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Breaking Barriers to Educational Access: Gender-Free Primary Education as a Policy Strategy for Reducing Out-of-School Children in Balochistan

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ABSTRACT

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Educational exclusion in Balochistan shows a significant number of out-of-school children (OOSC) attributed to social inequality, lack of infrastructure due to dispersed settlements, and the absence of teachers in many areas. This research addresses the Gender-Free Primary Education (GFPE) Plan, which introduces a gender-inclusive, community-based primary school model for teaching Grades 1 to 5 and employs female teachers. This study utilized mixed methods with an explanatory sequential design. The methods included the analysis of pertinent documents, administration of a survey to 287 education management stakeholders from all 12 districts, and conducting 20 key informant interviews. The survey results showed that 78.4% of the respondents fully supported the establishment of GFPE, and 81.2% of the respondents from the dispersed districts stated that GFPE would reduce OOSC by 20% in a three-year period. Support varied across the districts, and ANOVA demonstrated significant results, $F(2, 284) = 18.42, p < .001$. Safety, the availability of female teachers, the cost of the service, and community framing were cited by the respondents as the main barriers to GFPE. GFPE is affordable and culturally negotiable, and with the appropriate resources and safeguards, could be implemented in order to improve the access to primary education for girls in Balochistan.

1. Introduction

Pakistan has an education access crisis. UNICEF estimates over 25 million 5–16 year olds are out of school. Balochistan has the highest school

exclusion, nearly 69% of school-age children are out of school. Article 25A states the State will provide free and compulsory education to all



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children of five to sixteen years. Education remains a constitutional right, unevenly implemented in Balochistan (UNICEF, 2025; Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, art. 25A; BECS, 2012; Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi, 2021).

Balochistan's education issues extend beyond a lack of schools. Dispersed settlements, long travel distances, low population density, poor infrastructure, a lack of teachers, and gender gaps make conventional school expansion difficult (Ansari, Akhtar & Hafeez, 2024; Akhtar, et al., 2021). The Balochistan Education Sector Plan 2020–2025 identifies access and participation, governance, and research and data, while the provincial education statistics 2023–24 stress the need for school level data for planning enrollment and staffing and infrastructure (Government of Balochistan, 2020; School Education Department Balochistan, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

This article analyzes Gender-Free Primary Education (GFPE) as a policy to decrease school exclusion in Balochistan. Here, “gender-free” does not imply gender-blind education. Instead, it refers to a gender-inclusive community primary school model for gender-integrated small settlements, in which having separate girls’ and boys’ schools is unfeasible both financially and administratively. This model uses boundary walls, safe classroom design, naming the school in a manner that is culturally acceptable, and employing mothers and female teachers, as well as having mothers on school boards, in order to build trust and improve access (British Council, 2023; World Bank, 2023; Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education, 2024).

Out-of-school children must not only be addressed as an enrollment issue but as a governance issue. When school is far, and unsafe, and school is sparse and inadequate, it becomes very difficult to realize the guarantees in the constitution. This is why Balochistan needs context-based solutions, as school placement, accessibility, and school security, particularly the school security of girls, determines if they are able to attend school (Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training, 2024; Transparency International Pakistan, 2023; UNESCO, 2024; Global Partnership for Education, 2024).

For girls, access is most important. Studies

conducted on rural areas of Pakistan show that type of access to school and the quality of the school (as well as the reputation of the school) are important factors in enrollment, especially in conservative rural areas where parents evaluate safety, distance, and available female teachers before deciding to send their daughters to a school. Having a school that is close but unsafe does not solve the problem, just as a safe school that is too far does not solve the accessibility issue (Lloyd et al., 2005; Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi, 2021; UNICEF, 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Out-of-school children and the Geography of Exclusion

The phenomenon of children being out of school represents an educational and governance problem. Due to school distance and safety, staffing and infrastructure challenges, fulfilling constitutional commitments remains problematic (Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training, 2024; Transparency International Pakistan, 2023). UNICEF indicates that Baluchistan is the most school-exclusion prone with Baluchistan remaining the most problematic in Pakistan in the latest assessment reports (UNICEF, 2026; Pakistan Institute of Education, 2025). Balochistan is evidence that a context-specific approach is needed rather than the one-size-fits-all model of extending schools to meet demand. In sparsely populated regions, public educational systems frequently find it hard to provide school facilities for each village and for each gender. Consequently, the sanctioned school can exist only on paper and be, at the same time, under-utilized, under-resourced and inaccessible to the children of the dispersed settlements (Asian Development Bank, 2023; Global Partnership for Education, 2024).

Access is more important for girls. In rural regions of Pakistan, school access positively relates to and increases school attendance of girls (Lloyd et al., 2005). In conservative rural areas, parents consider distance, safety, female teachers, and school and staff reputation, along with school and community facilities, before making the decision to send girls to school (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi, 2023; Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi, 2024). A school that is safely near is not enough, while a distant school that is safe does not solve the problem.

(UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF, 2026). The GFPE model, therefore, considers the distance reduction and gender safeguards on an equal level when setting the primary education services (British Council, 2023; World Bank, 2023; GPE, 2024).

2.2 Gender, Culture and Girls' Schooling in Balochistan

In Balochistan, several interrelated factors, including poverty, distance, patriarchy, early marriage, safety, and weak institutional support, limit female education. Research conducted on girls' education in rural Balochistan points to poverty, long distances to school, insufficient infrastructure, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities as the most significant barriers to the enrollment and retention of girls in school (Lloyd et al., 2005; Nasreen Samar, n.d.; "Status of Girls Primary Education in Balochistan Province of Pakistan," n.d.; "Challenges of Girls' Education: An Evidence from Local Government Areas of District Kech, Balochistan," n.d.). Recent studies note the impact of inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teachers, lack of funding, and poor integration of gender and mobility on the exclusion of girls from school (Between Neglect and Necessity, 2025; Barriers to Quality Education in Rural Balochistan, n.d.).

In rural tribal Balochistan, the work of Arif et al. (2025) demonstrates exclusion of girls from school via the interlinked barriers of early marriage, domestic labor, and insufficient female teachers. Their study proposes culturally informed strategies that include local female teachers, scholarships, and conditional cash transfers, as well as community dialogue and gendered policy thinking. This evidence supports the assertion that culturally negotiated education reform in Balochistan is more effective than administratively imposed reform (Arif et al., 2025; The 'Problem' of Girls' Education in Rural Balochistan, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

Cultural sensitivity should never lead to poor service delivery. For example, if a community is too small to have the resources to provide separate primary schools, an integrated community school may serve the right to education better than keeping an inadequate school open to serve the purpose of maintaining school segregation (Khosro, et al., 2024; Sultana & Imran, 2024; Ahmad, Bibi & Imran, 2023). The difficulty lies

in the trade-off between socially desired outcomes and educational equity. In resource poor communities with low population density, separated community schools may be functionally impossible. However, community models may provide opportunities if they are built with female teachers, boundary walls, WASH, safe classrooms, and structures for community participation (Asian Development Bank, 2023; Global Partnership for Education, 2024; British Council, 2023; World Bank, 2023; Girls' Education Unlocks Future Potential in Pakistan's, 2015).

Thus, the GFPE model builds from female teachers and WASH to boundary walls, age-appropriate classroom management, and community governance (Danish, Akhtar & Imran, 2025; Mankash, et al., 2025; Hafeez, Yaseen & Imran, 2019). Evidence from Balochistan indicates that girls' education especially in the presence of stipends, community engagement, and teachers, improves when families regard schools as safe, and legitimate (Status of Girls Primary Education in Balochistan Province of Pakistan, n.d.; Girls' Education Unlocks Future Potential in Pakistan's, 2015; Evaluation of the Balochistan Rural Girls' Fellowship, n.d.).

2.3 Co-education, Consolidation and Policy Caution

Around the world, co-education can reduce costs and increase accessibility. However, in some communities that might reject co-education, co-education can create exclusion. Evidence from Punjab shows that in communities with strong social norms and strong parental concerns, converting single-sex schools into co-educational schools can reduce girls' enrollment in those schools. This is important for Balochistan because it shows that integrating co-education requires staff and infrastructure, and building trust and mobilizing the community is vital (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO 2024).

The GFPE should not be seen as one policy, or one administrative action, but as a framework. It encompasses proper community dialogue, district mapping, appropriate infrastructure, safe-school standards, and monitoring as integral steps. Integration may deepen resistance and reduce girls' participation in the absence of these steps, but the GFPE might offer a viable solution in

contexts of low enrollment (Asian Development Bank, 2023; Global Partnership for Education, 2024).

2.4 Financing and Community Accountability

Financing is at the heart of GFPE. Pakistan's experience with gender-responsive budgeting shows that some public finance management reforms in combination with innovations in monitoring can lead to more public investment in services for girls and women and higher levels of girls' school enrollment (Wallace, 2020). This indicates that GFPE should be seen as more than a cost-saving measure. Savings that arise from consolidation should be used to improve WASH, provide incentives for female teachers, offer transport and learning resources, provide remedial assistance and establish conditional cash transfers (World Bank, 2023; British Council, 2023).

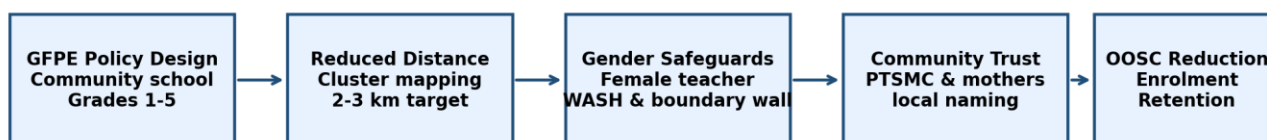
A rights-based GFPE model must shift efficiency gains to equity and quality. The most recent Balochistan system strengthening interventions show that significant progress can be made in the existing framework with the tools available. The second phase of UNICEF's Balochistan Education Support Programme introduced a digital school

census, a real-time school monitoring system, strengthened parent-teacher committees for school management, and a virtual teacher training academy. These innovations can help identify low enrollment schools, remote school clusters, and resource and personnel gaps for GFPE pilots (UNICEF, 2026; European Commission and UNICEF, 2021).

2.5 Conceptual Framework

This study identifies five interconnected elements: proximity, safety, female teacher presence, infrastructure, and community legitimacy that shape the relationship of GFPE and the reduction of OOSC. The model suggests that having a school in the vicinity is a necessary condition for the enrollment of girls; however, it is not sufficient. Parents may still not enroll girls in schools that do not have female teachers, separate girls' toilets, boundary walls, or trusted local governance. Similarly, a school may have all the necessary resources and a functional setup but may be underutilized if it is located far from dispersed populations. Hence, GFPE needs to be implemented as a cluster-based service-delivery model rather than a typical provision of co-education.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for GFPE and OOSC reduction.



Core assumption: access improves when proximity, safety, female staff and community legitimacy operate together.

The framework meets SDG 4 and SDG 5 by meeting the gender equality goals and offering inclusive and equitable quality education. Since it aims to make the right to education a reality for children in hard-to-reach areas, it meets Article 25A obligations. The main assumption is that integration will only increase access if it is seen as safe, trustworthy, and of high quality.

2.5 Research Objectives

- 1 To investigate how stakeholders, perceive gender-free primary education as a means of addressing the issue of children not attending school in Balochistan.
- 2 To understand how support of GFPE varies within districts categorized as having high, medium, and low levels of out of school

children.

- 3 To identify the primary factors of perceived potential decrease of out of school children in a GFPE model.
- 4 To evaluate stakeholders' viewpoints of GFPE and the issues of safety, economic feasibility, retention of female teachers, and cultural considerations.
- 5 To formulate an operational policy model of GFPE in Balochistan.

2.6 Research Questions

1. Regarding the GFPE in Balochistan, what is the level of support shown by those involved in education management?
2. Are there differences in the levels and patterns of support for GFPE among the various districts that have different levels of OOSC and varying settlement patterns?
3. What are the strongest predictors of the perception of potential OOSC reduction?
4. Considering GFPE implementation, what supports and challenges do stakeholders foresee?
5. When considering GFPE in Balochistan, what policy structures are available to define the parameters around implementation?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Explanatory sequential mixed methods were used. This research design is applicable when both quantitative dimensions and qualitative components are needed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, stakeholder perceptions and statistical relationships were captured through a survey, and the interview data provided an explanation for stakeholder support and resistance to GFPE. Document analysis was used to provide a linkage to the findings and the constitutional, policy and SDG commitments.

3.2 Study area and Sampling

In this study, three strata were defined to select 12 districts in Balochistan. High-OOSC districts in the study were Washuk, Kohlu, Dera Bugti and Chagai; Medium-OOSC districts were Pishin, Khuzdar, Killa Abdullah and Killa Saifullah; Low-OOSC districts were Quetta, Kech, Gwadar and Lasbela. The conditions of accessibility, distance to schools, and service delivery in the districts were the basis of the stratification. The empirical dataset was based on 287 responses, with 300 responses targeted, resulting in a response rate of 95.6%.

Table 1: District Strata, Sample Size and Mean Distance

Strata	Districts	n	Mean distance (km)
High OOSC (>60%)	Washuk, Kohlu, Dera Bugti, Chagai	96	28.4
Medium OOSC (40-60%)	Pishin, Khuzdar, Killa Abdullah, Killa Saifullah	102	14.2
Low OOSC (<45%)	Quetta, Kech, Gwadar, Lasbela	89	4.6
Total	12 districts	287	-

3.3 Respondents

Quantitative respondents included district education officers and their deputies, head teachers, managers of NGOs and UN agencies,

BISP officers, and education stakeholders. The largest respondent group was head teachers. The sample was relevant to the assessment of the conditions on the ground and the potential for the GFPE to be implemented in Balochistan.

Table 2: Respondent Profile

Designation	n	%
DEO/Dy DEO	42	14.6
Head teachers	128	44.6
NGO/UN managers	67	23.3
BISP officers	32	11.1
Others	18	6.3
Total	287	100.0

3.4 Instrumentation

Three types of instruments were used in the study: a structured questionnaire, a semi-structured key-informant interview guide, and a document-analysis checklist. The researcher developed the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview guide, and they were contextually based. The guide and the questionnaire were based on the study objectives, the GFPE conceptual framework, the evidence on rural Pakistan school

access and quality and the education policy priorities of Balochistan (Government of Balochistan, 2020; Lloyd et al., 2005). The questionnaire had 23 Likert-scale items, which included the assessment of the sustainability of the current system, WASH and safety, availability of female teachers, community acceptance, cost-effectiveness, and the potential to reduce OOSC. The Likert-scale offered five choices from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Table 3: Instrumentation Matrix

Instrument	Purpose	Key dimensions	Use in analysis
Structured questionnaire	To collect quantitative perceptions of education management stakeholders	System Sustainability, Distance, WASH, Female Teacher Availability, Safety, Community Acceptance, Cost-Effectiveness, OOSC Reduction Potential	Descriptive statistics, ANOVA, regression, and reliability testing.
Semi-structured KII guide	To collect qualitative perceptions from specific key informants	Safety at primary age, Cultural Acceptability, Economic Viability, Female Teacher Retention, and Implementation Concerns	Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006).
Document-analysis checklist	To connect empirical evidence with legal, policy, and development sector evidence	Article 25A, BESP 2020-2025, EMIS/Statistical Reports, SDG 4, and other evidence and research	Policy Analysis, Triangulation, and Development of a Research Framework.

Before commencing the main phase of data collection, the questionnaire was assessed by experts in education policy, and a pilot study was conducted. The pilot study involved 30 participants and was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the instrument. The semi-structured interview guides had an internal reliability of 0.86, which was considered

adequate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 respondents; to explain the statistical findings. A document analysis framework was used to cross-reference field findings with policy and statistical documents. The application of multiple methods of data collection worked to reinforce the design of the study which brought together key stakeholder

views, policy, and statistical data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013).

3.5 Document Analysis

Due to the policy nature of the study, document

analysis was used to compare the legal rights, the gap in provincial planning, the education statistics, and the perceptions of the stakeholders. Analysis of the key documents is included in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Documents Analyzed and Purpose of Analysis

Document/source	Purpose in the study
Constitution of Pakistan, Article 25A	Explore the right of free and compulsory education and the right of access to primary education.
Balochistan Education Sector Plan 2020-2025	Identify the priorities of the provincial framework relating to access, governance and the SDG 4 data.
Balochistan Education Statistics 2023-24	Analysis of education planning, infrastructure and personnel support at the school level.
Pakistan Education Profile and BES-II Report by UNICEF	Analyze the situation of children out of school (OOSC) in Balochistan and the recent reforms in the education system and their focus on strengthening the system.
Guides and policy related literature	Identify the findings in the context of rural Pakistan, co-education, Girls’ education, and gender-based budgeting responsive to education.

4. Findings

4.1 Findings of Document Analysis

The analysis of the documents produced three key results. There are legal and policy foundations for creatively expanding primary education. Article 25A places the obligation on the state for education of children aged 5-16 (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2025). There are also existing priorities for the provincial education policy relating to access, SDG 4, and the active reform priorities of governance and data-based planning (Government of Balochistan, 2020). There are also system strengthening initiatives currently taking place in Balochistan. These include a digital school census, real-time monitoring, teacher training, and activation of the PTSMC. These initiatives indicate that Balochistan has the systems and tools to support a cluster-based model of GFPE (UNICEF Pakistan, 2026).

The document analysis also indicated that a GFPE

policy would require precise framing. Evidence from the Punjab shows that the switch to coeducation could lead to the decline of girls’ school enrollment in the absence of community involvement and other measures (Karim, 2024). As a result, the GFPE policy in Balochistan should be presented as a community primary school model rather than a simple fusion of boys and girls schools.

4.2 Current System Assessment

Survey results indicated widespread dissatisfaction with the dual-gender school system in sparsely populated areas. Just 11.2% of respondents believed that the system of segregation was sustainable. The item on the role of WASH in the girl-child dropout rated the highest mean score. The item on the sufficiency of female teachers rated the lowest means. This implies that a shortage of female teachers is a significant barrier to safe and acceptable schooling.

Table 5: Current System Assessment

Item	Mean	SD	Agree %
WASH problems contribute to girls' dropout	4.52	0.61	91.3
Two schools in the same village can lead to one non-functional school	4.31	0.74	84.7
The segregated school system is sustainable in low-density areas	1.92	0.89	11.2
Sufficient female teachers are available	1.87	0.81	9.8

4.3 Perceptions of GFPE

Stakeholders uniformly expressed support for GFPE. 78.4% advocated for full primary GFPE for Grades 1-5, 16.2% supported GFPE for Grades 1-3 only, and 5.4% favored the status quo.

Parents' preference for nearby quality schools was the strongest statement. This indicates that when minimum social safeguards are guaranteed, parents and communities may prefer proximity to schools that meet social quality standards.

Table 6: Stakeholder Perceptions of GFPE

Item	Mean	SD	Support %
Acceptable if female teacher is available for ages 5-10	4.18	0.77	79.4
GFPE can reduce OOSC by 20% in three years	4.24	0.68	81.2
GFPE will improve utilization and cost-effectiveness	4.37	0.62	87.1
Culturally acceptable if safety conditions exist	3.96	0.84	71.1
Parents prefer nearby quality schools	4.41	0.59	89.2

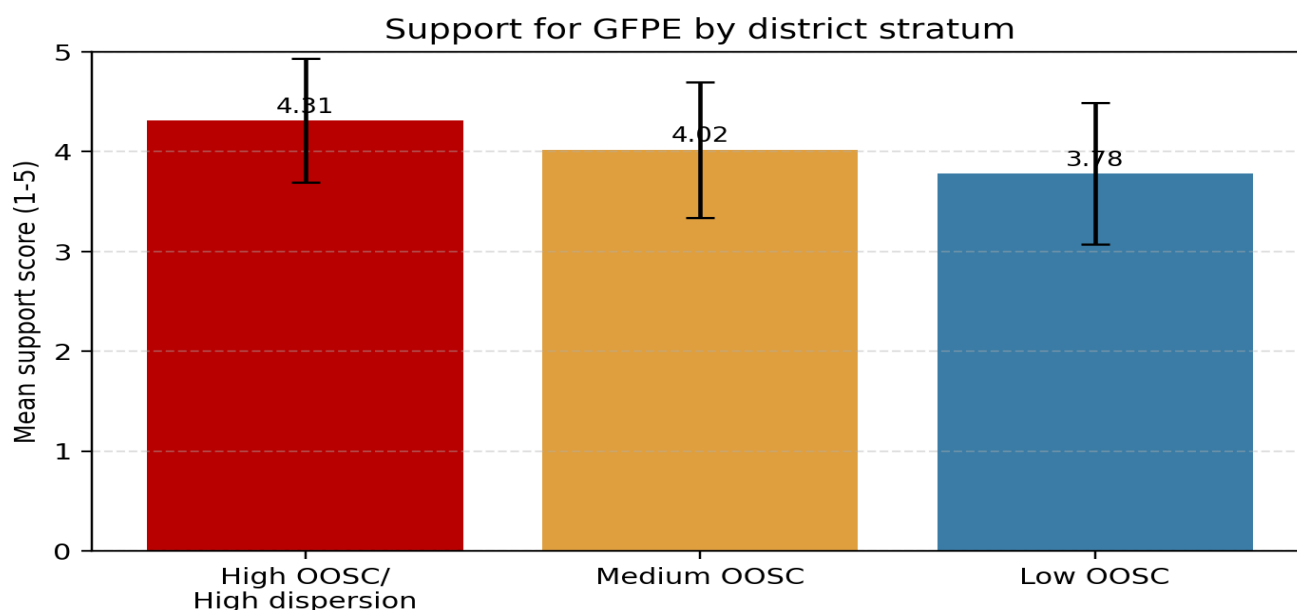
4.4 District-strata Differences

The results of an ANOVA indicated substantial variation for GFPE support across district strata. The highest support levels were found for high-OOSC/high-dispersion districts, while support levels for medium-OOSC and low-OOSC districts were moderate and minimal, respectively. The

difference across the strata was significant ($F(2,284) = 18.42, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$). This implies that of the district strata, high-OOSC/high-dispersion districts had the most urgent need for GFPE, given that there are more clustered settlements with longer distances, which also makes the operation of multiple schools difficult.

Table 7: ANOVA results: Support for GFPE by District Stratum

District stratum	Mean	SD	ANOVA result
High OOSC/high dispersion	4.31	0.62	$F(2, 284) = 18.42, p < .001$
Medium OOSC	4.02	0.68	Eta squared = .11
Low OOSC	3.78	0.71	High > Low, $p < .001$

Figure 2: Mean Support for GFPE by District Stratum.

4.5 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis evaluated the variables that lead to the perception of the potential for the reduction of OOSC. The model was statistically significant and demonstrated a 61 percent level of variance, $R^2 = .61$, adjusted $R^2 = .60$. Distance was a strong negative predictor, and the presence of female teachers was a strong positive predictor.

The density of segregated schools was, however, negatively associated with perceived reduction potential. The results reinforce the claim that the reduction of OOSC relies not only on the availability of schools, but also on reduced distance, increased female teachers, and the elimination of redundant, weak segregated school systems.

Table 8: Regression Model Predicting Perceived OOSC Reduction Potential

Predictor	Beta	t	p
Distance to school	-.42	-8.14	< .001
Female teacher availability	.38	7.42	< .001
Segregated school density	-.19	-	< .001
Model summary	$R^2 = .61$	$F(3, 283) = 147.3$	< .001

4.6 Qualitative Themes

The qualitative data generated four main themes. Stakeholders did not support GFPE, at least not

unconditionally. Safety, female staff, WASH, and community trust all needed to be confirmed. These themes socially contextualize the quantitative data.

Table 9: Qualitative Themes from Key Informant Interviews

Theme	Frequency	Illustrative quote
Safety at primary age	17/20	At 5-10 years parents do not object if a female teacher and boundary wall exist.
Economic viability	19/20	Budget for two schools but both empty; one functional school is better.
Female teacher retention	18/20	Give residence and hardship allowance; local girls will teach.
Strategic naming	15/20	Call it Community School, not co-ed.

5. Discussion

The study indicates that Balochistan may pursue the GFPE policy, noting that it may begin the GFPE only if community safety concerns are proactively addressed alongside the community's gender concerns. The quantitative data show that educational stakeholders, particularly those working in districts with high population dispersion, support the GFPE. The regression analysis indicates that the availability of female teachers and the geographic distance are stronger predictors of the anticipated OOSC reduction than formal gender segregation. This is consistent with rural Pakistan studies that demonstrated that the accessibility, type, and quality of schools influence the decisions of families regarding the enrollment of their children in school (Lloyd et al., 2005).

The study highlights some of the potential drawbacks of the GFPE. The case in Punjab shows that girls' enrollment can be negatively impacted if the conversion of schools from single-sex to coeducational structures is done without taking into account the social norms and the trust of the community (Karim, 2024). This indicates that GFPE should not be implemented as a consolidation strategy in Balochistan. Minimum safety and gender-responsive requirements should be met. These requirements should include the provision of female teachers, separated toilet facilities, safe school premises with boundary walls, and an active participation of mothers in the school management and monitoring of the school.

The qualitative evidence appears to justify this conservative response. Stakeholders did not dismiss integrated primary schooling; they simply imposed conditions. Established female teachers was made more prominent, in addition to the established conditions of safety, WASH, and naming. This finding is in agreement with Arif et al. (2025), who argue that in tribal Balochistan, the lack of female teachers, early marriages, domestic work, and the Baloch patriarchy result in the exclusion of girls from education. Thus, the

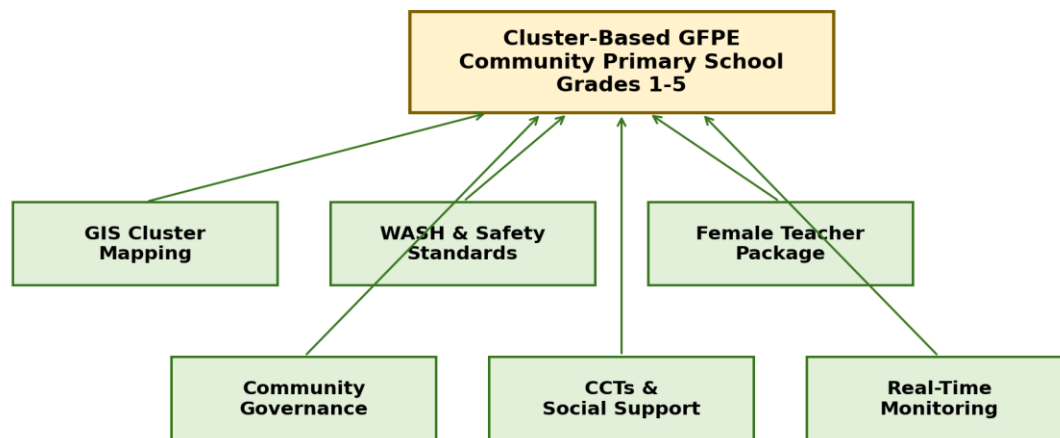
solution to Girls' Participation in Education is not a culturally blind reform, but the design of a culturally considerate reform that provides a locally negotiated response to the problem of distant and neglected schools.

This study also provides a new perspective to the education financing debate. In small settlements, the current dual-school model may be financially inefficient, as it separates limited staff, facilities, and resources. GFPE must not be an austerity policy. Consolidation must allow for advancement in quality. Gender-responsive budgeting in Pakistan demonstrates that budgetary reforms coupled with monitoring can generate public investments in education for women and girls, resulting in substantial improvements in enrollment (Wallace, 2020). Thus, fiscal efficiency must be wedded to gender equity.

This study takes a data-oriented approach to implementation. In Balochistan, there are already digital reforms as a result of the partnership between government, UNICEF, and the EU, such as real-time school monitoring, a digital school census, and active PTSMCs (UNICEF, 2026). These systems can pinpoint low enrollment schools, large geographic distance clusters, WASH and teaching gaps, as well as target communities for the GFPE pilots. The policy orientation is to formulate a solution for the problem of integrating data by linkage of the EMIS and monitoring evidence with the allocation of resources and teaching staff, and community accountability.

5.1 Proposed Policy Framework: Cluster-Based GFPE Model

This research aims to introduce a Cluster-Based Gender-Free Primary Education Model for Balochistan. This model is designed for small communities lacking operational and adequately enrolled gender-segregated primary schools. It will also apply to communities where children have to travel long distances to attend school. The model has six identified pillars; on which it is built.

Figure 3: *Cluster-Based GFPE Policy Model for Balochistan.*

Policy logic: merge weak duplication only when safety, female staffing, WASH, finance and monitoring conditions are secured.

5.1.1 GIS-based Cluster mapping

Using school-level EMIS data, the province should utilize GIS to map settlements. A cluster should ideally consist of 80-120 children within a safe walking distance. The policy would aim to have one functional community primary school located 2-3 km from children's homes, where possible. District maps should show existing schools, teachers, WASH, girls' enrollment, distance, and community risk level prior to a GFPE decision.

5.1.2 Minimum Safety and WASH standards

No GFPE school should be established if minimum standards are not met. These should include sufficient space within a perimeter, two separate toilets, safe drinking water, secured classroom space, safe entry, and child protection protocols with a visible complaints mechanism. Since respondents indicated that WASH the chief reason for girls' dropout, WASH should be a core access intervention.

5.1.3 Female Teacher deployment

At least one female teacher should be mandatory for every GFPE school. Local women should be targeted first for recruitment using a union-council domicile. A remote hardship allowance, safe housing, and WASH secure funding should be offered. The availability of a female teacher was one of the most significant factors in decreasing OOSC. There is a strong correlation between OOSC, WASH secure funding and female staff.

5.1.4 Community Governance

The study recommends the name Community Primary School instead of Community Co-Educational School to help mitigate resistance. Moreover, we believe that a minimum of 50% of the School Management Committee will be mothers. As part of the preparatory work, we will consult with the local religious leaders, the local Jirga, and the mothers' groups. We propose formal community oversight in the form of school report cards and public displays of school attendance.

5.1.5 Conditional Cash Transfers

Conditional cash transfers, as part of the GFPE, require that girls attend school. BISP and provincial social-protection data can identify the recipients of cash transfers among the poor. We recommend that cash transfers be conditioned upon attendance of girls in Grades 3-5 of the school, which is the age group with the highest school dropout rates.

5.1.7 Real-Time Monitoring

With the GFPE, we advocate the use of EMIS and Real-Time Monitoring of Schools. The indicators should include the enrollment and daily attendance of students, the presence of teachers, the operation of WASH facilities, retention of girls, as well as complaints and feedback from the community. We advocate that monitoring be digital and provide substantive management responses rather than merely passive reporting.

5.2. Implementation Roadmap

The study recommends the policy be piloted, socially adjusted, and evaluated during the early phases in a limited geographical scope, with the focus on expanding the policy to all provinces being greatly reduced. As part of the first phase, we focus on specific clusters in high-need

districts. During the subsequent phases, we focus on institutionalizing cash transfers, teacher packages, and specific monitoring. The third phase would focus on expanding the policy to all provinces only if the positive results of the policy increased enrollment and retention, community acceptance, and cost-effectiveness during the preceding phases.

Table 10: Proposed Implementation Roadmap

Phase	Timeline	Target	Estimated budget
Pilot	0-18 months	100 clusters in 8 districts	Rs. 450 million
Scale with CCTs	18-36 months	1,000 clusters linked with BISP/social protection	Rs. 1.2 billion
Full implementation	36-60 months	2,500 clusters; OOSC reduction target below 1.5 million	Rs. 2.8 billion

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed Gender-Free Primary Education for alleviating the problem of children out of school in Balochistan. The findings show that stakeholders support GFPE when it is framed as the establishment of community-based functional primary schools, staffed with female teachers and equipped with WASH, as a safe, nearby solution. Support is strongest in high dispersion districts. Support is most strongly related to distance, while regression analysis identifies the availability of female teachers as the next most important variable in perceived OOSC reduction. Parents and the community show willingness to accept the provision of integrated primary education to young children, provided the

solutions are safe, staffed by females, and include culturally appropriate infrastructure.

The study argues that the existing dual-gender school model is unsustainable for the majority of the scattered settlements in Balochistan. A Cluster-Based GFPE Model can reduce the unnecessary duplication of resource use, bring schools closer to children, and encourage the enrollment of girls. GFPE, however, should not be viewed as a cost-cutting merger policy. It should be a community-based, gender responsive, right-based, and data-centric policy. GFPE, if implemented with the right measures, can bring Balochistan closer to Article 25A, SDG 4 and SDG 5.

Policy Recommendations

1. The Government of Balochistan should implement a GFPE policy for low-density settlements that recognizes GFPE as a gender-responsive community primary school, rather than a coeducational school.
2. The province should implement a One-Village-One Functional School principle, in which two separate schools should not be established; consolidation should only take place after enrolment mapping and social appraisal and with the consent of the community.
3. Incentives for the service of female teachers should be offered through union-council domicile, the provision of a hardship

allowance, provision of safe housing, and the establishment of a clear career path for remote service.

4. WASH should be a standard that cannot be compromised. No GFPE school should be opened or converted without separate toilets, a wall, and safe drinking water.
5. Naming schools should be a culturally sensitive process. Community Primary School may be more culturally acceptable than coeducational school because it emphasizes service and community ownership.
6. GFPE should be tied to conditional cash transfers and the monitoring of attendance, especially for girls of low-income families.

7. Donors and NGOs should offer support to the pilot districts with WASH, female teacher training, and accelerated learning and be committed to independent evaluation prior to scale-up.

Limitations

This study is limited in several ways. First, our data collection targeted management stakeholders, excluding parents and children. Future studies should focus on the mothers,

fathers, sons, daughters, and community leaders. Second, the survey was limited to OOSC reduction potential, rather than the actual changes in enrollment post-implementation. Third, due to the cross-sectional nature of the study design, we are limited to evaluating only the present. Fourth, the qualitative sample of 20 key informants was useful for some depth, however, it is likely not representative of all districts and/or tribal settings. Finally, unless described in full, GFPE may be incorrectly interpreted.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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