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Abstract: *This study explores the factors influencing girls' dropout from secondary schools in Tehsil Katlang, District Mardan, with a particular focus on parental perspectives. Despite the recognized importance of education for social and economic development, a significant number of girls in rural areas discontinue their education before completing secondary level. The study adopts a qualitative research design and utilizes a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the issue. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with parents of girls who had dropped out of school, using purposive sampling. The findings reveal that multiple interconnected factors contribute to girls' dropout, including socio-cultural norms, domestic responsibilities, early marriage, financial constraints, gender discrimination, safety concerns, and limited access to educational facilities. Parental attitudes and community pressures also play a critical role in shaping decisions regarding girls' education. The study highlights that while some parents value education, they are often influenced by traditional beliefs and economic challenges. The research concludes that addressing girls' dropout requires a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach that involves community awareness, improved infrastructure, financial support, and policy interventions. This study contributes to understanding the local context of girls' education and provides recommendations for improving retention at the secondary school level.*

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social, economic, and cultural development. It plays a crucial role in empowering individuals, reducing poverty, and promoting gender equality. Despite global efforts to achieve universal education, girls' access to and retention in secondary education remain major challenges, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan. In many rural areas, girls are disproportionately affected by school dropout, especially at the secondary level, where socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers become more pronounced. Understanding the underlying causes of girls' dropout is essential for designing effective interventions, and parental perspectives provide critical insight into this issue. In Pakistan, the problem of girls' dropout from schools is deeply rooted in a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. Research indicates that female students are more likely to drop out of school compared to male students due to gender-based discrimination and socio-cultural constraints (Satti & Jamil, 2021). These

disparities are particularly evident in rural regions, where traditional norms and limited resources significantly hinder girls' educational attainment. The issue becomes even more critical at the secondary level, as dropout rates tend to increase sharply due to additional pressures such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and restricted mobility.

One of the most significant factors contributing to girls' dropout is socio-cultural norms that prioritize traditional gender roles over education. In many communities, girls are expected to focus on household responsibilities and caregiving roles, which limits their ability to continue schooling. Studies have shown that cultural expectations often discourage families from investing in girls' education, as it is perceived to have limited economic returns (Fatima et al., 2024) . These norms are further reinforced by patriarchal structures, where decision-making power is predominantly held by male family members, who may prioritize boys' education over girls'. Parental attitudes and perceptions play a crucial role in shaping girls' educational trajectories. Parents often act as primary decision-makers regarding their children's education, and their beliefs about gender roles, safety, and economic priorities significantly influence whether girls continue or discontinue schooling. Research based on parental perspectives highlights that concerns about safety, social reputation, and adherence to cultural values often lead to the withdrawal of girls from school (Raza et al., 2024) . In rural contexts, where community norms are more rigid, parents may feel pressured to conform to societal expectations, even if they personally value education.

Economic constraints are another major determinant of girls' dropout. Many families in rural Pakistan face financial hardships and are unable to bear the costs associated with education, such as tuition fees, transportation, uniforms, and study materials. In such situations, families often prioritize boys' education, considering them future breadwinners, while girls' education is seen as less essential. Empirical studies reveal that poverty and household income significantly influence school dropout rates, with girls being more vulnerable to discontinuation (Fatima et al., 2023) . Additionally, girls may be required to contribute to household income through labor, further limiting their ability to attend school. Another critical factor contributing to girls' dropout is the lack of access to educational facilities, particularly in rural areas. The scarcity of secondary schools, long distances to schools and inadequate transportation infrastructure pose significant challenges for girls' education. Parents often express concerns about the safety of their daughters while traveling long distances, which leads to reluctance in allowing them to continue their education. Studies conducted in rural Pakistan highlight that distance to school and lack of transportation are among the primary reasons for girls' dropout (Adil et al., 2025) . These infrastructural barriers are further exacerbated by poor school facilities, including the absence of female teachers and inadequate sanitation, which discourage girls from attending school.

Gender discrimination is another pervasive issue that contributes to girls' dropout. In many households, girls are considered less capable or less deserving of education compared to boys. This discriminatory mindset affects the allocation of resources and opportunities within families, leading to unequal access to education. Research has demonstrated that gender bias within families and communities is a significant predictor of girls' dropout, as it influences both parental decisions and societal attitudes (Yasin & Aslam, 2018) . Furthermore, the absence of female role models in educational institutions can negatively impact girls' motivation and aspirations. Early marriage is widely recognized as one of the most critical factors leading to girls' dropout from secondary schools. In many rural areas, girls are married at a young age, often before completing their education. Early marriage not only disrupts their schooling but also imposes additional responsibilities related to household management and childbearing. Studies have shown that early marriage is closely linked to increased dropout rates among

girls, as it limits their educational and economic opportunities (Fatima et al., 2023) . The practice of early marriage is often justified by cultural norms and economic considerations, further complicating efforts to address the issue.

In addition to socio-cultural and economic factors, institutional challenges also contribute to girls' dropout. These include poor quality of education, lack of trained teachers, outdated curricula, and inadequate school management. When the quality of education is perceived as low, parents may not see the value in continuing their daughters' education. Research indicates that deficiencies in the education system, such as unqualified teachers and lack of resources, can lead to disengagement and eventual dropout (Fatima et al., 2023) . Moreover, the absence of gender-sensitive policies and supportive learning environments further discourages girls from remaining in school. Another important aspect influencing girls' dropout is the role of family structure and dynamics. In joint family systems, decision-making is often influenced by extended family members, which can create additional pressure on parents to adhere to traditional norms. Girls in such families may face increased domestic responsibilities and restrictions on their mobility, making it difficult to continue their education. Studies suggest that family dynamics, including the influence of elders and collective decision-making, can significantly impact girls' educational outcomes (Channa et al., 2023) . In contrast, nuclear families may provide more flexibility and support for girls' education, although this is not always the case.

Language and communication barriers also play a role in girls' dropout, particularly in linguistically diverse regions. When the language of instruction differs from the language spoken at home, students may struggle to understand the curriculum, leading to poor academic performance and increased likelihood of dropout. This issue is particularly relevant in rural areas, where multiple dialects are spoken. Research indicates that language barriers can contribute to educational exclusion and disengagement among students (Rasheed et al., 2024) .

The significance of parental perspectives in understanding girls' dropout cannot be overstated. Parents are key stakeholders in the educational process, and their attitudes, beliefs, and decisions directly influence their children's educational outcomes. By examining parental perspectives, researchers can gain valuable insights into the underlying factors that contribute to girls' dropout and identify potential strategies for intervention. Studies focusing on parents' views highlight the importance of addressing cultural norms, economic challenges, and safety concerns to improve girls' educational retention (Raza et al., 2024) .

This study aims to explore the factors influencing girls' dropout from secondary schools in Tehsil Katlang, District Mardan, with a particular focus on parental perspectives. The region is characterized by a predominantly rural population, where traditional cultural practices and socio-economic challenges significantly impact girls' education. By analyzing parents' views, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by girls and to identify context-specific solutions that can enhance educational access and retention. One of the central problems contributing to girls' dropout is the deeply entrenched socio-cultural structure that prioritizes traditional gender roles over formal education. In many rural communities, girls are expected to assume domestic responsibilities at an early age, which limits their time and ability to continue schooling. These expectations are often reinforced by patriarchal values that assign greater importance to boys' education, thereby marginalizing girls within the household decision-making process (UNESCO, 2022). As a result, girls' education is frequently perceived as less valuable, leading to early withdrawal from school.

Economic hardship further exacerbates the problem, as families with limited financial resources are often compelled to make difficult decisions regarding the allocation of educational expenses. In such

circumstances, boys are typically given priority due to the perception that they will contribute more significantly to the family's income in the future. Girls, on the other hand, are often viewed as temporary members of the household who will eventually marry and join another family. This economic rationale leads to unequal investment in education and contributes significantly to higher dropout rates among girls (World Bank, 2023).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore parental perspectives on the factors influencing girls' dropout from secondary schools in Tehsil Katlang, District Mardan. A case study approach was used to gain in-depth understanding of the issue within its real-life context. The target population consisted of parents whose daughters had dropped out of secondary school, and a purposive sampling technique was applied to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their views freely while ensuring that key themes related to socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors were covered. The interviews were conducted in the local language to ensure clarity and comfort for respondents, and later transcribed for analysis. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where recurring patterns and themes were identified, categorized, and interpreted to understand the major causes of girls' dropout. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly maintained throughout the research process to ensure the credibility and integrity of the study.

Case Studies on Parents' Perception

Case Study 1: Socio-Cultural Pressure and Domestic Responsibilities

A parent from Tehsil Katlang explained that his daughter's education was interrupted primarily due to increasing domestic responsibilities within their joint family system. He described that in their household, which included grandparents, uncles, aunts, and several children, the workload was distributed among female members, particularly young girls. As his daughter grew older, expectations from her also increased, including cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, and taking care of younger siblings. These responsibilities consumed a significant portion of her time and energy, leaving little room for academic activities.

The parent further highlighted that societal expectations in their community reinforce the idea that girls should be trained for household roles rather than professional careers. He mentioned that although his daughter initially showed interest in her studies, the continuous pressure to prioritize domestic duties affected her academic performance and attendance. Over time, irregular attendance led to poor results, discouraging her from continuing school.

Additionally, the influence of elders in the joint family played a crucial role in the decision-making process. The parent noted that older family members believed that investing in girls' education beyond primary or middle level was unnecessary. This collective mindset ultimately led to the decision to withdraw the girl from school. This case reflects how socio-cultural norms and family structures can significantly limit girls' access to education.

Case Study 2: Financial Constraints and Preference for Boys' Education

Another parent emphasized financial hardship as the primary reason behind his daughter's dropout from secondary school. He explained that his family relied on a limited and unstable source of income, which made it difficult to meet daily expenses, let alone educational costs. Expenses such as school fees, uniforms, books, and transportation placed an additional burden on the household budget.

Faced with these financial challenges, the parent had to make difficult decisions regarding which

children to educate. He stated that he chose to prioritize his sons' education because he believed they would eventually support the family financially. In contrast, his daughter's education was considered less beneficial, as she would marry and become part of another household. This perception reflects a common economic rationale in many rural communities.

The parent also mentioned that although his daughter was academically capable and willing to continue her studies, the lack of financial resources left them with no alternative but to discontinue her education. He expressed regret over this decision but justified it as a necessity given their circumstances.

This case illustrates how poverty and gender-based prioritization within families contribute significantly to girls' dropout rates. It highlights the need for financial support programs and awareness initiatives to encourage equal investment in education for both boys and girls.

Case Study 3: Distance to School and Safety Concerns

A mother shared her concerns regarding the long distance between their home and the nearest secondary school, which ultimately led to her daughter's dropout. She explained that the school was located several kilometers away, requiring her daughter to walk or rely on irregular and unsafe transportation options. This daily commute was physically exhausting and time-consuming, especially during extreme weather conditions.

The mother expressed serious concerns about her daughter's safety while traveling to and from school. She feared harassment, accidents, and other risks that could arise due to the lack of secure transportation. These fears were further reinforced by incidents reported within the community, which heightened parental anxiety.

In addition to safety concerns, the mother also mentioned that the absence of reliable transport often resulted in irregular school attendance. Over time, this inconsistency affected her daughter's academic performance and motivation. Eventually, the family decided to withdraw her from school to avoid potential risks.

The mother emphasized that if there had been a nearby school or safe transportation facilities, they would have allowed their daughter to continue her education. This case highlights the critical role of infrastructure, accessibility, and safety in influencing girls' educational continuity in rural areas.

Case Study 4: Early Marriage and Social Expectations

One parent discussed how early marriage played a decisive role in his daughter's dropout from secondary school. He explained that in their community, it is customary for girls to be married at a young age, often before completing their education. The decision for early marriage was influenced by social pressure, cultural traditions, and concerns about family honor. The parent stated that delaying marriage could lead to criticism from relatives and community members, which families often seek to avoid. As a result, his daughter was married shortly after reaching adolescence. Following her marriage, she was expected to take on domestic responsibilities in her husband's household, including cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. These new responsibilities made it impossible for her to continue her education. The parent acknowledged that his daughter had a strong interest in studying but was unable to pursue her aspirations due to societal expectations. He also recognized that early marriage limited her future opportunities and personal development. This case demonstrates how deeply rooted cultural practices, such as early marriage, directly contribute to girls' dropout. It also highlights the tension between educational aspirations and societal expectations in rural communities.

Case Study 5: Influence of Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

A parent highlighted the influence of cultural norms and traditional gender roles in shaping decisions

about girls' education. He explained that in their society, strict expectations regarding modesty, honor, and appropriate behavior for girls often restrict their mobility and participation in public life. These norms discourage families from sending girls to schools that are far from home or co-educational. The parent noted that there was a strong concern about maintaining family reputation, which influenced their decision to withdraw their daughter from school after primary education. He mentioned that allowing girls to travel long distances or interact with unrelated males is often viewed negatively within the community. Despite personally valuing education, the parent felt compelled to conform to these societal expectations to avoid criticism and social isolation. He acknowledged that such cultural pressures create significant barriers for girls who wish to continue their education. This case highlights how cultural norms and gender roles can act as powerful determinants of educational outcomes. It underscores the importance of community awareness and cultural sensitivity in addressing girls' dropout issues.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study reveals that girls' dropout from secondary schools in Tehsil Katlang, District Mardan is influenced by a complex interaction of socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, infrastructural limitations, and parental perceptions. Factors such as domestic responsibilities, early marriage, gender discrimination, safety concerns, poverty, and limited access to schools collectively hinder girls' educational continuity. Parental perspectives highlight that while many parents recognize the value of education, they are often constrained by cultural expectations and financial realities that shape their decisions. Therefore, addressing this issue requires a multi-dimensional approach, including increasing awareness among parents about the importance of girls' education, providing financial assistance and scholarships to disadvantaged families, improving school infrastructure and transportation facilities, promoting female teachers' recruitment, and implementing community-based programs to challenge harmful cultural norms such as early marriage and gender bias. Collaborative efforts by government, educators, and local communities are essential to create a supportive and safe learning environment that encourages girls to complete their secondary education and achieve their full potential.

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