

Gendered Messages in Schooling: Education Policy, Textbooks, and the Formation of Girls' Aspirations

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Abstract

This paper examines how education policies and school textbooks in Pakistan shape adolescent girls' aspirations through the reproduction or disruption of gender norms. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the paper situates girls' education within intersecting policy, institutional, and sociocultural contexts. Using a qualitative research design, the study analyses national education policy documents alongside secondary-level textbooks to explore how gender roles, futures, and possibilities are represented and communicated to students. The findings reveal, that while policy discourse frequently frames girls' education as instrumental for national development, it remains largely silent on structural gender inequalities. Textbook content reinforces traditional gender roles by normalising women's domestic responsibilities and limiting representations of girls' professional and public aspirations. Together, these policy silences and textbook messages may shape girls' aspirations to conform with traditional gender expectations rather than challenge them.

Keywords: Gender, education policy, textbook analysis, patriarchy, ecological systems theory, Pakistan

Introduction

The global focus on women and gender in development gained significant momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by the increasing recognition that women were frequently excluded from development efforts (Bobel 2019; Khoja-Moolji 2016; Porter 2013). This led to the emergence of the Women in Development (WID) approach, which advocated for women's inclusion in economic activities, primarily through access to education and vocational training (Bobel 2019; Khoja-Moolji 2018). However, WID has been critiqued for its failure to consider

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the ways in which women's lives are shaped by their relationships with men. This has led to the emergence of the Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD) approaches, which emphasises the structural causes of women's marginalisation and conceptualises gender as a socially constructed phenomenon (Bobel 2019; Khoja-Moolji 2016; Khoja-Moolji 2018; Rivas/Purewal 2024).

While these evolving frameworks have recognised various dimensions of women's progress, they place considerable emphasis on girls' education (Bobel 2019; Khoja-Moolji 2018). Much of this focus has been directed toward the Global South, where girls often face systemic barriers to accessing formal education. In these contexts, education has been promoted as a panacea for a wide array of social issues, including poverty, terrorism, gender inequality, corruption, and child marriage (Khurshid 2017; Monkman 2018; Monkman 2021). As a result, numerous development programs have emerged to promote girls' education in these regions (Monkman 2018; Monkman 2021). However, despite the structural focus of GAD, many of these programs, in practice, adopt decontextualised approaches that fail to engage with the cultural norms and local gender dynamics that mediate girls' access to and experiences of education. Pakistan has been a central focus of many of these development initiatives aimed at expanding girls' access to schooling (Khurshid 2017). Within such efforts, education tends to be framed through an individualistic lens that assumes that girls' access to schooling leads to their liberation from oppressive patriarchal structures and enables them to become autonomous individuals who can contest and push patriarchal boundaries. However, this notion of the autonomous individual is more complex in contexts such as Pakistan, where social life is deeply embedded within kinship networks and obligations to family (Zulfiqar/Kuskoff 2024). While education is widely championed as a transformative force, our study interrogates whether education's transformative potential is constrained by patriarchal cultural ideologies, values, and norms, thereby limiting girls' aspirations rather than expanding possibilities. To explore this question, we analyse federal policy documents and compulsory English-language textbooks, examining how schooling functions as a site through which gendered discourses are constructed and transmitted.

Pakistan: A Case Study

Pakistan's Constitution promotes the notion of gender equality, stating that 'there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex alone' and that 'steps shall be taken to ensure the full participation of women in all spheres of national life'. In conjunction with constitutional provisions, several legal and policy frameworks have been devised to enhance the status of women in Pakistan. Notable among them are the National Gender Reform Action Plan (2005-2009), the Women's Protection Act (2006), the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002), the National Commission on the Status of Women Bill (2012), the National Fund for Advancement of Rural Women (2005), and the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) (Zulfiqar 2023). Pakistani governments have also adopted a number of international commitments that are focused on improving human rights and gender inequalities. However, these formal commitments stand in stark contrast to the country's actual performance. According to the Global Gender Gap

Report (Zahidi 2022), Pakistan ranks 145 out of 146 countries, including 145th in economic participation and 135th in educational attainment. It also has the lowest representation of women in senior, managerial, and legislative roles in South Asia (Zahidi 2022).

This disconnect between policy and practice is rooted in deeply embedded patriarchal structures. In Pakistan, patriarchy functions as a kinship-ordered system that strictly defines gender roles, subordinates women, and grants men dominant control. These norms restrict women's access to public life, limit educational and economic opportunities, and place family honour on female behaviour (Ali et al. 2022; Agha 2021). As a result, women face limited access to education and employment, with minimal investment in their development by both families and the state.

From an early age, boys are socialised as breadwinners and girls as homemakers, reinforcing a rigid gendered division of labour. Within the family, male authority figures often make key decisions about women's lives, including education, employment, and marriage. These patriarchal norms are institutionalised across society, particularly in schools and households, where gender segregation and control persist. Critically, a major force sustaining this status quo is the pervasive gendered ideology embedded in Pakistani societal discourse. These ideologies are continuously reinforced through mainstream media, educational policies, materials and textbooks (Agha/Syed/Mirani 2018; Agha/Shaiikh 2023).

In a World Bank study, Barón and colleagues (2024) highlight how sociocultural beliefs in Pakistan prevent girls from getting an education. The study importantly outlines demand-side factors, including parents' explanations such as "not interested in studies" or "further education not necessary". The study argues that these reasons serve as proxies for multifaceted sociocultural belief systems and social norms whose individual contributions remain analytically challenging to isolate. Therefore, more research is required to link these normative frameworks to gendered educational participation outcomes.

Supply-side factors also play an important role in Pakistan. School location and accessibility are often cited as common reasons for lower rates of school enrolment and completion for girls in Pakistan (Pakistan Institute of Education 2024). In addition to distance, cultural preferences for gender-segregated learning environments can significantly influence parental decisions regarding daughters' education. Kim/Alderman/Orazem (1999) analyse a targeted intervention in Quetta, Pakistan, where subsidised neighbourhood private schools were established specifically to accommodate parental demand for single-sex educational settings, thereby addressing cultural barriers to girls' enrolment. Indeed, Barón et al. (2024) prescribe 'hiring more female teachers as an important solution to address the challenges in girls' education in Pakistan. Research from other countries (Dee 2005; Muralidharan/Sheth 2016) also highlights the positive impact of teachers' demographic representation or match on student learning outcomes.

Literature Review

Gender Parity in Education

The emphasis on girls' education is reflected in global commitments such as the Education for All (EFA) initiative and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), both of which focus on increasing access to education especially for girls in developing countries (Cin 2017). Following these initiatives, multilateral organisations and national policies have continued to prioritise gender parity in education, linking it to broader goals of women's empowerment and societal transformation (Carvalho/Cameron 2023; Carvalho/Evans 2022; Duflo 2012).

Proponents of gender parity in education argue that eliminating gender imbalances can contribute significantly to women's empowerment (Carvalho/Evans 2022). For example, improving women's access to education is believed to enhance their opportunities for paid employment, thereby reducing poverty (Khurshid 2016, 2017). Others suggest that educating girls contributes to peace and stability by enabling women to participate in democratic processes and civil society, ultimately allowing them to transform their lives and the communities in which they live (Monkman 2018).

Critique of the Gender Parity Approach in Education

Despite these optimistic claims, feminist scholars have raised critical concerns about the overreliance on education as a universal solution. They argue that neoliberal development models often ignore the deeper material and ideological structures underpinning gender inequality (Bobel 2019; Khoja-Moolji 2018; Khurshid 2017). Moreover, these critiques challenge simplistic narratives that portray girls in the Global South either as heroic figures resisting oppression or as passive victims awaiting rescue by the Global North (Khoja-Moolji 2018; Khurshid 2017). They question the extent to which education can meaningfully contest gender inequality when broader structural constraints remain unaddressed.

The policy discourse of multilateral organisations often links women's education to empowerment and development, however, there is a lack of clarity in how empowerment is actually achieved through education (Diem/Young/Sampson 2019; Monkman 2011; Monkman 2018; Monkman/Hoffman 2013; Shah 2016). This discourse has been critiqued for adopting an "add women and stir" approach (Monkman/Hoffman 2013: 71). This add-and-stir approach assumes that merely including women in educational initiatives will automatically yield equitable outcomes. However, this approach overlooks crucial contextual factors such as entrenched cultural norms and patriarchal social structures that continue to limit women's opportunities. Consequently, linking women's participation in education directly to empowerment can result in overly simplistic and misleading narratives. As Monkman and Hoffman (2013: 73) observe, this policy language "makes it sound simple, direct, and unchallengeable," when in fact the pathway to empowerment is complex and deeply embedded in specific social, political, and economic contexts.

Research indicates that both family and school are pivotal in shaping young people's identities and attitudes towards gender (Mursaleen 2024). Furthermore, Oppenheim (2016), in his research on girls' education in rural Pakistan, criticises the instrumentalist approach to

education. He found that while parents and female teachers supported equal educational opportunities, they viewed girls' education primarily as a means to prepare them for domestic roles, whereas boys' education was linked to future employment. Education, in this context, reinforced rather than challenged traditional gender norms. For many parents, schooling served to increase daughters' marriage prospects rather than to promote independence.

Similarly, Khurshid's (2017) ethnographic research in Pakistan illustrates how women's access to education and employment is often conditioned by their domestic responsibilities. She argues that the intersection of new educational opportunities with entrenched cultural roles complicates the linear narrative of education leading to empowerment. Moreover, Khurshid (2016) critiques the assumption that education provides equal opportunity, pointing to the emergence of new social hierarchies between educated and uneducated women, which can further marginalise those without formal education.

We focus on the adolescence period in our research, as aspirations formed in this period are important for transition into adulthood (Madjdian 2023). Indeed, adolescence is a key development period that prepares them for adulthood (Zhang/Ng 2025). In our research, adolescence, defined as the age range from 12 to 18, is a critical developmental stage during which young people begin to form their sense of identity, purpose, and envision their futures. By exploring the crucial role of education in this formative period, the study seeks to uncover how social structures, cultural expectations, and educational environments, family structures and dynamics intersect to influence girls' aspirations in a patriarchal society like Pakistan. In other words, students experience cumulative exposure to gendered representations during these formative years, with foundational gender schemas established during childhood being internalised and educational possibilities and aspirations crystalised in this age range. This focus is particularly important because aspirations formed during adolescence often serve as a foundation for future actions and opportunities (Carvalho/Cameron 2023).

Schools as Empowering and Disempowering Institutions

Schools are widely recognised as key institutions for shaping social attitudes and facilitating change. There are several arguments as to why achieving gender parity in education is important for facilitating women's empowerment. For example, some argue that eliminating gender imbalance in education can lead to reducing poverty by improving women's access to paid employment (Khurshid 2017). Others suggest that educating girls brings peace and stability in and amongst countries, as it enables women to exercise their voice and take part in democratic processes and civil society and, through this participation transform their lives and the societies within which they live (Monkman 2018). These arguments suggest that women's empowerment through education will enable them to engage in development processes at individual and societal level. In practice, however, educational institutions are not always structured or empowered to challenge entrenched gender norms. Merely attending school does not necessarily translate into more equitable gender attitudes (Khurshid 2017; Zulfiqar/Kuskoff 2024). In fact, scholars have shown that classrooms can sometimes reinforce gender biases and stereotypes rather than dismantle them (Gray/Leith 2004). In schools, the socialisation process may further marginalise girls. Meanwhile pro-male attitudes among teachers, gender

imbalance in staffing, and the use of male-centric textbooks can collectively shape a learning environment that disadvantages female students (Zulfiqar 2023; Durrani/Halai 2020).

Textbooks have been identified as a particularly persistent source of gender bias. Blumberg (2008) argues that textbook content is one of the most difficult barriers to overcome on the path to gender equality in education, more entrenched even than gaps in school enrolment. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (n.d.) lists biased educational materials as one of the major challenges to achieving gender parity. Such content limits girls' aspirations, distorts their self-image, and reinforces stereotypes about both genders.

Studies of school curricula show that learning processes often reinforce existing gender hierarchies rather than challenge them. For example, the content analysis of Grade 5 textbooks (English, Urdu, and Islamic Studies) in Pakistan has revealed that textbook discourses shape girls' aspirations to align with patriarchal norms rather than challenging them (Tayyaba/Ansari/Faisal 2022). Tayyaba and colleagues also argue that the intersection of gender and class further disadvantages girls from working-class families in Pakistan. In many contexts, textbook developers lack the training and commitment to apply a gender lens, and even when gender-sensitive content is introduced, it may be resisted by entrenched institutional norms and power structures (Aikman/Rao 2012; Durrani/Halai 2020; Stromquist 2015). Beyond formal textbooks, the 'hidden textbook' also plays a significant role in reproducing gender regimes through everyday school practices (Durrani/Halai 2020). Research in Botswana and Ghana highlights how informal school practices reflect pervasive and unequal gender and sexual norms (Dunne 2007).

Similar patterns emerge across contexts. A recent large-scale quantitative analysis of textbooks from 34 countries further documents pervasive gender bias, revealing that women are severely under-represented and portrayed in a stereotypical manner (Crawford/Saintis-Miller/Todd 2024). In Pakistan, textbooks visually exclude women and fix gender meanings in ways that reinforce societal hierarchies (Durrani 2008; Islam/Asadullah 2018). In Tanzania, curricula prioritise preparing girls for domestic roles rather than broader opportunities (Ricketts 2013). Studies from Bangladesh likewise show that curricula often fail to develop women's life skills or critical awareness of social and economic inequalities, instead training them to be good wives and mothers (Ahmed/Hyndman-Rizk 2020; Aikman/Rao 2012; Chisamya et al. 2012). These findings call into question the empowering potential of education when schooling itself functions as a disempowering structure that reproduces gender inequalities rooted in cultural values and social norms. A narrow parity-focused approach centred on access overlooks the contextual factors that shape educational institutions and, in turn, women's experiences of education and empowerment (Zulfiqar/Kuskoff 2024; Khurshid 2017; Cin 2017).

In principle, Pakistan's education system holds significant potential for influencing societal values. Yet, despite government initiatives promoting gender equality and substantial financial investments, school textbooks continue to reflect patriarchal ideologies. Developed by textbook experts lacking gender sensitivity, these materials are still widely regarded by students and some teachers as authoritative and sacred (Dar/Bano 2023). Consequently, instead of dismantling biases, they often reinforce gendered norms (Agha/Shaiikh 2023; Khan/Kelly/Brown 2025; Tayyaba et al. 2022; Ullah/Skelton 2013). Ideally, schools should function as microcosms of an

equitable society, but in Pakistan, they frequently mirror the inequalities found in the wider social structure. In Pakistan, recent research has shown how textbooks visually exclude women or depict them through restrictive and stereotypical imagery, thereby maintaining existing hierarchies (Mahmood/Daghigh/Kaur 2024). In light of the findings from the literature, we argue that the everyday experiences of girls within school settings can play a critical role in shaping their educational aspirations. We further argue that when schools reinforce patriarchal norms through biased materials, teacher attitudes, and limited female representation, they send implicit messages about what is appropriate or possible for girls to achieve. Hence, rather than fostering ambition and self-confidence, such environments can diminish girls' motivation to pursue higher education or professional careers. Therefore, schools can, when structured around exclusionary and gendered practices, act not as agents of empowerment, but as disempowering institutions that constrain girls' aspirations.

While existing scholarship has examined either policy frameworks or curriculum content in isolation, few studies have systematically linked these levels of analysis. Moreover, research on gender and education in Pakistan has predominantly focused on access and enrolment, with comparatively little attention to the ideological content of formal curricula. This study addresses both gaps, offering a contextually grounded analysis of how gender inequality is discursively produced and sustained within the Pakistani education system.

Theoretical Considerations

Our research centres on examining the influence of macro-level cultural values and social norms on educational policies and micro-level textbook content. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of this dynamic, we utilise the ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner 1976; Bronfenbrenner 2005), a theoretical framework that highlights the interconnectedness between societal factors and educational practices. This approach allows us to analyse systematically how prevailing cultural values and social norms at the macro societal level inform and shape the development and implementation of educational policies, as well as the content embedded within textbooks. By investigating these relationships, our research aims to reveal the underlying processes through which broader societal values are translated into educational policies and textbooks, ultimately affecting student learning experiences.

Feminist theory offers an important paradigm to frame this research. Burton (2014) traces the theoretical foundations of feminist analysis of subordination and provides key insights into how public-private divisions and partnerships affect women's opportunities in societies. Critical theories are also well-suited for our research on girls' aspiration and education in Pakistan. Arinder (2020) discusses how feminist theory falls under critical theories and connects them to key issues in development research such as education research and systemic change. Indeed, understanding the representation of women in the literature used in education is an important area of inquiry in feminist research according to Arinder (2020). In other words, our study aims to explain what systems of power exist in educational contexts and how they create barriers. This is crucial to understand the nexus of gender and development.

Method

In line with our research aims and theoretical framework, we adopt a qualitative approach in our paper. Our study draws on two sets of data - compulsory English language textbooks for grades 9-10 and two recent federal education policy documents. To analyse these, we employ content analysis and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992; Fairclough 2001; Krippendorff 2018). Specifically, we focus on the content analysis of English textbooks in Pakistan and analyse two key federal policy documents. We explain the suitability of these methods for our research below.

We examine the barriers to girls' aspirations by conducting a critical discourse analysis of the key federal education policies. Discourse encompasses the ways in which narratives about girls' potential and futures are constructed and circulated through language and cultural representations. In countries where gender parity is lagging behind, government agencies and policy documents possess disproportionate capacity to shape discursive frameworks surrounding girls' aspirations and opportunities (Fairclough 2001). These factors influence what constitutes achievable aspirations for girls, thereby affecting both their self-perception and community responses to girls' educational and career ambitions. Importantly, policy documents may directly impact decisions, resource allocation, and the structural barriers or opportunities that girls encounter in pursuing their goals.

We analyse Pakistan's two most recent federal education policies: the National Education Policy Framework 2018 and Federal Foundation Learning Policy 2024, which establish macro-level ideological frameworks guiding education access, quality, performance, outcomes, and completion (MFEPT 2018, MFEPT 2024). The Foundation Learning Policy 2024 specifically addresses the foundational period for gender schema development, while the National Education Policy Framework 2018 provides overarching vision across all levels. These two documents represent substantial federal policy articulations in the past decade that explicitly address educational ideologies.

For content analysis, the primary data source was the English language textbooks for grades 9 and 10 from all four provinces of Pakistan i.e., Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). A total of 8 textbooks were analysed (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: English textbooks included in the content analysis

Province	Grade 9 Total Pages	Grade 10 Total Pages
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)	156	152
Balochistan	134	145
Sindh	222	184
Punjab	164	172

These textbooks incorporate a range of literary and informational genres, including short stories, poetry, and biographical accounts. For the textbook content analysis, a qualitative interpretive research design was employed to examine how English language textbooks used in

Pakistan construct and communicate gender roles through both textual and visual content. English textbooks were purposively selected because they contain narratives, dialogues, examples, and illustrations that depict everyday social life and therefore play a significant role in shaping children's perceptions of gendered possibilities. The sample comprised officially prescribed textbooks currently in use in public-sector schools, and all chapters, exercises, stories, sentences, and images were included to ensure comprehensive coverage. The study analysed both the written content and the accompanying visual images to investigate how male and female social actors are portrayed, with particular attention to their representation across key domains such as professional occupations, domestic responsibilities, and participation in sports activities, in order to identify recurring patterns of gender stereotyping or bias. A total of 45 visuals were selected for analysis. These images were selected because they depict men and women engaged in activities both within domestic settings and in public spaces.

Deductive categories were informed by existing literature on gender representation in education. Building on this body of work, a coding framework was developed to capture key dimensions of representation identified in the analysis. These included agency and role positioning (whether characters are depicted as active agents or passive recipients of action), occupational representation (the range, diversity, and gender distribution of professions), domestic role allocation (the extent of involvement in household labour, caregiving, and family responsibilities), spatial representation (the positioning of characters within public versus privatedomestic spheres) and activity type (the nature of activities performed, including physical, professional, educational, or routine tasks).

Within Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological framework, textbooks can be understood as a key component of the school microsystem, as they form part of the immediate learning environment through which students directly encounter knowledge, values, and social norms. As everyday classroom tools, textbooks shape student-teacher interactions, classroom discussions, and students' understandings of themselves and the world they inhabit. Textbooks are deeply shaped by the macrosystem, which encompasses the broader cultural beliefs, social values, and ideological assumptions embedded within society. In contrast, education policy discourse functions as an institutional expression of ideologies about gender, education, and development and thereby constitutes the institutional macrosystem.

Our study is motivated by the need to assess whether the heightened emphasis on girls' education in Pakistan is accompanied by substantive changes in textbook content and policy discourse. By systematically examining representations of gender, roles assigned to male and female characters, visibility of women in diverse professions, and how gender is addressed in recent education policies, the research seeks to understand how educational narratives construct gender norms. Such an analysis is important for identifying gaps, biases, or shifts that are needed within the education system.

Key Findings

We synthesise and report the key findings from our textbook analysis and policy analysis in this section. First, we review the evidence from the content analysis of English language textbooks. Next, we outline the key findings from the discourse analysis of two key policy

documents - the Federal Foundation Learning Program 2024 and the National Education Policy Framework 2018.

English Language Textbooks

Our analysis of English language textbooks in Pakistan focuses predominantly on implicit messages through representations of male and female figures, and images and narrative examples. We find that girls in these textbooks are often positioned as objects (recipients of intervention) but are rarely positioned as subjects i.e., agents of their own aspirations.

The professions represented in the examined materials predominantly featured male figures in various occupational roles, such as army officers, sportsmen, police officers and artists (see Figure 1 below). In contrast, female figures were depicted in teaching and nursing professions. The absence of women from other professional domains suggests a notable gender imbalance and highlights disparities in the representation of opportunities for males and females. We can infer from this that the exclusion of women from a wide range of professional fields underscores the dominant gender values embedded within Pakistani society. This reinforces societal norms that segregate males and females in different professional domains.

This representation in textbooks can shape how young girls in schools imagine their futures, potentially limiting their aspirations and discouraging them from pursuing careers outside the boundaries of traditional gender roles. It restricts women's visibility in professional settings and reinforces conventional expectations that limit their participation to indoor or domestic spheres. Such representations are particularly problematic within the context of education, an institution widely recognised for its potential to shape social attitudes and foster change (Blumberg 2008; Mursaleen 2024). While increasing girls' access to education is often celebrated as a pathway to gender equality, these findings and the literature cautions against viewing schooling as inherently progressive.

When examining domestic responsibilities in these textbooks, female characters are overwhelmingly depicted within the household sphere. It is important to mention here that the analysed textbooks portrayal of domestic spaces, relies mainly on verbal descriptions to portray social actors. Sentences like "Mother washes the dishes", "Mother said I am going to prepare lunch", "Mother said who'll help me clean the house?" and "Mother fed the baby", emphasise women's association with caregiving and household tasks. In contrast, male characters are typically shown heading to the office, reinforcing their role as financial providers. This division constructs a narrative in which men are positioned as breadwinners while women are confined to domestic duties. Such portrayals reinforce traditional gender roles and narrow the perceived range of opportunities available to women, particularly in the minds of young girls who read these textbooks. The implications of such portrayals are significant. As the literature emphasises, the everyday experiences and exposures of girls within school settings play a critical role in shaping their aspirations (Oppenheim 2016; Khurshid 2017). In this case, when textbooks consistently marginalise women's contributions or confine them to domestic spaces, young girls may internalise these limitations, developing a restricted sense of what they can achieve. Of the 45 visual images analysed, the majority from both Grade 9 and 10 depicted women in domesticated roles. This pattern aligns with what Blumberg (2008) describes as

gender bias in curriculum hidden in plain sight. Therefore, the analysis of visual images underline the repeated absence or minimisation of female participation in professional and public life in learning materials contributes to a hidden textbook that curtails ambition and reinforces conventional gender expectations.

Figure 1: Portrayal of males in English textbooks



Source: KPK Class 10 English Textbook pg.13, Balochistan Grade 9 English textbook pg.103

In the portrayal of sports and physical activities, male characters dominate the scene, appearing in roles that involve high-energy and are competitive sports such as squash, boxing, and cricket. Female characters, on the other hand, are noticeably absent from outdoor or physically demanding sports. Instead, they are primarily shown engaging in domestic chores, participating in school assemblies, sitting in classrooms, doing school activities or dress-making. This contrast in visual representation reveals two key dynamics. First, it reflects deeply ingrained gender norms that associate men with physical strength, competition, and assertiveness, while women are linked to supportive, and indoor roles. Second, by consistently placing males in active, skill-driven environments and limiting females to routine, non-competitive tasks, these depictions reinforce traditional stereotypes. They subtly communicate that athleticism and public visibility belong to men, while women's roles are confined to the private or controlled spaces. Again, we note here education as reinforcing traditional gender roles and values in Pakistani society instead of dismantling existing gender hierarchies (Zulfiqar 2023; Dar/Bano 2023; Mahmood et al. 2024; Ullah/Skelton 2013).

Next, we focus on the analysis of federal education policies. Recent policies establish the overarching ideological frameworks within which provincial curricula and textbooks operate. We selected the two documents purposively as the most recent and comprehensive federal policy articulations available. The National Education Policy Framework 2018 (MFEPT 2018) provides an overarching vision for schooling in Pakistan, and the Federal Foundation Learning Policy 2024 (MFEPT 2024) represents the most current federal policy statement focused on improving specific skills of children in Pakistan.

Federal Foundation Learning Policy 2024

The Federal Foundation Learning Policy (FFLP) 2024 was drafted by the Pakistan Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MFEPT 2024). The policy focuses on creating an

environment that supports minimum proficiency in mathematics and reading during primary school years. The policy “aims to strengthen proficiencies in reading and basic numeracy skills of all children enrolled in various types of educational institutions” (MFEPT 2024: 3). It is important to note that it is the first such policy to be presented at the federal level in Pakistan.

FFLP acknowledges the diverse learning environments within the state system. For instance, the schooling system in the state of Punjab is different from the state of Balochistan. There are two main pillars of this policy: Phase 1 focuses on foundational learning strategy to be rolled out for children enrolled in ECE till Grade 3. Next, Phase 2 of this policy stresses on remedial foundational learning strategies for children enrolled in Grade 4 – 8. Therefore, the overall focus of the policy is on improving foundational learning curricula, methods, and programs, particularly given the critical importance of numeracy and literacy acquisition during the primary school years.

Throughout the policy corpus, the Pakistani government explicitly focuses on specific policy targets and benchmarking. A deeper reading of the policy document shows that the terms ‘gender’ and ‘girl/s’ are systematically excluded. We argue that an absence of girls-specific considerations suggests an assumption of universal applicability that may mask differentiated needs of boys and girls.

Despite the policy’s relatively strong approach to improve educational outcomes for primary school years, there are significant barriers that limit its potential to achieve its aims for girls in Pakistan. First, the use of universal language ignores girls’ experiences and challenges. The gender-neutral framing of the policy leaves girls’ disadvantaged, as it masks the specific barriers faced by girls. With a strong focus on reading and numeracy skills, the policy underlines a narrow view of the gender gaps in school enrolment and attainment. While learning and improving skills is a critical step to improve educational performance, it is not by itself enough to ensure that primary school performance of girls improves over time.

Second, the document provides limited guidance on addressing specific barriers faced by female students. The policy lists benchmarks for English, Urdu and Mathematics to achieve basic reading with comprehension and numeracy skills. However, benchmarking fails to account for how gender and culture intersect to influence education access, enrolment, performance, progress, and completion (Woods 2007).

Recent data from the Pakistan Institute of Education (2024) acknowledges the low transition and retention levels in Pakistan for girls. According to them, the transition from primary to secondary schooling continues to be the point at which most girls tend to drop out of the education system. This is despite the progress made in improving access to primary education for girls by provincial governments with more girls enrolled in primary schools in recent years and better learning. Without acknowledging the specific barriers encountered by girl students, the policy is limited in its ability to create solutions that improve learning outcomes for girls in primary school education in Pakistan.

Next, the policy primarily focuses on learning strategies without positioning the learning material in the context of gender disparity in access, completion and attainment of education (for example, “Each school will be responsible for conducting a rapid diagnostic and setting school-specific goals for reading and numeracy improvements on a regular basis” (MFEPT 2024: 5)). The policy further states that the school head will be responsible for conducting

diagnostic reading and numeracy assessment in all grades up till Grade 8. However, the policy notably fails to acknowledge gender disparities in learning outcomes, treating achievement gaps as gender-neutral technical problems rather than issues requiring attention to girls' specific barriers and circumstances. This omission treats learning as a neutral process, it overlooks how textbooks can actively reproduce disparities that exist in the wider society. This exacerbates the need for adopting a gender lens in curricula and teaching material. It relates closely to our findings from the analysis of English Language textbooks.

Lastly, the policy also focuses on the need for training of primary school teachers. It states: "By the end of the 2029- '30 academic year, all teachers in primary schools/sections will be trained on the delivery of foundational learning skills" (MFEPT 2024: 4).

This aligns with Barber's framework (2009) that highlights how performance benchmarking cannot be successful without considering the human capital in the system. In this case, teacher recruitment, training, upskilling along with improved school leadership makeup the human capital aspect that is linked to successful outcomes. Therefore, the training and improvement of pedagogical skills of teachers is a welcome initiative. However, an exploratory review of recent policy changes (at Federal and regional level) reveals that the teachers' textbook and training does not take into account the very inequalities that education curricula aim to address. The policy approaches training needs of teachers in relatively narrow ways and does not acknowledge how teacher curricula, teaching methods and even classroom interactions may continue to favour one gender. This reiterates the need for a gender responsive teaching textbook and material to bridge access and achievement gaps for girls in Pakistan.

Some of the demand-side factors and sociocultural beliefs that shape their education experiences remain overlooked in the policy. This overlooked dimension may compromise policy effectiveness in the long run.

Therefore, gender emerges as a critical yet unexamined factor in the Federal Foundation Learning Policy as it overlooks how sociocultural gender norms may differentially affect boys' and girls' engagement with these programs. Importantly, understanding the existence and nature of these significant barriers is a critical first step in addressing them in future education policy measures in Pakistan.

National Education Policy Framework 2018

The National Education Policy Framework 2018 was drafted by Pakistan's Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MFEPT 2018). The policy framework addresses the significant education challenges for school-aged children in Pakistan, including having 22.5 million out-of-school children, with more girls than boys out of school. The policy document acknowledges that Pakistan ranks poorly compared to South Asian neighbours on education indicators. It clearly acknowledges some of the other barriers to improving gender parity in education outcomes as we learn that public expenditure on education in Pakistan is comparatively lower than other Asian countries. Throughout the document, the policy outlines a clear understanding of the poor education indicators of Pakistan. For instance, it states:

“Pakistan faces significant education challenges in providing uniform and quality education for all children”. (MFEPT 2018: 2)

It also specifies: “Considering the diversity across Pakistan there will be a need to use a variety of interventions based on the research findings and especially target girls and minorities” (MFEPT 2018: 8).

The policy continues to explicitly discuss the poorer outcomes for girls compared with boys in Pakistan. For example, not only does the policy highlight the disadvantages girls encounter in accessing school education, but it also outlines several barriers that girls and their families continue to face during schooling years. A key problem recognised in the policy is the lack of uniformity in standards and quality in education across Pakistan. Importantly, the policy also underscores demand-side factors that impact girls’ education. For instance, access to middle and high schools is a major cause of concern and results in very low engagement from nearby communities. Relatedly, the policy discusses other key concerns, including low completion rates and dropout rates (high number of out-of-school kids in Grade 6-8 and Grade 9-10). Governance and management are also highlighted as major issues.

School distance is a significant geographical barrier in access to education for girls in Pakistan. According to the policy

17% of households in Punjab, 12% of households in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 13% of households in Sindh, and 18% of households in Balochistan cite school distance as the primary reason for never sending their girls aged 6-15 to school (MFEPT 2018: 7).

However, this statement also draws our attention to families’ decision-making power. This framing places decision-making agency with families (*“never sending their girls”*) rather than highlighting structural barriers created by government policy and resource allocation. It subtly shifts responsibility to families while acknowledging distance as a factor.

In relation to financial barriers to girls’ education access, the policy states, “all provinces are already providing girls stipends for transition to secondary and will consider better targeting of stipends for improved results” (MFEPT 2018: 8).

This statement employs present continuous tense to suggest ongoing action, positioning the government as already addressing the problem. Additionally, the phrase ‘all provinces are already providing’ performs a discourse of sufficiency - that the current issue is merely one of resource optimisation. However, the commitment to future action is notably weak throughout the document (*“will consider better targeting”*). Particularly, the term ‘better targeting’ implies the problem is administrative inefficiency rather than systemic inadequacy, framing existing challenges into a resource management problem that is solvable through improved bureaucratic processes.

The policy often uses authoritative language (*“data has clearly shown”*) to position gender disparity as an objective fact rather than a socially constructed inequality. It excludes questions of structural power and resource allocation.

The policy also highlights power dynamics as it outlines the following ‘champions of education’: “President of Pakistan, Prime Minister of Pakistan, Federal Minister of Education, Finance Minister of Education.” (MFEPT 2018: 6)

This discussion positions high-ranking political figures as the key decision-makers and change agents in the education system rather than including teachers, students, or community leaders in this designated category of influence. It highlights the systems of power that exist in educational contexts in Pakistan and how they create barriers. This further strengthens the need for public-private partnerships going forward. The document reveals a valuable understanding of the need for public-private partnerships and more importantly political will to achieve improved education outcomes for girls. At the same time, it acknowledges how multiple identities create discrimination and exclusion.

Putting Pakistan on a road to achieve high standards in education outcomes requires an ambitious plan backed by high political will. This also requires a special focus on disadvantaged areas, minorities, girls and children with disabilities to reduce achievement gaps amongst the various groups (MFEPT 2018: 5).

The discourse consistently positions educational inequality as a technical problem to be managed through incremental improvements rather than a rights issue requiring transformative change. Throughout the policy, girls' education is framed primarily through instrumental value (focus on outcomes, performance, results, and transitions) rather than intrinsic worth or rights-based approaches. The phrase 'various groups' further neutralises the framing, treating systemic inequalities as demographic variations rather than cultural or products of power relations. By doing this, the discourse enables technocratic solutions that leave patriarchal, class-based and ableist structures intact.

The policy also states:

The placement of teachers also shows wide variations: some schools have fewer than five students per teacher, and others more than 100. Political interference in teacher placement and transfers is the main contributor to the imbalance" (MFEPT 2018: 11).

This directly names political interference as a problem but isolates it to teacher distribution rather than connecting it to broader systemic issues. The passive construction of political interference obscures who interferes and to what ends. This framing, specifically grammatical choice, fails to bring to light the key actors and their roles and motivations. The framing further separates this political problem from the gender disparities mentioned elsewhere, missing an opportunity to connect these power dynamics.

Discussion

Our research centres on examining the influence of higher-level cultural values and social norms on girls' education in Pakistan through an analysis of educational policies and textbook content. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of this dynamic, we employ the ecological systems approach, a theoretical framework that emphasises the interconnectedness between societal structures and educational tools and practices. This approach enables us to systematically analyse how prevailing cultural and political ideologies at the macro level inform

the development and implementation of educational policies, and shape the content embedded within school textbooks, which in turn shape the aspirations of girls in Pakistan.

Complementing this ecological approach, feminist frameworks enable us to interrogate power relations, gendered representations, and the discursive construction of femininity within educational materials. Importantly, they help us understand how textbooks may function as sites where patriarchal norms are either reproduced or contested, and how these representations shape girls' educational experiences and future possibilities.

The findings of this study illustrate how textbook content in Pakistan is shaped by deeply embedded cultural norms and gendered ideologies operating across multiple levels of social ecology. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems framework, textbook representations can be understood as part of the microsystem, where children directly encounter institutional messages about gender through school materials. Within this microsystem, textbooks function not only as educational tools but also as mechanisms of cultural transmission, mirroring and reproducing values that privilege male authority and public participation while confining women to domestic and caregiving roles – valued grounded in dominant cultural narratives surrounding women, honour, modesty, and the construction of masculinity and femininity in Pakistani society (Zulfiqar 2023). The visual and textual narratives analysed here demonstrate this pattern: men are consistently portrayed as active agents in diverse professions, whereas women appear primarily in nurturing, supportive, and private roles (Mahmood et al. 2024).

Our analysis reveals a clear alignment between textbook content and prevailing cultural expectations, illustrating the operation of what has been termed the 'hidden textbook', whereby implicit messages embedded in educational materials transmit normative assumptions about gender roles, social hierarchy, and power (Blumberg 2008). These representations not only reflect macro-level ideologies but actively contribute to their reproduction. The persistent marginalisation of women from professional and public domains in these texts therefore positions schooling, which is often seen as a site of progress, as a force that reinforces rather than challenges social hierarchies (Agha/Shaiikh 2023; Ullah/Skelton 2013).

Textbooks thus can act as powerful cultural tools through which patriarchal scripts are normalised and transmitted, a finding consistent with recent studies analysing learning materials in Pakistan (Tayyaba et al. 2022). Moreover, our research extends recent scholarship by Crawford et al. (2024) who provide compelling quantitative evidence of gender bias across textbooks in 34 countries, documenting that Pakistan has among the lowest female representation globally with fewer than 1 in 3 gendered words being female. While their computational methods excel at identifying surface patterns, our study complements their quantitative findings by employing critical discourse analysis and content analysis to interrogate how patriarchal norms become institutionalised in Pakistani educational policy and textbooks, and why these patterns persist despite stated commitments to girls' education. In doing so, our study highlights the ideological mechanisms through which gender bias is produced and legitimised.

Our discourse analysis reveals a temporal shift between the two most recent federal policy documents that has significant implications for girls' schooling in Pakistan. The National Education Policy Framework 2018 acknowledges the systemic barriers facing girls and

identifies responsible actors yet stops short of committing to address the underlying power dynamics that sustain these inequalities. The Federal Foundation Learning Policy 2024, by contrast, overlooks the schooling gender gap and adopts an explicitly gender-neutral framing, rendering invisible the specific disparities and challenges that girls continue to face in Pakistan's education system. Together, these documents trace the absence of gender-conscious policy discourse at the macro level.

This policy trajectory has direct consequences for micro-level textbook content, though the mechanism is one of omission rather than prescription. By failing to explicitly require or guide critical engagement with gender bias, federal policy creates a discursive vacuum in which textbooks reproduce existing cultural norms. In this sense, patriarchal representations in textbooks are not simply a product of cultural inertia but an indirect outcome. Thus, while policies do not actively reproduce gender stereotypes, their failure to disrupt them amounts to tacit endorsement, allowing dominant representations to persist unchallenged across the microsystem of formal schooling. This echoes the key findings from recent scholarship (Zulfiqar 2023; Barón et al. 2024; Baumard/André 2025; Tayyaba et al. 2022).

Education, particularly, girls' schooling is often positioned as a pathway to empowerment and social change (Khurshid 2017; Monkman 2021), yet our study finds that this promise often remains unfulfilled. In line with feminist theories, our findings from both the textbook and policy analyses underline how systems of power operate through everyday institutions and representations to reproduce gender hierarchies (Burton 2014). The marginal positioning of girls in textbooks as passive recipients rather than active agents reflect feminist theory's analysis of subordination, where women are symbolically confined to domestic and supportive roles. Without addressing how education systems themselves function as sites of ideological reproduction i.e., through curriculum content and policy silence alike, macro-level interventions risk expanding access without achieving genuine gender equality (Stromquist 2003).

Conclusion

Our paper investigates how education can shape the aspirations of adolescent girls in Pakistan. To do this, we draw on Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems framework relying on a two-pronged approach where we analyse key policy documents that influence girls' enrolment and education outcomes in schools alongside an analysis of English language textbooks. Our analysis reveals that gender inequality in Pakistan operates simultaneously at the structural level through policy discourse and at the everyday level, through textbook representations that normalise limited roles for women. It is at this intersection of institutional inertia and cultural reproduction that girls' aspirations are shaped and bounded.

An important focus of this paper is on the interconnectedness of cultural gender inequality and structural gender inequality in education. Importantly, the findings highlight that not only are these inequalities interconnected but they are reinforcing each other. What is needed is a bilateral support for girls' education in Pakistan at the micro and macro level. Our research underlines how culture is reflected in the interactions between micro and macro factors that shape girls' aspirations in Pakistan. This speaks to the ecological systems framework that

highlights the interconnectedness of different factors and underscores the required approach that drives systemic change. As Baumard and André (2025) explained, culture emanates from interactions with the shared environment.

It is worth noting that, in recent years, there have been interventions that support the economic participation of women in Pakistan. For example, the Job Talash program, a transport intervention that supports safe commute, positively impacted women's decision to participate in the job market in Lahore, Pakistan. However, such interventions are effective at later stages secondary school and job search and engagement, but early interventions and engagement would arguably yield greater benefits to support girls' education and aspirations in a society with traditional gender norms.

The influence of education is a complex, multi-layered and contextually rooted phenomenon. Our findings highlight the importance of adopting a gender-responsive approach to education reform. This includes revising textbooks to ensure balanced and empowering representations, integrating gender analysis into policy and moving beyond gender-neutral frameworks that overlook existing inequalities.

Our study has several limitations. While our analysis offers valuable insights into how gender is represented in textbooks and policies, it does not capture how girls and boys experience schooling in their everyday lives. Gaining students' own narratives would provide a more nuanced understanding of how these representations are interpreted and lived. Further research could also engage directly with school leadership to examine institutional perspectives on gendered experiences of schooling to better assess how curricular materials shape educational practice in the Pakistani context. In addition, examining the role of the family unit can provide important insights into how household expectations and values interact with the schooling institution to influence students' educational experiences and aspirations.

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