higher education. While fathers were generally supportive of their children's education, mothers were more likely to prioritize marriage, reflecting traditional gender roles. This finding supports the work of Desai and Andrist (2010), who found that in many rural families, girls' education is seen as secondary to their roles as wives and mothers.

The reluctance of many parents to allow their daughters to travel long distances for education, is another significant barrier in the way of rural girls, going in for higher education. In rural Punjab, as in many parts of India, safety concerns and fears of "ruining a girl's reputation" often prevent girls from pursuing higher education. This cultural emphasis on protecting girls from perceived dangers is a significant barrier to their educational attainment and reinforces traditional gender roles.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to address the barriers to higher education for rural youth in Punjab:

- 1. Financial Support Programs :** The government and private organizations should expand scholarships and financial aid programs for rural students, particularly girls. These programs should cover not only tuition fees but also transportation, books, and other necessary expenses. Special scholarships targeting girls could help offset the cultural barriers that prioritize boys' education.
- 2. Infrastructural Development in Rural Areas :** The government should invest in the development of higher education infrastructure in rural areas, including the establishment of more colleges and universities. Improved transportation networks are also needed to allow students, particularly girls, to commute safely to educational institutions. Ensuring that girls can travel safely is critical to encouraging their continued participation in education.
- 3. Community Awareness Campaigns :** Awareness programs aimed at changing cultural attitudes towards girls' education should be implemented at the community level. These campaigns should involve both men and women, focusing on the long-term benefits of educating girls for the family and society. Educating parents about the economic and social advantages of having an educated daughter may help shift cultural norms.
- 4. Digital Inclusion for Rural Students :** The government and private sector should work together to bridge the digital divide in rural India by providing affordable internet access and technological resources to rural households. Girls should be encouraged to use technology as part of their education, and any fears or misconceptions about the dangers of digital technology should be addressed through community outreach.
- 5. Gender-Sensitive Policies in Education :** Schools and colleges should implement policies that promote gender equality, including safe spaces for girls to engage in extracurricular activities, leadership opportunities, and mentorship programs. These policies should aim to build girls' confidence and provide them with the support they need to succeed in higher education.

7. Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significant barriers to higher education faced by rural youth in Punjab with a particular focus on gender disparities. Socioeconomic constraints, cultural norms, and parental attitudes all contribute to the disparities in educational access, despite the academic potential of rural students. While boys and girls face similar financial barriers, girls are further hindered by traditional gender roles that prioritize marriage over education.

Addressing these barriers will require a multifaceted approach that includes financial support, infrastructural development, and cultural change. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this paper, Punjab can improve access to higher education for its rural youth, particularly girls, and ensure that they have the opportunity to fulfill their academic potential. Ultimately, promoting gender equality in education will not only benefit individual students but also contribute to the broader social and economic development of rural communities in Punjab.

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