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The Role of Parental Attitudes and Cultural Norms in shaping Female Education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The literacy rate among females is a pressing issue in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Pakistan. The economic factors are well documented, while the cultural factors such as purdah, early marriage and parental attitudes need further study. The objective of the study was to explore the cultural and parental factors that obstruct the female education level in KP. Descriptive survey was conducted in 10. A structured questionnaire was used and the data were analyzed descriptively (frequencies and percentages). The study found that 71% of students reported parental discrimination in education, with male parents (91.5%) overwhelmingly dominating educational decision-making. While 90% believed purdah should be observed, 60-74% did not believe it prevents girls' education, suggesting evolving cultural attitudes. Early marriage was practiced by 70% of families, and 88% identified it as a restricting factor in female education. The majority (70-75%) reported no negative effects of female education, though 68% identified non-earning status of women as a cause of deprivation from education. Significantly, 85.5% believed educated women perform domestic duties, challenging the perception that education makes women neglect household responsibilities. Cultural and parental barriers significantly constrain girls' education in KP. However, the finding that most students distinguish between purdah and education, and do not perceive negative effects of female education, and suggested the evolving cultural attitudes.



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1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right (Lee 2013). Education is a critical instrument for social and economic development. The education of women, in particular, has been associated with improvements in family welfare, child health, poverty reduction, and sustainable community development (Lee 2013; Zendeli 2017). Despite substantial progress in educational access across many developing countries, gender disparities in education continue to persist, especially in traditional and patriarchal societies. In these settings, social norms, cultural values, and family dynamics can influence boys' and girls' educational experiences in various ways (Gul, Fatima, and Akhtar 2025).

Pakistan has been striving to enhance education access and gender equality in the past few decades (Ahmad, Shaheen and Hussain 2024; Halai and Durrani 2021). In many areas however, the literacy rate and educational status of females is still lagging behind that of males, especially in conservative and rural areas (Chaudhry 2007; Latif 2009). In the past, there were obstacles in the way of females participating in education in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and other Pakhtun-dominated areas (Y. Ali, Husain, and Imran 2022). The challenges are usually associated with parental attitudes, cultural norms, purdah norms, economic constraints and norms of early marriages (Saeed 2012).

The place of purdah, attitude of parents and early marriages on education of girls is crucial for effective educational policy and activity design. Student perceptions offer a powerful window into social reality which can affect educational opportunities and constraints. Thus, the impact of parent's attitude, culture awareness about purdah and marriage on female educational participation, the present study sought to find out. The results of this study add to the knowledge of social and cultural factors impacting girls' education and serve as proof for policy makers, teachers, and community leaders who strive to ensure gender equity in education.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Women literacy rate is especially low in conservative provinces like KP (Khan Abdul Ghaffor Province) in Pakistan. While a number of

policy initiatives have been identified, the pace of progress has been slow, and gender gaps in education are high. Although cultural and parental factors are crucial to girls' educational outcomes in KP, the exact mechanism by which purdah, early marriage, gender discrimination, and perceptions of female education limit girls' access to education is not well understood. This study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence on household-level cultural and parental barriers to female elementary education in KP.

1.2 Research Objectives

- To examine parental discrimination in education and the extent of parental engagement in female children's education in KP.
- To assess the role of purdah in shaping girls' access to elementary education.
- To investigate the prevalence of early marriage and its relationship to female education discontinuation.
- To explore perceptions of the negative effects of female education on family honor and domestic roles.
- To examine the impact of women's non-earning status and family honor on girls' educational opportunities.
- To assess whether educated women are perceived as able to perform domestic duties and adjust within families.

1.3 Research Questions

- Do parents discriminate between male and female education in KP?
- What is the role of purdah in girls' access to elementary education?
- What is the prevalence of early marriage, and how does it affect female education?
- What are the perceived negative effects of female education in society?
- How do non-earning status of women and family honor affect girls' educational opportunities?
- Are educated women perceived as capable of performing domestic duties and adjusting within families?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study provide evidence on cultural and parental barriers that must be addressed in policy design for girls' education. It raises awareness of cultural practices and attitudes that limit girls' education. It also offers insights for designing culturally sensitive interventions. This study further help parents reconsider cultural practices and attitudes that deprive girls of education, and establishes a baseline for further research on cultural and parental barriers to female education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Parental Attitudes and Female Education

Parents constitute the primary socializing agents in children's lives and significantly influence educational aspirations and outcomes. From a wide array of research, there is clear evidence that family support is positively correlated with educational attainment, academic performance, and school retention. On the other hand, negative parental attitudes toward girls can have a negative effect on girls' education and can contribute to gender inequalities (Taylor, Clayton, and Rowley 2004). Educational choices often are made based on educational priorities, which may be skewed toward educating boys in patriarchal societies, where girls are expected to take care of the home after they get married. There are some studies in South Asia that have reported the willingness of families to invest in boys' education as compared with girls' education. These practices result in lower school enrollment rates, more dropout rates, and lower educational attainment among girls (T. S. Ali et al. 2022; Hasan et al. 2025). Researchers also have pointed to the importance of fathers in educational decision-making. Traditionally, fathers may have more power within the family regarding the decisions on education investments. The centralization of decision-making power can also reinforce gender biases, as decisions on education are based on the traditional definitions of the gender roles of males and females (Khan and Biao 2025).

2.2 Purdah and Cultural Perceptions

Female education and purdah have been the subject of much scholarly discussion (Ramirez 2026). Previous studies tended to describe purdah as a hindrance to girls' participation in education, as a lack of mobility may prevent them from

reaching school and accessing education-related services. The factors that could have a negative impact on the participation of girls in education include limited transport, safety concerns, and social norms around women's conduct (Jan, Ali, and Niqab 2018; Samuri and Hopkins 2023). But recent studies indicate that purdah and education don't necessarily clash. Researchers have discovered that a great number of families are proponents of education for women and yet cultural and religious values that relate to modesty are observed. Establishment of girls-only schools, female teaching staff and culturally acceptable educational environments has helped many families balance their aspirations for education with traditional values (Bharti 2025; Mukhopadhyay 2021). Such a changing outlook suggested that culture should not be assumed as a barrier to learning. Rather, it seems that the connection between cultural norms and educational opportunities is a function of social context and the existence of educational institutions supportive of them.

2.3 Early Marriage and Educational Discontinuation

Early marriage is one of the most obvious impediments to girls' education throughout the world. Child and early marriage is identified as a significant contributor to female school dropout, by international organizations and education researchers globally. The role of marriage adds to the struggles with education because of responsibilities involving household management and child care, as well as family obligations (Tabassum et al. 2026). Research showed that early marriage is associated with a significant drop in girls' secondary and post-secondary education attainment. In addition to individual women's decisions to leave education, the impact of not continuing in education has ramifications for community development, health outcomes, and economic development (Shabbar 2022; Tabassum et al. 2026; Uddin and Antara 2025).

2.4 Economic Factors and Female Education

Economics is an important factor in education decision-making. For families with fewer resources, education spending may be allocated based on what they believe they will get out of it. In many traditional societies, daughters are seen as guest children, who will leave once they marry

to join another family and thus their benefits of being educated are less (Khan and Biao 2025; Pasha 2024; Tabassum et al. 2026). Research has shown that women's economic dependency contributes significantly to educational disadvantage. Where women have limited access to employment opportunities, families may perceive little economic value in prolonged female education. Conversely, increased opportunities for female employment are associated with higher educational participation and stronger parental support for girls' schooling (Bradshaw, Castellino, and Diop 2017; Kabeer 2018; Walker et al. 2019).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey research design. The quantitative approach was chosen to systematically document cultural practices, and parental attitudes affecting girls' education.

3.2 Population of the Study

Target population of the current study was all elementary school students (male and female) in government and private schools in KP.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

Students from 10 schools (5 public and 5 private) across KP-Pakistan were sampled for data collection. The study employed a non-probability quota sampling technique. Different sample sizes were obtained for each thematic section of the questionnaire to ensure sufficient representation of respondents possessing relevant experiences and perceptions related to parental attitudes (20 to 40 students), purdah and cultural perceptions (20 to 50 students), and marriage-related educational discontinuation (20 to 40 students).

3.4 Research Instrument

Structured questionnaire (close-ended questions) with multiple choice and yes/no items was used in this study. The research instrument has sections

cultural practices (purdah, marriage types), parental attitudes (discrimination, interest in education), perceived effects of female education (negative effects, domestic duties).

3.5 Validity and Reliability

To establish validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by three subject matter experts in education and sociology from Qurtuba University, Peshawar, KP-Pakistan. Their feedback was incorporated to improve clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. A pilot study was conducted with 10 students from schools not included in the main sample. Based on the pilot study, ambiguous questions were revised and redundant items were removed. Kronbach's alpha was used to test the instrument's reliability, the results of which showed 0.82, meaning that the instrument was very reliable.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

For the data collection, permission was obtained from school principals. Students were approached and purpose of the study explained. Questionnaires were given out and students were allowed 20 – 30 minutes to fill them in. Questionnaires were completed and returned for responses to be checked for completion. Results of the questionnaires were collated and analyzed.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

All participants (and parents) were given informed consent. Participation was voluntary. Names of respondents were not revealed. The identities of students were anonymised.

3.8 Data Analysis Procedure

The questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data which was coded and entered into SPSS Version 20.0 for analysis. The data were summarized by descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. The findings are presented in tables and figures for clarity and interpretation.

4. Results

4.1 Parental Attitudes Toward Female Education

Table 1: Parental Discrimination in Education

Response	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage
Parents Discriminate	15	71%
Parents Do Not Discriminate	5	29%

To present findings on parental attitudes and discrimination, the results were analyzed and presented in Table 1 and Figure 1A. A significant majority of students (71%) reported that their parents discriminate between male and female education. This finding confirms that gender

discrimination in education is prevalent at the household level in KPK. The high rate of reported parental discrimination (71%) is consistent with the finding that sisters are twice as likely as brothers to be out of school.

Table 2: Parents Taking Interest in Success/Failure

Response	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage
Yes	14	74%
No	6	26%

Consequently, Table 2 and Figure 1B declared that, a majority of students (74%) reported that their parents take notice of their success or failure

in education. However, 26% of students reported that their parents do not take interest, which is a significant minority.

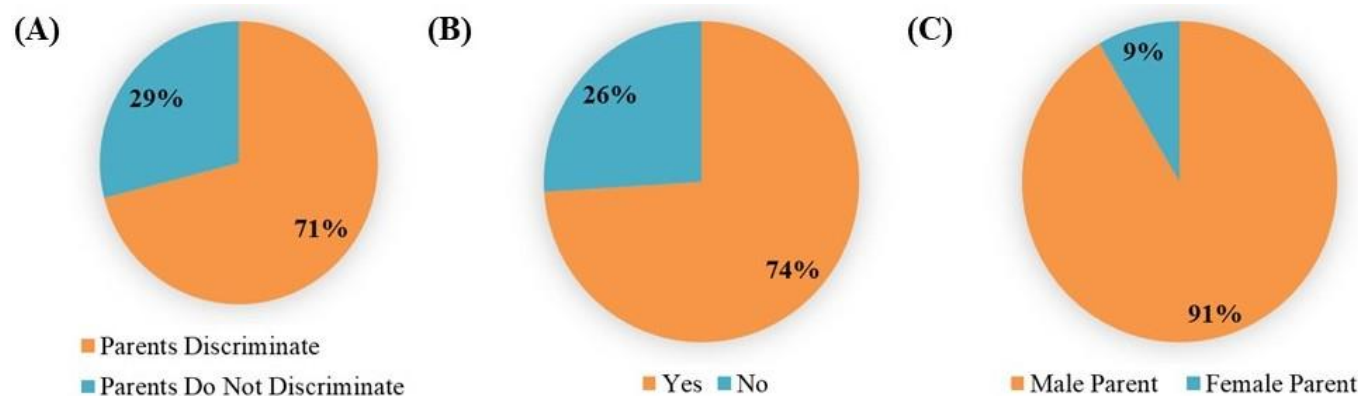
Table 3: Parent Taking Interest by Sex.

Parent Type	Frequency (n=40)	Percentage
Male Parent	36	91.50%
Female Parent	4	8.50%

Subsequently, Table 3 and Figure 1C declared that, among parents who take interest in their children's education, male parents (91.5%) were overwhelmingly more likely to be interested than

female parents (8.5%). This reflects the patriarchal nature of Pakhtun society, where educational decisions are dominated by male family members.

Figure 1: Pie chart showing the percentages of Parental Attitudes Toward Female Education. Parental Discrimination in Education (A), Parents Taking Interest in Success/Failure (B), and Parent Taking Interest by Sex (C).



4.2 Purdah and Its Role in Female Education

Table 4: *Purdah Observance and Its Role in Female Education*

Response	Frequency (n=30)	Percentage
Purdah Should Be Observed	25	90%
Purdah Should Not Be Observed	5	10%

The results were analysed and presented in Table 4 and Figure 2A to present the findings with regard to purdah practices and perceptions. The majority of students (90%) thought that there

should be purdah. But, it does not imply that purdah stands in the way of education – many students might think that purdah and education go hand in hand.

Table 5: *Purdah Keeping Girls Away from Education*

Response	Frequency (n=30)	Percentage
Yes	10	40%
No	20	60%

As a result, Table 5 and Figure 2B revealed that the opinion of 90% of respondents was that the rule of purdah should be adhered to, whereas 60% opined that purdah does not keep girls away from education. This is a crucial discovery – it

implies that, students differentiate between seeing purdah and withdrawing education. This is particularly important for developing culturally appropriate interventions to support purdah and education.

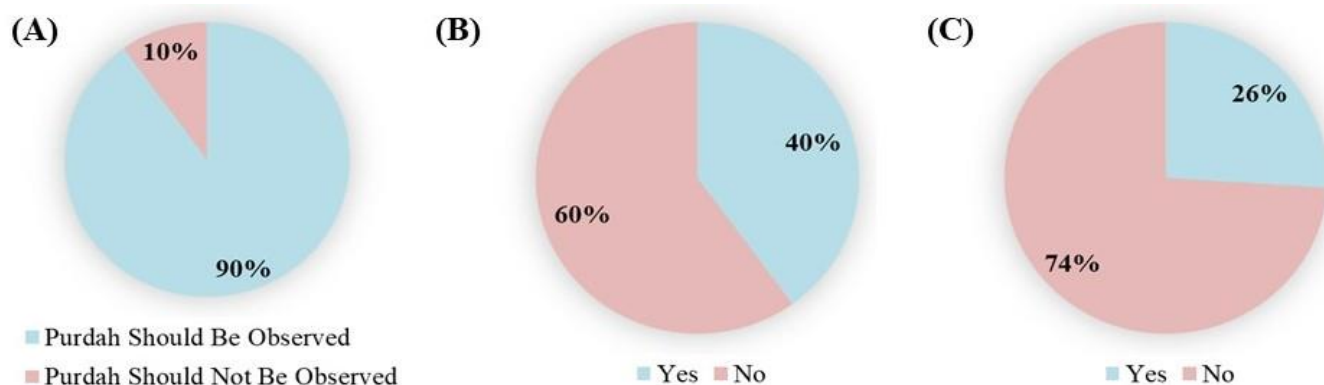
Table 6: *Purdah Keeping Girls Away from Education (Additional Response)*

Response	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage
Yes	6	26%
No	14	74%

The finding is further substantiated by the additional finding on purdah, which is presented in Table 6 and Figure 2C, which in case of girls, the purdah prevents them from getting education, with 74% of respondents agreeing. Only 26% felt that purdah is a hindrance. This implies that the concept of purdah and education are not

incompatible with each other. Most students (60-74%) feel that purdah is not a barrier in the education of girls. This contradicts the notion that purdah and education do not go together and indicates that perhaps cultural attitudes are changing.

Figure 2: *Purdah and proportion of female education (pie chart). Purdah observance and its role in female education (A), Purdah keeping girls away from education (B), and the additional response of Purdah keeping girls away from education (C).*



4.3 Marriage Practices and Female Education

Table 7: *Categories of Marriage in Families*

Marriage Type	Frequency (n=40)	Percentage
Early Marriage	25	70%
Timely Marriage	15	30%
Late Marriage	0	0%

To present findings on marriage types and their impact, the results were analyzed and presented in Table 7 and Figure 3A. Early marriage was the dominant practice, reported by 70% of respondents. Timely marriage was reported by

30%, while late marriage was not reported by any respondent. This indicates that early marriage is a deeply entrenched cultural practice in the families of KPK

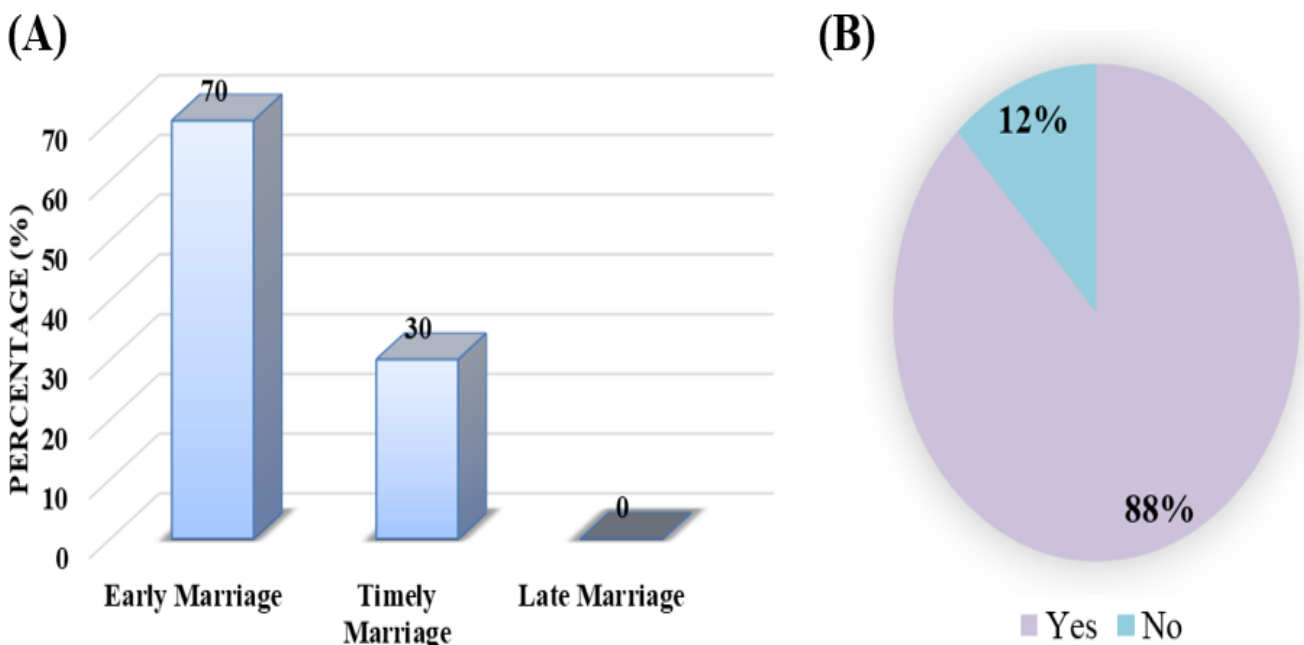
Table 8: *Early Marriage as a Restricting Factor in Female Education*

Response	Frequency (n=40)	Percentage
Yes	30	88%
No	10	12%

Consequently, Table 8 and Figure 3B declared that, an overwhelming majority of respondents (88%) identified early marriage as a restricting factor in female education. This is consistent with the finding that 70% of families practice early marriage. Early marriage leads to girls discontinuing education after marriage, often

before completing their studies. The combination of high rates of early marriage (70%) and the recognition that early marriage restricts education (88%) suggests a cyclical pattern: early marriage leads to girls discontinuing education, perpetuating low female literacy.

Figure 3: Bar and Pie chart showing the percentages of Marriage Practices and Female Education. Categories of marriage in families (A), and early marriage as a restricting factor in female education (B).



4.4 Perception on Negative Effects of Female Education

Table 9: *Negative Effects of Female Education in Society*

Response	Frequency (n=40)	Percentage
Yes	15	25%
No	25	75%

To present findings on perceived negative effects of female education, the results were analyzed and presented in Table 9 and Figure 4A. Only 25% of respondents believed that female education has

negative effects in society, while 75% disagreed. This suggests that the vast majority of students do not perceive female education as a threat to family honor or social order.

Table 10: *Causes of Negative Effects of Female Education*

Cause	Frequency (n=40)	Percentage
Women Become Liberal	6	10%
No Attention Toward Children and Household	8	10%
No Negative Effect	20	70%
It Shelters Purdah	6	10%

Consequently, Table 10 and Figure 4B declared that, the majority of respondents (70%) reported that there are no negative effects of female education. Among the minority who identified negative effects, the most common concerns were that educated women neglect their children and

household (10%) and become liberal (10%). The fact that 70% of respondents reported no negative effects of female education is encouraging and suggests that negative perceptions may be less prevalent among students than among older generations.

Figure 4: *Pie chart and bar chart showing the percentages of the effects of female education on family honor. Negative effects of female education in society (A), and causes of negative effects of female education (B).*

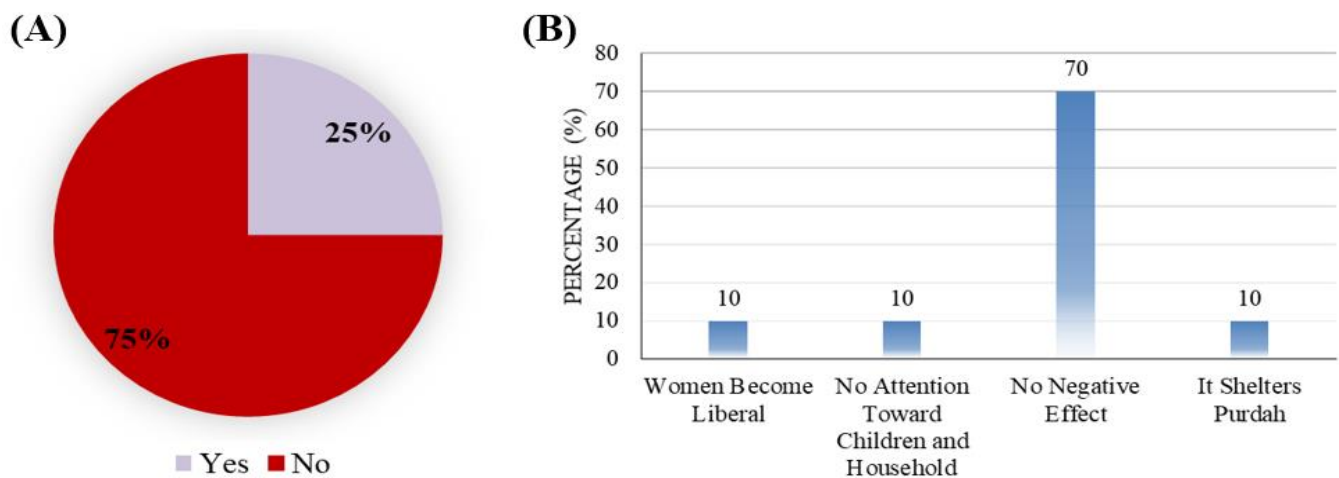


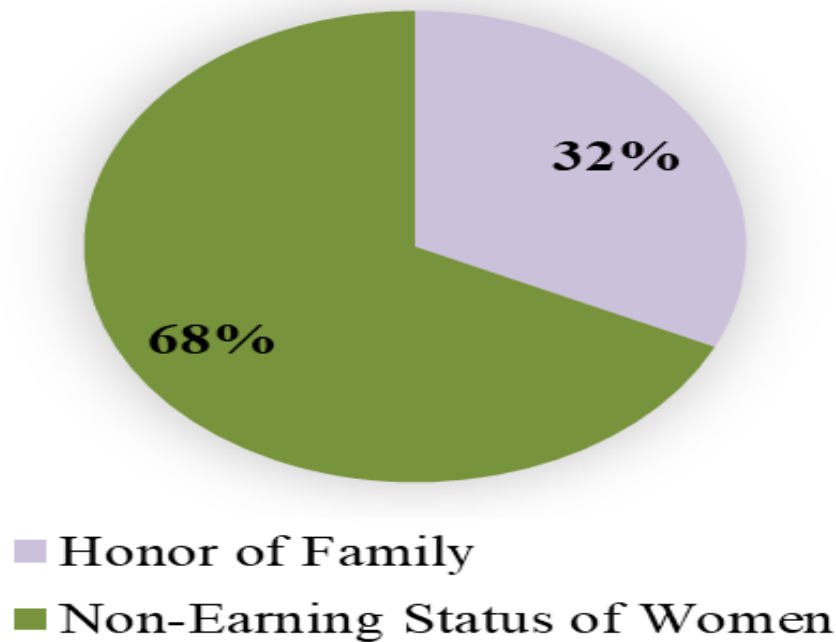
Table 11: *Deprivation of Female Education Due to Non-Earning Status and Honor*

Category	Frequency (n=40)	Percentage
Honor of Family	12	32%
Non-Earning Status of Women	28	68%

Consequently, Table 11 and Figure 5 declared that 68% of respondents identified non-earning status of women as a cause of deprivation from education, while 32% identified family honor. This finding is significant because it suggests that economic factors are more important than honor concerns in determining whether girls receive education. The finding that non-earning status (68%) outweighs honor concerns (32%) suggests

that economic calculations are the primary driver of educational decisions. Parents are more concerned about daughters' inability to earn income than about honor concerns. This suggests that economic interventions (job creation for women, income support) may be more effective in promoting female education than cultural interventions alone.

Figure 5: *Percent deprivation of Female Education Due to Non-Earning Status and Honor*



4.5 Domestic Duties and Educated Women

Table 12: *Domestic Duties Performed by Educated Females*

Response	Frequency (n=50)	Percentage
Yes (Educated women perform domestic duties)	40	85.50%
No (Educated women do not perform domestic duties)	10	14.50%

To present findings on whether educated women perform their domestic duties, the results were analyzed and presented in Table 17 and Figure 6A. A vast majority (85.5%) agreed that educated women fulfil their domestic responsibilities, very

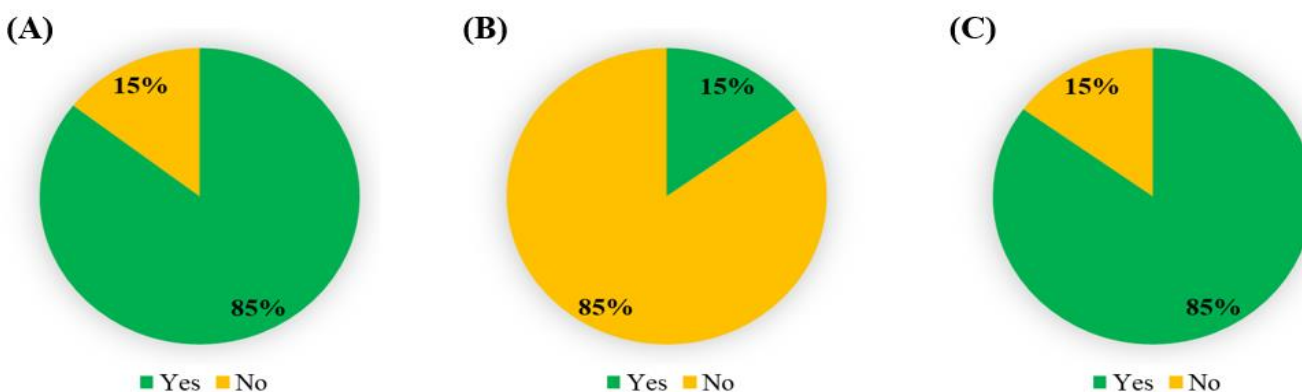
few (14.5%) disagreed. The discovery contradicts the popular notion that educating women means that they neglect their chores. The majority opinion indicates that most respondents believe that education and domestic duties are compatible.

Table 13: *Adjustment and Acceptance of Educated Women*

Response	Non-Adjustment of Educated Women	Acceptance of Parents' Decisions
Yes	6 (15%)	15 (85%)
No	14 (85%)	5 (15%)
Total	20 (100%)	20 (100%)

As a result, 85% of the respondents stated that they disagreed with the statement 'Educated women cannot adjust themselves', whereas 15% agreed, as shown in Table 13 and Figure 6B and C on adjustment of educated women at home. To the question of acceptance of parents' decisions, however, 85% of the respondents said that educated women accept their parents' decisions, with only 15% saying they differed. This implies

that although, for the majority of those who responded, education does not make women 'un-adjustable' to their child's upbringing, there is some worry that it may make women less accepting of parental authority. Most respondents (85.5%) disagree that educated women neglect their domestic responsibilities, contradicting the belief that women neglect domestic responsibilities after they get educated.

Figure 6: *Percentages of domestic duties and educated women. Domestic duties performed by educated females (A), Adjustment of educated women (B), and Acceptance of Parents' Decisions (C)*

5. Discussion

The results of this study show that gender discrimination in education is still strong in Pakhtun society. Large numbers of respondents talked about feeling discriminated against in their education from their parents, showing that inequalities in education are still being replicated within families. The overwhelmingly dominant decision-making in education for girls by the male parent confirms previous studies that suggest the pervasive influence of patriarchy in determining education outcomes for girls. Parents are a key determinant of educational opportunities for children. Educational choices are often made unilaterally and not shared among family members, but set by older family members, usually fathers (Khan and Biao 2025). The second important factor which affects the education of females is purdah. Purdah is generally considered

to be a code of modesty, boundaries and social interaction between men and women (Jan et al. 2018). One of the major impediments to the participation of women in education in many developing societies is early marriage. Young marriage is usually associated with dropping out of school, more household chores and less opportunities for personal and professional growth (Tabassum et al. 2026). Economics is another factor that leads to a choice in education. Whereas families with limited finances tend to invest more in their sons' education and see them mainly as domestic workers (Khan and Biao 2025; Tabassum et al. 2026). If women are not perceived as being able to add to the household's economic output, parents may not invest in their education. Yet, the social and economic context is shifting and is creating new opportunities for women to be involved in education and employment, which is

increasingly challenging these assumptions.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the cultural and parental barriers to female elementary education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The key findings included that 71% of students reported parental discrimination in education, and male parents (91.5%) overwhelmingly dominated educational decision-making. While 90% believed purdah should be observed, 60-74% did not believe it prevents girls' education, suggesting evolving cultural attitudes. The 70% of families practiced early marriage, and 88% identified it as a restricting factor in female education. The 70-75% reported no negative effects of female education, challenging assumptions about negative perceptions. The 68% identified non-earning status of women as a cause of deprivation from education, while 32% identified family honor. The 85.5% believed educated women perform domestic duties, and 85% believed they accept

parents' decisions. It was concluded that, gender discrimination in education is systematic and deeply entrenched in Pakhtun society, with male parents dominating educational decisions. purdah is not inherently Incompatible with Education. Early marriage is a primary driver of female education discontinuation. Non-earning status of women is a more significant barrier than family honor, suggesting that economic interventions may be more effective than cultural interventions alone. The majority of students do not perceive negative effects of female education, and most believe educated women perform domestic duties and accept parental decisions.

7. Delimitation of the Study

The study was limited to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. Only 10 schools (5 public, 5 private) were included. Focused on purdah, early marriage, parental attitudes, and perceptions of female education, domestic roles, and non-earning status.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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