HEARING SILENT VOICES AND LISTENING TO PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF PUKHTUN WOMEN ON HIGHER EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN PAKISTAN

Shabana Shamaas Gul Khattak
Department of History & Pakistan Studies
International Islamic University, Islamabad.

Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate factors relating to the low level of women’s participation in higher education in Khyber Pukhtunkhwah (KP), a particularly conservative and traditionalist region of Pakistan, adjoining Afghanistan. The data analysis shows that women who succeed in entering higher education are in general from the elite/upper and the upper-middle classes. However, even these elite women face problems relating to particularly conservative understandings and practices that are culturally specific to Pukhtun culture rather than to the actual teachings of Islam, the religion professed by a majority of the people. In addition, attitudes towards women and the language of instruction have implications on women's access to education. More importantly, women of all economic classes have difficulty in making their own decisions and have to seek approval from their families, particularly their male relatives. The paper argues that men (and women) misinterpret teachings of religion, in other words they ‘culturalise’ Islam, instead of Islamising their culture. Drawing upon women's narratives, this study not only investigates factors affecting female participation in higher education in KP, but also gives voice to the traditionally voiceless Pakhtun women and puts on record stories not heard before.

Keywords

Gender, Islam, feminism, women's higher education, Pakhtun women, patriarchy
Introduction

Becky Francis (2000a), a British educationist specialising in gender inequalities in the classroom, applying her social constructionist and feminist perspective, argues that gender, though not a fixed entity, is indeed a marker of inequality. In her view "the construction of gender differences leads women to share certain experiences because of the almost universal subjection of women and the feminine compared with men" (p. 19). This paper explores gender perceptions and experiences of the deprived and silent women of KP by hearing their voices, thereby recognising their needs and aspirations based upon their own experiences. As my research project progressed, several factors contributing to the present dismal state of women and gender issues in the society under study came into focus through dialogue and discussions. One major factor that overarched all our dialogues was the presence of firmly rooted patriarchy in the Pakhtun male consciousness shaping their unconscious attitudes and elected behaviours, which validates their desire to control and dominate women. Historically, patriarchy here in KP, as elsewhere, presents a continuous and an on-going process of producing and reproducing inequalities (Thomas, 1999; Francis, 2000b). This process is definitely an alarming one and requires timely and effective measures to contain it, uproot it, and finally, erase it.

The present study focused on a group of relatively young women students in KP, and examined their voices to provide a contextual analysis of their experiences. Thus, the aim of the paper is to provide a deepening insight into Pukhtun women’s actual experiences in accessing higher education. It is worth noticing here that lack of female education is no longer a local issue of inequality; it is an international concern, though closely connected with Muslim societies across the globe. In the context of the rising global political tensions and dichotomies that engulf Muslim societies today, Muslim women’s education is often, though erroneously, viewed as a religious issue, blaming Islam itself or its variant interpretations as producers of patriarchy. Despite local and global concerns for women’s education, both gender disparity in education and misinterpretation of Islam remain unresolved. In Pakistan, where large numbers of girls remain deprived of literacy, any discourse on women’s higher education might sound out of place. This paper, by focussing on women’s higher education, legitimises this discourse and argues that higher education need not be viewed as a topic of a female student's stepping up process from the beginner’s level onwards, but as a thought process which rejects women as human beings as makers of their destiny and of their society.

KP, previously known as the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), is an important province of Pakistan, where culture, language, traditions and patriarchal values are significantly different from those in the rest of the country. The inhabitants of Pukhtunkhwah are Pukhtuns/Pashtuns, also called ‘Afghans’ or ‘Pathans’ by western
Hearing silent voices of Pukhtun women

historians. Known for refusing domination by foreign rulers, Pukhtuns are traditional people, who follow their centuries-old customs and traditions. That might be one of the reasons that the British imperialists intervened very little in Pukhtunkhawah, and kept it as ‘a land without law’ until 1901. For centuries, the Pukhtuns have retained a predominately strict and patriarchal setup in which men and women remain segregated and live almost in two separate worlds (Lall, 2009). In view of this situation, this researcher, instead of looking at Pakistan generally in terms of gender and education, selected KP, since this region, being home to a number of tribal tradition-locked groups with a more ethnically complex structure than any other province of the country, is also a region struck by poverty, low education and limited infrastructure facilities for development.

Gender is of much significance in KP where the percentage for female participation in higher education is chronically low—6.55% compared to male participation at 28.44% (FBS, 2009). This low ratio raises a natural query as to various explanations for this low percentage of women in higher education. The study seeks to answer this question by focusing on women who have succeeded against the odds in entering higher education in KP and thus set an example for others to follow.

Methodology

Before I lay out methodology adopted for this research, I would like to state that the epistemological framework, in which a researcher’s standpoint carries a great impact on the knowledge he or she produces, informs this study. For a researcher, recognition that knowledge is somehow subjective is important because subjectivity realises the researcher’s presence in the generation of knowledge. Thus, a researcher through his/her life experiences, thoughts and ideas brings him/herself into the study. In the case of this research, my personal experience has played a pivotal role at all stages—from the selection of the topic to its completion. My association with KP as my place of origin and the struggle I faced, that finally enabled me to acquire a doctoral degree, prepared me not only to hear the narratives of my respondents but also to understand the whole saga behind them.

Keeping my personal experience in the backdrop, this research thus began with a simple question: what are the perceptions and experiences of female students contemplating and participating in higher education in Peshawar, Pukhtunkhawah? The answer to this apparently simple question came by applying a combination of research techniques and methods. A mixed methods approach assisted in generating primary data for this research. This involved conducting interviews with forty-eight women students in four higher education institutes in Peshawar, KP, using both quantitative and qualitative
methods. The data collection process began in early March 2008 and lasted until the end of September 2009. This process is summarised in the table below:

| Research Tool | Time         | Sample                                                                 |
|---------------|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. An informal discussion with the Director of colleges Pukhtunkhwah (March 2008) |
| Pilot Study   | April 2008   | 10 students from a different college                                   |
| 2. Initial Survey                                      |
| a. Questionnaire prepared & implemented                | September 2008 | 40 students (10 students from each college: 10x4 = 40)                |
| 3. Audit Survey                                        |
| a. Questionnaire (A repeat of the initial survey questionnaire) | April 2009 | 172 students (43x4 = 172) Other than Initial Survey Group             |
| 4. The Post-Survey                                      |
| a. Questionnaire                                       | September 2009 | Original 40 students of initial survey (10x4 = 40)                     |
| b. Focused-Interviews                                   | September 2009 | 4 students (1 from each college)                                      |

To test the variables of this study and get the most valid answers to the research questions, I employed methodological triangulation, whereby I used different methods of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools, semi-structured questionnaires, and focused interviews. I also tested Time triangulation by crosschecking the validity of my initial survey questionnaire of 2009 with my audit survey sample of 172 at a different time of the year.

For the study, I randomly selected four colleges in Peshawar, the capital of Pukhtunkhwah. Bearing in mind the economic class division of my study, the time scale, my financial resources and terrorists’ threats in the area, I was careful that the chosen sample must be appropriate for the study to be valid (Cohen et al., 2007). Therefore, due to security and time issues the sample of this study was necessarily limited.

The study was conducted with preapproval of the local Directorate of Education (colleges). I also sought the cooperation of local colleges and contacted each college several times to establish a rapport with them. Thus, the study began as a cooperative effort between the researcher and the colleges. To maintain the comparative element in the study, I established my standardised methodology in each college of my sample. The colleges selected were Jinnah College for Women, Frontier College for Women, Home
Hearing silent voices of Pukhtun women

Economics College for Women and City College for Women. They are all degree colleges. Special permission was granted by the Directorate to use the colleges’ real names in the study.

To provide a sharper and more explicit focus on women’s own voices, thematic content analysis was adopted for the assessment of the research findings. Further, to seek out whether, and in which ways, such thematic choices can enlighten our understanding of gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan, application of feminist theorising led to the analysis of the data under the headings, Liberal, Radical, Marxist/socialist and Islamic feminisms. As said before, all the interviewees were categorised into four economic classes, middle-upper, upper-middle, lower middle, and working-class.

Data analysis of each stage was recorded immediately after its completion. This helped in identifying themes and ideas to follow through. It was necessary to code and score the data into specific categories for the purpose of analysis. Pre-coding helped in converting responses into objective scores (e.g. checklists and rating scales in the questionnaire instrument). Open-ended questions in the semi-structured and focused interviews were analysed by identifying different themes from the responses, as the aim was to unveil women’s voices. The pre-testing of research instruments had indicated that the data for open-ended questions would need post-coding and scoring. Thus, the verbatim interviewee responses were subsequently subjected to response analysis. A majority of interviewee narratives quoted in this article are derived from the original focused interviews.

Finally, I acknowledge that the only urban sample size of my study could be considered as one of its limitations. However, the qualitative data collection tool gave us live experiences of the interviewees that we used for generalization and border picture of the main issues. Therefore, this study legitimizes some information rather than complete experiences of women that affected their education. Indeed this limitation had a positive impact as it enabled me to focus on a smaller group, and thereby gain and interpret data, which was in-depth and allowed me to focus more sharply on the chosen issues.

Theoretical Framework

Different feminisms advance different explanations for women’s subordination by men. These theories help us in understanding how inequality emerges in higher education. Until relatively recently, it has been common to identify three distinct types of feminist approaches to education: liberal, radical and Marxist/socialist. Middleton (1987) and Weiner (1994) have given useful account of how these different approaches have informed work on gender inequality in education. In recent years, however, the distinctions between
these three approaches were blurred, particularly in the area of empirical research. While there are major differences at the level of grand theory, liberal, radical and Marxist/socialist feminists appear increasingly to agree about how gender is constructed within higher education. What these approaches have most in common is that they challenge a view of education which is only concerned with the male-experience, and which treats male experience as the ‘norm’.

A fourth approach, not included in the above, is that of Islamic feminism. Claims made by Islamic feminists about women’s equality with men draw on the fact that many women in Muslim societies have different traditions and customs and yet male domination is a common experience of all. Muslim women’s conceptions of activism aim at improving women’s legal, social, political, economic and educational situation in the Muslim world by challenging the patriarchal culture of Muslim societies. On the other hand, Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an, seeks rights and justice for both women and men because knowledge is an obligatory act for them (Contractor, 2010). Relatively few feminist researchers in the sociology of education theorise the ways in which religion and its doctrinal approach constricts women's access to education and perpetuates gender inequality by subordinating women's roles and status in a society.

**Liberal Feminism**

Here education tends to be seen, to some extent, in isolation from the social structure. Education systems are seen to create and perpetuate inequality and were seen as partly to blame for the ideology of the feminine mystique (Friedan, 1983:67) However, women’s main problem is their own attitude; if only women would stop wanting to limit themselves to the domestic sphere, they could bring about change in society.

The fundamental concept of the second wave feminists’ was ‘patriarchy’, which they defined as a system of male-domination and oppression for the exploitation of women (Krolokke and Sorensen, 2006). Patriarchy has a different form of authority in Pakistan with a corresponding impact upon women’s authentic voices. Though Pukhtunkhwa women made substantial contributions to the Pukhtu language, however, due to rigid Pukhtu perspectives, subjects like mathematics, statistics, and the natural sciences are traditionally taught to men, and subjects such as art, literature, and biological sciences are traditionally taught to women. This division seems to be underpinned by the prevailing cultural and religious view because these professional subjects will take longer to study. Women are encouraged to study for only short periods for their first degree so that they can get married at an early age. Pukhtunkhwa parents’ first priority is to find a suitable marriage proposal rather than a suitable subject choice for daughters’ higher education.
Similar concerns were noted in works of twentieth-century feminist writers, who commented on parents’ apparent lack of interest in careers for girls, as they assumed that they would simply marry, have children and stay at home (Blackstone and Fulton, 1975, Hussain, 1995).

As women in KP do not have the power of control over their own lives because of the power of males in the family, culture and society push them towards the roles of wife and mother, erroneously assuming that education has no part in the performance of these two roles. In this traditional society, getting a degree is viewed as getting a mere piece of paper that does not guarantee a successful marital life. Furthermore, there exists a widely believed concern that a highly educated woman has difficulty in finding a suitable match in marriage. Traditionally misogynist males prefer to marry young un-educated females because of their flexible and non-argumentative attitude and their ability to bear children, all of which enables men to retain their dominance over women (Shehzad, et al., 2010). Liberal feminists argue that schools are partly responsible for instilling sexiest attitude in children (Delamont, 1980). In Pakistan, in addition to parents, culture and society, the educational system is mainly responsible for distilling these attitudes in children. Teachers echo these messages through the hidden curriculum.

**Marxist/Socialist Feminism**

Although with Marxist/socialist feminism, the power structures are defined as twofold: capitalism and patriarchy, yet Marxist/socialist feminist interpretations of the education system have focused less on attitudes and more on power structures. Thus, Marxist/socialist feminism favours redistribution of power and capital to raise the position of women in society. Williams (1995) criticises state policies in this regard as representing contradictory interests of patriarchy and capitalism, which together reinforce women’s roles as dependent caregivers within the family and as low-paid workers outside. She further argues that there is a need to challenge this view by demanding a broader base for caring and reorganisation of sexual division of labour and division between paid and unpaid work. However, state policy mentions the positive aspect of the demand side (by providing women with equal chance for women’s education and work) but on the supply side actually provides very limited opportunities for women’s education and work. Barrett’s (1984) analysis is more deterministic, arguing that education is explicitly the object of state policy, and serves to reproduce both class and the class system, but it is not reducible to it. I agree with Barrett’s analysis that education is the entity of the state policy because in Pakistan, the dual education system (state schools, Urdu medium and private schools, English medium) are producing a de facto class system. This class system can be seen in Pakistani society where the students of state schools make up a low-income working class who do low-income jobs--this, in turn, provides them with only limited access to their fundamental
needs and entry to higher education. On the other hand, the private schools produce a high-income capitalist/elite class, which has all the necessary means to live a luxury life and has easy access to higher education that prepares them for high-income jobs.

Radical Feminism

There are two main strands within the radical feminist paradigm. The first is a belief that education consists of the transmission of ‘male’ knowledge, that is, what is taught in schools is male experience presented as though it were every day’s experience of everyone. It is biased knowledge, pretending to be value free (Spender, 1982). Spender strongly argues that:

Men have provided us with a false picture of the world, not just because their view is so limited, but also because they have insisted that their limited view is the total view (Spender, 1982:16; cited in Thomas, 1990).

The Textbook Board of Pakistan, which has countrywide branches and aims to produce quality textbooks up to BA/BSc levels, provides a specific example as it displays the same characteristics of male-domination and supremacy and thus assists in retaining the subordination of women through its hidden message in the curriculum (Isani and Virk, 2007). Curriculum design and the content of textbooks are strong contributors to the perpetuation of gender discrimination in the education system. This view has been noted in previous studies (Malik and Courtney, 2011; Mattu and Hussain, 2004). Dean (2007) stating that existing textbooks are full of gender marginalisation and discrimination, active strong masculine roles for men and weak inferior roles for women, showing them as more passive. Gender bias, of course, is not limited to schools; it is also evident at college and university levels (Thomas, 1990).

Thus, women are either invisible in these textbooks or, when they appear, they are seen performing low-status tasks. Radical feminists generally have given little attention to changing the education system, since it is seen as inevitably patriarchal because society is patriarchal. Instead, women must make their own education, and establish their own rules in society, which is problematic in the male-dominated society of KP as women are impelled to support this male domination because without male support and agreement, a woman cannot move on in her society. The male is the head of the family unit, so all the family members are bound to obey and respect him. Similarly, Hussain (1995) found that permission of the male head for women to enter higher education means a guarantee of his financial support for the women.

This paper emphasises that we not only need dramatic social changes in our society but also a change in women’s thinking is needed. Challenging culture and patriarchy will
not happen unless women break their own silence and ask for their rights. Higher education has the potential that could empower women. Malik and Courtney (2011), for example, recognized higher education as an instrument for social change and women’s empowerment. They further argued that engagement in higher education equips women with the knowledge that will form the basis of their economic independence. Attainment of these achievements brings with it an increased status and recognition from family and the wider community (Malik and Courtney, 2011: 41). However a question arises here: how do we prepare the ground for women’s smooth entry into higher education? My study will attempt to answer this and similar questions.

**Islamic Feminism**

Islamic feminists ardently believe and eloquently articulate that gender equality is imbedded in the spirit of the Quran. Islamic feminism mainly stresses the re-reading of the Quran with a female perspective—something that is sometimes called the scholarship of activism (Afshar, 2000). This feminist approach seeks to challenge patriarchy and patriarchal understandings of faith, even if Islamic feminists seek to achieve their goals and rights in partnership with men. Islamic feminism challenges stereotypical imagery of Muslim women and seeks to replace it with images of Muslim women as contributing citizens in a pluralist world (Contractor, 2010). Thus, this feminism has a dual struggle, both against the existence of patriarchy in Muslim communities and against the widely held secular suspicions of visible religiosity. Contractor observes that, "This feminism is usually grounded in the Islamic beliefs of these women and at the same time is underpinned by the Western socio-cultural milieu of many Muslim women" (Contractor 2010: 23).

Islamic feminism challenges patriarchy and patriarchal interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah; however, Islamic feminists are in favour of men supporting them to achieve their goal of equal rights. They challenge the stereotypical woman’s role in society and give the example of Ayisha (RA), one of the wives of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who was a great scholar and teacher of Quran and Hadith in the 7th century AD. Thus this feminism, like radical feminism, is a dual struggle against the existence—indeed, their salience—of patriarchy in Muslim communities and also against widely held secular suspicions of visible religiosity (Contractor, 2010:76). Islamic feminists do not categorize the issues of women’s subordination and oppression with socio-economic or class differences like Marxist feminists do. Islamic feminism encourages women’s knowledge of Islam as well as contemporary knowledge or education. To empower Muslim women and challenge the existing patriarchal interpretation of Islam, both contemporary and Islamic education must enable them to convey their argument for or against
patriarchy. However, unlike Marxist feminism, Islamic feminism does not prioritise women's oppression along class lines.

Yamani (2006) and Karmi (2006) in their research argue that the perception of Islam as a hard patriarchal religion is not found in the original texts; on the contrary, it is based on current dominant conservative interpretations of Islam. That is one of the key arguments of this study too—that the culture and traditions of the Pukhtunkhwah society are over-dominated by patriarchal values and by centuries-old customs rather than by Islamic precepts. Pukhtun culture, and the men and women who enforce it, draw on longstanding and entrenched patterns affecting women’s lives which allow very few chances for geographic or social mobility. This situation creates hurdles, which impede girls’ access to primary education and their overall development (Naz, et al., 2011). There is a need, therefore, to redefine culture and religious discourses for KP women, so that their rights are not diminished in the name of religion or culture. Islamic feminism encourages women's participation in education, particularly higher education, because education provides women with the tools to examine alternative ways to study and work permissible within Islamic jurisprudence. Islamic feminists (Yamani, 2006; Wadud, 2000; Afshar, 2000; Mernissi, 2001) argue that Islam condemns all forms of inequality against women and that gender inequalities in Muslim societies are cultural practices, which can be eliminated through higher education.

I argue that Islamic feminism should be considered and developed as an alternative feminism – which, together with Marxist feminism and its recognition of the importance of class location in women’s oppression, can facilitate women’s emancipation in Islamic countries. Western and Islamic feminists do not consider religion an impediment to gender equality in education. They do not consider how women’s own thinking should be changed and how women silence themselves. Islamic feminism, as it currently stands, is originally a product of those Muslim feminists who have accessed higher education and have attained high positions in western societies.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section of the paper provides an analysis of the data, grouped according to a number of themes: economic class, dual language of instruction, lack of women role models and preference to care-giving roles, women’s seclusion, Islamic rights of inheritance, gender equity and decision-making, and the education system and state policies and practices.

Economic Class
For the students, a sample of the father’s monthly income was used as a rough guide to the economic class of a family together with parents’ level of education. As already noted, four
categories were used: upper class, upper-middle-class, lower-middle class and working-class.

Students from a more prosperous background were likely to be more confident as one respondent said, ‘I have no problem in continuing my higher education’ (upper-class). The realities of access to higher education were different between groups: higher education is generally accessible only to upper/upper-middle classes (‘My family would invest in my higher education; it is not a big deal’ (upper-middle-class), because there are no scholarships or other financial support schemes available for working-class students in local universities. All the students, therefore, have to rely on their parents’ financial resources. One respondent put it aptly by saying that, ‘It depends on the financial position of my parents - that will be decided after me finishing my degree first’ (lower middle class), and indeed some working class students are forced to take a few years off from their studies to earn enough money to enable them to resume their studies later. Working-class women are often encouraged to undertake distance education as a cheaper solution. ‘I cannot say anything now about whether I would be able to continue my higher education or not? I might go for distance learning’ (working-class).

Pukhtunkhaw society interprets the education system as less about attitudes and more about power structures. So, drawing on Marxist/socialist feminism, power structures can be seen as having two elements: capitalism and patriarchy (William, 1995). Parents’ education is also co-related to their economic-class. The fathers of upper-class students had high levels of qualifications (as doctors, engineers and professors). Similarly, more mothers from this group had higher degrees. ‘My father is an engineer and my mum is a doctor. They always encourage us to be educated’ (upper class); in contrast a typical response from a working-class student was ‘neither my mother nor father are highly educated’.

Dual Language of Instruction: English for upper class, Urdu for lower class

There is also a co-relation between students’ economic-class and the language of instruction. Language used for instruction is a significant factor that could have serious academic and economic implications for students. All the private schools are English-medium, meaning that all the subjects are taught in the English language. In contrast, for government/state schools, Urdu is the language of instruction for all subjects with English offered as an additional core-subject. Educational institutions that use English as their language of instruction are frequently criticised as being elitist and catering only for

---

1 The procedure for distance learning in Pakistan is as follows: students gain admission to the university as a private candidate (at a lower lower fee than for regular students). They do not need to attend lectures and seminars at the university; instead they study and prepare themselves for the final examination at home. Such students have limited knowledge and most of them rely on rote memorization by using commercially prepared notes. This system of examination and study is a serious concern for Pakistan but is outside the scope of this study.
affluent Pakistanis, because only the upper-class parents can afford to send their children to these English-medium schools, ‘My entire family went to English medium schools so we are very fluent in English’ (upper-class). Such schools provide opportunities for proficiency in the main international language (English) which gives their students access to western centres of learning as well as the potential for increased social and economic mobility. This dichotomy has been criticised as unfair and unnecessary (Qureshi, 2005). Working-class students cannot afford the high fees of English-medium schools; ‘English medium schools were very expensive therefore my parents send me to Urdu-medium school’ (lower middle class), ‘my parents could hardly afford the expenses of my study in Urdu-medium school. I never thought about studying in English medium school’ (working-class).

Moreover, students taught in the Urdu-medium schools, struggle at the university level where the medium of instruction is English. Most reference books are available in English only. As a result, only those students who have a good English language background can gain a degree-level qualification. Students who have not studied in English are at a considerable disadvantage both in gaining admission to high status educational institutions and if successful, in understanding the resource material, primarily available in English (Qureshi, 2005). Thus economic-class as a determinant of the language of instruction in education emerged as a significant factor in the study.

Lack of Women Role Models and Preference to Care-giving Role

There was a reported lack of role models in education and work for the respondents in the sample. The mothers of the respondents were mostly housewives, as said one respondent, ‘majority of my family women are housewives’ (lower-middle-class). A small percentage of them were teachers, doctors and other government employees; My mum has a MSc degree, but my father never let her work because my father is a MNA [member of National Assembly] and he doesn’t like my mum to work for money’ (upper-class). For the mothers, it was general for them not to work after marriage. Class was not a determining factor in this finding. It can thus be inferred that respondents from all social classes were raised in a domestic culture where women do not do paid work.

The women in the sample perceived and identified care giving and career as in conflict (37/40 respondents). Most indicated that a woman could gain as much sense of achievement from her husband’s career as from her own; ‘if my husband is highly educated and earning good money than I do not need to work’ (lower middle class). Slightly fewer (31/48) indicated that a woman’s first preference should be care of her family (In my family there are very few working women, because my family believes that the woman’s first responsibility is to look after her family) while rather more perceived that it is rare for a woman to make a success of both home and career.
The attitude of Pakistani society towards women’s work is still ‘old-fashioned’. Women’s work is generally not valued very high. If a woman’s family suffered due to her absence from home, it would be wiser for her to curtail her involvement in the world of work. Women should only continue with work if they can do justice to both their families and careers (upper class).

Most perceived care giving as a career substitute. Women’s social role in the KP, as said before, is perceived predominantly as that of a wife and a mother. This view has been disputed as erroneous in two ways (Evans, 2000, 2002). Women (and men), it is argued, are adaptable social beings and can be persuaded into a variety of social roles to suit the constraints of particular situations. Although it is true that women bear children, however, they are created with men, and the attempt to base female identity primarily on this physical difference is a social, rather than a natural process (Thomas, 1999; Francis and Skelton, 2005).

Added to this perception, was the shared assumption of interviewees that it was rare for a woman to have a family and a career and make a success of both. In this respect, women in the sample reflected gender-typical rather than class-based tendencies.

**Women’s Seclusion (co-education, workplace) and purdah (veiling seclusion)**

Seclusion or the confinement of women to appointed locations and spheres of life was an important variable explored in the interviews. For the purpose of this study, seclusion was defined not only in terms of isolation in certain locales (educational institutes and workplaces) but also in the practice of physical veiling. Its observance was viewed as a broader factor of exclusion of women to that of economic, political and social power, authority and influence.

*I observed seclusion ‘to a degree because I am not veiling, but my access to the public sphere is limited (upper class).*

*I strictly follow my Islamic code of dress (veiled from head to toe). Women in my immediate family, my mother and sisters all observed ‘purdah’ (working-class).*

Segregation and veiling led to the establishment of separate women’s universities throughout the country. Because higher education in Pakistan is mostly integrated, women feel uncomfortable in such a mixed-sex environment.

*I cover myself when I go out. It is not necessarily to be chaperoned; however, I feel very uncomfortable in presence of male classmates. I know my limitation to keep my family honour. We are poor people and have nothing other than honour, therefore, we have to be very careful (working-class).*
Some respondents perceived the benefits of co-education for themselves, at the same time they felt empathy for other women who would have to drop out from higher education due to their family’s disapproval of educational integration. ‘*I prefer coeducation because when men are everywhere in our society so why not to face men in the first place*’ (upper class).

However, middle and working class women were generally not allowed to study in an integrated educational institution as said some:

*Some girls do not get permission from their families to go alone to university. There is a lot of purdah (the word purdah is used for seclusion here) in our family, so my father did not allow my sister to go to the university – if it had been separate, it would have been useful for us* (middle-class).

*Most of my household members do not allow women to study in an integrated university, so they are deprived of higher education* (working-class).

The majority of respondents favoured the establishment of a separate university for women, due to the opposition to co-education of their families and as a form of ‘social’ escape for women in KP. In other words, it seemed a solution to support KP culture on the one hand and find a way to be educated on the other. Women’s universities were viewed as a platform for women’s liberation from the cultural and traditional norms of the society. Interviewees were less enthusiastic about co-educational universities because of the assumption that equal access to education is sufficient to ensure equality between the sexes, with which they disagreed (Lasser, 2007; Meal, 2008). There was a perceived need for women-only higher education institutions despite the argument that there are not enough resources to make that happen.

Ironically, seclusion, as it is practiced in the regional culture, has an element of prestige attached to it (Hussain, 2002). Traditionally, upper-class women practised it as an assertion of their class status. However, seclusionary practice has been taken up across all social segments. Respondents showed hesitancy about moving about openly and independently ‘*I am not veiling but my access to the public sphere is limited, I prefer to go out with my family*’ (upper class). Thus even though this respondent was not veiled and was allowed to drive, she never went out without her family. Perhaps avoidance of the public-sphere is an upper-class luxury, which is beyond the reach of women from families with reduced incomes. Middle and working-class respondents said they observed partial or total seclusion along with the other female members of their family ‘*I strictly follow my Islamic code of dress, my mother and sister also observed ‘purdah’ (veiling)*’ (working-class). However, veiling and use of a cloak-like shawl were not seen to deprive them of their mobility. Unlike upper-class respondents, the lower classes could travel on public transport without chaperones. The privacy provided by veiling afforded them a greater sense of confidence when operating in the public sphere.
The respondents also articulated the need for a segregated work environment, an issue taken up particularly by Islamic feminists and Pukhtun educators. The interviewees claimed that working women were not ‘well perceived’, especially if they worked in integrated work environments.

I want to get some part time work but we need a suitable environment because it would be more difficult for women to adjust to a mixed environment. Where it is separated, then it is fine (upper-middle-class).

The restraints to women’s work, which exist across all economic categories, are internally embedded due to years of social conditioning and because of external factors. The women said they were dependent on male consent and social sanction, and economically dependent on their fathers, brothers, uncles and husbands. This dependence rendered them powerless to make decisions about their lives. Moreover, the prevalence of seclusion, chaperonage, care-giving and domestic activities meant strict control over women’s lives – which often prevented them from becoming productive participants in the workplace.

It was evident that most respondents had not developed feminist or emancipatory ideas. They did not challenge the existing norms of the society or the existing cultural status quo of the society because they could not envisage any alternatives. Women’s work is generally not appreciated and it would take a long time to change this attitude. This view affected fewer women from wealthier families as they did not need to work, but for working class respondents paid work was an economic necessity.

Islam recommends segregation of both education and work environments; however, a developing country like Pakistan has limited resources to carry out this recommendation. Sharia mandates that a woman should strictly follow the Islamic code of dress to avoid any negative impact. Islam encourages finding a way to gain knowledge without violating any Islamic rule of law (Contractor, 2010). As already noted, Yamani (2006) and Karmi (2006) argue that the picture of Islam as a hard patriarchal religion is based on the current dominant conservative view of Islam, not the original Islam. Islam is over-influenced by the cultures and patriarchal values prevalent in today’s Muslim societies (Mehran, 2009). A more widely held interpretation of the situation in KP and in Pakistan is that the labour market is male-dominated, and the common cultural and social practice is to decrease women’s participation in the labour market, to discourage them from working outside the home, and to increase their dependency on men.

Islamic Rights of Inheritance

This research also examined the Islamic tradition of gender relations and the accruing social blueprint for gender issues in Pakistan. Islam advocates women’s liberty and gives
them the right to own and inherit property, to marry of their own free will, to divorce if they so desire, to obtain formal education and to make decisions about their lives (Chaudhry, 2001). In restricting their right to education and work, the women in the study argued that they are also denied access to their Islamic right of inheritance. They said:

Very rarely inherited property is allotted to women in our society (upper class).

It is not fair to take a share in father's property, we should leave it for our brother, and I think it is a greediness of a sister (lower middle class).

Working-class respondents had similar thoughts,

There is nothing to inherit but if there were some family property then I will not take my share from my brothers.

Thus, the responses indicate that religion is dominated by cultural values.

**Gender Equity and Decision-making within the Household**

Since Pakistani women are economically and socially dependent, it was decided to explore the nature of the respondents’ households, and the extent to which women were not equal in the household, and whether they could make decisions about themselves. Most respondents said that they were obliged to seek the approval of the men in their family:

I felt that everyone is equal in my household. However, I felt social and cultural constraints. Many of the things I want to do, but I could not (upper class).

My parents feel that a girl should have a basic education because highly educated women have less flexibility to cope with their in-laws (upper-middle-class).

Once again, the Pukhtun culture prevented them from understanding the reality about their family life.

Women are the ‘izzat’ (honour) of the household so we should respect them. The family members have an unequal relationship with her (working-class).

Furthermore, it was decided to investigate decision-making in an effort to trace social pressure on respondents’ lives. All the respondents claimed that they were not able to make independent decisions as is evident from the following responses:

My future decisions will be prompted mostly by my own inclinations but would be under my parent’s guidance (upper class).

My parents have right to make a decision about my life because I cannot go beyond their support (upper-middle-class).

My parents, along with my grandparents, made the decisions in the family (working-class).

Thus, male support remains important in women’s lives, across all social-strata. The severe consequences of going against the wishes of men deterred the respondents from
entertaining thoughts about independent decision-making, with male family members exerting considerable control over their freedom to decide about their education, subject choice and work. KP women perceived themselves dependent on and supported by fathers, brothers and husbands, mainly because the state does not take any such responsibilities for individuals. Thus, loss of family support makes women vulnerable. Priority is given across economic strata to gaining a suitable wedding proposal rather than investing in or planning for higher education.

The respondents appeared to support this form of male-domination in KP. The following excerpts show this attitude:

I felt that it is ‘nicer’ if the men in the family support a woman’s decision. It ensures future support from them and makes a woman feel secure. However, we never make major decisions in our life against the wishes of our family men and have no idea what will happen then (upper class).

It was not necessary to have male support in making decisions about woman’s life. However, I mentally would feel safer if I had the support of the men in my family. The consequences of going against male sanction would be disastrous (upper-middle-class).

Yes, obviously it is very important in my family that a woman could not make any decisions without male sanction. I felt that if women oppose the wishes of male family members, they are not afforded their rightful place, their real status in their home. Women are the ‘izzat’ (honour) of the family. Thus, they should strive to live up the expectations of their parents while single and their in-laws after marriage (lower middle class).

We do not do what they do not like; women in some instances refrain from behaviour that would be socially unacceptable to men, an example of internalisation of socio-cultural control (working class).

Upper-class men were more likely to encourage their daughters to go on to higher education. For instance, one woman told me,

My family men do encourage women’s higher education and respect our opinion but the final decision is theirs (upper class).

However, there were similar elements of opposition across all economic-classes.

My father will allow me but my brother says only finish your BA no more, because there is no women’s post-graduate college and the Frontier Women University does not offer MA in my subject (lower middle class).
However, there was a perception that male attitudes towards female participation in higher education were in the process of change: there was said to be a generally favourable attitude towards education. However, some male members of a family (particularly brothers) remained opposed to the female pursuit of higher education in co-educational institutions. The desire for segregation was mainly a middle and working-class phenomenon. ‘They (family) want us to study further but all depends on brother and father’s decision’ (working-class)

Brothers appeared more influential than fathers and other family members in the decision-making of their sisters’ education and work, and enjoy greater freedom than their sisters enjoy. A daughter cannot think to go against the decision of her family, but a son can force his parents to accept his decision. Sometimes having older fathers encourages brothers to make decisions about the family; they will probably eventually have to maintain the entire family. Fathers also give preference to their sons’ opinions rather than their daughters in decision-making.

The research suggests that brothers are generally reluctant for their sisters to enter higher education because they want them to marry. Another reason is that public transport is not safe for female college/university students to travel alone. Therefore, if their sisters do not attend college, they do not have to pick them up and drop them off. Money is a source of power for affluent families who can afford chauffeur-driven cars or hiring private transport. They can afford boarding colleges or hostels (the most expensive accommodation in the cities) or hire tutors to teach their daughters at home in preparation for any form of education.

Money confers other benefits. The upper-class respondents exhibited a relatively higher degree of confidence and boldness. They preferred to converse in English and were quite fluent. In contrast, working-class respondents showed inadequate knowledge, lack of confidence, and they spoke in their first languages, Urdu and Pukhtun. Moreover, they spoke hesitantly, their use of syntax was poor and their vocabulary was limited. This put them at a disadvantage in reading, decoding and communication skills.

**Education System and State Policies and Practices**

Most respondents perceived the standards of education system in Pakistan as poor. One respondent observed,

*Our education system has low standard. We have to learn things by heart (rote learning/memorisation)...this is how we can get good grades here. Our education system is increasing educated jahils (ignorant/s) in society (upper class).*
They expressed dismay that education in general, and also higher education, were not better:

*In Pakistan education is not valued, yet there is not such an adequate reward for acquiring it. Because after a degree women are made to sit at home...generally it is considered that getting girls married is more important than getting them to acquire education* (lower middle class).

Moreover, there was a feeling that the syllabi in education were not applicable to real life and would consequently not necessarily culminate in a job at the end,

*Our education system is lacking infrastructure, I am confused what subject I need to study to get a suitable job* (working-class).

*I do not know why I am studying my course subjects; I might just want to get BA degree* (upper-middle-class).

*Sometimes we find it hard to find out a suitable job because of our subject combination at college and its relevancy in the job market...that always pushes women for teaching jobs* (working-class).

The respondents placed responsibility for the failure to increase women’s participation in higher education on state policies and practices:

*The state has failed to improve women participation in education. I felt that the state implemented few policies have lack of practice. The already existing policies did not make any difference in women's lives* (upper class).

*I am really disappointed with the government policies and practices on women’s welfare that the laws made in this context are ineffective. There are many laws but no implementation. I am strongly recommending women’s education by any means that would solve many problems of women by themselves* (working-class).

**Discussion**

Similar to Thomas's (1990) observation that research in the sociology of women’s higher education is rather lacking as compared to research about primary and secondary levels, women’s higher education remains little researched in Pakistan. Of these few studies, most are contract studies funded by donor agencies and focus on primary and secondary education that theorise higher education as a source of women’s empowerment (the World Bank, 2002 and 2005; UNDP, 2005; UNESCO, 2008; UNESCO, 2010; UNIFEM, 2005). On the other hand, there are very few academic studies (Naz et al., 2011; Malik and Courtney, 2011, Shahzad et al., 2009). Moreover, as gender inequality is already
entrenched at the primary level and is further reinforced at the secondary level, the issue of gender inequality at the stage of higher education reaches an acceptance level; hence, fewer studies are undertaken. Informal discussions with individuals who were not in my list of respondents, such as office attendants and junior staff of the colleges confirmed the above-mentioned research findings when they told me that the question of women's higher education is already a doomed issue as most girls are already debared from schools. These observations coming from ordinary people and not from researchers and scholars, indeed presents the crux of the issue of women's higher education not only in KP but in the rest of Pakistan.

Delamaont's thesis that "Schools develop and reinforce sex segregation, stereotypes and even discriminations which segregate the negative aspects of sex roles in the outside world, when they could be trying to alleviate them" (Delamont, 1980:3 cited in Thomas, 1990, 11) goes one step further in Pakistan. In Pakistan, not only schools but also parents, culture and society instill these attitudes in children. Qureshi, et al., (2007) and Malik and Courtney (2011) came up with the same conclusion that Pakistani educational institutions promote traditional and culture values that help establishing women’s subordination position in the society rather empowering their leadership status. They further argue that the school culture in Pakistan shapes boys and girls differently. These statements demonstrate a central emphasis of the liberal feminists’ analysis, that education has the ability to promote positive or negative attitudes, and that changing educational systems will eventually change the society.

Conclusion

The study found a strong but complex and paradoxical role for KP men in women’s’ lives; on the one hand they can be educated and broad-minded, while on the other, un-educated and narrow-minded. The former position encourages and supports women in all spheres of life while the second forces women into their traditional subordinated role. The study also found a co-relation between the economic status, medium of instruction and access to higher education. Money becomes power in the sense that it provides access to the country’s expensive private schools, proficiency in English, the language of the elite class and which opens doors to higher education within and outside the country.

Findings of this study show that not only are dramatic social changes needed in the KP society, but also a change in women’s own thinking and psychological make-up is required. Challenging culture and patriarchy will not happen unless women feel confident enough to break their silence and demand their rights to higher education. Higher education has the possibility of empowering women, ushering social change, and creating economic independence.
References

Afshar, H. 2000. *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case-study*, London: MacMillan.

Bourdieu, P. 1999. *Culture and Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Barrett, M. 1984. *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminists Analysis*, London: Verso.

Byrne, E. 1978. *Women in Education*. London: Tavistock.

Chodorow, N. 1974. ‘Family Structure and Feminine Personality’ In M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, (Eds.) *Woman, Culture and Society* (pp.43-66). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Contractor, S. 2010. *Muslim Women in Britain: Demystifying the Muslimah: exploring different perceptions of young Muslim women in Britain*, London: Routledge.

Dean, B. 2007. ‘Creating subjects for gender apartheid: A critical study of an English language Pakistani textbook’ in R. Qureshi, and J. Rariatey, *A Gender and education in Pakistan* (pp. 170-96). Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Delamont, S. 1980. *Sex Roles and the School*, London: Methuen.

FBS (Federal Bureau of Statistics). 2009. *Year Book 2006-2007*, Islamabad: FBS.

Evans, G. 2000. *The role and changing status of women in the twentieth century*, Wales: QCAA.

Evans, M. (Ed.). 2002. *The Women Question: Readings on the Subordination of Women*, UK: Fontana Paperbacks.

Francis, B. 2000a. *Boys, Girls and Achievement: Addressing the Classroom Issues*. London: Routledge.

Francis, B. 2000b. "The gendered subject: students’ subject preferences and discussions of gender and subject ability." *Oxford Review of Education*, 26 (1): 35-48.

Francis, B. and Skelton, C. (Eds.). 2001. *Investigating Gender*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Francis, B. and Skelton, C. 2005. *Reassessing Gender and Achievement*, London: Routledge.

Friedan, B. 1983. *The Feminine Mystique*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Giroux, H. 1983b. "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis". *Harvard Educational Review*, 53 (3): 257-293.

Hill, D. 2001. ‘Theorizing Politics and the Curriculum: Understanding and Addressing Inequalities through Critical Pedagogy and Critical Policy’ in D. Hill, and L. Robertson (2001) *Equality in the Primary School*, (pp. 293-319).London: Continuum Publishing Group.

Hussain, I. 2002. *Pakistan Educational and Cultural Perspective*, Lahore: Nadeem Book House.

Isani, C. and Virk, M. 2007. *Higher Education in Pakistan: A Historical and Futuristic Perspective*, Islamabad: National Book Foundation.

Karmi, G. 2006. ‘Women in Islamic Law’ in Mai Yamani (Ed.) *Feminism and Islam* (pp. 87-102). Reading: Garnet Publishing.
Khan, S. 2007. Gender Issues in Higher Education in Pakistan. Islamabad: Allama Iqbal Open University.

Khattak, S. 2011. Feminism in Education: historical and contemporary issues of gender inequality in higher education in Occasional Papers in Education and Lifelong Learning: An International Journal of Middlesex University 5(2):67-78. http://www.mdx.ac.uk/aboutus/Schools/arts_education/research/journals/index.

Khattak, S. 2012. "Synthesising Feminists’ Theories in Higher Education of Khyber Pukhtunkhwah (KPK) Pakistan@. Nova Southeastern University Online Journal for Emerging Scholarly Research 1 (1): 46-57. http://www.fischlerschool.nova.edu/resources/uploads/app/52/files/emerging-scholarly-research-journal-2012.pdf

Kelly, A. 1985. "The construction of masculine science." British Journal of Sociology of Education, 6(2): 133-54.

Lall, M. 2009. "Gender and Education in Pakistan: The Shifting Dynamics across Ethnic Groups." Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism 9 (1):114-121.

Lasser, C. (Ed.). 2007. Educating Men and Women Together: Co-education in Changing World, USA: University of Illinois.

Malik, S. and Courtney, K. 2011. "Higher Education and Women’s Empowerment in Pakistan." Gender and Education 23 (1): 29-45.

Meal, F. 2008. "Single-Sex and Coeducational Schooling: Relationships to Socio-emotional and Academic Development." Review of Educational Research, 68(2):101-129.

Mehran, G. 2009. "Doing and Undoing Gender: Female Higher Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran." International Review of Education, 55(6): 541-559.

Matti, A. and Hussain, N. 2004. ‘Class and gender in school texts’ in A. Nayyar, and A. Salim (Eds.). The subtle subversion: The state of curricula and textbooks in Pakistan (pp. 91-100). Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute.

Mernessi, F. 2001. Women and Islam, London: London Press.

Middleton, S. 1987. ‘The sociology of women’s education as a field of academic study’ in M. Arnot and G. Weiner (Eds.). Gender and the politics of Schooling, (pp. 389-99).London: Open University Press.

Naz, A. Daraz, U. Khan, W. Hussain, M. Khan, Q. 2011. "The Dormancy of Empowerment: An Analytical Study of Various Impediments to Women’s Education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwah Province of Pakistan." International Journal of Business and Social Science, 2 (16): 78-87.

Qureshi, H. 2005. in Pakistan, Karachi: Maaref Ltd.

Qureshi, R. 2007. Gender and Education in Pakistan, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Qureshi, R. and Rarieya, J. (Ed.). 2007. Gender and Education in Pakistan, Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Shahzad, S., Ali, R., Azam, M. and Khan, R. 2009. "Family Structural Norms, Leading to Gender Disparity at University Level." Abasyn University Journal of Social Sciences, 3(2): 61-66.
Spender, D. 1982. *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal*, London: Routledge.
Thomas, K. 1999. *Gender and Subject in Higher Education*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
UNDP (United Nation Development Programme) (2005) *HDR 2005-Country Fact Sheet: Pakistan*, Islamabad.
UNDP (United Nation Development Programme) http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_PAK.html (accessed 28/08/2008).
UNESCO (United Nation Educational Scientific and Culture Organization). 2008. *Learning Achievements in Primary Schools of Pakistan, A Quest for Quality Education*, Islamabad: UNESCO.
UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific Culture Organization). 2010. *Why Gender Equality in Basic Education in Pakistan*, Islamabad: UNESCO.
UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) (2005) *Not a Minute More: Facts and Figures on Violence against Women*, NP: UNDFW.
http://www.unifem.org/campaigns/november25/FactsFigures.pdf (accessed 28/08/2008).
Wadud, A. 2000. *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Walkerdine, V. 1987. ‘Some issues in the historical construction of the scientific truth about girls’ in A. Kelly. (Ed.) *Science for Girls?* (pp. 37-44). Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
Weiner, G. 1994. *Feminism in Education: an Introduction*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
Williams, F. (1995). *Social Policy: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
World Bank. 2002. *Women in Pakistan: an Economic and Social Strategy (Country Study)*, Washington: World Bank.
Yamani, M. (Ed.) (2006). *Feminism in Islam*. Reading: Garnet Publishing.

**Acknowledgements**

My profound gratitude to Dr. Gaby Weiner, who not only proof-read my first drafts but gave me very valuable suggestions for the subject matter and content of this article. A special thanks to Dr. Dave Hill for his valuable suggestions, and encouragement.

---

**Dr. Shabana Shamaas Gul Khattak** teaches in the Department of History and Pakistan Studies, International Islamic University, Islamabad. She has recently completed her Postdoctoral study from SOAS, University of London. She completed her study for her
PhD at the University of Middlesex, London. She has contributed chapters to books and has published several papers on education and schooling in Pakistan. Earlier, to acknowledge her father's inspirational role in her studies, Dr Khattak wrote and published under her his name (Shaamas Gul Khattak). Her main areas of interest are gender, culture and religious discourses, feminism (particularly Islamic feminism), higher education, and social justice and language politics in Khyber Pukhtunkhwah.