Female Graduate's Perceptions of Gender Inequality in Punjab: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The study aimed to examine female graduates' perceptions regarding gender inequality that hinders access to higher education in the Mansa district of Punjab. Utilizing a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 female students from rural areas, selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis revealed significant challenges, including uneducated parenting, patriarchal attitudes, economic hurdles, geographical barriers, safety concerns, and discriminatory practices, all of which impede women's access to higher education in rural Mansa. This study proposes several strategies, such as policy reforms, community social programs, and financial support initiatives, which can assist in transforming societal attitudes toward girl education and hence advancing a supportive environment for female education in rural Punjab. This research aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, emphasizing the elimination of gender disparities in education.

Keywords: *Perceptions, Gender Inequality, Female Graduates, Punjab.*

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a crucial driver of socio-economic development (UNESCO, 2003). Women's participation in the education sector is an important pathway towards national development and gender equality. Numerous efforts at global and national level are initiated through various policies and programmes such as 1960 UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, 1979 Convention on the elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Hassan, 2020) Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme 2015, gender disparities persist, particularly in developing regions (UNESCO, 2024). The gender wise literacy rates at the national level demonstrate that female literacy rose from 53.71% in 2001 to 70.30% in 2021, marking an increase of 16.59 percentage points (Figure 1). Male literacy also saw steady growth, rising from 75.30% in 2001 to 84.70% in 2021. Focusing on Punjab state (Figure 2), in 2001 female literacy stood at 63.40%, compared to 75.20% for males. By 2021, female literacy had risen to 76.50%, an increase of 13.10 percentage points, while male literacy grew to 88.50%.

Figures 1 and 2 show the National and State-wise gender literacy rates for the period 2001-2021
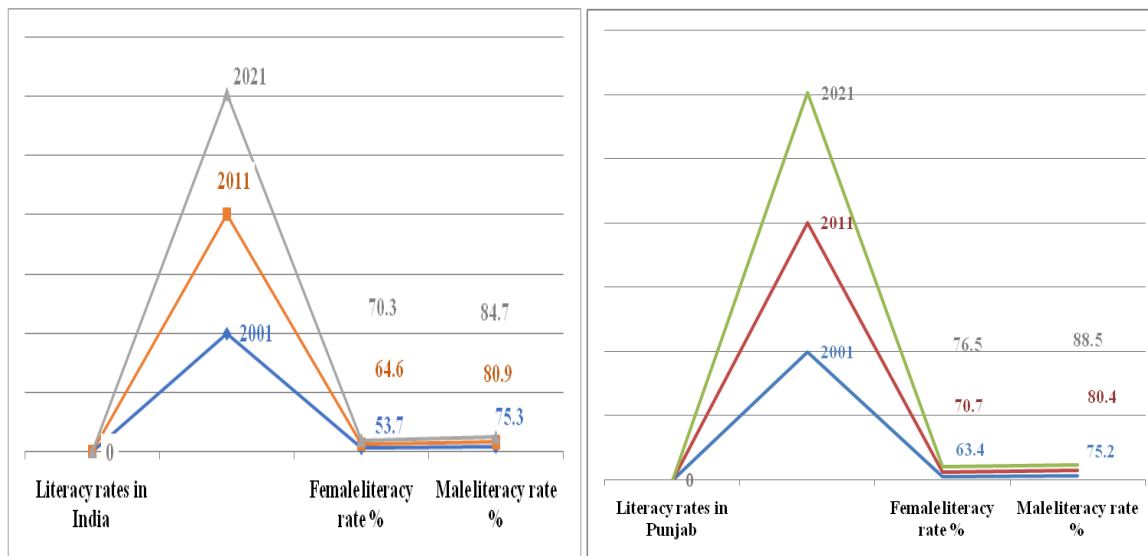
Fig. 1 Literacy rate: National level   Fig. 2 State level

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024

The notable increase in female literacy at national and state levels highlights the success of educational policies supporting women's education and reflects a socio-cultural shift toward valuing female education. Nevertheless, significant gender disparities remain, especially in rural regions, where female literacy rates trail male rates by up to 15% (Swargiary, 2024). Socio-cultural barriers and economic constraints (Chauhan, 2024) hinder educational access and contribute to elevated dropout rates among female students, impeding national efforts to achieve educational parity. This study aims to investigate the perceptions of female graduates in Mansa district, characterized by the lowest literacy rates (UNESCO, 2024), thus enhancing the discourse on gender equality in education.

Research objectives

1. To provide analysis of gender inequality in the Mansa district of Punjab by examining the challenges faced by the female graduates in receiving higher education.

2. To explore female graduates' perspectives on effective strategies for reducing gender inequality.

Literature review

Socio-cultural factors significantly shape educational opportunities for girls, particularly in rural communities (Bertsch & Warner-Soderholm, 2013). Research indicated that societal

expectations often prioritize girls' domestic roles—such as household chores and preparation for marriage—over their educational aspirations (Choudhury et al., 2023). This cultural emphasis on domesticity leads to lower enrollment and higher dropout rates among female students, as education is deemed less crucial for their future as homemakers (Chauhan, 2024). Gender biases perpetuated by societal attitudes further diminish the perceived value of educated women in the workforce, creating a cycle of educational deprivation (Vadeyar, 2014).

Economic challenges compound these socio-cultural barriers, resulting in low enrollment rates for girls. Rural schools frequently lack essential infrastructure, such as adequate sanitation, safe transportation, and qualified teachers, hindering regular attendance, especially for girls (Singh & Dhillon, 2021). Inadequate facilities discourage continued attendance and contribute to dropout rates among adolescent girls (Sharma & Gill, 2019). Economic strain on families further exacerbates cultural biases against female education, heightening preferences for educating boys (Bansal, 2022).

Addressing these intertwined factors in rural Punjab necessitates a holistic approach that recognizes the cultural and economic realities influencing family decisions (Choudhury et al., 2023).

Methodology & Data Collection

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to explore female graduates' perceptions of gender inequality in education. A purposive sample of 35 female graduates, aged 18 to 25, from rural Mansa district, Punjab, was selected to highlight their educational challenges related to gender and rurality (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were interviewed in their local languages, ensuring confidentiality and comfort. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, enhancing reliability and validity through rigorous coding and peer debriefing, reflecting the district's female literacy rate of 76.50% (MOSPI, 2024).

Table1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Demographic Variable	Categories	Frequency	%
Age Group	18-22	26	74%
	22-25	9	26%
	Primary	9	25%
	Upper primary	8	22%
Father's qualification	Higher	14	40%

	Illiterate	4	11%
Mother's qualification	Primary	7	20%
	Upper primary	11	31%
	Higher	8	22%
	Illiterate	9	25%
Family Income	₹5,00,000 – ₹10,00,000	0	
	₹2,00,000 – ₹5,00,000	1	2%
	1,00,000 – ₹2,00,000	4	11%
	Below ₹1,00,000	30	87%
Marital Status	Married	0	–
	Unmarried	35	100%

Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the sample. A majority of participants (74%) are aged 18-22. Regarding parental education, 40% of fathers have higher qualifications, while 25% are only primary-educated. In contrast, mothers exhibit more varied educational backgrounds, with 31% having upper primary qualifications and 25% being illiterate, reflecting gender disparities. Additionally, 87% of families earn below ₹1,00,000, and the sample consists entirely of unmarried individuals.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. This analytical process involved coding the data to discern recurring themes and patterns associated with gender disparities in higher education. Table 2 presents the results of the thematic analysis derived from the semi-structured interview transcripts, highlighting the identified themes along with the frequency and percentage of participants who referenced each theme in response to the interview questions.

The analysis part is divided into two sections: the first section highlights the challenges faced by participants, while the second section focuses on the strategies proposed to overcome these barriers.

Table2. Thematic analysis of challenges faced by female graduates and proposed strategies for achieving gender equality in education

Sections	Themes	Frequency	(%)
1. **Challenges faced by the female graduates in pursuing higher education**	Low Parental Education	16	45%
	Patriarchal Attitudes	9	25%
	Safety Concerns	10	28%
	Discriminatory Practices	17	49%
	Financial Hurdles	18	51%
	Geographical Barriers	6	17%
2. **Strategies proposed to achieve gender equality in education**	Policy reforms	8	22%
	Community Social Programs and Initiatives	7	20%
	Financial Support and Assistance Mechanisms	20	57%

First Section: Challenges faced by female graduates for higher education

This section highlights the challenges faced by female graduates for higher education which varies from low parental education to geographical barrier and other related aspects as discussed below:

(i) Low Parental Education

As shown in Table 2, 45% of female graduates reported that low parental education is a significant barrier to girls receiving an education or continuing their studies in college. Previous research supported the findings of the present study by reporting that parents with lower education levels often do not prioritize formal schooling for girls, focusing instead on traditional gender roles. These parents perceive education as less relevant or unnecessary for girls, believing that their primary responsibilities should revolve around domestic duties and care giving rather than academic or professional pursuits. These entrenched beliefs not only hinder girl's access to education but also contribute to broader cycles of poverty and inequality, as girls who are deprived of formal schooling are less likely to gain the skills necessary for economic

independence and empowerment (Kantova, 2024). The following responses from participants illustrate this barrier:

- ***Respondent 1:*** *"My parents didn't go beyond primary school, and they don't understand the importance of higher education, which makes it hard for me to continue my education."*

- ***Respondent 2:*** *"Since my parents have only basic education, they don't see the value in me going to college. They believe it's not necessary for me to continue studying."*

(ii) Patriarchal Attitudes

25% respondents identified patriarchal attitudes as a significant barrier to their education (Table 2). These findings align with previous research, which demonstrates that patriarchal norms reinforce traditional gender roles prioritizing domestic responsibilities for girls, thereby limiting their access to education, especially in rural and conservative communities. Girls are often expected to undertake household duties—such as caregiving, cooking, and cleaning—deemed more important than formal schooling. This emphasis on domestic roles reflects traditional views on femininity and reinforces the notion that a girl's value lies in her contributions to the household rather than her academic or professional potential. Consequently, families may perceive investments in daughter's education as unnecessary or counterproductive, particularly in the context of limited financial resources, corroborating the findings of Diamond (2022) and Psaki et al. (2022).

- ***Respondent 1:*** *"In our community, there is a belief that girls should focus on household duties rather than education. This traditional attitude makes it difficult for girls like me to pursue further studies."*

- ***Respondent 2****: "Many people in my community think that educating girls is not as important as educating boys. This outdated mindset creates barriers for girls wanting to continue their education."*

(iii) Safety Concerns

As shown in Table 2, 10% of respondents mentioned that safety concerns act as a barrier to higher education for girls. Prior research substantiated the findings of the current study by indicating that fear of safety significantly impacts girl's educational opportunities, particularly in contexts where security concerns, gender-based violence, and entrenched cultural norms prevail. In many regions, the pervasive threat of violence against girls, including harassment, assault, and

even abduction, creates an environment of fear that restricts their mobility and access to educational institutions. This fear is often exacerbated by reports of incidents involving gender-based violence, which not only heighten anxiety among families but also contribute to a societal narrative that prioritizes the perceived safety of girls over their right to education (UNESCO, 2023). Respondent's statements support these findings:

● *Respondent 1: "When I am in college, my parents are constantly worried about me due to the incidents involving girls in daily life. This concern makes it very tough for girls to receive an education far from home."*

● *Respondent 2: "The fear of safety on the way to college is a big problem. Many girls, including myself, face these concerns, and it often leads to us missing classes."*

(iv)Discriminatory Practices

As shown in Table 2, 49% of participants reported that traditional gender roles have a significant impact on their educational experiences. Previous research aligned the findings of the current study by reporting that unequal treatment of girls in educational contexts remains a pervasive issue, often manifesting through disparities in access, resources, and support when compared to their male counterparts. Previous research underscores that promoting gender equality is not merely a moral imperative but also a critical factor in enhancing educational outcomes for girls. When girls are afforded equal opportunities in education, the benefits extend beyond individual achievement; they contribute to broader societal advancements in health, economic development, and social cohesion (Guerrero & Puerta, 2023). Some respondents explained:

● *Respondent 1: "We often receive less attention and fewer resources compared to boys, which makes it harder for us to succeed academically."*

● *Respondent 2: "The lack of equal treatment for girls in our community affects our education significantly. Girls are often given fewer opportunities, which lead to lower enrollment and higher dropout rates."*

(v) Financial Hurdles

Financial difficulties were cited as a barrier by 51% of female students, as shown in Table 2. Earlier empirical evidence supports the results of this study by documenting that high education costs represent a significant barrier to educational attainment for girls, particularly in low-income families where financial resources are limited and often disproportionately allocated toward boys' education. This economic disparity arises from deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms that

prioritize male education due to perceptions of boys as future breadwinners, while girls are frequently viewed through the lens of traditional gender roles that emphasize domestic responsibilities over academic pursuits (Rodriguez, 2020). These financial challenges are reflected in the following statements:

- ***Respondent 1:*** *"The high costs of education are a major barrier for girls in our area. Many families can't afford the fees, books, and other expenses, which forces them to pull their daughters out of school."*
- ***Respondent 2:*** *"Because education is so expensive, my family struggles to pay for my college."*

(vi)Geographical Barriers

Table 2 indicates that 15% of respondents identified geographical barriers as a significant challenge to their education. These findings align with prior research, which underscores that the physical distance to colleges is a critical obstacle for girls, particularly in rural areas where educational institutions are often limited and situated far from residential communities. This geographical separation complicates daily commuting and raises safety concerns that disproportionately impact female students. In many rural settings, traveling to educational facilities may require navigating unsafe terrains or areas with prevalent incidents of gender-based violence, leading families to hesitate in permitting their daughters to undertake long journeys to college (Varghese, 2021).

- ***Respondent 1:*** *"The College is too far from my home, and traveling there every day is not feasible. This distance makes it difficult for me and other girls to attend college regularly."*
- ***Respondent 2:*** *"Since the nearest college is far away, it's hard for me to get there regularly. The long distance makes it challenging and expensive."*

Second section: Strategies suggested by female graduates to overcome these challenges.

This section proposed several strategies suggested by the female graduates to address gender inequality, including policy reforms, community social programs, financial support, and assistance.

(i) Policy Reforms

According to 22% of respondents (Table 2), policy reforms are crucial for improving girls' access to education. Prior investigations corroborated the results of the present study by

demonstrating the importance of government interventions in enhancing girls' enrollment and retention in educational institutions, particularly in contexts where socio-cultural barriers and economic constraints disproportionately affect female students. Initiatives such as free education eliminate direct financial barriers, making schooling accessible to families who may otherwise prioritize expenditures for boys. This financial support is crucial in low-income households, where educational resources are often limited and competition for funding between boys and girls can lead to the latter being marginalized. (Mondal & Islam, 2021). Respondents emphasized the need for policy changes:

- ***Respondent 1:*** *"Policy changes are crucial for improving girls' education, as current policies do not fully address socio-cultural and economic barriers. A targeted approach is needed to overcome limitations such as inadequate safety measures and lack of financial support."*

- ***Respondent 2:*** *"Significant policy reforms are necessary for advancing girls' education. We need policies that address gender bias, offer scholarships, and ensure safe environments to boost enrollment and retention rates."*

(ii) Community Social Programs and Initiatives

20 % of respondents indicated that community social programs, such as awareness campaigns and support networks, are essential for enhancing girls' education. These findings align with previous research suggesting that initiatives like mentorship programs and community workshops significantly improve female students' attendance and academic performance. Mentorship programs, which pair female students with experienced mentors—often female educators or community leaders—offer invaluable support beyond academic guidance. These mentors serve as role models, inspiring young women to overcome educational challenges and fostering a strong sense of self-efficacy and ambition. The personalized attention and encouragement from mentoring relationships positively influence girls' motivation to attend school regularly and engage with academic content (McDaniel et al., 2015).

- ***Respondent 1:*** *"There should be mentorship programs and role models for female empowerment. Having someone to guide and inspire us, especially successful women from our own communities, would motivate girls like me to stay focused on our education."*

● ***Respondent 2:*** *'There should be parental engagement and education workshops. These programs can help parents understand the importance of girls' education and encourage them to support their daughters.''*

(iii) Financial Support and Assistance Mechanisms

57% of respondents emphasized that scholarships and financial support are crucial for girls' education. These findings align with prior research, which suggests that scholarship programs should be more inclusive, particularly targeting low-income students within the general category, who often encounter significant financial barriers to accessing quality education. Despite the existence of various scholarship initiatives, many inadvertently prioritize specific groups, excluding deserving students who do not fit traditional categories based on caste, ethnicity, or gender. To promote equitable educational opportunities, scholarship programs must be restructured to ensure accessibility for a broader range of economically disadvantaged students (Castleman & Meyer, 2018).

● ***Respondent 1:*** *"Scholarships and grants are really important because they help students who can't afford to pay for their education. Many talented students are unable to continue their studies because of money issues."*

● ***Respondent 2:*** *"Without scholarships and grants, a lot of students miss out on education. These financial supports make it possible for students from poor families to go to school or college."*

Discussion

Socio-cultural factors are deeply ingrained in many communities, significantly influencing educational opportunities for girls (Bertsch & Warner-Soderholm, 2013). Research consistently indicated that, particularly in rural areas, societal expectations often dictate that girls should focus on household chores or prepare for marriage, which frequently takes precedence over their educational pursuits (Choudhury et al., 2023). This cultural emphasis on domesticity leads to lower enrollment rates and higher dropout rates among female students, as education is often viewed as less essential for their anticipated roles as homemakers (Nayyar et al., 2023). Furthermore, societal attitudes that undervalue the contributions of educated women perpetuate gender biases, creating a cycle of educational deprivation for girls. Such biases are often mirrored in parental decision-making, where boys are perceived as future breadwinners who warrant greater educational investment (Guerrero & Puerta, 2023). This unequal allocation of

educational resources based on gender reinforces existing inequalities, especially in rural communities dominated by traditional norms (Choudhury et al., 2023).

Economic challenges further compound these socio-cultural barriers, contributing to low enrollment rates for girls in the education sector. Rural schools often lack essential infrastructure, such as adequate sanitation facilities, safe transportation, and qualified teachers, making regular attendance particularly challenging for girls (Singh & Dhillon, 2021). Inadequate facilities, such as poor sanitation, disproportionately affect adolescent girls, discouraging continued attendance and contributing to elevated dropout rates (Sharma & Gill, 2019). Bansal (2022) documented how economic strain intensifies cultural biases against female education, amplifying the preference for educating boys and exacerbating gender disparity.

Moreover, poverty and financial instability significantly limit girls' access to education. In rural areas, where agriculture is often the primary income source, the costs associated with schooling—such as fees, books, uniforms, and transportation—pose prohibitive challenges for families with limited resources (Nayyar et al., 2023). When financial constraints compel families to make choices regarding education, boys are often prioritized, widening the educational gap (Sharma & Gill, 2019).

The literature highlighted that the intersection of socio-cultural and economic barriers presents a multifaceted challenge to female education. These barriers are mutually reinforcing, complicating the ability of girls to access and succeed in educational endeavors. Addressing these challenges, particularly in rural Punjab, necessitates a holistic approach that acknowledges the intertwined cultural and economic realities influencing family decisions (Nayyar et al., 2023). Thus, enhancing opportunities for girls requires strategies that consider the complex interplay of these factors, as reflected in the perceptions of female graduates regarding gender inequality.

Implications

The findings underscore the urgent need for innovative strategies to enhance girls' access to higher education in Punjab. There is a need to establish mentorship programs that connect female graduates with role models who can inspire and guide them through educational challenges. Additionally, integrating technology in educational outreach can be pivotal. Virtual workshops and online resources can offer critical information about financial aid opportunities, scholarship applications, and educational pathways, especially in remote areas. Moreover, developing

partnerships with local businesses to create internship and apprenticeship opportunities can help bridge the gap between education and employment, reinforcing the value of education in a practical context. Lastly, involving male family members and community leaders in advocacy initiatives can shift patriarchal attitudes, promoting a more inclusive support system for girls' education. These approaches can complement existing frameworks and create a more conducive environment for female education in Punjab.

Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted barriers to girls' higher education in Punjab, encompassing socio-cultural, economic, and safety concerns. The need for innovative strategies, such as mentorship programs and community engagement, is essential to address these challenges effectively. Additionally, fostering partnerships with local businesses and utilizing technology for educational outreach can significantly improve access. By implementing comprehensive support systems, stakeholders can create a more equitable educational environment, ultimately promoting higher enrollment and retention rates for female students in the region.

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