

# Exploring Sociocultural Constraints on Females' Higher Education in Balochistan: A Mixed-Methods Study

Komunitas: International Journal of  
Indonesian Society and Culture  
17 (2) (2025): 126-137  
DOI: 10.15294/komunitas.v17i2.31610  
© 2025 Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia  
p-ISSN 2086-5465 | e-ISSN 2460-7320  
Web: <https://journal.unnes.ac.id/journals/komunitas>

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## Abstract

In Balochistan, females' pursuit of higher education (HE) often encounters entrenched sociocultural constraints and economic barriers, despite Pakistan's commitments to gender equality. The study aims to explore the intersecting challenges to female participation in HE in Balochistan through a convergent mixed-methods approach with survey data (289 participants) and seven semi-structured interviews conducted among female students. Quantitative results revealed persistent challenges: 46.5% of respondents reported unequal opportunities, and 78.3% financial hardship. Institutional obstacles were also widespread, including administrative bias (72.8%), gender discrimination (69.3%), and unequal access to activities (64.8%). Complementing these figures, qualitative findings highlighted resilience, with most participants articulating strong ambitions for educational and professional advancement, despite facing systemic and social challenges. Community attitudes were found to be uneven, as families with higher educational backgrounds expressed greater support for female higher education. The study concludes that addressing these challenges requires need-based scholarships, context-specific community engagement, and gender sensitive institutional reform. Further, policy recommendations to promote gender parity and foster an inclusive HE environment in rural Pakistan suggest that effective interventions must combine need-based scholarships, gender-sensitive reforms, and community engagement tailored to local contexts.

## Keywords

Gender Equality; Higher Education; Socio-Cultural Barriers; Balochistan; Rural Pakistan

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality challenge persists across Pakistan, despite 1973's constitutional assurances and successive national development plans endorsing gender equity (Hussain et al., 2022). Noticeably, girls in rural regions of Pakistan face substantial gender-based systemic barriers (Jamal et al., 2023). The disparity in literacy among women is eye-opening in Pakistan; rural literacy stands at 46%, compared to urban literacy at 72% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This discrimination is caused by several reasons, such as inadequate educational funds and infrastructure, a shortage of competent female teachers, patriarchal gender biases, and early marriages that violate fundamental human rights (Afzal et al., 2013).

In Balochistan, female HE stands at just 37% shimmering deep-rooted regional disparities (Ali et al., 2025), Pakistan's largest and most underdeveloped province, lagging nationwide (Kakar et al., 2022). District Lasbela, an industrial zone, represents severe educational backwardness due to ingrained tribal barriers, distance barriers, and unequal resource distribution. This significantly impedes women's access to higher education, prolongs gender inequalities, and undermines their capacity to achieve socio-economic empowerment (Manzoor et al., 2025). This study aims to explore and analyze the socio-cultural constraints on women's access to and participation in higher education in Balochistan, using empowerment and feminist theories as a theoretical lens. The following objectives are developed to guide this study: to identify and analyze socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers affecting women's access in Balochistan; to explore families and community attitudes and perceptions regarding women's higher education in Balochistan; and to assess the effectiveness of existing institutional policies and support structures for women's higher educational empowerment in Balochistan.

In the existing literature, significant gaps persist concerning the challenges and opportunities for women's higher edu-

cation in rural Balochistan, especially in District Lasbela. Many studies neglected socio-cultural factors, local economic issues, and institutional policy paucity specific to the area. In addition, prior research often overlooked exploring the intersectionality of gender, tribal identity, and socio-economic status in pursuing HE in the province. The study aims to fill the gap by exploring sociocultural constraints on females' participation in HE in Balochistan using Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water and Marine Sciences (hereafter LUAWMS) as a site for data collection.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over recent decades, global trends show significant progress in females' access to higher education (HE). However, persistent disparities in developing countries reveal how sociocultural norms continue to restrict educational opportunities for females (Mehmood et al., 2018). In Pakistan's Balochistan province, this paradox is particularly evident, where patriarchal structures and economic challenges create unique barriers to females' HE participation (Kasi et al., 2021; Panezai et al., 2024).

The higher education sector in Pakistan exhibits consistently rising female gross enrolment rates at the national level (GER: 36.8% in 2001 to 47.2% in 2014); however, prominent regional inequalities persist (Mehmood et al., 2018). Balochistan's situation reflects sociocultural restraints, where traditional honor (izzat) is linked with the educational framework, often truncated schooling for girls (Hasan et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2022). Sociocultural gender stereotypes prioritize domestic roles primarily for women; many families neglect the importance of education in life to perceive HE as non-essential (Agha, 2021; Maqsood et al., 2012).

The scarcity of higher secondary institutions in Balochistan leads to significant female student attrition after high school (Ali et al., 2025). Lack of gender-segregated amenities such as girls' hostel facilities further confines mobility (Hasan et al.,

2025; Kakar et al., 2022) alongside transportation uncertainty (Shah et al., 2025). Another considerable factor of conservative traditional values is the diminution of female education opportunities (Aslam et al., 2020). Economic factors further exacerbate these problems, as poverty-stricken families prioritize sons' education (Mehmood et al., 2018; Panezai et al., 2024). Society perceives returns on investment (Sadaf et al., 2023), believing that daughters eventually leave them after their marriages, which perpetuates the cycle of imperfect educational opportunities for girls (Hasan et al., 2025)

The literature confirms that institutional infrastructure restraints, economic barriers, and societal pressure hinder women's immersion in higher education in Balochistan (Ali et al., 2025; Manzoor et al., 2025; Habib et al., 2024; Coşkun, 2023; Kasi et al., 2021). However, previous research emphasizes the transformative potential to drive progress of HE in empowering women's economic and social status, healthcare awareness, and community leadership (Ibidapo & Dada, 2025; Montenegro & Patrinos, 2014; Pederson et al., 2014). Thus, following the prior research literature, this study aims to explore female participation in HE and to discuss how Balochistan's unique barriers could enable developmental benefits through increased female educational achievement

### Theoretical Framework

Empowerment, feminism, and intersectionality theories are the theoretical premises of this study, emphasizing education to promote women's socioeconomic and political empowerment. Furthermore, empowerment theory supports examining females' participation in HE in restrictive contexts like Balochistan, Pakistan, highlighting agency, autonomy, and structural change. It reflects education as a tool for promoting gender equity. (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 2021). For example, a study (Kabbeer, 2016) Discriminates access to resources, agency (capacity to identify one's goals and act upon them), and accomplishments

(outcomes). According to this theory, higher education serves as both a resource and a means to increase their agency, empowering women to challenge traditional roles and engage fully in society.

Feminism accentuates fostering equal access to education practices to challenging systemic barriers (Malhotra et al., 2002). Hooks (2000) and Mohanty (2005) focus on challenging patriarchal edifices that uphold gender inequities. It scrutinises how power, culture, and institutions edge women's opportunities across personal, family, educational, and policy levels. In the context of this study, feminist theory helps analyse how gendered expectations, bias, and curricular exclusion influence females' experiences in HE (Leathwood & Read, 2009).

In addition, incorporating intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989) Profoundly enriched the analysis by revealing how multiple social identities converge to shape women's lived experiences. Intersectional theory recognizes that women's experiences are shaped by the intersection of gender with other axes of identity, including class, ethnicity, rural or urban status, and tribal affiliation, all salient in Balochistan. By applying intersectionality, our study avoids universalizing "women's" experience and grounds the analysis of women's lived realities in the Lasbela district. This approach also explained why certain women face compounded disadvantages, emphasizing the need for interventions that are both context-sensitive and multi-dimensional (Shields, 2008).

The chosen theories guided our research questions on barriers, agency, and equity and positioned this study as a novel contribution. Unlike prior work that mainly tracks enrolment or policy gaps, this study combines quantitative evidence of structural barriers with qualitative accounts of resilience, situating it within empowerment, feminist, and intersectionality perspectives. This dual focus fills a gap in research on Balochistan while adding to global debates on gender, equity, and education through a participatory and transformative lens.

## METHODS

We used a mixed-methods research design that integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The mixed-methods approach allowed comprehensive exploration and data triangulation. It ensured both depth and breadth in understanding the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers to females' higher education participation in Balochistan (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Almalki, 2016).

### Study Location and Population

The Lasbela district was selected because it exhibits stark educational disparities. Female literacy is only 26.5%, and in some tehsils like Lakhra, female literacy is only 7.5%. Higher education access is minimal: at the district's sole public university, 8.8% of enrolled students are female. These figures underscore the significant sociocultural and structural constraints on women's educational participation in Lasbela (Rehman et al., 2025).

### Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

This study employed a random simple sampling method, ensuring that every female had an equal chance of being selected, so that the findings are representative and generalizable within the district context. Three hundred questionnaires were distributed among students. 289 well-filled questionnaires were used for analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Moreover, interviewees were selected purposively. Seven students participated in and were interviewed during the semi-structured interviews. Before conducting the interviews, participants were provided with consent forms. The anonymity of the interviewees was maintained, and confidentiality was maintained.

### Data Collection Techniques and Instrumentation

Primary data collection involved the use of structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data on demographic variables, attitudes, perceived barriers,

and educational experiences (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative insights into personal narratives, community attitudes, and the impact of institutional practices on women's participation in higher education (Patton, 2014).

**Table 1.** Frequency statistics regarding participants' demographic information

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	289	100%
Marital Status		
Married	28	9.68%
Unmarried	261	90.31%
Age		
20-25 years	173	59.8%
26-30 years	116	40.2%
31 years or above	0	0%
Field of Study		
Agriculture	46	15.13%
Social Sciences	47	15.46%
Information & CT	49	16.12%
Language & Literature	15	5.19%
Veterinary	35	12.11%
Marie Sciences	15	4.93%
Education	97	31.91%
Semester		
2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester	38	13.15%
4 <sup>th</sup> Semester	118	40.83%
6 <sup>th</sup> Semester	66	22.84%
8 <sup>th</sup> Semester	67	23.18%
Family Size		
Small (1-4)	29	10.3%
Medium (5-8)	173	59.86%
Large (9 or above)	87	30.10%
Father Occupation		
Employed	104	36%
Unemployed	41	14.2
Agriculture	35	12.1%
Other	109	37.7%

### Data Analysis and Procedures

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), employing descriptive statistics and frequency distributions. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, where recurring themes related to sociocultural, economic, and institutional barriers were systematically identified, analysed, and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Field, 2024).

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to in the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with a strong emphasis on confidentiality and anonymity (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Cultural sensitivities were respected, and institutional permissions were obtained through formal procedures. The research process was conducted with transparency, integrity, and ethical accountability to ensure the trust and cooperation of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Results

#### Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 shows that the respondents were female (100%), predominantly between 20 and 30. Most respondents, 59.8% fell within the 20–25-year age group, and 40.1% were between 26 and 30 years old. Moreover, respondents primarily came from medium-sized families, comprising 59.86% of the sample,

with 5–8 members, and a significant portion also came from larger families, 30.10%. As shown in Table 1, fathers' occupations varied considerably, with the most essential segments employed in diverse sectors, including 36% categorized under other employment types, such as private businesses, 37.7%. Monthly household expenses ranged widely, reflecting diverse economic backgrounds.

### Attitudes and Opportunities

The data in Table 2 reflect participants' perceptions of their educational experiences and opportunities, revealing a consistent pattern of limited support and inequality, especially regarding gender. While 41.7% of respondents agreed that their parents were comfortable with them pursuing higher education, a slightly higher 45.9% disagreed, indicating lingering parental hesitation or socio-cultural barriers. Similarly, only 41.7% felt they had equal educational opportunities as their brothers, while 46.5% disagreed, suggesting persistent gender-based disparities within families. Autonomy in university enrolment was slightly more positive, with 48.3% affirming that it was their own choice, though a significant 43.1% still reported experiencing external influence or a lack of agency. The most striking finding was access to physical activities at the university level, where only 21.7% felt they had equal opportunities, and an overwhelming 64.8% disagreed. This reflects severe institutional or cultural limitations in non-

**Table 2.** Frequency statistics regarding attitudes and opportunities

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My parents feel comfortable with me pursuing higher education.	68 (23.4%)	53 (18.3%)	36 (12.4%)	87 (30.0%)	46 (15.9%)
I am given equal education opportunities as my siblings (brothers).	60 (20.7%)	61 (21.0%)	33 (11.4%)	96 (33.1%)	39 (13.4%)
I chose to enroll in a university based on my own choice.	51 (17.6%)	89 (30.7%)	25 (8.6%)	96 (33.1%)	29 (10.0%)
I chose to enroll in a university based on my own choice.	51 (17.6%)	89 (30.7%)	25 (8.6%)	96 (33.1%)	29 (10.0%)
I receive equal chances for participation in physical activities from the university administration.	11 (3.8%)	52 (17.9%)	39 (13.4%)	80 (27.6%)	108 (37.2%)

academic inclusion, especially for female students. The data highlights an imbalance in familial and institutional support structures, underscoring the need for targeted reforms to promote educational equity and student empowerment.

### Socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers

Table 3 presents frequency statistics on sociocultural factors influencing higher education, revealing a complex mix of support, personal advocacy, and structural constraints. While 40.7% of respondents agreed that their community supports female education, 48.2% disagreed or remained undecided, indicating ambivalence or latent resistance to societal norms. Encouragingly, a vast majority, 84.9% reported actively supporting female family members in pursuing higher education, reflecting strong individual-level advocacy. However, 48.6% felt ignored in higher education due to societal and cultural factors, and 62% believed that sociocultural elements constrained their academic careers, highlighting widespread systemic challenges.

Moreover, 70.4% perceived that

prevailing social values negatively affect their learning experiences, underscoring the impact of entrenched traditions. Multiculturalism and religious diversity were also perceived as barriers by 64.1% and 59.3% of respondents, respectively, suggesting that coexistence in diverse academic settings may pose challenges to integration or identity. Finally, while a plurality 50% disagreed that Islamic principles restrict women's participation in coeducational settings, a significant 36.5% expressed concern or uncertainty, indicating ongoing debates within religious-cultural frameworks. The data portrays a dual reality: individuals often act as agents of change but are simultaneously constrained by deep-rooted sociocultural norms and structural inequalities within the educational landscape.

Table 4 highlights overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the role of higher education in empowering women and promoting community development. A substantial majority, 86.2% view higher education as a key driver of women's empowerment, while 84.1% believe highly

**Table 3.** Frequency statistics regarding sociocultural factors

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The community's attitude towards female education is generally supportive.	42 (14.5%)	76 (26.2%)	32 (11.0%)	110 (37.9%)	30 (10.3%)
I actively encourage female family members to pursue higher education.	102 (35.2%)	144 (49.7%)	15 (5.2%)	24 (8.3%)	5 (1.7%)
I feel ignored in higher education due to societal and cultural factors.	43 (14.8%)	98 (33.8%)	44 (15.2%)	81 (27.9%)	24 (8.3%)
Sociocultural factors constrain my academic career.	83 (28.6%)	97 (33.4%)	34 (11.7%)	43 (14.8%)	32 (11.0%)
I perceive that existing social values negatively impact my learning in higher education.	77 (26.6%)	127 (43.8%)	29 (10.0%)	45 (15.5%)	12 (4.1%)
I perceive that multiculturalism can be a barrier to accessing higher education.	59 (20.3%)	127 (43.8%)	30 (10.3%)	56 (19.3%)	18 (6.2%)
I perceive it as a challenge to coexist with people from various religions while pursuing higher education.	46 (15.9%)	126 (43.4%)	32 (11.0%)	65 (22.4%)	21 (7.2%)
I perceive Islamic principles as a constraint for women to pursue higher education in a coeducational setting.	27 (9.3%)	79 (27.2%)	39 (13.4%)	118 (40.7%)	27 (9.3%)



**Table 4.** Frequency statistics regarding empowerment and community impact

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I perceive higher education as a source of women's empowerment.	113 (39%)	137 (47.2%)	10 (3.4%)	25 (8.6%)	4 (1.4%)
Highly educated women (with higher education degrees) can contribute to improving the health sector.	99 (34.1%)	145 (50.0%)	19 (6.6%)	21 (7.2%)	5 (1.7%)
I believe that educated females can have a profoundly positive impact on community prosperity.	116 (40.0%)	135 (46.6%)	14 (4.8%)	15 (5.2%)	8 (2.8%)

**Table 5.** Frequency statistics regarding support and challenges

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I receive psychological support to pursue higher education.	52 (17.9%)	71 (24.5%)	16 (5.5%)	71 (24.5%)	79 (27.2%)
I am constrained by financial limitations that hinder my pursuit of higher education.	74 (25.5%)	153 (52.8%)	13 (4.5%)	41 (14.1%)	9 (3.1%)
I perceive challenges in obtaining higher education due to administrative bias.	82 (28.3%)	129 (44.5%)	31 (10.7%)	31 (10.7%)	13 (4.5%)
I perceive gender discrimination in higher education.	79 (27.2%)	122 (42.1%)	14 (4.8%)	51 (17.6%)	20 (6.9%)
I feel uncomfortable studying in a coeducational environment in higher education.	59 (20.3%)	127 (43.8%)	18 (6.2%)	63 (21.7%)	23 (7.9%)
I experience harassment from male teachers and colleagues in higher education.	84 (29.0%)	108 (37.2%)	23 (7.9%)	44 (15.2%)	31 (10.7%)
I experienced harassment from the public while attending higher education institutions.	72 (24.8%)	113 (39.0%)	26 (9.0%)	53 (18.3%)	25 (8.6%)

educated women can significantly improve the health sector.

Similarly, 86.6% agree that educated females positively impact community prosperity. These findings reflect a deeply rooted belief in the transformative power of female education, not only for individual advancement but also for the well-being of society.

Table 5 presents respondents' experiences with support and challenges in higher education, revealing a landscape marked by significant barriers, particularly psychological, financial, and gender based. Only 42.4% reported receiving psychological support, while an almost equal 51.7% disagreed or remained

undecided, indicating a concerning gap in emotional and mental well-being resources. Financial hardship emerged as a dominant issue, with 78.3% of participants identifying economic limitations as a major obstacle to continuing their education. Administrative bias was also a notable concern, perceived by 72.8% of respondents, highlighting systemic issues within institutional governance.

Gender discrimination was acknowledged by 69.3%, reflecting persistent inequality in educational settings. Furthermore, 64.1% expressed discomfort studying in coeducational environments, 66.2% reported experiencing harassment from male teachers or colleagues, and 63.8% reported harassment from the public

while attending educational institutions. These findings paint a troubling picture of an academic journey that, for many, is not only academically challenging but also emotionally and socially unsafe, underscoring the urgent need for reforms in psychological support, financial aid, gender sensitivity, and institutional accountability.

## QUALITATIVE RESULTS

### Community attitudes toward women's higher education

Qualitative insights reveal that while some segments of the community, especially those with higher education, increasingly support female education, traditional attitudes remain dominant in many parts of Balochistan. Many female interviewees reported that their communities continue to favor early marriage and conventional domestic roles for women over academic pursuits. However, interviewed participants also observed gradual shifts in perceptions among younger generations and educated households, suggesting that advocacy and awareness efforts could be leveraged to accelerate cultural change. One interviewed participant shared,

*In our area, most people still think that educating girls is a waste. They believe girls should get married early and stay at home. But in my own family, my elder sister is studying medicine, and that's made my relatives reconsider. (Interviewed Participant 3)*

### Personal narratives and experiences of barriers and support

Narratives from interviews and focus group discussions highlighted substantial challenges. Many female students reported that their educational choices were not autonomous but were heavily influenced by their families. Significant constraints included cultural and religious expectations, financial strain, and lack of career guidance. Students from less-educated families expressed that their

parents were skeptical about the benefits of higher education for girls. As said by an interviewed participant:

*My parents were unsure if it was worth the expense. They thought maybe it's better if I help around the house and get married soon. But I want to be a teacher. I had to really insist on getting enrolled. (Interviewed Participant 1)*

Most interviewees mentioned that boys in the family are prioritized for educational resources. Girls are often expected to sacrifice their aspirations for household responsibilities or to support their male siblings. In contrast, families where parents have a higher level of education tend to display more gender-equitable attitudes and are more supportive of their daughters' academic pursuits. Furthermore, interviewees emphasized a lack of autonomy and decision-making power in their educational lives. One of the interviewed participants uttered the following comment:

*We are not asked what we want. Most of us were told where to go and what to study, especially if our brothers are already studying. Our choices come second. (Interviewed Participant 5)*

Qualitative results revealed that gender-based institutional inequities also surfaced. Interviewed participants commonly reported feeling sidelined in university environments, especially in extracurricular and sports activities. They reported the situation in the following sentences:

*There are more opportunities for boys. Even in sports, they have better equipment and more time slots. Girls often have restrictions and are discouraged. (Interviewed Participant 2)*

Qualitative analysis revealed that numerous participants expressed frustration over the double burden of academic and societal expectations, which affected their performance and mental well-being. The lack of counseling services and safe spaces for discussion was seen as a critical gap. As one interviewee said:

*It is hard to focus when you are constantly reminded that you are different and have to prove yourself all the time.*



(Interviewed Participant 4, 6)

However, the qualitative results also highlighted some empowering trends. Many females are breaking stereotypes within their families and communities, advocating for themselves and their peers. Their resilience indicates a readiness for systemic change, which can be supported through targeted interventions including policy reform, institutional changes, and community engagement.

These qualitative narratives provide an in-depth context for understanding the numerical trends observed in the quantitative data, thereby deepening insights into the lived experiences behind structural barriers. In addition, the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results confirmed the consistency of the findings. The quantitative analyses reported on parental resistance, institutional biases, gender disparities, and economic hardship, as they corresponded with qualitative results. Interview narratives further supported sociocultural restrictions and prevailing societal attitudes.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that shape women's access to higher education in Balochistan, alongside the influence of family and community attitudes and the effectiveness of institutional support structures. A key strength of the findings lies in the alignment between quantitative evidence and qualitative accounts, which provide a comprehensive understanding of women's educational experiences.

The results confirm that cultural traditions, restrictive social values, and family expectations remain significant barriers to women's higher education. Quantitative findings revealed unequal opportunities between women and their brothers, while qualitative narratives described parental control, prioritization of male siblings, and pressure toward early marriage. These findings are consistent with earlier research in Balochistan, where Ghaffar et al. (2023)

reported systemic cultural restrictions in Nushki, and Barrech et al. (2020) documented the persistence of patriarchal traditions. Similarly, evidence from Punjab (Jabeen et al., 2024). Although gradual change is emerging among more educated families, traditional norms dominate much of Pakistan. These results are aligned with Khan et al., (2024) and Yuliatin et al., (2025).

The study's findings further demonstrate that higher education institutions often reproduce social inequalities rather than countering them. Quantitative results highlighted dissatisfaction with institutional support, with reports of discrimination, harassment, administrative bias, and the absence of psychological and financial services. Rana et al., (2024) and Amjad (2024) Similarly, found systemic gender bias in educational leadership, while Zulfiqar & Kuskoff (2024) and Manzoor et al., (2025) Identified institutional neglect and harassment as persistent deterrents. Meza-Mejia et al., (2023) highlighting socio-cultural constructs, stereotypes, institutional bias, and the underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership roles. This aligns with our findings about institutional bias and gender norms. These convergent findings underscore the need for robust gender-sensitive policies and accountability mechanisms to ensure institutions function as inclusive spaces of empowerment rather than as barriers.

Financial constraints emerged as one of the most pressing challenges. Quantitative data indicated that limited household resources curtailed women's educational opportunities. This result is consistent with previous research findings that suggest parental attitudes and income levels are a critical determinant of females' educational outcomes (Gužíková & Mendelová, 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2025). While qualitative accounts revealed that parents often considered investment in sons' education more worthwhile. Tuition fees, transportation, and accommodation costs were frequently cited as prohibitive. These results resonate with earlier research demonstrating the

combined impact of economic hardship and cultural expectations (Aslam et al., 2020; Daraz et al., 2023). Household educational spending also remains gendered, with boys systematically favoured (Jabeen et al., 2024; Khoso et al., 2025; Reshi et al., 2022).

Family attitudes toward women's higher education were divided. Some families offered support, while others resisted, particularly in households with lower educational attainment. Both survey and interview data showed limited autonomy in academic decision-making, with fathers or brothers often controlling whether and where women could study. Yet evidence of resilience and agency was also prominent. Many respondents described encouraging female relatives, while qualitative narratives highlighted women actively contesting restrictive norms. Barrech et al., (2020) "men deley": ["formattedCitation": "(Barrech et al., 2020 and Islam et al., (2023) observed women mobilizing within families to challenge cultural restrictions, while comparative research in Punjab (Jabeen et al., 2024) and across South Asia (Arafat et al., 2021) indicates that parental attitudes remain contested but are gradually shifting. These findings are consistent with research emphasizing the critical role of parental attitudes and income levels in shaping women's educational outcomes (Gužíková & Mendelová, 2022).

The study shows that socio-cultural norms, economic hardship, and institutional shortcomings converge to restrict women's access to higher education in Balochistan. As Rana et al., (2024) and Pan-ezai et al., (2024) argue, higher education in Pakistan holds significant transformative potential, but this can only be realized through systemic reforms that simultaneously address cultural resistance, institutional deficiencies, and economic inequities (Barra et al., 2024; Kalim et al., 2025; Montenegro & Patrinos, 2014). The findings support intersectional theories and empowerment (Preuß et al., 2025), suggesting that structural reforms are required within institutions and policy frameworks through strategies that acknowledge and magnify individual agency, recognize and

amplify existing forms of resistance and self-advocacy (Kabeer, 2021; Malhotra et al., 2002).

## CONCLUSION

The study's primary purpose was to explore sociocultural barriers grounded in empowerment, feminism, and intersectionality theory affecting female HE participation in Balochistan, Pakistan. The findings revealed significant constraints such as sociocultural norms, financial limitations, and institutional challenges. Despite myriad barriers identified in the study, a hope of change emerged an avenue of resilience. Youth have strong aspirations for education and career growth, often struggling with the adversity of societal norms. The findings suggest that targeted policy interventions and community engagement strategies could significantly reduce barriers to female participation and enhance enrolment and retention in HE.

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